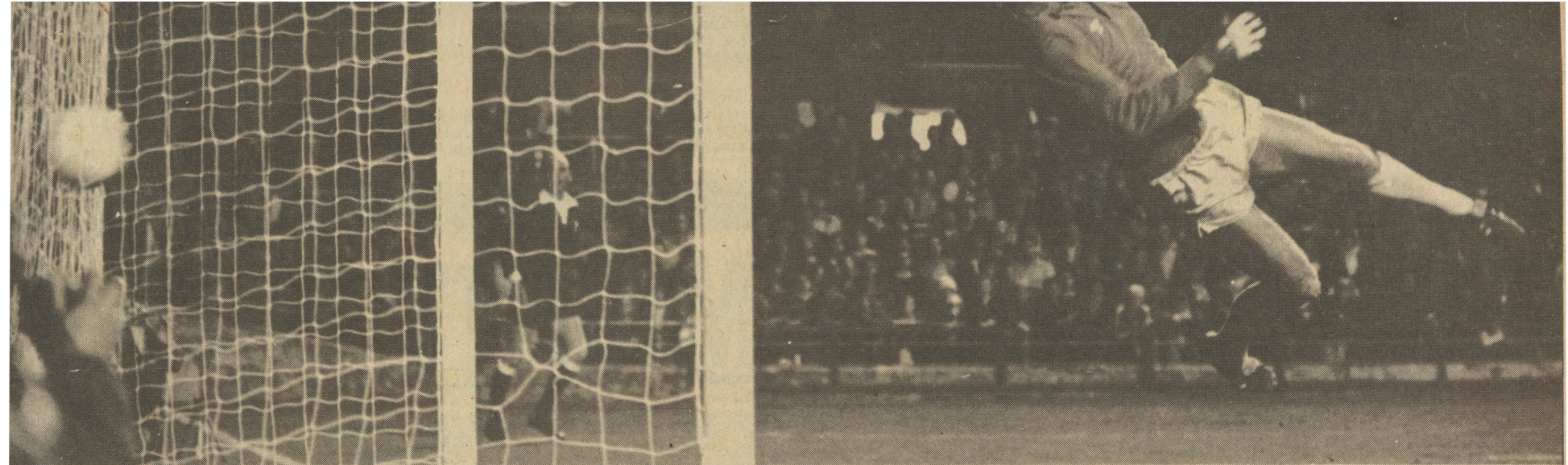




■ Stranded . . . Joe Corrigan gropes at air after being beaten by Raddy Antic's 25th minute free kick

Pictures: KEITH DOBNEY

ABSENT FANS MISS OUT ON CUP CRACKER

TWO terrible defensive errors gave Malcolm Allison's struggling Manchester City the right to enter tomorrow's draw for the fourth round of the Football League Cup.

But those Luton fans who claim that the First Division team's appearance in the next stage of the competition bears an element of luck, will not find many to argue against them.

There were long periods when the Town matched anything City could offer and the real losers on the night were the fans who stayed away, leaving an alarmingly low attendance of just over 10,000.

Both teams contributed much to an entertaining game where the result was in dispute until the final whistle. And no one was more relieved to hear it than Allison.

Instead of going to Maine Road for a replay, Luton will now entertain Tampa Bay Rowdies in a friendly at Kenilworth Road on Monday.

There can be no doubt that the Town deserved at least a second bite at City, whose two goals had an element of luck about them while Luton's effort was based on pure skill.

No one needed a victory more than Allison. But he must have been worried throughout the 90 minutes that Luton could help put him out of a job.

"Apart from one ten-minute spell, I never felt confident about the final result," he admitted. "It was a very difficult game for us and I was disappointed with many of the things we did during the game."

"We had done our homework on Luton and, as expected, they stretched us to the limit. They are a very good attacking team and didn't surprise us with the problems they posed."

Punished

Pleat expressed his "deep disappointment" at the two mistakes which put City through. "Once we stumbled over the first ten minutes we began to look good," he said.

"Our two mistakes were a huge disappointment to me and we were severely punished for them. Unlike the League where teams have a chance to recover from mistakes over the season, cup competitions don't provide that opportunity."

Apart from those two mistakes, Luton did everything asked of them — but it wasn't quite enough. Their furious pace in the second half won them seven corners to City's three and Allison may have been forced to settle for a replay if referee Stephen Bates had given more consideration to Brian Stein's second half penalty claim

Luton Town 1 Man City 2 By ERIC HARRIS

LUTON TOWN: Findlay; Stephens, Donaghy, Grealish (Smith), Saxby, Price, Hill, Stein, West, Antic, Moss.

MANCHESTER CITY: Corrigan; Ranson, Reid, Booth, Caton, Henry, Power, Daley, Palmer, Bennett, Reeves. Sub: Sugrue.

REFEREE: S. Bates (Bristol).

ATTENDANCE: 10,265.

GOALS: Antic (25), Bennet (11), Henry (43).

BOOKINGS: Caton (foul on Hill), Saxby (foul on Power), Ranson (dissent).

when he appeared to be brought down.

After surviving a hectic first ten minutes when keeper Jake Findlay made good saves from Roger Palmer and Kevin Reeves, City took the lead with a move which stemmed from a rare error by Paul Price.

His attempted clearance was delivered to Reeves' feet and, from his cross, Dave Bennett — always a source of trouble to the Town — ran through, riding Mike Saxby's tackle before driving the ball firmly out of Findlay's reach.

Instead of demoralising the Town, the goal served only as a boost and with Raddy Antic again operating as an emergency striker in the absence of anyone else capable of finding the net, City knew immediately they had a fight on their hands.

Antic was presented with the opportunity of equalising from the Town's first corner after 15 minutes. But his

No penalty! Two pictures sum up the Town's agony



■ Penalty? Stein tumbles to the ground after a tackle by Tommy Caton. The referee's verdict? . . . a corner

Defensive slips prove costly

powerful header from the far post flashed wide.

Eight minutes later, big Joe Corrigan's groping fingers prevented Saxby from scoring with another header. The keeper had to make two desperate, but successful, attempts to claw the ball off the line.

Bending

Luton's pressure, however, was rewarded after 25 minutes when Antic equalised with a superb goal.

It came from a free kick awarded for a foul on Alan West. City built a strong defensive wall but Antic

showed his skill from dead ball situations by bending his shot around the wall and well out of Corrigan's reach.

Corrigan saw further hectic action as the Town realised they had the ability to compete against First Division opposition. The keeper was forced low to West's shot before diving at David Moss's feet to block the rebound.

But two minutes before the break, City struck again. A quick counter attack sent Steve Daley wide down the left and from his accurate cross, Tony Henry was left completely unmarked to head the ball past Findlay.

That goal could not have come at a worse time for the Town but they boldly went in search of an equaliser after the break.

Findlay saved at Daley's feet and Reeves shot wide before Luton hit back when Saxby headed a shade wide and Stein's shot was deflected for a corner.

The action was fast and furious — but it wasn't enough to provide Luton with that elusive equaliser in a tense tie where they deserved much more than the applause of the fans and Allison's accolades.



■ Penalty? Corrigan appears to use his left arm to impede Brian Stein