

# Stock gamble pays dividend

Luton Town 3, Birmingham City 2

THIS was billed as a promotion showdown. And not for one second did it fail to live up to the expectations of a daylight duel to the death.

Both sides were aware that a draw would be tantamount to defeat in this bitter struggle for the luxury of a trip to next year's First Division.

This was the moment of truth for both Luton and Birmingham. And in this throbbing life-and-death atmosphere, Alec Stock, the astute Luton manager, made one of the most adventurous gambles of his illustrious career.

Chris Nicholl, the centre-half whom Stock described after the game as "the revelation of the season," failed a fitness test in the morning, only to be told a few minutes before the kick-off: "You're in."

Still shaking with excitement and pride, Alec told me: "We gave Chris a work-out and a few sharp tests before the game, and it was obvious he was not right. A leg injury was still giving him considerable trouble. It was an agonising decision to make. I decided to pawn my reputation for I knew we needed his skill and dominance in the air at the back."

## TRAILING

Stock must have seen himself alight at the stake when, after 21 minutes, the Hatters were trailing 2-0 by goals from Bob Latchford and Phil Summerill.

At this stage, the 8,000-odd Birmingham fans who had travelled on five British Rail "specials" must have had this game written off as the Midlands' 15th without loss.

But Luton, roared on by their largest home crowd of the season — more than 25,000 — wiped out the deficit before half-time with two neat goals from Viv Busby, a 21-year-old ex-Wycombe Wanderers amateur.

The winner came before most grandstand customers had taken their seats for the second-half. Skipper Mike Keen, taking a free-kick following a foul by Roger Hynd on Malcolm Macdonald, side-footed the ball to left-back Alan Slough, who ignited a bit of Bobby Charlton dynamite from 35 yards.

## BUBBLING

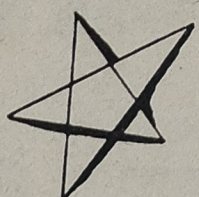
Still bubbling over, Stock explained how it can be a nightmare for a manager even when you're out in front: "You're 2-0 down and you pull it back because you have a team of 21-year-olds who just keep running and running, surging forward, enjoying their game, not having learned that top sides don't give away two-goal leads."

"Then when they've achieved the impossible, you wish you had a few 28-year-old veterans out there to steady them down and tighten up the game. We came back from the dead, and still we kept pounding forward."

"After our left-back had tasted the sweetness of scoring, I think he was going after a hat-trick! 'Just be content to win it, don't bother about burying them,' I wanted to scream out."



Phil Summerill almost proved the match-winner for Birmingham with his intelligent play. Scored their second goal.



Although 16-year-old Trevor Francis did not score, his flashes of intuitive brilliance, which threatened to win this game at any time for Birmingham, were among the lasting memories of this uncompromising epic.

Nicholl was to blame for Birmingham's "opener," but later he and John Moore were responsible for snuffing out the Blues' danger men.

Jimmy Ryan's speed and control, and Macdonald's industry made Luton the more positive side.

## RATINGS (Points out of five)

### LUTON

Read (3). Competent, but nothing spectacular.

