

PROMOTION? WE CAN DO IT YET, SAYS BOSS

News

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But home record is dented again

WITH A DEFIANCE to be admired, Town boss David Pleat stood up in the Press room at Kenilworth Road on Saturday night and declared that the tenth home draw of the season was not a disaster.

"We're still only two points away from the top," he said, "And I still believe we can do it."

He added that Bob Hatton, who missed two of the best chances of a frustrating second half against Shrewsbury, had promised that he was saving a couple of goals for Saturday's trip to Birmingham, where he once formed a lethal striking partnership with Bob Latchford.

I'd like to believe the manager. I'd like to see Birmingham crushed at St Andrew's, I'd like to see the Town win promotion after all.

But mid-table Shrewsbury seemed to prove that the Town are not yet good enough to go up and hold their own in the best soccer competition in the world.

NERVES SHOWING

They went home with a point because the Town's nerves were showing in the first half, and because Bob Wardle put on a memorable goalkeeping display in the second.

Until half-time, Shrewsbury looked the better side, with a well-drilled defence and offside trap, a hard-working four-man midfield, and a couple of useful front runners in Steve Biggins and John Dungworth.

If their skills were not up to the Town's normal standard, they more than compensated by their willingness to work, run and cover, and like the Town could reflect on the fact that but for a couple of misses they might have snatched both points.

Paul Price and Mike Saxby worked hard to contain the twin spearhead, but Biggins lashed a good early chance wide, and later forced Jake Findlay to make an important save in Shrewsbury's only second half attack of consequence.

PATTERN LOST

The Town could not find their usual rhythm and pattern for a long time, with the midfield struggling to find space for forward passes.

But they hit top gear in the second half, attacking the Oak Road end, and with the supporters urging on every move.

Shrewsbury retreated in depth and goalkeeper Wardle took the chance to make a series of saves which left Sam Bartram in awe, and the Town stupefied.

David Moss, Brian Stein and Hatton worked at maximum pace and their

THE TOP TEAMS									
	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts	Diff	
Sunderland	38	19	10	9	59	39	48	+20	
Leicester	38	18	12	8	53	36	48	+17	
Chelsea	39	21	6	12	61	51	48	+10	
Birmingham	38	19	9	10	52	34	47	+18	
Luton Town	39	15	16	8	62	42	46	+20	
QPR	39	16	12	11	68	49	44	+19	

urgency was matched as Ricky Hill, Alan West and Tony Grealish got further forward.

Mal Donaghy and Kirk Stephens must have run a marathon each as they joined in to try to get round the back, but every move ended with the ball in the crowd or in Wardle's arms.

But Hatton missed the two best chances of the game, he was left clear for lack of an offside flag to reach a long pass by Stephens in the 67th minute, but shot weakly at Wardle, and five minutes from time he blazed the ball over the bar from about five yards.

That miss came in a scramble following a corner produced by the outstanding save of the game when Wardle seemed to fly to reach a header by Stein.

Five minutes earlier the Town thought they had scored when a flowing move by West and Stein ended with Hatton heading hard and low towards the bottom corner of the net.

GOAL APPEALS

Wardle had to scramble, and the Town players appealed in unison for a goal, claiming that the ball had crossed the line as Wardle reached it.

The linesman, in the right position, but on the blind side of the keeper's body, ruled no-goal.

Shrewsbury had to hang on for dear life in the last few minutes, with the Town committing everything to attack.

Steve White was put on in place of Ricky Hill for the last 13 minutes, and helped to set up chances which produced saves by Wardle against Hatton and Stein.

And if the third 0-0 home draw of the season was a big disappointment, it is a pleasure to be able to report that it was the sixth consecutive match without defeat.



● OVER AND OUT: Bob Hatton lifts a close-range chance into the terraces.

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 0, SHREWSBURY 0

TOWN: Findlay; Stephens, Donaghy, Saxby, Price; Grealish, Hill (White, 77 minutes), West; Stein, Hatton, Moss.

SHREWSBURY: Wardle; King, Leonard, Larkin, Keay; Turner, Tong, Atkins, Cross; Biggins, Dungworth; sub Lindsay, not used.

GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town six off target, 15 saved; Shrewsbury two off target, five saved.

REFEREE: Alf Grey, Gorleston—one of the better ones although Town thought he missed a goal when Wardle might have been behind his line making a save from Hatton.

ATTENDANCE: 10,793—pathetic for such an important game, but those who did go gave genuine support, particularly in the second half.

ENTERTAINMENT: It only needed a goal or two as the Town gave everything after the interval, only to be foiled by the best goalkeeping display seen at Kenilworth Road for a long time.

SADSPOT: It looks like the end of the promotion drive with the tenth home draw of the season, although the manager refuses to believe it yet.

TWO POINTS AWAY FROM TOP THREE

ALTHOUGH the manager has not given up the chase yet, the Town now have to rely on late failures by rivals to keep alive their promotion hopes.

With three games to play, the Town are still fifth, two points short of the top three places. Even with three victories, which is a tall order, they can now gain only 52 points.

The last time that total was enough for promotion was in 1973/74—when the Town's 50 points made them runners-up to 65-point Middlesbrough.

Sunderland, who finished fourth last season with 55 points after a strange series of reverses at the tail-end of the campaign, look set to make sure of it this time.

They retained top place, on goal difference, despite being held 1-1 by Orient in front of 33,279 customers at Roker Park. It was only the fifth home point Sunderland have dropped this season, compared with 14 by the Town.

