

Suspense all the way

Promotion race: Six points could do it says Pleat

FASTEN your seatbelts, sit back and start biting your fingernails. A glorious Easter yielded five precious points for Luton, who now face their last four games of the season under tremendous pressure and tension.

A goal 35 seconds into injury time at Stamford Bridge yesterday afternoon robbed the Town of a perfect Easter present and left them anxiously looking over their shoulders wondering if Sunderland and Leicester can win games in hand.

It is now almost certain that the Second Division promotion battle — already the most hectic for several seasons — will not be resolved until the last game on May 3.

The prospect of Luton reaching Division One rests on their own ability, coupled with the teams below them dropping points.

Although manager David Pleat shrugged off suggestions that his team must take maximum points from their remaining matches, it seems unlikely that his target of six will be enough.

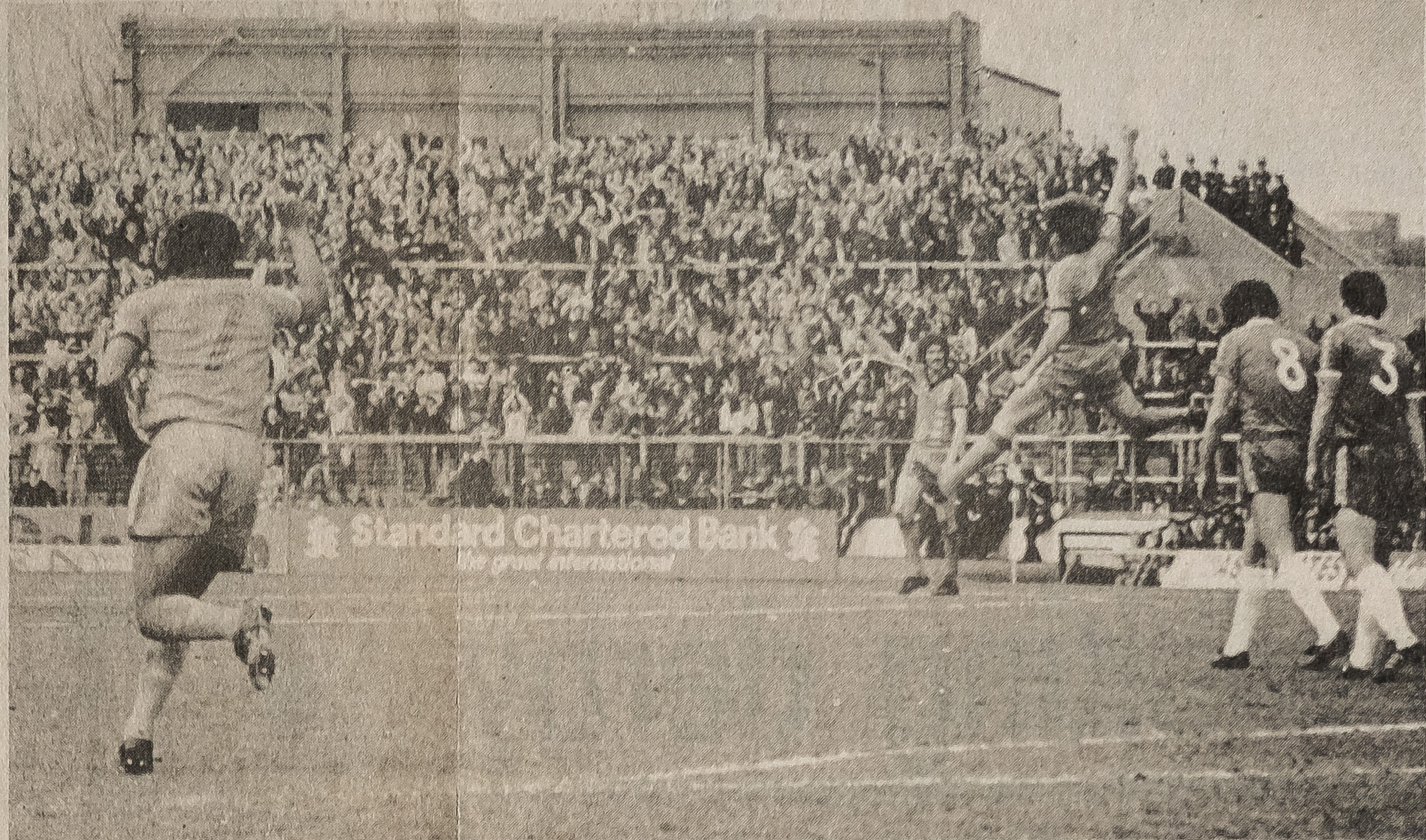
Pleat will undoubtedly watch the progress of Leicester and Sunderland this evening at Cardiff and Shrewsbury where a dropped point for any of the Town's rivals will make the white-hot situation at the top almost unbearable.

