Christmas whine turns to champagne

Match facts

THE MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Sommer; James, Peake, Johnson, Thomas; Telfer, Allen (Oakes 70 mins), Waddock, Preece; Dixon (Harrison 42 mins), Marshall, Goalkeeper Davis.

READING: Hislop; Jones, Wdowczyk, Bernal, Gooding; Taylor (Lambert 81 mins), Pirkiniemi, Osborn, Gilkes; Quinn, Lovell.

Unused subs Hartenberger and goalkeeper Sheppard.

GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town seven saved and three wide; Reading three saved, three wide, and injury-time shot by Stuart Lovell hit the outside of a post.

REFEREE: Garmin Singh, Wolverhampton: absolutely excellent, keeping the game flowing and using common sense instead of the book.

BOOKED: No-one, although Mick Gooding of Reading might well have been for a trip to stop Dwight Marshall continuing a run towards goal.

ATTENDANCE: 11,623, Elm Park's biggest of the season so far, boosted by 1,805 from Luton, 300 more than the the Town's previous largest following of the campaign, at Watford.

ENTERTAINMENT: Interesting rather than riveting.

WELL COVERED: Kerry Dixon outnumbered at Reading, with Andy Bernal getting a lift on the Luton striker's shoulder

THE BIGGEST crowd of the season, including a massive following from Luton, turned up at Elm Park on Boxing Day in the hope of seeing a Christmas cracker.

What we got was more like cold turkey, as two hard working teams cancelled each other out with neither showing a festive touch of flair to break the deadlock.

It was appreciated by the managers more than the fans, because the point each said deserved kept them in contention.

We had had to wait a long time for the match to burst into some semblance of life, when Scott Oakes was sent on as sub, a player committed to running with the ball and attacking, in place of Paul Allen, who had played a solid holding role in midfield.

Oakes added a new dimension, and was unlucky not to score, although Reading also went close in injury time, when a cross-shot by Stuart Lovell hit the outside of the far post.

Mr Pleat was able to point out that the Town's composed defending had frustrated Reading to half-chances apart from that opening. The only other time they threatened was on the hour mark, when Simon Osborn burst clear after playing a one-two with Jimmy Quinn. Juergen Sommer repaired the damage to the hole that had appeared in the centre of the Town defence by saving at Osborn's feet.

The Town defended well upfield, with Reading often caught offside home fans chanted "Boring, boring, Luton' as they suffered agonies of frustration.

A week earlier Reading had put four goals past Wolves. Six years ago left winger Michael Gilkes had run the Town ragged at Wembley when Reading scored four in the Simod Cup final.

It never looked like happening again on Monday, when the Royals were forced to pile-on as goal kicks. As they became less composed in the bid to appease their fans the Town looked much more likely to score on the break.

"Reading are a very composed team, but we made them get a little anxious," said Mr Pleat. "We had the greater momentum but couldn't make quality chances. But I was pleased that we had some chances."

He rightly picked out Gary Waddock as the Town's man of the match. He was superb, tackling solidly every time and always ready to take the short pass out of defence and twist play to attack.

But David Preece, so often the Town's best man in recent weeks, was out of touch after his ankle injury, and if he does not risk further debut the Town attack.

The midfields cancelled out other out, with Phil Parkinson doing the Waddock job for Reading, concentrating on reducing the service to Kerry Dixon.

And he was just as effective against John Hartson, after Dixon limped off with a hamstring pull, with Allen taking over the role against Stanford.

Waddock's return from suspension relegated Mark Harrison to the bench, and the decision left him boiling hard for action when he was sent on.

The last 20 minutes was the highlight for Town fans, with Oakes quickening the pace.

He had a good chance on goal by the wall from a free kick on time, then forced Shaka Hislop to make the save of the match over a thundering 25-yard drive.

READING 0
LUTON TOWN 0

CORNERED: Dwight Marshall battling for possession at Reading.

