

LAST SEVEN MINUTES WRECK A RECOVERY

Equaliser is scrubbed out by two late goals

I SUPPOSE all soccer games have a touch of "If Only . . ." about them. It was horribly true at Meadow Lane as a bedraggled Town side meekly allowed itself to look second best against a Notts County outfit which looked a very ordinary team.

There can be no excuses for the defeat, because it was a case of the Town losing the points rather than of County winning them.

At times it was painful to watch. Man for man, County were no more skilled than the Town. But as a team of triers they got what they deserved.

But if only David Moss had been available to give the Town attack a bit of width and a more varied approach . . . If only Barry Silkman had turned in the sort of performance that marked his Kenilworth Road debut . . .

If only Alan West had scored from the best chance of the match, in the first half before County had taken the lead . . .

If only the defence had cut out a free kick move after the Town had clawed their way back to equality in the last 15 minutes . . . And if only an opponent hadn't been given space for a free header in the goal area to score the killer goal . . .

County's final fling was the most galling aspect of the game, because they hit the Town with two goals in the last seven minutes when slack defensive work undid all the good that had been done by a brilliant equaliser from Hatton.

Report

By **BRIAN SWAIN**
Sports Editor

But the match statistics show that Notts County carried the most attacking threat. They won on corners 6-2. They made 17 scoring attempts, and converted three. The Town had five efforts, and two of those were in the move that brought the equaliser.

With Brian Stein out with a knee injury and Ricky Hill on the sub's bench after suffering from a pelvic strain during the week, the Town employed a 4-4-2 formation with Donaghy, West, Silkman and David Carr in the middle.

For most of the game it ensured that the Town held County in that department. West was shadowed by David Hunt, a tactic which was prompted by memories of the way West destroyed County in the 6-0 humiliation at Kenilworth Road in October.

But even the midfield fell away late in the game, and rarely was the formation able to put consistent pressure on the County defence.

Hatton and Steve Taylor, usually hopelessly outnumbered, could not win their unequal struggle without support arriving quickly from midfield, and with Silkman rarely in the game the attacks were too limited.

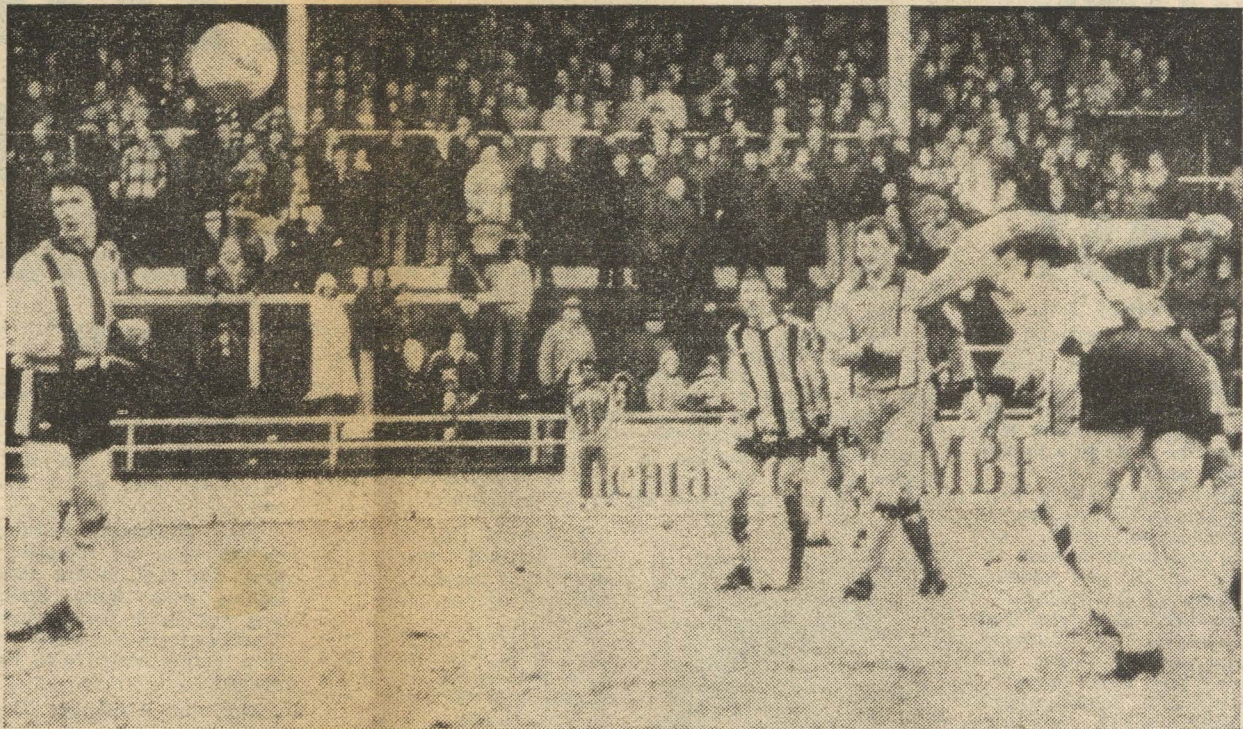
County were not much better, and at half-time when the score-sheet was blank the match had all the signs of a 0-0 draw.

The best chance until then had been created in the 36th minute when Taylor battled down the left wing, got behind the defence, and pulled back a low pass which left goalkeeper McManus stranded.

West's brain had been the only one to work out what would happen, and he made a valiant attempt to make contact. He got to the right spot at high speed, but with the net gaping in front of him knocked the ball wide of the post.

I doubt if the home side would have recovered if that effort had hit the net, but they came back to break the deadlock seven minutes after the interval.

