

Knock-out experts clobber Hammers

HAVING knocked the Town out of the Second Division promotion battle on Saturday, Birmingham dished out similar treatment to West Ham at Upton Park on Tuesday night, and grabbed top place.

A header by Keith Bertschin again proved decisive in a tough encounter marred by the sending off of Colin Todd and Billy Bonds early in the second half.

That happened two minutes after Alvin Martin had headed a West Ham equaliser to Alan Ainscow's first-half goal, and after the dust had settled Bertschin scored the winner 20 minutes from time.

It leaves West Ham with little hope of making their games in hand count, and free to concentrate on the FA Cup final on May 10.

Saturday's results could hardly have been more harsh to the Town — they were the only losers out of the top six, although none of the promotion battlers had it easy.

Previous leaders Sunderland lost top place, but were happy enough to recover at Eastville to take a vital point from Bristol Rovers.

The draw pushed them down to third place, and they dropped to fourth after Birmingham's win on Tuesday night. But they have a match in hand on third-placed Chelsea, and a better goal difference.

Saturday's biggest Second Division game, 24,002, saw Chelsea struggle to a 1-0 home win over Notts County. Leicester took over top place, until Tuesday night, when a goal by Eddie Kelly gave them their eighth away win of the season, at Wrexham.

Queens Park Rangers dropped out when Charlton, already doomed to relegation, held them to a 2-2 draw at The Valley. Clive Allen got both for Rangers, taking his season's total to 29.

The most astonishing fall of all was mourned by a meagre crowd of 14,349 at St James's Park. Newcastle, league leaders for so long, slumped to their second home defeat of the season, beaten 3-1 by Swansea to drop to their lowest position so far, seventh. They had been in the top three for four months.

YOUTH TEAM REACH FINAL

LUTON TOWN 3, NORWICH 0

HITTING SOME impressive peaks of perfection in the second half, the Town's youth side reached the final of the Eastern Junior Cup with one of its best displays of the season.

Top of the South Eastern Counties League, Norwich looked a good side before the interval, when Andy Foote worked hard to marshal a dependable Town defence.

Seamus Heath tormented the Norwich rearguard down the Town's left wing after the break and capped an all-action display of hard running and close ball control with an explosive goal to end Norwich's challenge.

The goalkeeper was left to stare in admiration as a 25-yard thunderbolt shot ripped into the net. Heath had scored a lucky first goal, with an inswinging corner deceiving the Norwich defence, and Mick Small hit the second.



● NEAR THING: Bob Hatton, second from right, glances a header wide during the Town's late siege of the Birmingham goal.

DREAM ENDS—BUT IT'S NO FAILURE!

THE GREAT promotion dream is over for another season, after the Town lost a classic encounter against close rivals Birmingham at St Andrew's. In a rip-roaring cup-tie of a game, Birmingham were delighted to hang on for dear life at the end to take two points which could put them back into the First Division at the Town's expense.

Defeat was rough justice on a Town side which was so adaptable that it threw away its normal careful, considered style for a frantic finale—and still went close to snatching a point at least.

Birmingham snuffed out the Town's hopes through being marginally better at the critical art of taking chances. Their winner was a gem of a goal, a far-post header by Keith Bertschin, the man who hit a hat-trick in the 3-2 success at Kenilworth Road in November.

In the Birmingham manager's office after the game people were talking about the Town's failure. They had lost a vital match, and dropped out of the promotion reckoning. I felt pig sick myself.

But when I look back over 40 league matches, failure is hardly the word. I recall journeys home from Gillingham and Bristol last August when I feared real failure... relegation.

Match Details

BIRMINGHAM CITY 1, LUTON TN. 0
Half-time: 1-0

TOWN: Findlay; Stephens, Donaghy, Saxby, Price; Grealish, Hill, West (White, 66 mins); Stein, Hatton, Moss.

BIRMINGHAM: Wealds; Broadhurst, Dennis, Gallagher, Todd; Curbishley, Gemmill, Ainscow; Worthington (Lynex, 80 mins), Bertschin, Dillon.

THE GOAL: Keith Bertschin, 25 minutes, far post header from inch-perfect cross by Kevin Dillon.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Birmingham seven saved, six off target, two disallowed for fouls; Town seven saved, eight off target, one hit the post.