Luton Town's season at a glance

DATE... OPPONENTS... RESULT... TOWN SCORERS... ATTENDANCE... LEAGUE POSITION

ENDSLEIGH LEAGUE DIV I

		August		
13	West Brom	(H)	1-1 (Oakes)	8,640
20	Derby Co	(A)	0-0	13,060
27	Sunderland	(H)	1-2 (Hartson, Hughes)	5,918
30	Tranmere	(A)	2-4 (Hughes, Hartson)	5,480
			September	
3	Port Vale	(H)	1-0 (Marshall)	6,541
10	Burnley	(H)	0-1	8,991
17	Bolton	(A)	0-3	7,764
17	Watford	(A)	4-2 (Telfer 2, Dixon, Oakes)	8,880
24	Millwall	(A)	0-0	7,150
			October	
1	Bristol City	(H)	0-1	6,633
8	Stoke City	(A)	2-1 (Marshall, Preece)	11,712
15	Middlesboro	(H)	5-1 (Marshall 2, Preece, Hartson, cg)	8,412
22	Sheffield Utd	(A)	3-1 (James, Dixon, cg)	13,317
29	Barnsley	(H)	0-1	7,217
			November	
1	Grimsby Tn	(H)	1-2 (Oakes)	5,839
5	Wolves	(H)	3-2 (Preece, Marshall, Dixon)	26,749
12	Oldham Ath	(A)	0-0	7,907
19	Portsmouth	(H)	2-0 (Dixon, Preece)	7,218
26	Swindon	(A)	2-1 (Dixon Oakes)	9,455
			December	
3	Sheffield Utd	(H)	3-6 (Hartson, cg, Johnson, pen)	5,011
11	Derby	(H)	0-0	6,400
17	West Brom	(A)	0-1	14,392
26	Reading	(A)	0-0	
27	Sunderland	(H)	3-0 (Hughes, Johnson)	
31	Notts County	(A)		
			January	
2	Charlton Ath	(H)		
14	Barnsley	(A)		
21	Wolves	(A)		
			February	
4	Oldham Ath	(H)		
11	Grimsby	(A)		
18	Swindon	(H)		
21	Portsmouth	(A)		
25	Bristol City	(A)		
			March	
4	Millwall	(H)		
7	Port Vale	(H)		
11	Southend	(A)		
18	Tranmere	(A)		
21	Burnley	(A)		
25	Watford	(H)		
			April	
1	Bolton	(A)		
8	Notts County	(H)		
15	Sunderland	(A)		
17	Reading	(H)		
22	Charlton Ath	(A)		
29	Middlesboro	(A)		
			May	
6	Stoke City	(H)		

COCA-COLA CUP (First round)

		August		
26	Fulham	(H)	1-1 (Oakes)	3,287
23	Fulham	(A)	1-1 (Marshall)	5,134

Who's who

GOALS... APPEARANCES

League goals		
Marshall	James	24
Dixon	Peake	24
Preece	Johnson	24
Hartson	Telfer	24
Oakes	Preece	24
Hughes	Thomas	18 (2)
Telfer	Marshall	18 (5)
James	Waddock	16
Johnson	Oakes	17 (6)
Own goals	Dixon	16 (2)
Assists	Hartson	9 (9)
Telfer	Hughes	8 (1)
Hartson	Greene	6
Preece	Linton	5 (2)
Oakes	Skelton	3 (1)
Thomas	Allen	3 (1)
Hughes	Houghton	3
Johnson	Williams	1 (1)
James	Woodstord	(1)
	Davis	(1)

CUP GOALS... APPEARANCES

Coca-Cola goals		
Oakes	Telfer	2
Marshall	Preece	2
Dixon	Hughes	2
Sommer	Dixon	2
James	Oakes	1 (1)
Greene	Marshall	1 (1)
Allen	Hartson	1
Johnson	Skelton	(1)

FA Cup		
Johnson	James	2
Peake	Peake	2
Johnson	Johnson	2
Telfer	Telfer	2
Preece	Preece	2
Hartson	Hartson	2
Oakes	Oakes	1
Hughes	Hughes	1
Telfer	Marshall	1
Thomas	Waddock	1
Dixon	Dixon	1
Allen	Allen	1
Sommer	Sommer	1
Davis	Davis	1

