

MISSSED CHANCES LET LEAGUE LEADERS OFF THE HOOK

PRIDE AND disappointment was the mixture of feelings Town boss David Pleat expressed after seeing his side take a richly-deserved point from Second Division leaders Brighton at Kenilworth Road.

The pride came from an all-round team display in which the Town looked a better soccer side than the visitors. The disappointment was acknowledgement that poor finishing allowed Brighton to come back with a late equaliser when the game really should have been beyond their reach.

"We were the better side, and they should have been buried before they equalised," he said. "We had them reeling, and another goal would have finished them off.

"We just couldn't get the damned ball in the net, even though we were getting round the back of their defence in the second half."

Brighton delighted

Brighton manager Alan Mullery was delighted with the point earned by Teddy Maybank's curling 20-yard drive seven minutes from time.

He had the frustration of missing promotion on goal difference a year ago, and confessed that the Second Division title race this year is just as nerve-racking.

"If we had been beaten today we would have been out of the running," he said.

Most Town supporters must feel that it was a case of the Town losing a point in a game which started as a nervous cat and mouse confrontation, then developed into a thrilling cut and thrust encounter.

For a long time both sides concentrated on trying to win the midfield, and a crucial factor in that struggle was that Ricky Hill turned in his most effective performance for some time.

Deflected goal

It gave Alan West and Alan Birchenall more scope, and the Town were ahead on points by the interval.

Both defences had done well to keep attacks at long range, but the Town deserved the lead which was taken in the 32nd minute. Birchenall and Hill built an

Report by
BRIAN SWAIN
 Sports Editor

attack down the right flank, and from Hill's pass to the edge of the penalty area West shot goalwards. Eric Steele dived to make a fairly comfortable save, only to be beaten when full-back Gary Williams deflected the ball into the net.

Brighton's only worthwhile shot before the interval had been by Paul Clark, the man who broke Lil Fucillo's leg. He almost silenced the jeers with a cannon-ball effort which flashed narrowly wide.

Looking for more efficiency from midfield, Brighton reorganised for the second half, with Clark going back into defence and Brian Horton moving forward.

Horton sold a neat dummy to give Peter Ward a shot at goal in the 51st minute, but although the shot beat Jake Findlay, Kirk Stephens was perfectly placed and cleared off the line.

The Town came back to spoil some brilliant build-up work by poor finishing. Steve Taylor got through with only Steele to beat, and lost out when he should have scored, and the goalkeeper made a good save from Bob Hatton's 30-yard shot.

Penalty appeals

Brighton appealed in vain for a penalty when Stephens deflected a drive by Ward for a corner with his elbow, but Clive Thomas ruled that it was not an intentional handling offence.

With desperation creeping into their game, Brighton gambled for the last 20 minutes, taking off defender Williams and introducing Malcolm Poskett, and playing with only three men at the back.

The sub might have snatched an equaliser with one of his first touches, but failed to get a touch to Birchenall's foolhardy back pass. Findlay went to save a shot which was not made, and the ball trickled past him towards goal.

It hit the post, and Mal Donaghy raced in to clear, fair reward for being a quicker thinker than any of the Brighton attackers.

Brighton's gamble should have been a loser, but Hatton had one shot smothered after wriggling through a crowd of players, then blasted another over the bar after Taylor had gone round the back of the defence on the right.

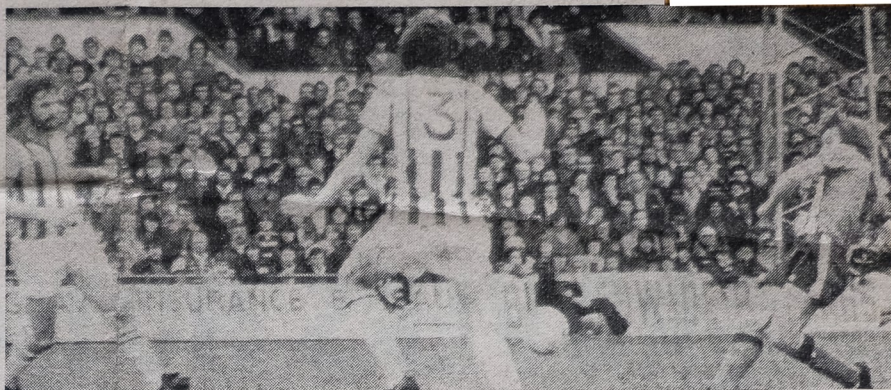
And seven minutes from time Brighton made the most of their good fortune. Mr Thomas, always strict, penalised Forbes Phillipson-Masters for a challenge which looked fair enough from the stand.

