



● ON THE BALL: John Dreyer, the new skipper, breaks out of defence under the watchful eyes of David Preece.

Pleased to have one in the bag

JIM RYAN was in no doubt that the opening day, and not two lost, on the opening day of his first full season in charge at Kenilworth Road.

His professor Ray Harford might agree: he is now manager at Winklesden, who lost 3-0 at home to Arsenal a few hours after he forecast in a national newspaper that his men would put the fear of God into the visitors.

Steve Coppell was happy with the point at Luton, and suggested that no team could be judged until half a dozen games had been played. He was delighted with the way his summer signings had settled in, with Eric Young's £250,000 transfer from Winklesden reuniting him with Andy Thorn.

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The managers' viewpoints

But he admitted: "We could have lost to Luton, so the draw is OK, with two home games coming up." Mr Ryan was pleased with the way his young men had come through. "We have got good kids. The hardest part is getting them to make the big jump into the First Division. They need someone to have a little bit of faith in them, and I am prepared to give them the opportunity until such time when it looks as though they are not going to make it."

"All the coaches like Ceri Hughes as a player, and we have our fingers crossed that he is going to make that last step. But we don't underestimate the size of the step for a 19-year-old. We are playing in a very difficult and cruel league."

Hughes was subdued by Jason Rees late in the game, but not because of his form. It was just to introduce a fresh pair of legs on an exhausting afternoon, said the manager.

BOTH MANAGERS made the point at Kenilworth Road on Saturday night that you cannot make judgements on football teams on the evidence of the first day of the season.

I know what they mean. I had contrasting thoughts, being disappointed that two home points had escaped, but at the same time encouraged by the quality of some of the team's football.

CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT

It got better as the match progressed, thanks to a goal that gave them a lift in the last few seconds of the first half.

Iain Dowie came to the rescue with a headed equaliser which did wonders for confidence, and led to an improved team performance after the break.

But one problem was that neat and entertaining football rarely looked like producing the decisive thrust in the penalty area.

Yet we should be grateful for a rarity — it was the first point the Town have managed on an opening day since John Moore's team went to Leicester in 1986, when Brian Stein's goal gave them a 1-1 draw.

A finisher of Stein's quality would be a Godsend today as a complement to Dowie's power and determination. Meanwhile much will rest on the man who has made immense progress in the past 12 months, and on Kingsley Black and Lars Elstrup.

Brian Swain reports Pictures: Josh Levy

We know Black is quality, and it shone through on a day when he was playing his first league game after a stomach muscle operation in the summer.

Elstrup is still not the player we thought he was when Ray Harford signed him — but after a nervy start he began to show his touch as the Town got more into the game, particularly when dropping off and flicking on passes.

If that can be adapted to get him into the box for shooting chances more often, one of my worries will be eased.

TEENAGER FLOURISHES

Saturday's game went some way towards dispelling fears about midfield, although the Town are short of injury cover in that department following the sales of Danny Wilson and Mick Kennedy.

Ceri Hughes, 19, justified his selection in Wilson's old position with a performance that grew in maturity and flowered brightly when the Town enjoyed their best spell, in the second half.

David Preece had a quiet game, while Darren McDonough gave everything as the defensive man in the middle. He might also have added the firepower that must be found from midfield when he did well to get up late to meet a hooked cross by Dowie, then spoiled with a volley on the stretch which went high into the terrace.

As Jim Ryan said, it was a case of deserving credit for even getting there — the easy option would be to fail to make contact at all.

Defensively the Town were caught a couple of times by a team that has had £1.7million spent on it in the close season.

But I like the central partnership of David Beaumont and new skipper John Dreyer, and they were exonerated of blame by the manager for the opening goal, in the 15th minute.

Dreyer had been played into a spot of bother by Julian James and hacked down Ian Wright five yards outside the penalty area.

PERFECT HEADER

The free kick was as expected: Glyn Hodges floated it in and among a rush of dummy runs Eric Young rose and glanced a perfect header into the far corner, past Alec Chamberlain's left hand.

Earlier Wright had been presented with a clearer chance when Beaumont and Tim Bracker got into a tangle and Beaumont gave the ball away. Alec Chamberlain saved, and later kept the point intact with a tip-over from John Salako and a low diving save from Andy Gray.

Had either of those late efforts counted it would have been rough justice on the Town, who turned on the style in the second half without getting to close quarters.

A lot of threat came from Black on the right, and



● HEADING FOR SUCCESS: Iain Dowie is too quick for Andy Thorn and gets in first to put the Town level. The picture on the facing page was taken a split second later.

Town Match Verdict ★ ★ ★

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● SEASON'S FIRST: Iain Dowie's header leaves £1 million goalkeeper Nigel Martyn unable to do anything but watch the ball hit the net and it's 1-1 in the last minute of the first half.

FOILED AT THE DOUBLE

And he might have got a winner too, when Nigel Martyn was much relieved to save a stinging 20-yard ployer and then cling on to make it a double save. Dowie incredibly got in behind his own shot to try to meet the rebound.

The problem was that no-one else got a shot on target, except for an early drive by Black.

Palace defended with nine men during the Town's second half supremacy.

Others will do the same on the pitch they love to hate and the Town's ability to overcome deep defence will be the key to this season's success.

But as two managers said, it's too early to judge the strengths and abilities of anyone with a 38-match season only 30 minutes old so far.

Match details

LUTON TOWN 1 C. PALACE 1
 (Half-time: 0-0)

TOWN: Chamberlain; Breacker, Beaumont, Dreyer, James, Hughes (Rees 81 mins), McDonough, Preece; Black, Dowie, Elstrup. Other subs: Harvey, Salako, Shaw, Hodges (Dennis 86 mins), Gray, Thomas, Barber, Wright. Other subs: O'Reilly.
 THE GOALS: Eric Young header from free kick, 15 minutes; Iain Dowie header from Julian James cross 68th minute.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Both teams six saved and four wide. Corners 5-3 to Palace.

REFEREE: Alan Gunn, Sussex — kept it flowing well and sorted out minor scuffles with a persuasive chat.

ATTENDANCE: 9,583, a drop of 800 on Palace's visit for the final home game of last season, when the result was so much more desperate for the Town and their fans. This time a lot more Palace followers seemed to be here found Luton friends to buy their guest tickets.

ENTERTAINMENT: A bit of a mixture, with both sides struggling sometimes in the heat. The Town first half until Iain Dowie administered a tonic in the second half, until the last ten minutes, was better, and more encouraging.



● KINKLETOES: Kingsley Black takes them on two at a time.