

WOODWORK HELPS VILLA TO SURVIVE

EVEN ASTON VILLA manager Graham Taylor talked about luck after seeing his side take three crucial points to push Luton Town into the relegation zone at Villa Park.

While Town boss Ray Harford could not believe that defeat was what his men deserved, Taylor spoke of how his team had suffered similar misfortune on occasions.

He added: "I am not going to say we were lucky today, just that luck evens out over a season."

For Town fans, the defeat was hard to take because but for some splendid work by Villa goalkeeper Nigel Spink and the intervention twice of the woodwork when he was beaten the Town would have won handsomely.

But there was a worrying aspect which needs to be put right: the defence was sliced open very early, yet again, to present the opposition with a goal in the first two minutes.

And basic marking was non-existent when Villa snatched the goal that turned out to be the winner after Ricky

Reports: Brian Swain Pictures by Josh Levy

Hill had headed an equaliser.

Both managers agreed that the fans had been treated to a highly exciting clash, played at speed and with an adventurous approach by visitors and home team alike.

Neither defence looked comfortable in a match both sides needed to win — Villa are also struggling to stay in the First Division in their first season back.

Roy Wegerle returned for the Town after a five-match absence, and Danny Wilson was back after missing one game. Of the two Wegerle looked more menacing, with Wilson still short of the power performance level we saw from him earlier in the season. But Wegerle made an impact, with his willingness to take on men always a danger to Villa.

Kingsley Black, unbelievably busy in covering or attacking, was the man of the match for the Town, one of many who didn't deserve to be losers.

Tim Breacker suffered a nightmare start. Tony Daley skipped past him in the second minute to fire in a shot across Les Sealey's body for Villa's first goal in nearly eight hours of football. Breacker was uncomfortable against Daley's pace, was booked for a foul on the little winger shortly after the goal, but improved rapidly after that.

Daley went off with a thigh injury in the 32nd minute, by which time the Town had survived an early pounding, and equalised through Ricky Hill. He was used as a right-sided attacker in the first half, and moved into the middle after the interval, and caused plenty of problems for a Villa defence that needed a good goalkeeper behind it.

The Town's goal came after Black and Ashley Grimes had worked the ball down the left flank. Black tried to cross, the ball bounced off a defender and Grimes quickly delivered the centre. Hill flung himself to head towards goal and a deflection off Martin Keown wrong-footed Spink.

Until then Villa had threatened to power their way to an easy win, with Sealey forced to make a double save from Alan McNally and Gordon Cowans as the crowd sensed Villa's chance of survival points.

The atmosphere changed after Hill's equaliser. Villa lost their confidence, so did the crowd, and a visiting team that had looked on the ropes was suddenly heading towards a points win.

You could sense that Villa were there for the taking, and I had little doubt if the Town had gone ahead the home fans would have stayed to jeer rather than cheer.

But with Spink inspired, the knock-out punch was not produced.

The defence tightened up, although I felt there was too little quality creative work from midfield, where only Black sparkled.

He was desperately unlucky in the 31st minute with a 25-yard diagonal which beat Spink and rebounded off the bar, and fate then twisted the knife.

Ian Olney, born in Luton and once a paying customer at Kenilworth Road, was sent on as sub for Daley in the 32nd minute. Three minutes later he had scored his first goal in league football, unmarked at close range to meet a cross from Nigel Callaghan.

"I hope Luton don't go down," he said. "But I wouldn't want them to stay up at our expense."

If the spirit the Town showed after Olney's goal is present for every minute of the rest of the season, safety is certain.

Villa were forced back as the Town hit a purple patch of good direct passing and running. Goals seemed sure to follow, but Spink scrambled away a header from Steve

Foster following a corner by Wilson, and then produced two brilliant tip-over saves in quick succession, to deny Mick Harford and Black.

Villa were kept on tenterhooks for the rest of the match, with Sealey having only two more important saves to make, to keep out a header by McNally and a late volley by Callaghan.

Raphael Meade was sent on in place of McDonough for the last half-hour and his pace and power added an extra ingredient to Town attacks. But the luck was the same: twice he looked like scoring, but a post blocked an overhead kick and Spink made a reaction save a few minutes later.

John Dreyer went on for 25 minutes in place of Grimes to make his belated challenge for a recall for Wembley.

I don't know about choosing the form players — perhaps what we really need to know now is who is likely to be lucky. But if, as Mr Taylor said, good luck and bad is balanced by the end of the season, the Town are more than due for a change.

Match details

98/89 **ASTON VILLA 2
LUTON TOWN 1**
HALF-TIME: 2-1

LUTON TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Beaumont, Grimes (Dreyer, 65 mins); Wilson, McDonough (Meade, 57 mins), Black; Wegerle, Hill, Harford.

ASTON VILLA: Spink; Price, Keown, Sims, Evans; Callaghan, Gray, Cowans, Daley (Olney 32 mins); Platt, McNally. Other sub: Mountfield, not used.

THE GOALS: Tony Daley for Villa, after just 1 min 40 secs, individual effort, cutting in past Tim Breacker and shooting into far corner; Ricky Hill header for the Town, 26th minute, from cross by Ashley Grimes; Ian Olney — born in Luton! — from cross by Nigel Callaghan, 35th minute.

OTHER STRIKES: Town eight saved, five wide, two hit the woodwork; Villa ten saved and three wide. Corners: 11-5 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 15,640, Villa Park's second-lowest of the season with the small Town following making themselves heard and seen. Pity about the "Evans Out" banner . . .

REFEREE: Steve Lodge, Barnsley. Had a very good game, but the Town thought he was let down by a linesman who should have given offside against Daley in the build-up to his goal.

ENTERTAINMENT: A rip-roaring open game, with a bit of a cup-tie atmosphere, with Villa riding their luck to win. The Town never deserved to lose.