Sunderland match details
LUTON TOWN: Sommer; James, Peake, Johnson, Thomas; Telfer, Waddock, Preece (Sutton 80 mins), Oakes; Hartson, Marshall (Allman 88 mins), Goalkeeper Davis. SUNDERLAND: Chamberlain; Kubicki, McMahon, Ball, Bennett, Gray, Ord, Terry, Cunningham (Howey 33 mins), Smith; Phil Gray, Russell, Quinn. Unused sub Atkinson, goalkeeper Norman. THE GOALS: 1-0 22 mins: Scott Oakes low drive, from near lay-off by Dwight Marshall 26 mins: Oakes again, shot on the turn from low cross by Paul Telfer; 3-0 48 mins: Kevin Johnson, from a corner, header by a defender deflected into his own net by Mitchell Thomas. OTHER ATTEMPTS: Town four saved and six wide; Sunderland four saved and six wide. Crowd: 9,5 1a (at Roker Park). REFEREE: John Holbrook, Ludlow. Not always on, and the yellow cards were very hands. BOOKED: David Preece for a foul on Shaun Cunningham, who had got away with a blatant one on Preece earlier; Dwight Marshall, for playing on and setting after being given offside. ATTENDANCE: 8,952, Kenilworth Road's highest of the season so far, and including about 1,000 Sunderland fans. ENTERTAINMENT: Perfect to complete the holiday, with the Town much too good for Sunderland on a very wet pitch.

REPORTS BY BRIAN SWAIN
PICTURES BY GARETH OWEN

Rovers gift rivals a late Christmas box

BARTON ROVERS 1
CHALFONT ST PETER 2

ROVERS slipped to fourth place in the Diadora League Division Two after a bright start in which they took the lead at Chalfont on Boxing Day morning.

They took the lead in the 21st minute as the product of a lovely move.

Andy Linsell hit the ball across the box and Gordon Gadle was on the spot to volley in his 16th goal of the season in fine style.

Five minutes later Gadle produced some more fine work when he got to the line and squared the ball across the goal.

But there was no Barton player on hand to provide the final touch.

In the 31st minute Gadle was again a threat to the Chalfont goal with a header that hit the crossbar. Rebound met again and Barton continued to be well on top.

But three minutes before the break Jez Warner had a shot blocked and the home side broke away to mount an attack at the other end which resulted in Darren Stone scrambling home the equalizer by the far post.

Barton, having dominated the first half, were confident that they could pick themselves up and make sure of the points after the break.

But thing went wrong 18 minutes into the second half when a linesman flagged for a goal-kick to Chalfont which was disputed by the Rovers.

Warner had chased the ball to the line and had his foot on it before it went over.

Despite the protests that it had not gone out of play, the linesman gave the goal kick and from it Chalfont again broke up the field and Lance Cadogan raced on to the long punt rightfold to draw Chalfont into the lead.

Barton recovered from the shock and did most of the pressing in the closing stages but were unable to force an equalizer although they had three or four chances.

With 15 minutes to go Richard Camp came on as substitute for his 200th appearance for the Rovers and ten minutes from the end, Dave Hunstock, who is back home on holiday from university, came on, but to no avail.

Five minutes into injury time things might have been worse for the Rovers when Nicky Chilvers conceded a penalty.

But John Franks kick was brilliantly saved by Rovers goalkeeper, Gary Turner.

On Saturday Barton are at home to Cheshunt and on Monday they visit Banstead Athletic. Both games kick off at 3pm.

South Midlands League results: Premier: Arlesey 3, Letchworth 8; Langford 2, Buckingham 2; Division 1: Northaw 1, Totton Bar 8; Wingate & Finchley 3, Harpenden 0.

ONE UP: Scott Oakes whacks in the opening goal against Sunderland

A CHAMPAGNE performance by the Town led to a sour Christmas whine by the opposition boss as David Pleat's men delighted Kenilworth Road's biggest crowd of the season on Tuesday.

