

DEFENDERS ARE AT SIXES AND SEVENS

89/90

RAY HARFORD did well to put a brave face on things when he agreed to meet the Press at The Dell, after the worst result of his career as manager of Luton Town.

The real inquest was in private in the Kenilworth Road dressing rooms on Monday, with all sorts of questions to be asked.

The root cause of the Town's problems was poor defending. Three of Southampton's goals came from set pieces, and three from direct assaults on a defence caught square and spreadeagled.

But you had to admire the skill with which all nine goals in an action-packed contest were taken.

The Town, as we knew, were in defensive trouble before kick-off, and by half-time they had lost their fourth central defender this season, with Marvin Johnson limping off and 19-year Julian James replacing him alongside John Dreyer.

Southampton deserved their best win of the season, yet at half-time, when they led 2-1, I thought the Town looked capable of taking one point at the very least.

SAINTS ATTACKERS QUICKER

There was a self-destruct air about both defences, but the Saints had the better and quicker attackers.

They have abandoned a rigid 4-4-2 formation after it conceded 66 goals and scored 52 the season before last. Manager Chris Nicholl has changed it in one major aspect: Matthew Le Tissier has been turned into a right winger and Rod Wallace has more than compensated for the loss of elder brother Danny by flying down the other wing.

The system has a carefree look about it, and can be caught out, but when it works it gives the customers what they want. Liverpool were thrashed 4-1 at The Dell a month ago and Saturday's result against the Town was all the sweeter for Southampton people who have never forgotten the Town's 7-0 victory four years ago, and 6-1 in January.

Wallace was the man of the match, with his work ensuring that Tim Breacker had to concentrate on defence, with rarely the chance to overlap as an attacker.

TWO GOALS IN 90 SECONDS

Steve Williams was put out of action by flu to deny him the chance of showing his old club that he can still do it. David Preece was recalled, but while he is enthusiastic and a potential match-winner in terms of service to front men, he was one of several who could not impose themselves on the game, and was eventually substituted.

The biggest irony of all was that when Roy Wegerle was sent on his place, with the score 3-2, and the Town still very much in contention, their change to 4-3-3 was greeted with two Southampton goals in 90 seconds.

So the game was all but over, and we were left to

Reports: Brian Swain. Pictures: Josh Levy

try to take some consolation out of the fact that at least the Town demonstrated that they too could score quality goals, even if they could not match Southampton's quantity.

Inexperience in defence was punished by a team that did the simple things well, and underlined the after-match comment by Ray Harford that he needs to find another Steve Foster to add a touch of leadership and authority.

NOT FAR SHORT

I agree — despite Saturday's mauling, I think the Town are not far short of being a very good side. But they need a father-figure at the back, plus a goal-scorer, or more positive signs that Lars Elstrup or Roy Wegerle can make bigger contributions to a minimum target of 50 league goals a season. The present rate, 17 from 15 matches, is not good enough.

The daft thing is that the Town were not as humiliated as the result might suggest.

They made their customary, and worrying, slow start, got on top for a period either side of half time, and then wilted as the sucker-punches came in during the last 20 minutes.

I doubt if any of the defence went home feeling satisfied with his performance.

The midfield was a mixture: at times it looked very good, and at others it was by-passed by simple quick passing.

Iain Dowie was too lonely for too long to cash in on a Southampton defence that never looked comfortable when the Town attacked in numbers, but with Wegerle and Elstrup still inconsistent the Town's pressure was much more sporadic than Southampton's.

DEFENCE CAUGHT SQUARE

In Paul Rideout they had the best central attacker, and he accepted the present of a goal in the first three minutes, when Glenn Cockerill's through-ball ambled through the middle of a square defence.

Dowie's knock-down from Preece's free quick almost brought an equaliser, but Black and Elstrup both saw their efforts blocked before Rideout shot wide from a good opening after getting goal-side of Breacker. Wallace netted a split second after an off-side whistle, but the Town settled down and Dreyer hammered in a cracking goal from 25 yards after Southampton failed to clear a corner.

A 1-1 interval score would have been about right, but four minutes before the break the Town defence stood around as Jimmy Case floated in a free kick from the left wing to the far post for Le Tissier to head home.

The second half started with another early goal, with 95 seconds gone when Black's deflected shot beat Flowers following a through-ball by Dreyer and a good low cross from the left by Elstrup.

At that stage Southampton's defenders were look-

ing every bit as rocky as the Town's, but dreams of the first away win for a year were dented in the 53rd minute. James headed a cross away, missing his own bar by inches, and the Town defended the corner badly. Alec Chamberlain failed to go for it, Neil Ruddock headed down from six yards, and Wallace shot in from close range.

With 20 minutes go the Town switched tactics by sending on Wegerle, the second sub, but the new formation had no chance to get into its stride before 3-2 became 5-2 in little more than a minute.

Wallace waltzed round Chamberlain on the edge of the box and hit Southampton's fourth, and Le Tissier set up Shearer to score at the second attempt after Chamberlain blocked the first.

Shearer might have had another goal, but his header hit the bar after a poor punched clearance by Chamberlain.

With the Town chasing the game, Rideout headed his second and Southampton's sixth four minutes from time, unmarked again from a free kick by Case.

Elstrup replied a minute later with a superb turn away from two defenders and a 20-yard low shot as he fell after taking a short pass from Wilson.

Match details

SOUTHAMPTON 6 LUTON TOWN 3

(HALF-TIME: 2-1)

TOWN: Chamberlain; Breacker, Dreyer, Johnson (James, 45 mins), Harvey; Black, Wilson, Kennedy, Preece (Wegerle, 70 mins); Elstrup, Dowie.

SOUTHAMPTON: Flowers; Dodd, Ruddock, Osman, Benali; Le Tissier, Cockerill, Case, Rod Wallace; Shearer, Rideout. Subs: Horne and Ray Wallace.

THE GOALS: Paul Rideout, 2mins 29 seconds, 1-0; John Dreyer, 24 mins, 1-1; Matthew Le Tissier, 41 mins, 2-1; Kingsley Black, 46mins 35secs, 2-2; Rod Wallace, 53 mins, 3-2; Wallace again, 71 mins, 4-2; Alan Shearer, 72 mins, 5-2; Paul Rideout, 84 mins, 6-2; Lars Elstrup, 85 mins, 6-3.

OTHER STRIKES: Town four saved and five wide; Southampton three saved, four wide, one netted shortly after offside whistle and one hit the bar. Corners: 6-5 to Southampton.

REFEREE: Ron Groves, Weston-Super-Mare — did well to keep up with the pace of the game.

YELLOW CARD: Danny Wilson, for a foul on Rod Wallace, obviously through frustration at his own mistake in losing possession, and unlucky to collect his fourth booking of the season.

ATTENDANCE: 14,014 — and well done the patient few hundred from Luton who kept cheering to the bitter end. **ENTERTAINMENT:** Memorable, but enjoyable only for the home fans, who saw the result go the way of a team that plays with flair and pace, and takes the risk of trying to score more than they concede.