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NOT THE END OF THE DREAM YET!

IT TOOK the best visiting team we have seen at Kenilworth Road this season to smash the Town's unbeaten home record. And before supporters write off the team after one poor result, the words of Birmingham manager Jim Smith deserve consideration.

"Luton are the best side we have met this season," he said. "I don't think they played up to their potential, but they still made us fight to the last kick.

"I don't think you should be too disappointed, because Luton and Birmingham are both good sides, and both can believe in themselves as First Division material."

I felt that Mr Smith had got it right. Town boss David Pleat confessed: "We never got going, and when we took the lead I thought it must have been our birthday.

"On the day Birmingham deserved the points, because we were not at our best. We made two terrible mistakes to give away goals, and we didn't play collectively as well as we can. It seemed that we were not mentally tuned in with each other."

A couple of weeks ago the Birmingham boss had gone on record with a comment that perhaps Luton Town were a small club who did not have the resources to sustain a real promotion challenge, and Saturday's match underlines the big problem Mr Pleat faces.

Birmingham, in a big city and with a big stadium, collected more than a million pounds from the sale of Trevor Francis, and have invested heavily in a calculated gamble.

"We can't afford to stay in the Second Division," said Smith. His 12-man squad on duty at Kenilworth Road is backed by the injured Archie Gemmill, Don Givens and Alan Ainscow. And they were trying to buy Frank Worthington for £150,000.

Ironically Keith Bertschin, whose place might be in danger from Worthington's arrival at St Andrew's, responded by scoring his first-ever league hat-trick to sink the Town's proud record.

The Town, with a side which picks itself through lack of serious competition for places, were below par in most departments.

Passes went astray, and that failing led directly to two goals, and perhaps the team paid the price of success through having had three men away on international duty in midweek.

Tony Grealish was not his usual dominant self in midfield, and Paul Price and Mal Donaghy also showed some reaction from long hours of travelling instead of training.

Kirk Stephens had the hardest game of his life against the pace and skills of Willie Johnston, and the winger provided the ammunition for Bertschin to gun down the Town.

Jake Findlay confessed that he should have stopped the second goal, but his

THE TOP TEAMS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	P
QPR	17	10	3	4	34	15	23
Chelsea	14	11	1	2	29	20	23
Newcastle	17	9	5	3	23	15	23
Luton Tn	17	8	6	3	30	17	22
Leicester	17	8	6	3	31	21	22
Birm'ham	17	9	4	4	23	17	22

REPORT: BRIAN SWAIN

PICTURES: JOHN SHORTHOUSE

mistake when the ball bobbled over his hands was little worse than some of the errors that led up to it.

Too often the ball was given away, and Birmingham showed much better skill at using it properly.

Their defence was always under less pressure than the Town's, and they could have had the game sewn up before half-time.

Bertschin struck his first goal when unmarked after a corner, and Steve Lynex would have made it two against a lesser goalkeeper than Findlay.

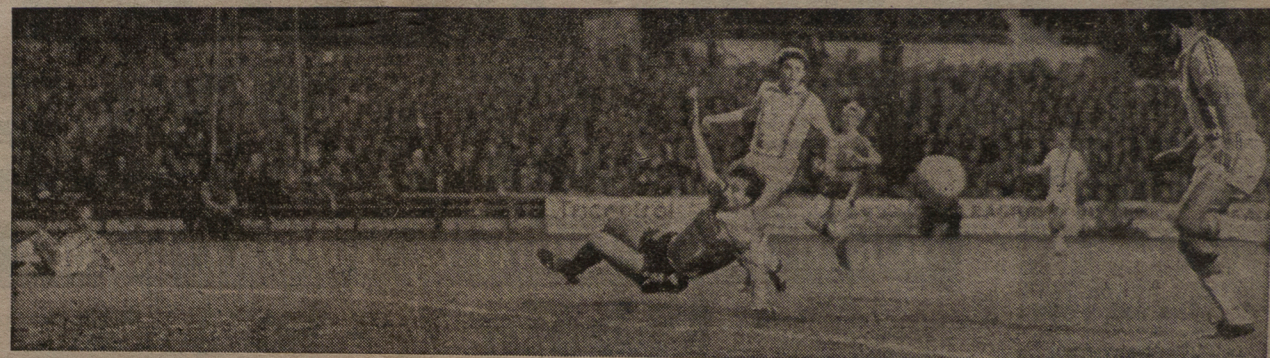
David Moss shot the equaliser from the penalty spot, his 13th goal of the season, after Terry Lees had fallen and handled the ball to stop the winger going for goal.

