

STRIKING LACK OF FIREPOWER

Reports: Brian Swain – Pictures: Josh Levy

THE GOOD NEWS from St. James's Park, Newcastle, was that Luton Town showed more than enough organisation, determination, and professionalism to suggest that they can stay in the First Division.

The bad news was that all the encouraging signs were balanced by the fact that you couldn't see where a goal would come from to help ease relegation worries.

For neutrals on a bitterly cold grey day, with a chill damp wind whipping in from the North Sea, the match was a scrappy nervous encounter. For the committed fans it was a nail-biting 90 minutes, a contest between the Town's careful approach and Newcastle's passionate but nervous attempts to win on a tide of local fervour.

The draw was probably a fair result because neither side had a high quality First Division finisher on view, and both missed acceptable chances on the rare occasions when defences were cut open.

I spent the long journey home trying to work out which was more important: the general excellence of the Town's teamwork, or the knowledge that while one point was highly welcome we might have had all three to make the final weeks of the season a little easier on the nerves. If the Town go down, one of the poorest away records in the First Division will shoulder blame as much as the unusual home results this season. Even bottom club West Ham have managed twice as many away wins as the Town's two to date.

At half-time at St. James's Park the third looked well within reach. Newcastle, now looking likely to be in the Second Division next season, were short of confidence and the roar of the crowd, urging on their men with something akin to hatred of visitors, served only to make the tension show.

Newcastle offered plenty of fire and enthusiasm, and not much skill. They played a sweeper system, with full-backs trying to push forward down the flanks, and the Town showed a welcome ability to overcome it by sending their own defenders wide on counter-attacks. But there was not a lot of punch in the middle of the front line.

John Dreyer had another excellent game at left back, with Tim Breacker an effective attacker from deep on the other flank. With Dreyer looking so confident, I looked for more attacking thrust from Kingsley Black. David Preece was really buzzing alongside him, and Black looked the most potent attacker the Town had.

FINDING SPACE

In the late stages, when Newcastle were getting desperate to snatch something from such a crucial game, he found huge spaces on the left wing. He had missed a first-half chance to be the matchwinner, but I was surprised when he was pulled off, and subbed by Darron McDonough, with seven minutes to go. The Town had decided that they must consolidate their one point at that stage, and almost paid a high price. In injury time the Town were caught out by a far post cross, but Mirandinha blasted his shot wide when he ought to have given Newcastle an unlikely win.

With so much at stake, it was no surprise to see a lot of the action confined to midfield. The good football in that department came from the Town, and at times their short-passing game threatened to tear Newcastle apart. But too often the final pass, often a longer one, failed to find its target and I felt that at times the Town were being drawn into the kind of physical battle Newcastle wanted.

The home side's major attacking tactic was to hope for quick breaks, looking for the pace and control of Michael O'Neill to get on the end of hopeful long balls. They shortened their game in the second half, and looked better for it, and the Town did well to blanket more regular attacks with good defensive covering.

The disappointment was that Mick Harford and Roy Wegerle never looked like doing damage at close quarters. I admire the way Harford takes his talents to deep-lying positions, and gets through an enormous amount of work, as he did on Saturday against one of his former clubs. But unless someone else exploits the gaps he creates I would prefer to see the striker spending more time in the box, being given a service by others instead of having to do so much spadework himself.

The defence was rarely in trouble against the

mundane level of invention Newcastle produced. Alec Chamberlain did everything required with confidence and authority, and Steve Foster and David Beaumont blocked almost everything that was tried down the middle. Beaumont's timing in the tackle was perfection, as was Dreyer's when he came into play as the covering man.

The midfield was less consistent, with Preece taking the eye with an energetic display. He put in every ounce of effort in tackling and attacking, and was one of five men unlucky to collect bookings from a rather fussy ref, Michael Peck of Kendal, for a foul on Kevin Brock.

Ricky Hill and Danny Wilson were not in the game so consistently as Preece, but both cheerfully got stuck in on a day when the niceties of football were never going to be allowed to surface by either side.

Things might have been different if the Town had been able to produce a ruthless streak to cash in on an early injury to Newcastle goalkeeperr Gary Kelly. The game was barely a minute old when Dreyer's clever pass down the line sent Preece away on the left wing. He hammered over a hard cross which was pulled back a little too far for the Town attackers. But O'Neill, trying to help an overworked defence, struck a weak backpass from the edge of the box, and Breacker stormed in. Kelly saved a goal by dropping at Breacker's feet, but needed lengthy treatment for a gash on the knee. He was hopping about for the next 44 minutes - and had six stitches inserted at the interval - and must have been highly relieved that the Town did not give him a more testing time when they had so much of the play.

CHANCE MISSED

His lack of mobility was obvious in the 14th minute when Breacker fed Wilson down the right. The cross between defenders and keeper was near-perfect. None of the three centre-backs had a hope of reaching it except at the risk of an own goal. It should have been the keeper's ball, but Kelly limped ineffectively and Black was clear for an angled drive that ripped into the side netting when it might very well have been the goal to complete Newcastle's misery.

On the half-hour Newcastle contrived to miss an even better chance. The Town defence was caught square by Paul Sweeney's long ball down the middle. O'Neill, who hit a hat-trick in the corresponding fixture last season, was on his own and as Chamberlain advanced he controlled the ball, set himself perfectly, and then blazed well wide.

The Newcastle fans howled in derision, and it turned out to be the last real chance the home side created until injury time at the end of the game. John Hendrie, sharing the role of attacking optimist with O'Neill, made a couple of threatening runs, but was halted by Beaumont and Chamberlain, with the keeper doing particularly well when Preece's

backpass was too short and gave Hendrie half an opening.

Raphael Meade was sent on for Wegerle with 22 minutes to go, shortly after the home fans had cheered the arrival of Mirandinha in place of O'Neill. Harford was unlucky not to make firm contact with a bicycle kick from Dreyer's searching cross, but the game fizzled out as both sides realised that a draw was far better than going for three points and risking defeat.

Match details

NEWCASTLE UTD 0
LUTON TOWN 0 89/89

TOWN: Chamberlain; Breacker, Foster, Beaumont, Dreyer; Wilson, Hill, Preece, Black (McDonough, 83 mins); Harford, Wegerle (Meade, 68 mins).

NEWCASTLE: Kelly; Kristensen (Wharton, 81 mins), Scott, Roeder, Thorn, Sansom; McCreery, Brock, Sweeney; O'Neill (Mirandinha, 60 mins), Hendrie.

GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town three saved and nine wide; Newcastle five saved and five wide. Corners: 4-3 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 18,493, lowest of the season at St. James's Park.

REFEREE: Michael Peck, Kendal - certainly no homer, but seemed too keen to be involved, and five yellow cards did not reflect the way the game was played.

ENTERTAINMENT: The nerve ends were showing in both teams, and the neutrals found it a scrappy match to watch. But it was compelling stuff for the committed fans, with the draw probably right. Both teams missed good chances which could have settled it.

BOOKINGS: Hendrie and Mirandinha of Newcastle; Danny Wilson for dissent and Mick Harford and David Preece for fouls.