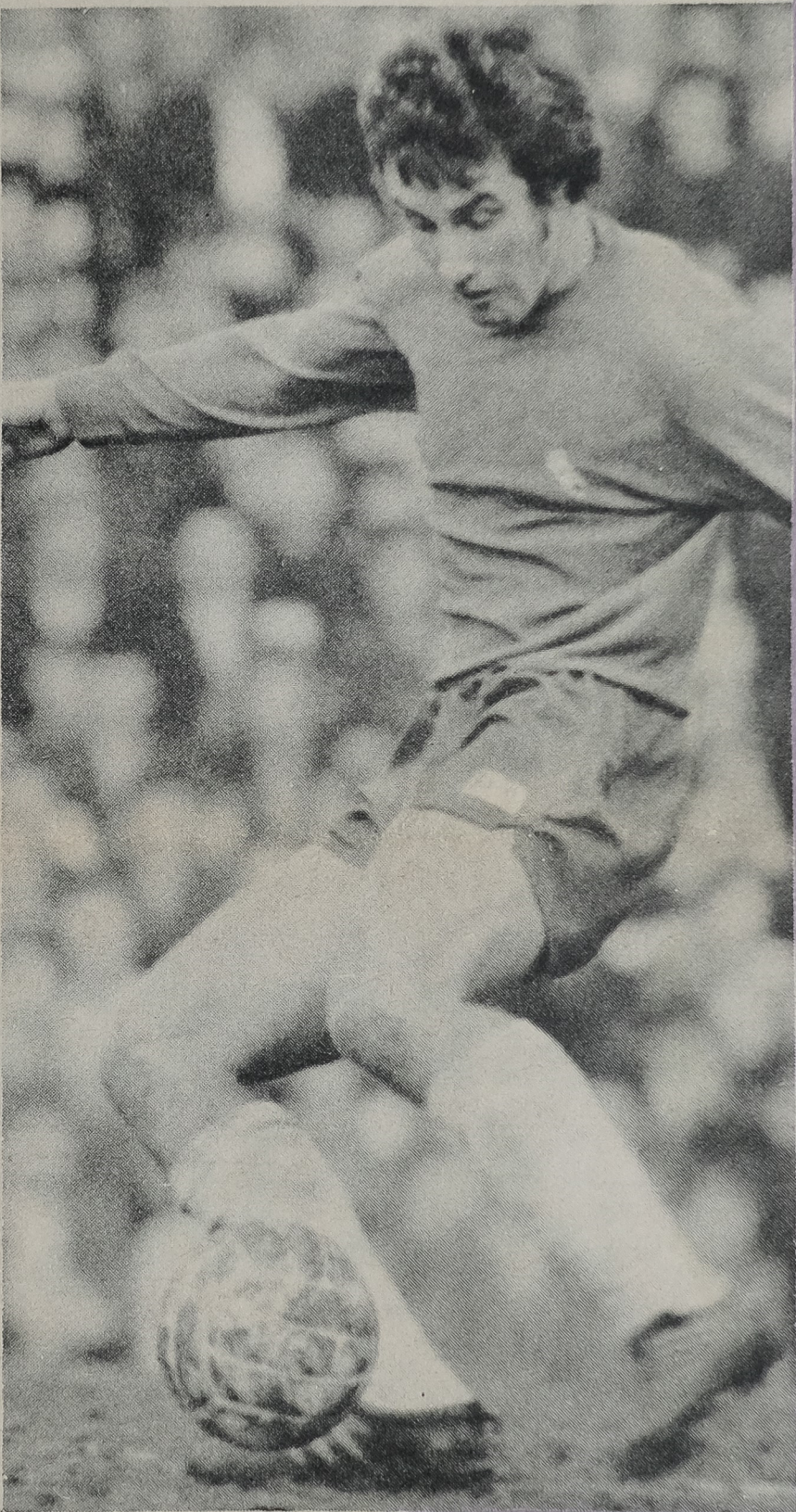
Ryan (John) (3). Flapped a little early on.

Slough (4). Could do no wrong after hitting winner.

Givens (2). Committed himself too often.

Nicholl (4). Dominated the air battles, despite being unfit.

## BIG MATCH X-RAY by Mike Litchfield



Moore (5). My man of the match.

Ryan (Jimmy) (4). A speedy and tricky winger.

Busby (4). Surely a great future.

Macdonald (4). Always a menace.

Keen (4). Not so effective as Busby.

Anderson (4). Industrious without being outstanding.

## BIRMINGHAM

Kelly (3). Not to blame for any of the goals.

Martin (3). Gave away little.

Page (3). Not too happy against Ryan.

Smith (3). A strong tackler.

Hynd (2). A game he will want to forget.

Robinson (3). A trier.

Campbell (3). A hard worker.

Francis (4). A thrill to watch.

Latchford (4). A perpetual danger.

Summerill (4). Several times almost the match-winner.

Taylor (3). Out in the cold for long spells.