

Sweeper system is an instant hit

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Reports: Brian Swain — Pictures: Josh Levy

THE FIRST big tactical change Ray Harford has made since he became manager of Luton Town had an impressive full debut at Hillsborough. He brought in a sweeper system, and it not only covered injury absences, but also got close to achieving that first elusive away victory of a year.

On a weekend when a £1 million offer for Roy Wegerle had been irresistible to the Town's directors, the only quibble I had about a good all-round performance was a familiar one about an attack that is not achieving its promise.

But that is a minor criticism in the context of the difficulties the Town overcame against a Sheffield Wednesday side whose revival had already seen them dispose of Liverpool in their previous home game.

The Town were hit by more injury blows before kick-off, then suffered the agony of seeing Marvin Johnson stretched off after 50 impressive minutes as sweeper.

They were one down at the time, and if they had been swamped as Hillsborough's supporters tried to roar on their team, we probably would not have been too surprised.

WILLIAMS TAKES OVER

Instead they re-organised and with Steve Williams brilliant as the second sweeper of the day, hit back to rescue a vital point.

And they well deserved it, with the Wednesday fans making it clear they thought the Town had won a moral victory. "You've got to beat teams like Luton at home if you're going to do any good," was the home moan as Hillsborough emptied.

The news that Wegerle was leaving had broken overnight, although no-one knows if we was going to be in the team at Sheffield if QPR had not come in with the chequebook.

David Beaumont's hopes of returning after a month's absence were dashed when he failed to get through a training session without adverse reaction, and then Kingsley Black went down with flu and Mick Kennedy was ruled out by a hamstring strain. The manager's response was to reorganise completely. He had experimented with a sweeper — Tim Allpress — at Crystal Palace in the Zenith Cup, but had to abandon that when David Preece and Danny Wilson got the red cards that will keep them out of the Town's next two matches.

At Hillsborough Marvin Johnson was sweeper, between and behind John Dreyer and Julian James in a back three. Tim Breacker and Richard Harvey

were pushed forward into a mobile five-man mid-field, and Breacker in particular revelled in his attacking role.

Harvey had to help out in defence more than Breacker, because Dave Bennett occasionally threatened to discomfort the Town's left flank, but eventually Bennett was seen off so effectively that he was already being jeered by the home fans before he was substituted.

Williams, Wilson and Preece were a solid midfield trio and ahead of them Lars Elstrup and Iain Dowie were very willing workers even if they still need time to find the extra sharpness needed to unlock experienced defences.

The performance at Sheffield confirmed for me that the Town have got it half right — they are not going to be easy touches for anyone, home or away. And that is despite the loss of top defenders through injury.

Marvin Johnson is now a better player because of the enforced challenge he has had to face. Dreyer had another excellent match, and 19-year-old James, in only his second full league appearance, was a dual success — as defender and then attacker with a dramatic first goal for the Town.

Midfield was less consistent, with Wilson still struggling to find his full form for 90 minutes. But his commitment and leadership was well to the fore, and Preece also kept probing away as the Town showed a welcome ability to play the ball through all departments.

BUILDING FROM THE BACK

If Alec Chamberlain's kicking let him down a couple of times, he more than made amends with three quality saves, and it was also a pleasure to see how many times he started Town moves by rolling the ball short to defenders who were willing to carry and pass and not try the big boot every time.

But the ability to avoid being murdered needs an extra element — the ability to deal fatal blows to the other team's defence, and that is in short supply at the moment. Eighteen goals in 17 league games is not enough to enable the defence to rest easy.

Dowie, completing his first year as a full-time pro, gives everything he has, but at this level experience is also important. It's coming, and I like the attitude that refuses to be over-awed. Defenders are always made well aware of his power and determination, and if he keeps improving at the rate of the past three months he is going to be another bonus.

Elstrup, much more of a footballer than just a goal-scorer, also needs time. He is in a strange country, settling into a new home, and meeting a strange

pitch in home games, and Roy Wegerle, for instance, who also came here from abroad, says it takes 12 months for a man to settle down to get on top of his job.

My impression from Hillsborough strengthened the belief I have held for most of this season: with a fully fit squad the Town are not short of being a very good side. And even with injuries they are remarkably good, and perhaps better than we should expect for a First Division club existing on Second Division support.

Despite the new formation they were looking pretty comfortable despite some hustling Wednesday attacking in the early stages, and the Town had the first clear chance when a quick break from Dowie's interception of a dodgy pass enabled Preece and Elstrup to set up a chance for Breacker. He side-footed a shot inches wide.

Wednesday were desperate for a good result, and played with a lot of passion and endeavour, but it came as a surprise when they snatched the lead. Full-back Phil King rattled the Town's bar with a long range shot. Failure to apply a big boot enabled King to regain possession and as he returned the ball into the penalty area David Hirst, Dreyer and James went for it. James got there first and smashed a clearance into Dreyer's face, from where it went into the net.

The Town refused to be rattled by that, and might have equalised when Preece Williams and Elstrup, adept at delivering a telling final pass, set up Dowie, but he snatched at the chance and blazed wide with a hurried shot from the edge of the box.

It was Elstrup's turn to shoot wide, on the turn after good work by Wilson down the right, but Johnson's twisted ankle five minutes into the second half came close to turning the game.

KEEPER TO THE RESCUE

After he was carried off, and while Williams was finding his right place in defence, Wednesday sensed they had a chance. They produced some rousing and hectic attacking and the crowd got behind them. But the Town survived, with the aid of an outstanding save by Chamberlain from Hirst and an offside flag

which ruled out Bennett's angled shot past the goalkeeper after Dalian Atkinson had been half-stopped.

Once Williams had got into position in front of Dreyer and James, instead of behind them, the Town clicked into their new shape again and settled down.

The crowd, seeing the balance shift once more, started to put pressure on their own men, and Wednesday's passing fell apart as they got too frantic in the effort to wrap it up.

The equaliser was a magic moment for James, who stayed upfield after a corner. Williams won the ball on the Town's right, delivered a perfect far post cross, and James took off to send a header bulletting into the net. And the man just behind him, ready to do the same, was Dreyer, the other defender involved in Sheffield's goal.

The reverse roused Wednesday again briefly, but Chamberlain made another good save from Bennett and Peter Shirtliff shot wide, and Wednesday were back-peddling for the last 15 minutes.

And they might have lost, because in the closing stages Dowie did brilliantly to control the ball and take it past a defender, only to shoot narrowly wide.



● STRIKING: Lars Elstrup puts his best foot forward, as the Town attack at Hillsborough.