

SPURS PILE ON THE AGONY

88/89

MANAGER RAY HARFORD, under fire from the terraces as his Littlewoods Cup holders stumble deeper into trouble in the First Division, admitted that he was "on the floor" after Tuesday's home defeat against Spurs.

The galling thing was that in terms of effort, workrate, endeavour and commitment the Town never deserved to lose.

But they were short of the expertise that enabled Spurs to snatch victory without dominating a battling Town side.

The boss believes that the euphoria of getting to Wembley again has been blown away by recent results — six defeats and a draw in the last seven league games.

Perhaps the point was proved by the way the Town did much better than Tuesday's result suggests. It was flattering to Spurs, except that they made much better use of fewer scoring chances.

Les Sealey, as well as being beaten three times, had to make more saves than Eric Thorstvedt at the other end. And that was despite the fact that the Town had more of the play.

They also had the advantage of a well-deserved interval lead, courtesy of a Steve Foster header. But while you expect centre-halves to pop up with the odd goal now and again, recent statistics underline a point about the lack of firepower from men who should be regular scorers.

Mick Harford and Roy Wegerle were on target in the second leg of the Littlewoods Cup semi-final against West Ham. But in the last eight league games, which have yielded just four points out of 24, the Town's goals have amounted to two by Foster, a penalty by Danny Wilson, and one by Ricky Hill.

Fans have been complaining about the Town's tactics. Yet on that score Tuesday night's show — and the one at Old Trafford on Saturday — could hardly be faulted.

An enterprising formation took the game to Spurs. Perhaps it was a little too adventurous in the second half. After Tottenham had nicked an equaliser with a goal out of nothing the Town continued to chase the game, leaving the back door open to counter attacks.

LUTON 1 SPURS 3

The Town's need to go for all three points played into Spurs' hands.

My only consolation was to see John Lyall of West Ham and Charlton's Lennie Lawrence sit and take in the fact that on the night the Town deserved so much more than they got.

They both have to face the Town in the battle for survival. And my money is still on the Town to produce the right blend to ease current worries.

But I will be happier when pressure looks more likely to be turned into goals, and Roy Wegerle's return after injury cannot be too soon.

Iain Dowie gave 100 per cent on his first full league appearance without looking genuine First Division. But that is hardly surprising — a debut in a team struggling to beat the relegation trapdoor is hardly an auspicious introduction to big time football.

There is an inevitable nervousness as tension increases, and the Town's misfortune on Tuesday night was that they could not get the goals their pressure should have brought when they were on top.

For most of the first half Spurs were forced to defend, with the Town playing quickfire and penetrating football. But not much came of it in the way of accurate goal attempts, and Spurs, on their occasional breaks, had the touch of quality the Town lacked.

They could afford to be more patient, but when they did move forward they created the cleaner chances, with David Howells nearly converting a cross by Paul Walsh and Chris Waddle being denied by Les Sealey's save from a free kick.

Referee David Elleray from Harrow, infamous for being wired for sound at Millwall for television and telling a player that he might be useless but was not a cheat, proved half his point. At least he treated both sides equally unfairly, including four bookings spread with complete disregard for the feeling of the game.

At half-time the Town seemed to be on their way, with Foster's header from David Preece's corner in the 42nd minute giving them a lead they deserved.

But ten minutes into the second half Howells made the best of a lucky bounce off David Beaumont from a curling pass by Chris Waddle and cracked the equaliser.

The Town had been denied optimistic penalty claims when Dowie fell over the goalkeeper just before that, and felt short-changed in the 66th minute when Harford netted and was ruled offside.

That decision looked right from the pressbox, but a Town victory still seemed to be on as they continued to take the game to Spurs. But Dowie, Tim Breacker and Harford all put scoring efforts wide of the target, and Spurs, having defended defiantly, made a mockery of the previous 80 minutes by scoring twice in the late stages.

In the 82nd minute Sealey had to make a stupendous save to tip a drive by Paul Gascoigne round the post. The defending from the corner was sub-standard, and as the

ball was half-cleared Gary Mabbutt drove against the post. Sealey had made no attempt to save, and was helpless as Paul Walsh scored against his former club from the rebound.

The Town then had to chase even harder to try to save the game, and were punished in the last minute when Gascoigne scored a stunning goal, starting a solo run from his own half, bursting through Foster and Beaumont, and finishing clinically.

For all their endeavour and promise, the Town had none with that kind of positive skill, and that was the difference between the sides.

THE MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Beaumont, Grimes; Hill, McDonough, Preece; Harford, Dowie (Cooke, 80 mins), Black. Other sub: Rob Johnson.

SPURS: Thorstvedt; Fenwick, Butters, Mabbutt, Hughton; Gascoigne, Howells, Allen; Walsh, Waddle, Stewart. Subs: Polston and Samways, not used.

THE GOALS: Steve Foster header for the Town, 42 minutes; David Howells for Spurs, 55 minutes; Paul Walsh, 82 minutes; Paul Gascoigne 90th minute.

OTHER STRIKES: Town five saved, nine wide, one netted and disallowed. Spurs six saved, five wide, one hit a post and led to a goal. Corners: 6-5 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 11,146 — only Liverpool have attracted more for a league match this season, and Tuesday's gate was 1,000 better than last time Spurs came.

REFEREE: David Elleray, Harrow. Not on top of his game, and too quick with the book. Cautions — Paul Stewart and Terry Fenwick of Spurs, Mick Harford and Steve Foster of the Town, with Harford now due for his second suspension of the season.

ENTERTAINMENT: It would have been a great night out if the result hadn't made home fans feel so miserable. Spurs were flattered by the score-line, but that hardly matters when you want a result more than a performance.