Sports News

Town match verdict ★

● HEADS UP: Sean Farrell is outjumped as Lars Elstrup watches from the wing.

MYSTERY OF A TEAM THAT CAN BE SO GOOD ONE WEEK, SO BAD THE NEXT

Sports Editor Brian Swain reports

DOWNCAST and uncharacteristically depressed, manager Jim Ryan was as baffled as the fans as to why Luton Town played so badly against a team they had beaten at The Dell in September.

Southampton played well — mainly because they were allowed to.

POOR

Both defences were poor, but the malaise ran right through the Town ranks.

Consistency is the elusive quality that has to be found to prevent a slide further down the First Division table.

After considering a recall for Steve Williams at the end of his ban, the manager opted to keep the team that had played so well at Bramall Lane a week earlier.

They deserved their chance, he figured.

All they had to do was to continue where they left off at Sheffield, and Southampton would be outplayed.

LEAD

But it rarely looked like happening.

After falling behind to an excellent early strike the Town hit back to snatch the lead.

Then they threw it away with a kamikaze approach you might see from a junior schoolboy team.

The temptation is to blame it all on the defence.

Yet if forwards are regularly losing possession and the midfield rarely winning it, too much is asked of a back four to carry the whole team, even in a home game.

Southampton were the better side on the day, despite being without Russell Osman and Jimmy Case.

And while the Town mystified their fans by being so much below par the Saints put on one of their best performances of the season.

With the Town so much off colour almost every man suffered by comparison with his opposite number.

The result was that the visitors found it easy to win the ball, and were then given the freedom of the park to use it as they pleased.

ESCAPES

And as well as scoring four goals they were close to making it six, with Neil Ruddock hitting a post when it was 4-2 and Alan Shearer shooting at Julian James on the goal-line after Rod Wallace had broken free and rounded Alec Chamberlain in injury time.

The Town looked only a little better when two substitutions were made, one each side of Southampton's fourth goal.

The sight of Steve Williams warming up for a return against his former club brought mixed cheers.

CHOICE

Some turned to jeers when it was seen that Mark Pembridge, who had done remarkably well in a poor team performance, was the man to be pulled off.

The popular choice was Durron McDonough, but the second change ended his passable spell in midfield — David Beaumont was taken off to let Iain Dowie join Sean Farrell in attack, and McDonough, switched to centre-half, immediately looked much more comfortable.

CHASE

But by that time there was an unrealistic look about the game — Southampton were too clear, not under too much pressure, and looking dangerous on the break.

The Town had to chase the game and at least they kept going. But there was not a lot of conviction about it.

Both defences had problems, with Alexei Cheredink at one end and John Dreyer at the other close to giving away soft early goals.

The alarm bells rang quickly as the Town back four played like men who did not believe in themselves, although the opening goal was a cracker.

It started with Barry Horne winning the ball in his own half and laying a attack down Southampton's right. Cheredink, Shearer and then Alan McLoughlin kept the move going down the flank, and when McLoughlin's hard driven cross arrived Wallace had timed his run perfectly to knock in the opener.

The Town's reply was equally well constructed and taken Pembridge sent Farrell down the left wing and from his cross Lars Elstrup, who seemed scarcely to have been involved until then, brilliantly shot his 14th goal of the season.

MOBILE

Two minutes later Pembridge and Farrell combined again, this time on the right, and from the striker's centre across the face of the goal full-back James was well forward to score from close range.

On a better day that would have been the platform for a full recovery from the early stresses and strains.

But instead Southampton made it 2-2 with the game's third goal in four minutes, with the Town about as mobile as Stonehenge as Cheredink threaded a diagonal pass through for Matthew Le Tissier to help himself to his 14th goal of the season.

He struck again 56 seconds after the interval to complete another good passing move and it was just about all over when Shearer laid on Wallace's second goal in the 62nd minute.

The Town were rocked, and the post saved them from further disaster when Ruddock got in an angled shot after a corner was not cleared.

Hope rose briefly with 12 minutes to go when Elstrup was nudged off the ball by Ruddock as he tried to reach a cross by Preece and Dreyer converted his third penalty of the season.

STOPPED

Southampton went through a minor crisis of confidence after that, but Dowie and Williams both saw shots stopped, and in injury time should have scored their fifth — Shearer had all the goal to aim at and only James on the line, but managed to drive his shot straight at the defender.