Victory for Sunderland at Shrewsbury — Luton's visitors on Saturday — would put them top on goal difference and leave the way clear for a titanic struggle for the rest of the chasing pack.

Pleat's players rose magnificently to the manager's pre-Easter demands for five points, knowing that a defeat would almost certainly have killed the Town's hopes of staying in the top three.

After the shattering disappointment of watching Mal Donaghy deflect Colin Lee's injury-time goal yesterday, Pleat sensibly acknowledged Luton's Easter parade.

"We wanted five points and have taken them," he said. "We are disappointed at dropping a point in this manner but it is still a good performance."



■ Chelsea heads drop as Grealish shows his delight at scoring Luton's first half goal.

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"I thought we did enough to take both points and now believe we want another six to stand a good chance of promotion."

The electronic scoreboard had already signalled time when Chelsea dramatically won a last-ditch corner. Keeper Petar Borota joined his ten colleagues in Luton's half as Clive Walker swung the ball across.

It was met by a forest of legs and hacking boots, but Lee made the final lunge and Donaghy had the misfortune

to deflect the ball past Jake Findlay.

It was a goal Chelsea deserved for their second half revival which won them six corners after Luton had substituted the struggling David Moss with Mark Aizlewood.

The Town were worth their half time lead courtesy of Tony Grealish's 25th minute goal, but they failed to seriously test Borota after the break and didn't manage to put one shot on target.

But, for all that, Luton often looked as though they would emerge unscathed after

teasing Chelsea throughout a first half when they almost lost Findlay with an ankle injury.

Deserved

He received lengthy treatment from physiotherapist John Sheridan, but the turning point of the match arrived when Moss finally felt the after-effects of his ankle injury and was forced to retire.

It left the Town with only Bob Hatton and Brian Stein operating up front — and it wasn't enough to produce a second goal which would have

almost certainly have killed Chelsea off.

Luton forced the game's first corner after 14 minutes after Micky Nutton fouled Stein. But the Town had to wait another 11 minutes before deservedly taking the lead.

Alan West made the goal when he turned the ball into Grealish's path and, from 25 yards out, the Eire international managed to screw the ball past Borota's groping fingers.

Borota had looked anything but safe with his handling — a deficiency which probably led Pleat to instruct his players to shoot on sight. It was a move which paid handsome dividends for Grealish.

But Chelsea should have equalised in the 34th minute when Walker was presented with too much space. But, with only Findlay standing between him and a goal, he shot wide with Donaghy desperately trying to get his foot to the ball at the near post.

Additional

Moss's 53rd minute substitution allowed Aizlewood to move into the back four with Donaghy moving to midfield as the Town opted for a 4-2-2 formation.

But even the additional defender was not enough to prevent Tommy Langley forcing his way through two minutes later, although he completely ruined hopes of an immediate Chelsea equaliser by blasting the ball over the top.

Colin Viljoen headed wide from a left wing cross before Donaghy forced Borota to make a low save. And, despite Chelsea's late surge, the Town still looked as though they were going to hang on for both points.

Chelsea manager Geoff Hurst was bold enough to narrow the promotion candidates down to five clubs — Leicester, Birmingham, Chelsea, Sunderland and Luton.

"It's now a situation of any three from five," he said. "We had the opportunity to make promotion almost a reality over Easter but failed to make anything from our three games which produced only one point."

"But we are not out of it yet and, like other managers, I maintain the job will not be sorted out until the last kick of the season."

CHELSEA: Borota; Chivers, Rofe (Fillery), Viljoen, Pates, Nutton, Britton, Lee, Langley, Walker, Harris.

LUTON: Findlay; Stephens, Donaghy, Grealish, Saxby, Price, Hill, West, Stein, Hatton, Moss (Aizlewood).

REFEREE: T. Bune (Cranleigh).

ATTENDANCE: 28,078.

GOALS: Grealish (25), Lee (89).