

LUTON TOWN 0 CHESTERFIELD 1

CRESTFALLEN and demoralised at being mugged on Saturday by a bunch of journeymen footballers, Luton Town's players were much in need of the chance to prove they are a lot better than that in last night's Coca Cola Cup clash with Premiership Derby County.

They were jeered off the pitch at Kenilworth Road after Chesterfield completed a smash and grab raid with considerable ease, aided by the Town's inability to ward off the culprits.

What hurt local fans was that the damage was self-inflicted - a needless penalty given away to gift the opposition the lead, and then a brain-dead reaction from a team which was allowed to do plenty of attacking, but did not have the wit or guile to pick its way through the meanest defence in the Second Division.

Perhaps Chesterfield deserved more credit that we were prepared to give them: their football and tactics were not pretty, but very effective, and cast doubt on previous hopes that the Town had started to get to grips with the requirements of football at this level.

In skipper Sean Dyche Chesterfield had the man of the match, an inspirational figure who towered above David Oldfield and Andrew Fotiadis.

Manager Lennie Lawrence eventually paid Dyche the ultimate compliment, subbing both his front men to allow Kim Grant and Bontcho Guentchev to show that the available alternative pairing was as ineffective as the first.

And as tension spread through the team Town fans were not put into better humour by the insertion of more and more long ball soccer.

The visitors set out their stall early. The ball did not go into the Town's penalty area for the first ten minutes. Chesterfield midfielders pulled back to help the back four, and for all their possession the Town could

REPORTS BY BRIAN SWAIN PICTURES BY GARETH OWEN

not find a way through.

They desperately needed an early goal to force Chesterfield to change tactics, but the nearest we got was a Guentchev volley which flew wide after a corner by Graham Alexander was part-cleared.

Disaster struck after 26 minutes, when Tommy Curtis led a break down the Town's right flank. It was difficult to know if he was trying to shoot from a very narrow angle, or intended to pull back a cross. But Marvin Johnson threw himself at the ball and pushed it round the post with his hand.

The gift was accepted with professional pleasure by Curtis, who smashed home the first league penalty of his career.

And after that it was a frustrating experience for Town players and supporters alike. Chesterfield defended, Luton attacked, and neither side got anywhere.

Gary Waddock did his best to drive things on from midfield, but Chesterfield swamped their own half with cover.

Guentchev showed a hint of what might have been, with a little individual skill to dance round Jamie Hewitt and deliver a low drive which Billy Mercer palmed round the post.

In the second half it was nearly all one-way traffic, but the Town's forward movement was featureless and bland, and Dyche and his mates were content to soak up everything.

Graham Alexander and Ceri Hughes kept the momentum going, but moves ran into a series of blind alleys. We sat thinking an equaliser must come - it was certainly deserved on run of play - and that then things would be different.

But Chesterfield had other ideas, and the Town's off-form attack made it all too easy for them to hold on to their advantage.

Big match facts

TOWN: Feuer; James, Davis, Johnson, Thomas; Alexander, Waddock, Hughes, Guentchev; Fotiadis (Grant 63 mins), Oldfield (Showler 65 mins). Unused sub McLaren.

CHESTERFIELD: Mercer; Hewitt, Williams, Dyche, Rogers; Gaughan, Curtis, Holland, Jules; Davies, Morris (Lormor 68 mins). Unused subs Perkins and Lomas.

THE GOAL: Tommy Curtis penalty, 26 mins, after Marvin Johnson handled a cross-shot by Curtis at the near post.

OTHER STRIKES: Town four saved and seven wide; Chesterfield four saved and even wide. Corners: 11-3 to the Town.

REFEREE: Roger Furnandiz, Doncaster.

ATTENDANCE: 4,763, well over 2,000 down on last season's average.

ENTERTAINMENT: Miserable and frustrating for Town fans, as they saw their team mugged. Chesterfield invited the Town to attack, and found it all too easy to keep out a team bereft of ideas.

Alexander unleashed a thundering 20-yarder which Mercer tipped over the bar, and the Town then gently subsided into a morass of mediocrity.

Fotiadis and Oldfield made way for Paul Showler and Kim Grant, but it made little difference. And the anger round the stadium grew with the frustration in the closing minutes, highlighted by howls of mixed disbelief and derision when Grant met a perfect pass by Guentchev and volleyed the ball into the scoreboard on top of the Oak Road stand above Mercer's goal.

Steve Davis went upfield as an auxiliary forward in the closing stages, with no real impact, and the Town were lucky not to suffer further for that change: they were caught stretched and Mitchell Thomas's weak back pass gave Kevin Davies an opening, which he wasted by shooting wide.

Chesterfield didn't mind - they came to Luton to defend, not to attack, and the naive response of the Town left them well pleased as they set off for home with three points, and third place in the table, in the swag bag.