Horton rolled the free-kick gently to his left to improve the shooting angle, and Maybank's drive was a beauty, swerving into the corner of the net.

It was rough justice on a Town side which always looked at least the equals of Brighton.

And while the visitors could complain that they had to field a weakened side, with two first-team defenders on the injury list, they might bear in mind the fact that the Town were not exactly at full strength either.

Fucillo watched the match from the stand, and the hapless David Moss was loyal enough to turn out when not fully fit. It worked against Millwall, but not against Brighton and I hope the player is now given the full rest he so obviously deserves.

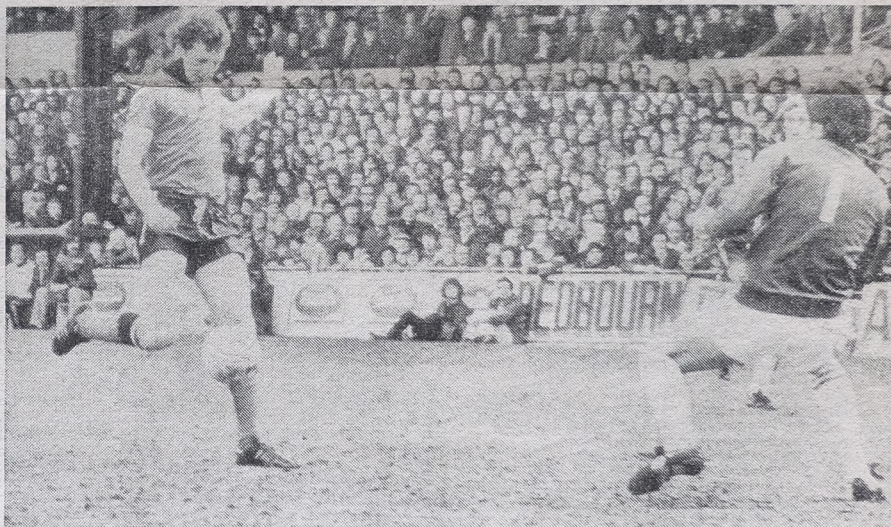


The one that counted...

THE BONUS of an own goal gave the Town a first-half lead against Brighton, with the critical moment captured above by John Shorthouse's camera. Alan West, on the right, shoots for goal, and defender Williams, No. 3 on his back, is about to deflect the ball into the net in the attempt to block the shot.

BELOW: Steve Taylor gets through in the second half, but the chance went astray when goalkeeper Steele scrambled the ball to safety. BOTTOM OF PAGE: Bob Hatton, wriggling into a gap between two defenders, sees his close-range angled shot beaten out by Steele.

...and two that should have



Match Details

LUTON TOWN 1, BRIGHTON 1

Half-time: 1-0

TOWN: Findlay; Stephens, Aizlewood, Phillipson-Masters, Donaghy; Birchenall, Hill, West; Taylor, Hatton, Moss. Sub: Stein, not used.

BRIGHTON: Steele; Cattlin, Williams (Poskett, 67 mins), Horton, Winstanley; Clark, Ryan, Sayer; Ward, Maybank, O'Sullivan.

THE GOALS: Gary Williams, own goal for the Town, 32 minutes, deflecting drive by Alan West after smooth attack built by West, Alan Birchenall and Ricky Hill; Teddy Maybank for Brighton, 83 minutes, 20-yard curling drive after short free-kick by Horton.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town six saved and three off target; Brighton four saved and two off target.

REFEREE: Clive Thomas, Porthcawl — both sides thought he was too severe, seeing offences even when they weren't there. Perhaps so, but rather than have the match go out of control, which it never did.

ATTENDANCE: 13,132, second highest of the season.

ENTERTAINMENT: A cracking game to watch, but Brighton were let off by the Town's failure to make their dominance tell in the first half-hour of the second half.

3376 21-4-79