But knowing it could have been worse was not much consolation for Town fans.

Pictures: Josh Levy

● PRESSURE: Sean Farrell and Saints goalkeeper Tim Flowers watch a Town attack break down.

● CELEBRATIONS: Kingsley Black congratulates Julian James on his first goal of the season, to make it 2-1 to the Town after 26 minutes.

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 3 SOUTHAMPTON 4

Half-time: 2-2

TOWN: Chamberlain; James, Dreyer, Beaumont (Dowie 67 mins), Harvey; Pembridge (Williams 57 mins), McDonough, Preece; Black, Farrell, Elstrup.

SAINTS: Flowers; Cherednik, Moore (Davis 62 mins), Ruddock, Adams; Horne, Cockerill, McLoughlin; Shearer, Le Tissier, Wallace. Other sub: Getsmonov.

GOALS: Rod Wallace for Saints, 9 mins, end of a very good passing movement; Lars Elstrup, 24 mins, cracker from Sean Farrell's left-wing cross; Julian James, 26 mins, from Farrell's pull-back from the right; Matthew Le Tissier for Saints, 28 mins, Town defence wide open as Cheredink's through ball sliced through them; Le Tissier again, 56 seconds into the second half, nice control, run and shot from Cheredink's pass; Wallace, 62 mins, Town caught chasing and exposed by good passes; John Dreyer, penalty, 78 mins, after Neil Ruddock shoved Elstrup.

OTHER STRIKES: Town eight saved and two wide; Southampton six saved, nine wide and one hit outside of a post. Corners: 6-6.

ATTENDANCE: 9,021, first time this season gate was lower than for the corresponding fixture a year ago (by nearly 400).

REFEREE: Ray Lewis, Great Bookham — not up to his usual standard, with a slow linesman not helping.

BOOKED: Le Tissier, time-wasting; Horne, foul on Williams; Williams, foul on Cockerill 21 minutes after going on as sub.

ENTERTAINMENT: It was probably an excellent match, with good attacking and poor defending, but the result spoiled it for home fans — scoring three and still losing at home made it a miserable afternoon.

And the boss is baffled too

Managers' viewpoint

HAVING seen seven and six goals put past his team on previous visits to Kenilworth Road, Southampton boss Chris Nicholl hit on an unusual preparation strategy for what he saw as his final ordeal by plastic.

GLAD

He is one of many managers who will be glad to see artificial pitches banned.

For previous visits the Saints trained on plastic every day for a week — and got stuffed.

"This time we didn't — I thought 'Sod that, we'll train normally' and the result was our best performance ever on that pitch."

GOALS

Most observers thought poor defences contributed to the fun and games, but Mr. Nicholl expressed the other viewpoint — there was good attacking play too, and very good goals at both ends.

Town boss Jim Ryan was almost morose, plunged into despair again by the men who had given him elation at Sheffield just a week earlier.

"I wish I could explain it, but who can?" he asked. "It's something we will have to work on, to get more consistency from week to week.

CHOICE

"Southampton are a good side and deserve credit for their play. But our defensive play was woeful. Defensively, including midfield players and forwards, we didn't work hard enough nor defend well enough.

"We lost the battle of midfield and it was generally a very poor team performance. There is no doubt that on the day Southampton were the better team."

CHOICE

Team selection had needed a close decision between Steve Williams and Mark Pembridge.

Said the boss: "With hindsight perhaps we should have changed the side, but I felt that we had built up a momentum at Sheffield which would have carried on into the Southampton game. It didn't, and no-one knows why."

● GOAL: Julian James knocks in the Town's second.

The First Division

	HOME					AWAY					
	P	W	D	L	F	A	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liverpool	21	9	1	0	26	5	6	3	2	15	11	49
**Arsenal	22	8	3	0	25	5	6	5	0	16	5	48
C. Palace	22	7	3	0	16	9	6	3	3	16	11	45
Leeds	22	7	2	2	24	10	4	4	3	12	13	39
*Man Utd	22	7	2	2	32	10	4	4	2	13	13	38
Tottenham	22	7	3	2	26	15	2	4	4	8	12	34
Chelsea	22	7	4	1	20	13	2	1	7	16	26	32
Wimbledon	22	5	4	3	18	15	3	3	4	16	17	31
Nottm For	21	5	2	3	18	13	3	4	4	18	18	30
Man City	21	6	1	3	16	13	1	7	3	14	17	29
Norwich	22	7	1	4	20	21	2	1	7	8	18	29
Everton	22	6	3	3	18	9	1	3	6	8	16	27
So'ton	22	5	2	3	18	12	2	2	8	15	28	25
A. Villa	21	4	5	0	13	6	1	4	7	7	14	24
Luton Town	22	4	4	3	14	11	2	1	8	11	25	23
Coventry	22	4	4	3	16	12	1	2	8	5	16	21
Sunderland	22	3	4	4	10	10	1	2	8	14	25	18
Derby Co	21	2	6	3	13	17	2	0	8	6	21	18
QPR	22	3	2	5	15	15	1	3	8	11	26	17
Sheff Utd	21	2	2	6	7	14	1	2	8	6	23	13