They attacked down their left wing and Mick Vinter pulled the ball back from the by-line to the edge of the penalty area.



● **THE EQUALISER:** Bob Hatton, partly obscured on the right by a defender, ghosts into position and heads the Town level, 15 minutes from time.

Paul Hooks failed to reach it, but succeeded in confusing the defence in the attempt, and the ball ran on for Arthur Mann to hammer it low into the net.

For the next ten minutes the Town had to battle hard as County at last began to show a little confidence in their build-up.

They survived and came up with a well-deserved equaliser in the 75th minute. Carr, giving 100 per cent throughout the game, linked with Kirk Stephens, another whole-hearted trier, and deserved a goal.

Taylor provided the final cross from which Carr headed powerfully towards the bottom corner of the net. Pedro Richards blocked it on the line. Carr had a second attempt, this time to the other corner, and Jeff Blockley hacked off the line.

Back came the ball from Paul Price and this time Hatton directed a smooth glancing header through the crowd of defenders to end his long blank spell.

That should have been the bonus point-saver, but in the last seven minutes the defence got into all sorts of tangles from two set pieces.

Don Masson was involved in both. In the 83rd minute his long free kick to the far side of the penalty area was headed down by centre-half Brian Stubbs for Hunt to score with a first-time drive.

Three minutes later a short corner routine ended with Masson chipping the ball into the goalmouth, where two attackers were unmarked, and as Jake Findlay stood on his line Paul Hooks headed a simple goal from five or six yards.

It was poor reward for the supporters who had stood through 90 minutes of incessant rain on the open terrace, and still kept up their cheering and singing until the final whistle brought merciful release.

"They're the people I think about most," said assistant manager Ken Gutteridge. "They had 90 minutes of frustration, and got soaking wet. We weren't doing it on the field, but they did their best from the terraces."

"We should have given them a draw to celebrate at the very least — you should never allow yourself to be beaten when you get the bonus of an equaliser 15 minutes from the end."

YOUTH SIDE SHOWS THE WAY WITH A CUP WIN

A TEAM of teenagers served up a brand of soccer at Kenilworth Road on Monday night which should have shamed the Town's men who flopped so badly at Nottingham. John Moore's youngsters swept into the quarter-finals of the FA Youth Cup in rousing style, brushing aside a well-fancied Aston Villa team.

They well earned their 2-1 win to make history — the first time the Town have gone beyond the fourth round — and will now travel to Maine Road to meet Manchester City.

It was a game in marked contrast to the inept show their seniors had put on at Nottingham, with much to admire and plenty to get the spectators cheering.

Every single lad worked for his colleagues to produce another shock result, and this performance was even better than the one which put out Arsenal.

Villa came to Luton as favourites, and left beaten even more convincingly than the score suggests.

Jake Findlay had marked the Town's cards with a pre-match run-down on Villa's youngsters, and if the planning was excellent, the execution was near-perfection.

At the back central defenders Clive Goodyear and Les Harriott bottled up Villa's forwards, with Harriott having a storming game. He was unflinching in the tackle and fast enough to cause problems for Villa at both ends of the pitch.

Perceptive through-passes by Wayne Turner stretched Villa's defence, and they had no answer to the 90-minute whirlwind named Andy Pearson, who ran at them with bravery and skill, always ready to roast an opponent and shoot for goal.

Villa were doughty opponents, but always second best. Harriott scored the opening goal just before half-time with a far post header from John Lucas's corner.

Turner was denied when the goalkeeper made a brilliant save in the 67th minute, but that corner brought another goal, Martin Conquest getting the final touch after a scramble on the line.

Villa's reply was a booming 35-yard goal by Mark Jones, which caught Rob Walker too far off his line, but the goalkeeper made amends soon after with a brilliant save from Jenkins.

And stern defensive work ensured that Villa's kids were never given the late openings that have been made available to recent opponents in the Second Division.

TOWN: Walker, Woodward, Sisman, Johnson, Goodyear, Harriott, Madden, W. Turner, Conquest, Pearson, Lucas.

Match Details

NOTTS COUNTY 3, LUTON TOWN 1
Half-time: 0-0

TOWN: Findlay; Stephens, Aizlewood, Turner, Price; Donaghy, West, Carr, Silkman; Taylor, Hatton. Sub: Hill, not used.

NOTTS COUNTY: McManus; Richards, O'Brien, Blockley, Stubbs; Mann, Masson, Hunt; McCulloch, Hooks, Vinter. Sub: Benjamin, not used.

THE GOALS: Arthur Mann for Notts, 52 minutes, low drive from edge of box; Bob Hatton for the Town, 75 minutes, beautiful header from Paul Price's centre; David Hunt volley for Notts, 83 minutes; Paul Hooks for Notts, 86 minutes, free header on the six-yard line.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town two saved and two off target; Notts County eight off target and three saved.

ATTENDANCE: 7,624 including two coach-loads from Luton.

REFEREE: Ron Chadwick, Darwen, Lancs: more consistent than the Town team.

BOOKING: Mark Aizlewood for tripping Ian McCulloch seconds after being lectured for kicking the ball away at a throw-in.

ENTERTAINMENT: Wretched for Town supporters, but County fans were delighted to see their team's first league victory since November 25, taking revenge for a 6-0 thrashing at Kenilworth Road in October.



IF ONLY . . . The moment when Alan West stormed through a disorganised defence for a chance to put the Town into the lead. Goalkeeper Eric McManus, on the right, is stranded by Steve Taylor's low cross, and the cover is non-existent as West slides in, but puts the ball wide.

PICTURES: JOHN SHORTHOUSE