

SLIDE GOES ON: FIRST HOME DEFEAT

JUST a month ago the Town were second in the Division Two table, looking capable of mounting a serious promotion challenge. Today, five unsuccessful league games later, they have slid to a mid-table position and the relegation zone is now nearer than the top end.

The proud undefeated home record gave itself up with scarcely a whimper on Saturday to a Stoke side that had not won away from home for nine months.

The only glimmer of hope was that at least in the second half the Town started to show increased fighting spirit, although by then Stoke had cruised into a two-goal lead.

Town manager Harry Haslam, never prone to panic, admitted that it was a vastly disappointing performance, and laid stress on the fact that the Town's best player, Paul Futchner was badly missed.

True enough. But against Stoke Jim McNichol was not the chief culprit in a Town performance which was abysmal in the first half.

The recent league run of one point from five matches should perhaps be a matter more for the directors than players.

By co-incidence, the Town's annual report and accounts was published this week. Players had to be sold to balance the books.

And a small-town club like Luton, poorly supported at the turnstiles, can hardly expect to ring up transfer profits of £118,000 and still build a promotion-winning team on pin-money gate receipts.

The shortage of reserve strength means that young untried players have to be given their chance. The Manager's difficulty is in the timing of the new blood injection, and the problem of deciding whether the display against Stoke was the last stage in a bad run or perhaps the start of a better one.

The first half was disastrous for the Town. In midfield veteran Howard Kendall pulled the strings for Stoke. He stood out as genuine class.

For the Town, Lil Fuccillo was unable to make his tackles count, and the attack was so poor that there was hardly a serious shot at goal in the first 45 minutes.

Jim Husband produced one effort which had the ball in the net in the fourth minute, but the whistle had already blown for offside.

The Town battled to try to stay in the game, but Stoke made the best of their chances, and with the Town's back four looking rocky the visitors deserved their interval lead, with

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Kendall scoring the first and Garth Crooks the second.

The referee ruled out another "goal" by Crooks with a decision which left Stoke boss George Eastham completely baffled.

"If that had been allowed we needn't have gone out for the second half," he said.

After the break, and attacking the Oak Road goal, the Town at last began to force their way into the game, although Stoke followers claimed that their side deliberately pulled back and allowed it to happen.

