

MAKESHIFT PAIR A STRIKING SUCCESS

89/90

Reports: Brian Swain. Pictures: Josh Levy

EVEN INJURIES which robbed them of Roy Wegerle and Darron McDonough failed to dampen the pleasure of Luton Town and their supporters at the point taken from Millwall on Saturday.

Against all the odds, on a chilling afternoon, there was a heart-warming all-round team display at The Den, against a robust style that beat the Town three times last season.

One of the injuries might even have helped the Town's cause, because Iain Dowie, determined to prove a point, went on in place of Wegerle and produced an electrifying display. The makeshift attack pairing forced on the Town looked useful, to say the least.

The result could have gone either way in a tough no-nonsense battle. Millwall's heavy early pressure might have put them clear, but the Town produced the best spell of pure football shortly after the break, and only the woodwork stopped them taking a deserved lead.

ELSTRUP'S FIRST LEAGUE GOAL

In the last five minutes, when Millwall staged a ferocious attacking burst, the Town escaped a bitter finale, with Tony Cascarino heading wide from five or six yards when a winning goal looked inevitable.

Certainly the Town had more to enjoy than Millwall, with Lars Elstrup scoring his first League goal after five in the Littlewoods Cup, and Dowie taking man of the match honours when he went on as sub to replace Wegerle.

While away results are still not too impressive, there was a resilience and professional determination in all the Town's work at The Den.

It was not pretty, but it was effective, particularly

when Millwall were threatening to build on spells of intimidating attacking.

Manager Ray Harford had been blunt about his displeasure at Everton, when Town heads dropped after the first goal.

Millwall, not as good a side as the Merseysiders, were never allowed to gain any real supremacy, despite a lot of honest and sometimes frantic effort.

It was a scuffling battle in midfield, where the Town made two changes compared to the Goodison Park formation. Mick Kennedy returned after suspension, and did all that was asked. Steve Williams, recovered from a knee injury, was not as effective as he has been this season. But if some of his passes did not reach Town feet, they were always played to ensure that they prevented the opposition intercepting them in dangerous positions.

David Preece and Richard Harvey were the men left out, and two more changes had to be made during the game.

I made David Beaumont the pick of the defence, although it was disconcerting to see Cascarino and Teddy Sheringham winning the ball in the air too often for comfort.

They failed to cash in, so the Town got away with that, and there was little sign of Millwall being allowed to impose themselves on the game by quality of football.

They had a bit of fierce enthusiasm and a lot of willing effort, but not in the same remorseless measure we saw from them last season.

The Town did much less of the attacking over the 90 minutes, but when they did move forward they always had the classier touch.

They might have snatched an early lead, because with Kingsley Black switched to the midfield left and Danny Wilson on the right the Town's counter-attacks looked threatening.

EARLY CHANCE GOES BEGGING

Millwall thought Wilson was offside in the fifth minute when he got on the end of a long clearance by Chamberlain and went clear. But as goalkeeper Brian Horne advanced the Town skipper chipped wide of the far post from the inside right position.

The shock spurred Millwall to higher endeavour, but the Town defence looked calm and composed.

Tim Breacker's domination of Steve Anthrobus left the Millwall 'fans' so disheartened they turned on their own man, and stupidly barracked him until he was taken off.

Jimmy Carter, on the other flank, a thorn in the Town's side in the past, was unable to go past John Dreyer, who had suffered a bit of a nightmare in midweek against Everton's Pat Nevin.

The result was that Millwall were forced into doing what they do best: long balls were aimed towards the two big front men, with midfielders scurrying up to

try to get into attacking positions for the knock-downs.

The policy paid off in the 11th minute, thanks to a mistake by McDonough. He was caught in possession on the edge of his penalty area and tried to play a back pass. It was intercepted, and after the ball had pinged around the area full-back Ian Dawes shot past Chamberlain.

Not so long ago that would have been the end of it in away games. It might have been if Millwall had made better use of the superiority they achieved or the next 30 minutes.

But their exuberance was met by calm defence, with Alec Chamberlain — and what a fine season he is having — making a good tip-over save from Sheringham, Beaumont clearing from Sheringham's toes and Anthrobus putting a dolly chance wide with a terrible close-range header at the far post from a cross by right back Keith Stevens.

By the 38th minute, when the first team change had to be made, we had seen hardly anything of the Town attack.

Wegerle and Elstrup were almost marooned, with few clearances reaching them as the defence played into the teeth of a gale.

When Wegerle fell over, and was helped off with a recurrence of his ankle ligament injury, Dowie went on and immediately injected a new dimension into the attack. He was all fire and energy, with a cheerful bounciness that gave everyone a lift.

DEFENDER HELPS THE ATTACK

I thought Elstrup responded as though he needed this kind of support, and the partnership paid handsome dividends with the equaliser, in the Town's first concerted attack of the game, three minutes before the interval.

Dowie needed the help of Breacker when he won possession on the right wing. With two defenders between him and goal, Dowie waited for Breacker to come up in close support, and rolled the ball back to him. Breacker, in turn, was just as brainy because he knocked off a short pass through the gap Dowie had left, and Dowie was clear near the corner flag.

The cross was perfection, to the near post, and Elstrup's header could not have been more decisive. Half-time came too quickly for me, because Millwall were deflated and sickened, and so were their fans. I felt the interruption would be to the benefit of Millwall rather than the Town.

But the tea and biscuits break made no difference: the Town came out for the second half looking much more determined and set to build on their goal out of the blue.

Match details

MILLWALL 1 LUTON TOWN 1 (HALF-TIME: 1-1)

TOWN: Chamberlain; Breacker, Beaumont, McDonough (Harvey, 76 mins), Dreyer; Wilson, Williams, Kennedy, Black; Elstrup, Wegerle (Dowie 38 mins).

MILLWALL: Horne; Stevens, McLeary, Wood, Dawes; Carter, Hurlock, Waddock, Anthrobus (Sparham 66 mins); Sheringham, Cascarino. Other sub: Torpey.

THE GOALS: Ian Dawes for Millwall, 11th minute, after misplaced backpass by Darron McDonough; Lars Elstrup for the Town, 42 minutes, his first in League football, near post header from pinpoint centre from the right by Iain Dowie.

OTHER STRIKES: Town two saved, two wide, one shot by Kingsley Black hit the inside of a post; Millwall five saved and six wide. Corners: 7-6 to Millwall.

REFEREE: David Elleray, Harrow — famous for being wired for sound once for a TV programme. He hardly looked a star at The Den although both sides had cause to feel aggrieved.

YELLOW CARDS: Danny Wilson for dissent when a foul by Cascarino on McDonough was not given, and should have been; Tim Breacker for a foul.

ATTENDANCE: 11,140, Millwall's lowest in the League so far this season, on a day when a chilling wind made Cold Blow Lane live up to its name.

ENTERTAINMENT: A rousing match, with each side enjoying spells in the ascendancy. The football was honest and committed rather than pretty, but the result was about right — the Town were lucky to be level at half-time, unlucky not to go ahead in a purple patch early in the second half, and then fortunate again when Millwall missed chances in a frantic five-minute spell at the end.