"The game shouldn't have been played," said Sunderland manager Mick Buxton after seeing his team brushed aside on a sodden surface.

He was surprised that referee John Holbrook got the go-ahead in pouring rain an hour before kick-off, with ground staff forking the pitch until a few seconds before the game started.

Perhaps he let his mem know his feelings in the dressing room. They seemed to have little appetite for the fight, and a determined Town performance was well worth the third home win of the season.

It was mainly about determination, a refusal to give up lost cause, and a sharper awareness of what was needed in the conditions.

The Town outplayed Sunderland in all these aspects, and in turn potential adversity into triumphant pressure. Its goals came from two players who might not have been involved but for injuries.

Paul Allen and Kerry Dixon suffered a back strain and a hamstring pull respectively at Reading.

LUTON TOWN 3
SUNDERLAND 0
Half-time: 2-0

so Scott Oakes and John Hartson were recalled.

Oakes seems to have a liking for teams from the North East, having embarrassed Newcastle and Middlesbrough this year.

Sunderland were treated to more of the same; he his two cracking goals in four minutes in the first half, when he recaptured the form that had Premiership clubs gathering with their cheque books last season.

Hartson has already attracted a £1million bid from Southampton, and added a few more bob to his value by notching the third goal to kill off Sunderland's flickering hopes of a second-half revival.

David Preece was back on song in midfield, and in defence 37-year-old Trevor Peake looked after a rearguard that was beautifully organised as a unit.

"I wondered if he could give me two games in two days," admitted manager David Pleat. "But he was magnificent."

The Town boss had no doubt Mr Holbrook was right to play the game, and the conditions suited the Town, with a very wet and greasy top.

The goals, each taken with expert precision, were just reward for a side that had fired blanks in its three previous outings.

Oakes was unlucky not to get a hat-trick, because he netted for a third time in the second half, with Sunderland getting the benefit of a dubious offside decision.

Mr Hutson confessed that on the day Luton were by far the better team, but thought conditions played a part in the first goal.

The Oake Road end penalty area, which Sunderland defended in the first half, had a pronounced slaty ectsy patch where the ball refused to roll.

The Town realised that the right tactic was to get fast to the ball, and work for possession, and the poll paid off in the 22nd minute. Juergen Sommer hit a long free kick down the middle, and Hartson flicked on with a header. Dwight Marshall, who had an excellent game, competed with three defenders, beat them through his persistence and strength, and laid off a short pass.

Oakes met it with a careful drive into the bottom corner, and four minutes later hit the same spot with a sweet shot on the turn from a right wing cross by Paul Telfer.

Sunderland had to reorganise when midfielder Shaun Cunningham was stretchered off with a knee injury after a collision with Mitchell Thomas, and Mr Pleat feared that sub Lee Howey might be a more effective attacker.

But he was not allowed to be, any more than Phil Gray was on his return to Kenilworth Road.

The Town's defence was all about attack, and the forward pressure made Sunderland look second best throughout.

Sommer had to make a good save from a header by Gray, and Craig Russell might have pulled a goal back just before the break. He broke through and rounded the goalkeeper, but got himself angled and shot into the side netting when the target was wide open.

But there were closer calls at the other end, with defender Marvin Johnson gliding over the mud to go close with two strikers.

Mr Pleat was worried that two goals by half-time could be too small a margin once Sunderland had the benefit of testing the Town's Oak Road end defence.

But before Sunderland could work on that theory they were hit by a splendid clinching goal. Thomas made a strong run down the left, delivered a perfect cross and Hartson curved to be hovering in his leap enabled him to power in a header that left Alec Chamberlain helpless.

And when Howey might have scored an uncle-type consolation near the end, the teamwork the Town produced was perfectly illustrated - two goal Oakes was the man who headed off the line.

TWO BEAUTIES: The scoring double-act against Sunderland, John Hartson and Scott Oakes, celebrate the Town's second goal on Tuesday.