** Two points deducted. * One point deducted.

The season so far

THE TOWN's results, scorers, attendances and league table position:

August
25 C. Palace (h) 1-1 (Dowie) ..... 9,583 —
28 Arsenal (a) 1-2 (Elstrup) ..... 32,723 —
September
1 Southampton (a) 2-1 (Elstrup 2) 14,878 8
4 Man United (h) 0-1 ..... 12,576 8
8 Leeds Utd (h) 1-0 (Black) 10,185 8
15 QPR (a) 1-6 (Hughes) 10,196 11
22 Coventry (h) 1-0 (Dowie) 8,336 7
29 Norwich (a) 3-1 (Elstrup 3) 12,794 6
October
20 Sunderland (a) 0-2 ..... 20,025 8
27 Everton (h) 1-1 (Elstrup) 10,047 7
November
3 Derby (a) 1-2 (Black) 15,008 8
10 Liverpool (a) 0-4 ..... 35,2017 13
17 Man City (h) 2-2 (Dowie, Dreyer pen) 9,564 12
24 A. Villa (h) 2-0 (Black, Elstrup) 10,071 9
December
1 N. Forest (a) 2-2 (Elstrup 2) 16,498 10
8 Arsenal (h) 1-1 (Dreyer pen) 12,506 11
16 C. Palace (a) 0-1 ..... 15,195 12
22 Spurs (a) 1-2 (Dowie) 27,007 12
26 Sheff Utd (h) 0-1 ..... 10,004.12
29 Chelsea (h) 2-0 (OG, Black) 11,050 12
1991
January
1 Wimbledon (a) 0-2 ..... 4,521 14
12 Southampton (h) 3-4 (Elstrup, James, Dreyer pen) 9,021 15

LEAGUE APPEARANCES, including as sub in brackets: Ever-presents, 22 each: Chamberlain, Dreyer, Preece, Elstrup; Black 21; Dowie 19 (2); Hughes 17; Harvey 17 (2), Beaumont 15 (3), Johnson 13 (2), Williams 13 (1), McDonough 12 (4), Rees 8 (6), James 7 (3), Farrell 3 (6), Pembridge 2, Nogan (4), Breacker 8. Number of players used, 22 games: 18. Last season's total: 27.

LEAGUE GOALS: Elstrup 11, Dowie and Black 4, Dreyer 3 pens, Hughes 1, James 1, OG 1 (Cundy, Chelsea).

THE FA CUP

January
5 Sheff Utd (a) 3-1 (Farrell, Elstrup 2) 13,897

APPEARANCES: One each by Chamberlain, James, Dreyer, Beaumont, Harvey, Pembridge, McDonough, Preece, Elstrup, Farrell, Black.

GOALS: Elstrup 2, Farrell 1.

THE RUMBELOWS CUP

September
25 Bradford (h) 1-1 (Harvey) 5,120
October
10 Bradford (a) 1-1 (Black) — lost on pens 6,180

APPEARANCES: Chamberlain 2, Dreyer 2, Beaumont 2, Hughes 2, Preece 2, Black 2, Dowie 2, Harvey 2, Rees 1 (1), James 1 (1), Nogan 1 (1), Breacker 1, Elstrup 1, Williams 1, Johnson (1).

GOALS: Harvey and Black one each.

THE ZENITH DATA SYSTEMS CUP

December
25 W. Ham (h) 5-1 (Farrell 2, Rees, Elstrup, Black) 5,759

APPEARANCES: One each by Chamberlain, James, Harvey, Williams, McDonough, Dreyer, Elstrup, Rees, Farrell, Pembridge, Black. One each as sub: Beaumont and Nogan.

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