Moss later wasted two free kicks from just outside the penalty area, but Brian Stein put the Town ahead in the 70th minute when he swept in a low centre by Bob Hatton.

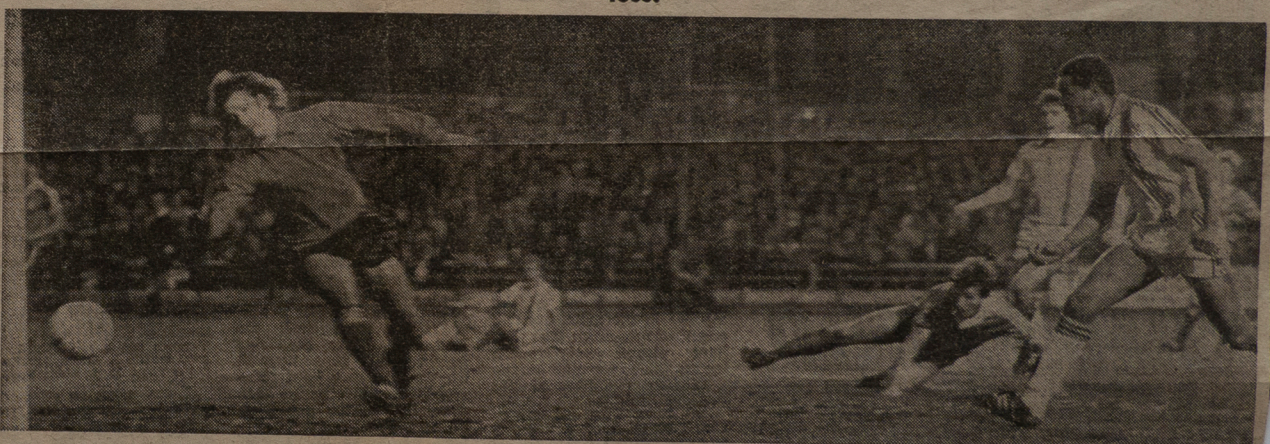
Straight from the restart Birmingham equalised, with no-one getting in a telling tackle as Bertschin collected the ball and had a toe-poke from the edge of the box, and in the very last minute the centre-forward grabbed the winner.

And he cheerfully welcomed the possibility of Worthington's transfer to Birmingham: "You need competition for places to build a good team," he said.

Birmingham have the money to do it, and the support to make the expense worthwhile.



● THE MAKING OF A GOAL: Bob Hatton, extreme left in the picture above, hammers a low cross into the Birmingham goalmouth towards Brian Stein. Below: Stein's shot leaves the goalkeeper helpless.



Match Details

LUTON TOWN 2 BIRMINGHAM 3

Half-time: 1-1

TOWN: Findlay; Stephens, Donaghy, Saxby, Price; Hill, Grealish, West; Stein, Hatton, Moss. Sub: Aizlewood, not used.

BIRMINGHAM CITY: Wealands; Lees, Dennis, Gallagher, Todd; Curbishley, Towers, Dillon; Lynex, Bertschin, Johnston. Sub: Evans, not used.

THE GOALS: Keith Bertschin hat-trick for Birmingham, from three low shots, 6 minutes, 71 minutes, 89 minutes; David Moss, penalty for the Town, 41 minutes, after Terry Lees handled; Brian Stein for the Town, 70 minutes, from Bob Hatton's low cross.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town three saved and seven off target; Birmingham six saved and seven off target.

ATTENDANCE: 13,720, second highest of the season but still not as big as recent performances deserved. Birmingham brought 2,000 with them.

REFEREE: Jeff Sewell, Leicester — gave a lovely performance, and even Birmingham boss Jim Smith agreed he was right as well as brave to give the Town a penalty.

BOOKING: Tony Grealish for dissent, caused by frustration as much as anything else.

ENTERTAINMENT: Very good if you were a neutral or a Birmingham fan. The Town never got going and the result was right.