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Sports News

Home defeat blame shared by everyone says the boss

THE TOWN'S crestfallen players were not even given the consolation of believing they had been beaten by one of the best teams in the division when manager David Pleat spoke after Saturday's defeat.

He joined the general praise for the sharpness of 20-year-old Andrew Cole, a former FA School of Excellence boy who some of us remember starring in an FA Youth Cup game against the Town a couple of years ago.

Arsenal reject

Arsenal decided to let him go for £500,000 during the summer, and he looked a snip.

He is keen to prove that George Graham made a mistake in giving him the elbow.

Mr. Pleat accepted that Bristol City had done a good job at Kenilworth Road, but added: "I don't see them as a top six side, although they will be all right."

He ordered Sunday training for his men after a longer than usual dressing room inquest, but said that was just normal, and not a punishment routine for a poor display.

On Saturday night he was concerned not to say too much in the heat of the moment.

He summed up Bristol City's game as "when they broke they scored."

He added: "It was a bad goal that gave them the comfort of an early lead.

"They coped very well with our efforts to penetrate them, although we had a lot of the play.

Not good enough

"We didn't pass the ball well enough, nor get round the back of them."

The manager had no choice but to stand by his young men, but suggested that perhaps some of them are not as good as they think they are.

The inference was that being in the league side at Luton may not be as big a deal as it is at other clubs.

But for Saturday's shambles everyone had to share responsibility.

"No-one is blameless," said Mr. Pleat. "We were not clever enough to beat three centre-backs.

"And it is important that senior players must play well and carry the team.

"But we're fit. We're workers. We're fighters. And I still have faith in our young players.

"But it was a shame we didn't have a Mick Harford to keep tossing it up to."

Sorted out

City manager Denis Smith was delighted with his side's show. It was, he said, just what he had hoped for.

They had been held to a 3-3 draw at home by Portsmouth in their opening match, when City's defending left something to be desired.

At Kenilworth Road they had sorted out that aspect of their game, and with the pace of Cole and the experience of 'Jackie' Dziekanowski his side was capable of scoring goals.

The Polish international had a quiet afternoon, and was subbed, but Cole, well supported by Leroy Rosenior, more than compensated for that.

Managers' viewpoints

● DAVID PLEAT: "We were not clever enough."

● TRYING: Steve Claridge, on his home debut, is outjumped by City goalkeeper Keith Welch.

● DEJECTED: The expressions on the faces of Des Linton and Steve Claridge show their feelings as they walk off.

MATCH DETAILS

Luton Town 0 Bristol City 3
Half-time: 0-1

LUTON TOWN: Petterson; Linton, Peake, Dreyer, James (Johnson 89 mins); Hughes, Kamara, Preece, Campbell (Oakes 60 mins); Claridge, Gray.

BRISTOL CITY: Welch; Mitchell, Osman, Thompson, Bryant, Scott; Mellon, Shelton (Edwards 86 mins), Dziekanowski (Harrison 65 mins); Cole, Rosenior.

THE GOALS: All three on the break — Micky Mellon, 12 minutes, from right wing run and cross by Andrew Cole; John Dreyer own goal, 51 minutes, under pressure, turning in Cole's fierce near-post cross; man of the match Cole, 75 minutes, solo run and low shot from flicked-on long free kick.

OTHER ATTEMPTS: Town four saved and four wide; City three saved and four wide. Corners: 10-1 to the Town.

REFEREE: Ray Bigger, Denton, Norfolk. Awfully finicky about unimportant matters which did not help the flow of the game. But he was not the only man on the pitch who did not have a very good day.

BOOKED: City sub Jerry Harrison, in injury time, for a foul on Town sub Marvin Johnson.

ATTENDANCE: 7,926, only a little higher than last season's lowest, at the first home game of the season. Disenchantment with the board?

ENTERTAINMENT: Wretched for home fans, with no brain to beat a sweeper system at one end and no pace to hold quicksilver Andrew Cole on the break at the other.

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Town match verdict ★

PATIENT CITY SET THE TRAP AND VICTIMS RUSH INTO IT

● ON THE BALL: David Preece, who ran and ran in the attempt to put a spark of life into the Town's attacking.

Brian Swain reports from Kenilworth Road

WITH little brain in attack, and not much pace in defence, the Town gave their fans an awful first home day of the season.

Bristol City came to Kenilworth Road with a game plan that might have been risky if they had been facing a sharp attack.

Instead they set a simple trap, and the Town walked right into it.

Manager David Pleat spread the blame evenly as the side turned in an abject display against visitors whose tactical prowess made the Town look like a bunch of kids offering to be mugged.

Pleased

Bristol City went home rightly pleased with themselves.

They had not played the consistent flowing football that was the hallmark of winning Town teams in the past.

But they did not need to be that good on a day when almost everyone in the Town side failed to do himself justice.

City defended with great composure, with the sweeper system so watertight that goalkeeper Keith Welch did not have a serious save to make.

And the three goals they scored were models of simplicity and speed.

Scramble

The Town got dragged into a scramble at one end, and then found themselves drawn on to the knock-out punches at the other.

Skipper Trevor Peake, who was 35 last month, was skinned by the pace of Andrew Cole, the former Arsenal striker.

The 20-year-old made two goals and scored the third to look a bargain at £500,000.

By contrast Steve Claridge had the bad luck to make his full debut on a day when the Town never looked like earning their first point of the season.

Wrath

One of the smallest first-day crowds for years suffered 90 minutes of frustration, and some of them stayed behind to vent their wrath on directors.