ENTERTAINMENT: Gripping and tense right through to the final whistle, with Birmingham groggy in the Town's late onslaught.

REFEREE: John Worrall, Warrington—positively unbiased and some decisions looked suspect. It didn't need a TV play-back to know that Jake Findlay moved early to make a dramatic penalty save against Archie Gemmill.

ATTENDANCE: 23,662, including more tremendous backing from Town followers.

BOOKINGS: Paul Price and Jake Findlay of the Town, and Mark Dennis of Birmingham, all for fouls.

THE TOP TEAMS

	HOME					AWAY					Goal diff
	P	W	D	L	F A	P	W	D	L	F A	
Birmingham	40	14	4	2	34 13	7	5	8	21	22 51	+20
Leicester	39	11	5	4	30 18	8	7	4	24	18 50	+18
Chelsea	40	13	3	4	31 16	9	3	8	31	35 50	+11
Sunderland	39	14	5	0	40 13	6	6	9	21	28 49	+20
Luton Town	40	8	10	2	34 17	7	6	7	28	26 46	+19
QPR	40	9	9	2	44 24	7	4	9	26	27 45	+21
Newcastle	40	13	5	2	33 17	2	8	10	17	28 43	+15
West Ham	37	12	2	5	32 17	6	4	8	15	20 42	+10

The progress since then has been remarkable, and manager David Pleat accepted his fate at Birmingham with a determination to find the little extra he needs for next season.

"We have had a tremendous season considering the youth of the side," he said. "The lads have character and ability. They will learn, and they will get better."

Sadly, youth was not enough on this occasion. BBC's Match of the Day highlights scarcely did justice to the Town's efforts, but I thought the home side looked a shade better in terms of team-work.

Colin Todd is still a top class defender, brilliant in the art of making interceptions and tackles look easy, quick to anticipate danger, and alert to the possibilities of a quick break from defence.

Archie Gemmill and Tony Grealish ended up with honours even in midfield, but Alan West and Ricky Hill were unable to tip the scales the Town's way, and the service to the front-runners was spasmodic.

Referee John Worrall rescued the Town when Alan Ainscow put the ball into the net in the seventh

minute — he ruled that Frank Worthington had fouled Jake Findlay in the build-up. Later he ruled out another "goal" when Joe Gallagher went up for a header, and was penalised for pushing.

Bertschin's headed goal came between those two incidents, after the Town's right flank had been pulled to pieces by full-back Mark Dennis and Kevin Dillon. Kirk Stephens gave Dillon a yard too much space for the cross and the centre was delivered with great accuracy for Bertschin to go flying in with a diving header.

The striker was set up for his second goal in the 61st minute, put clear on the break by Alan Curbishley's through-pass. Jake Findlay raced out of his area to make a rugby tackle to save a goal and earn a booking.

A stiff breeze and hard pitch caused problems for both sides, but the Town held out and an equaliser should have come in the 65th minute. Grealish set Bob Hatton free down the middle, and after Jeff Wealds blocked his shot Brian Stein collected the

loose ball, went past the goalkeeper and then shot high and wide of an inviting unguarded net.

With 25 minutes to go the Town switched to a 4-2-4 formation, with Steve White replacing West. He was just in time to see Hatton head another clear chance wide from Hill's cross, and when Birmingham swung back into attack Mike Saxby carelessly tackled Dillon on the edge of the box.

The penalty should have killed the Town, but Findlay decided which way to go, guessed right, got there early and made a dramatic save with a dive to his left from Gemmill's spot kick.

The let-off sparked a tremendous Town onslaught. White nearly scored by beating Wealds to a high ball delivered by Grealish—Todd cleared off the line but the referee mysteriously awarded Wealds a free kick for colliding with White.

In the last 15 minutes, the Town played soccer which Mr Pleat described as "quite Irish to us—long balls down the middle, chasing and hounding."

It nearly paid off, even if there was not much chasing down the left wing. Stein, working himself to near-exhaustion, slung over a long cross from the right, and Mal Donaghy's diving header smacked against the post. In a hectic scramble

Report by Brian Swain

Pictures: Mark Richards



● HANDED OFF: Defender Mark Dennis gets away with unorthodox blocking measures to try to stop Bob Hatton, whose header was scrambled off the line.