Saturday's match of the day in the Second Division was at Filbert Street, where Leicester became the only one of the top seven teams to take both points. They did it with a 2-1 win over Birmingham City and the result knocked Birmingham down from second place to fourth.

Chelsea, regained third place with a 1-1 draw at Preston, and the fight for three promotion places still looks like a battle between Sunderland, Leicester, Chelsea and Birmingham, with the Town in with a chance if they can win at Birmingham on Saturday.

Shrewsbury player-manager Graham Turner, who has seen all the contenders at close quarters, believes Luton and Leicester are fighting for the third promotion place.

"Sunderland have hit form at the right time," he said, "and I think they will make it this time. I fancy Birmingham to go up with them, and then I think it is between Luton and Leicester for the other place."

"You've missed out Chelsea," said a London reporter with the air of a wounded man. "Yes," replied Turner with a cheery smile. "We put seven past them in two games."

Smiles are likely to be in short supply elsewhere in London this week, Saturday's results settled some of the relegation issues, and Charlton are definitely in the Third Division next season.

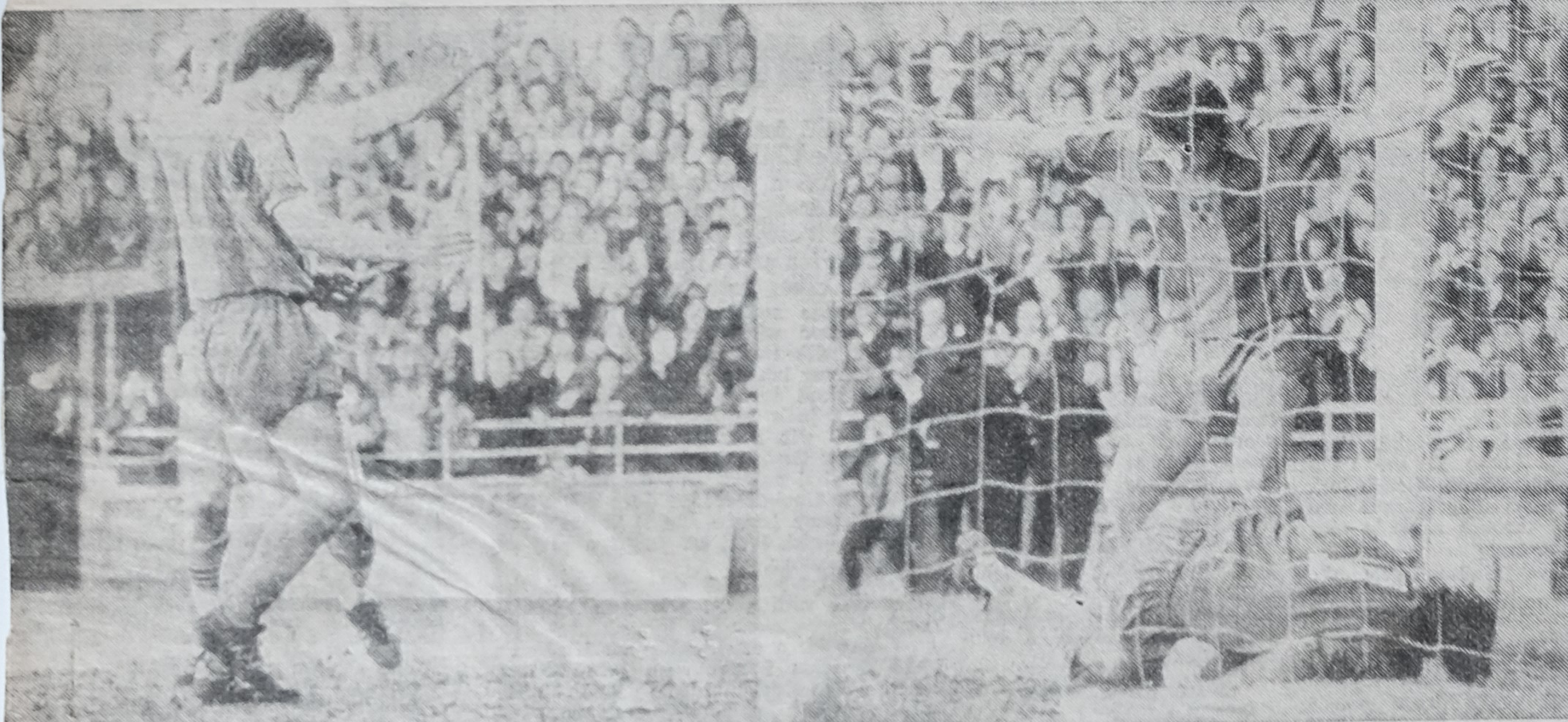
So are Burnley, for the first time in their 98-year history, victims of a policy which built a magnificent "Bob Lord Stand" but not a team.

Fulham are odds-on to be relegated as well, while Bolton are condemned to the drop from the First Division, just two years after pipping Southampton and Spurs for the Second Division championship. Derby County and Bristol City are almost doomed to drop with Bolton.

In the Third Division Blackburn, bottom of Division Two a year ago, could bounce straight back. They look good for third place, with Grimsby and Sheffield Wednesday favourites for promotion. Harry Haslam's Sheffield United, league leaders earlier in the season, have now dropped right out of the reckoning.

REPORT by BRIAN SWAIN

PICTURES: MARK RICHARDS



● OVER AND IN? Bob Hatton appeals, with no luck, for a goal when Bob Wardley grabbed his header during the second-half onslaught by the Town. The linesman ruled that the ball had not crossed the line, and photographic evidence suggests he was right.