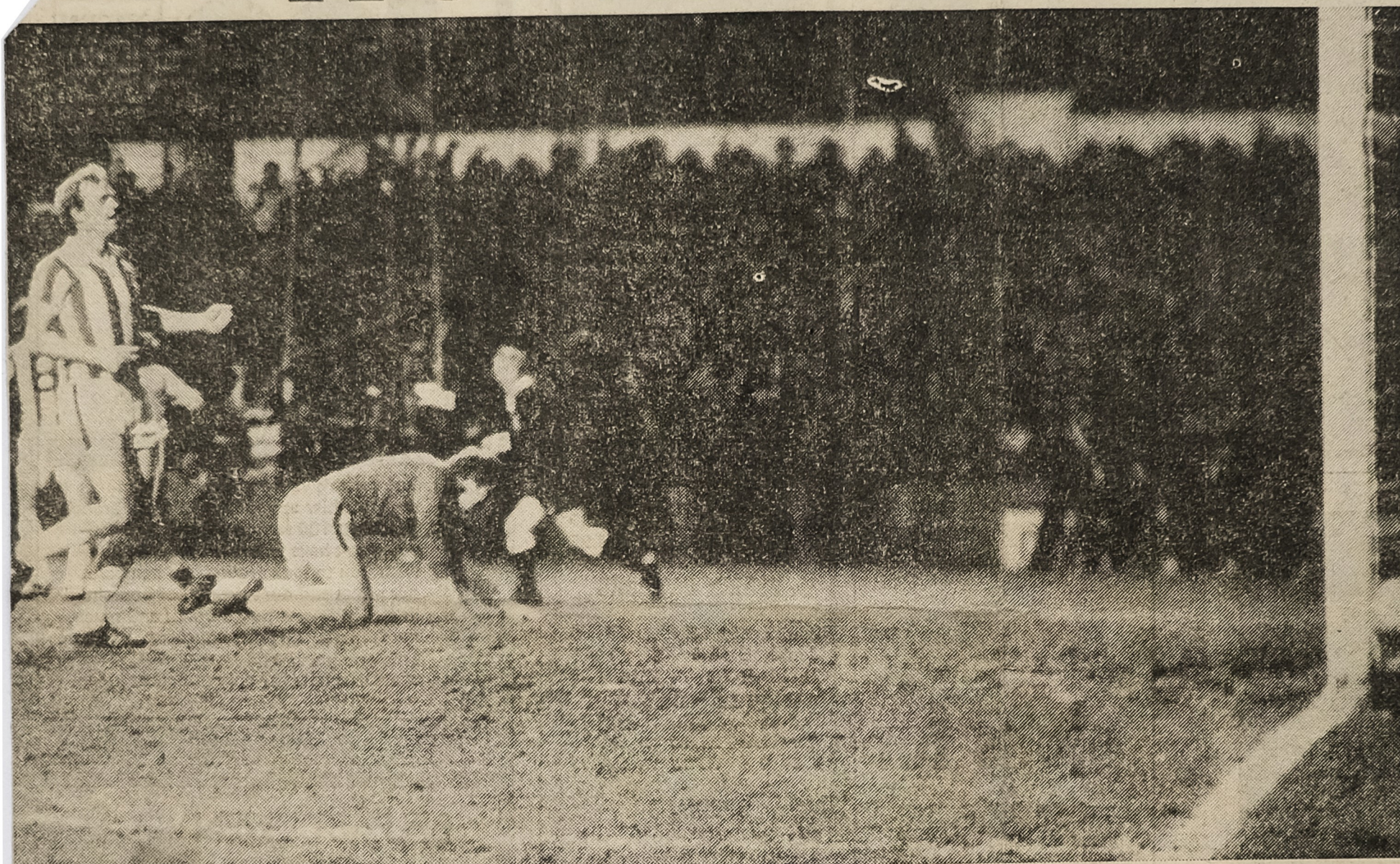
The turning point was a ten-minute spell early in the second half. Steve Buckley, again the one Town player to play up to standard, steamed down the left wing and laid off a pass to Gary Heale.

Heale let fly with a cracking drive from 25 yards, but Roger Jones did his side a valuable service by flipping it over the bar.

Ten minutes later Buckley stormed forward down the flank again, then cut inside with a smoothly balanced run which took him past two tackles. He ended the run with a 25-yard pile-driver with his right foot and although Jones was beaten this time the ball scraped the wrong side of the bar.

It was fitting that when the Town's goal was scored Buckley should be the man to get it, driving another hard shot low into the net after Stoke failed to cut out a through-pass by Ricky Hill.

For the last 15 minutes there was a deal of huffing and puffing from the Town, but although Stoke had to absorb a lot of pressure, it rarely showed signs of amounting to an equaliser.



● THE TOWN'S ONE BRIGHT MOMENT: the ball is in the net, with goalkeeper Roger Jones beaten and referee John Sewell signalling the goal that pulled one back for the Town in the 73rd minute. Steve Buckley did the damage with a thundering shot from the edge of the penalty area, but it was the Town's only success as their unbeaten home record went by the board.

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 1, STOKE CITY 2

Half-time: 0-2

TOWN: Aleksic; Price, Buckley, Faulkner, McNichol; West, Hill, Fuccillo; Husband, Ron Futchner, Heale (Stein, 64 minutes).

STOKE: Jones; Marsh, Lindsay, Smith, Dodd; Kendall, Waddington, Bowers (Richardson, 60 mins); Gregory, Busby, Crooks.

THE GOALS: Kendall for Stoke, 26 minutes, after Lil Fuccillo lost possession in midfield; Crooks for Stokes 37 minutes, after Waddington and Busby sliced through the midfield and Town's left flank; Steve Buckley, 73 minutes, his fourth of the season for the Town, from a through pass by Ricky Hill.

REFEREE: John Sewell, Leicester: a lot sharper than most of the Town players, although if his booking of Buckley was justified Stoke were lucky to escape similar retribution.

BOOKING: Steve Buckley, his first of the season, and seemed harsh, for a foul on Waddington.

ATTENDANCE: 9,384, about the Kenilworth Road average for a game which was well below average.

ENTERTAINMENT: None for Town fans in the first half, but a little better in the second.