Perhaps we are about to see all too painfully the real price of the sales the manager has had to make.

He is ready to put his faith in young men, because he has little choice, but young and old alike failed to do the business on Saturday.

The biggest failure was in the failure to unsettle City's back five, where Russell Osman tidied up behind two other centre-backs.

It cried out for the Town to get men down the flanks and round the back, but it happened too rarely to give us much hope of success.

Ruled out

Jamie Campbell, the most inexperienced of the younsters, did his best, and was unlucky with a volley which would have been an equaliser if the offside flag had not been waving before he hit it.

On a day when Roger Bigger looked a pretty poor ref the Town were also out of luck when Philip Gray was sent sprawling by Matt Bryant. It looked a clear penalty to many, but not to Mr. Bigger.

The Town needed a lucky break to push their effort and endeavour over the very fine line between success and failure.

Solid wall

There no shortage of work, but it was too often misdirected.

The visitors put up a brick wall of defence and the Town had no other idea than bang their heads against it.

And as that failed frustration crept in.

A midfield which ought to have been cool enough to be ready to defend was too often caught upfield in the frantic effors to break down City's defence in depth.

Chris Kamara, for instance, is always keen to get involved.

But despite his great experience he was one of those who got sucked into the suffocating and overcrowded half of the field where there was so much endeavour and so little inventiveness.

Width

I thought Campbell was the best at giving the Town width, but Ceri Hughes was too often drawn into the maelstrom in the middle to play into the visitors' hands.

The Town had much more of the ball than City, but did so much less with it.

The defence, exposed by City's quick breaks, found it impossible to cover the spaces given up so easily when moves broke down at the other end.

City simply swamped the area in front of their goal, and waited for the chance to launch smash and grab raids, usually starting with a long ball into space.

Corners

While the Town won 10-1 on corners, City could easily have gone home with a bigger win.

Andy Petterson pulled off one very good tip-over save, and Cole wasted a good chance before getting the goal he well deserved.

The Town started well, with Claridge being crowded out when Gray set up a half-chance.

Campbell's disallowed effort, from a right wing cross by Hughes, came with only three minutes on the clock.

Charged

But City settled after that, and Hughes had to work hard in defence to charge down a shot by Leroy Rosenior after a mistake by Des Linton let in attacking fullback Brian Mitchell.

The Town were pressing forward, trying to work out a way of penetrating the City rearguard when they were hit by the day's first sucker-punch, in the 12th minute.

Cole broke quickly on the right, beat the Town defence for speed, and had delivered an acurate pass across the face of goal while the cover was still rushing about behind him.

Micky Mellon helped himself to a simple goal, with only Petterson to worry about, and that set the pattern for the rest of the afternoon.

Nowhere

The Town huffed and puffed and got nowhere.

At the interval we hoped that Mr. Pleat would sort things out, but City boss Denis Smith must have had the easier task.

All he had to say to his men was to keep going as they were and they could hardly fail.

The second goal came six minutes after the break. John Dreyer was penalised near the half-way line for a high challenge on Rosenior.

Own goal

Osman whacked the free kick long towards the right wing, Cole broke clear again, and his hard low cross was met by an attempted clearance by Dreyer, who deflected it into his own net.

David Thompson, another City defender, was the man pressurising Dreyer, but a couple of yards short of making contact.

Cole shot wide after going clear on another run in pursuit of a long ball, and the pattern settled into a less than attractive one for the home fans.

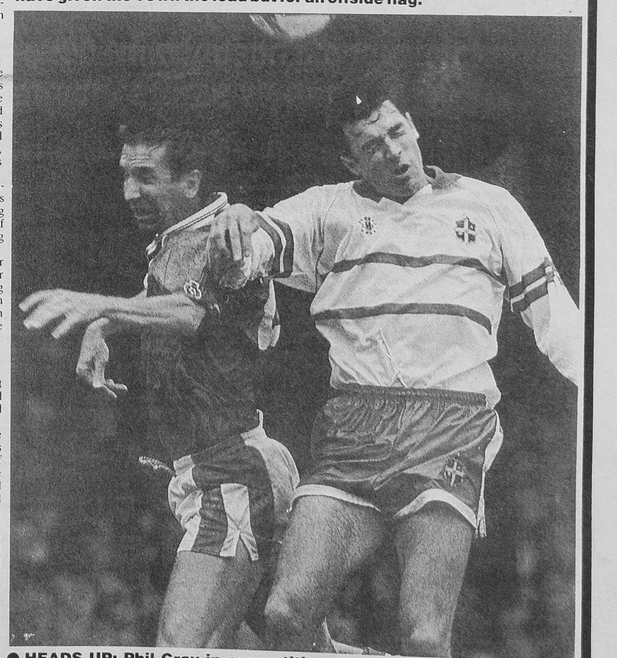
Arrogant

City defended almost arrogantly, conceded corners cheerfully, and broke effectively.

It did not change when Scott Oakes was sent on in place of Campbell, and the Kenilworth Road misery was completed with 15 minutes to go. Another long free kick was sent into the Town half, Cole collected, and his pace left Peake and Dreyer stranded.

The low angled shot was hit perfectly and City had completed one of the easiest victories they are likely to enjoy this season.

● UNLUCKY: Jamie Campbell lets fly with an early volley which would have given the Town the lead but for an offside flag.



● HEADS UP: Phil Gray in competition with Dave Thompson, one of City's three centre-backs.

ACTION PICTURES BY JOSH LEVY