34

3438 7-10-80

Verdict on the Town's week

Down three places

DEFEAT by bottom club Bristol City knocked the Town down three places in the Second Division table to 16th, only seven off the bottom.

City's first victory of the season lifted them above their neighbours Bristol Rovers on goal-difference, with the Rovers having the chance to re-establish their placing last night if they could lift themselves to put one over on Chelsea at Stamford Bridge.

There was a shock for the leaders, Blackburn Rovers, on Tuesday, when they sacrificed their unbeaten record at Hillsborough, going down 2-1 to Sheffield Wednesday.

A goal by Jimmy Neighbour in the 55th minute was enough to give West Ham victory over Cardiff City at Upton Park and keep them hot on the heels of Blackburn, a point behind the leaders with a better goal-difference than Notts County who dropped a point at home to Grimsby.

With top teams all collecting points, the gap between the Town and the promotion places widened after Saturday's results.

Notts County's win pushed them up to second place, with 14 points from nine matches. They overtook West Ham, who managed a 0-0 draw at Newcastle in front of the day's biggest Second Division gate, 24,848.

Derby moved up into contention, joining Sheffield Wednesday on 11 points by beating them 3-1 at the Baseball Ground.

PUT ON THE SPOT BY A BAD DECISION

FOR NEARLY an hour at Ashton Gate on Tuesday night the Town looked set for their first away win in the league since the first day of the season. But then a crucial refereeing decision went against them, and they fell apart against the worst side I have seen for a long time.

Bottom of the Second Division, Bristol City suddenly found the confidence and fighting spirit to turn the match and collect their first win in ten attempts.

Referee Bert Newsome became prime suspect after the match when Town boss David Pleat was asked how two points could be pinched when they seemed to be in the bag.

BRIAN SWAIN REPORTS FROM ASHTON GATE

LIFELINE

I agree with the implied criticism that he gave a penalty for a handling incident which did not look intentional. What bothered me more than Mr Pleat was that the Town should have put the game out of Bristol City's reach long before the ref threw them a lifeline.

We had seen plenty to be happy about in the first half, in which the home side had not one shot on target.

The Town's defence was cool and collected, and without being at their very best the midfield was more than a match for the home side.

COMMAND

Having scored only once on their own pitch all season, City's confidence was gone as the Town took command. Ricky Hill and Andy Harrow put a couple of 20-yard efforts over the bar and Alan West almost caught Ray Cashley off his line with a lob.

The Town found huge spaces to attack, and the mounting pressure brought its reward with the opening goal in the 38th minute.

A corner by David Moss was part-cleared, Paul Price hammered in a low drive, and as the ball was beaten out by a full-back Mike Saxby stabbed it into the net from close range.

If the build-up was less than classic, the end product was just reward for the Town's easy-going play.

Moss was not at his best, but put through a lovely long pass to catch City on the break. Harrow burst past Whitehead, but seemed to deny himself a yard by deciding to take the shot on his left foot as as he was running towards the right, and Cashley was able to make a save when a more experienced man would have beaten him.

Harrow's miss was followed soon after the interval by one by Moss — Alan West put the winger clear through a square defence, but his angled drive hit the goalkeeper instead of the net.

PENALTY

Five minutes later came the turning point. Tainton tried to hammer the ball into the goal area from just outside the penalty box. Mal Donaghy had put himself between opponent and goal, perhaps three yards from Tainton.

The ball hit him, and the ref gave a penalty. Ritchie despatched it to the relief of City's frustrated fans and new manager Bob Houghton, the man famous for fielding 11 defenders in a European cup final with Malmo.

The penalty stirred the crowd and spurred the City players and, as the Town's cool competence vanished, Bristol's play was suddenly injected with new urgency and vigour.

They got the winner in the 64th minute after Findlay did well to punch out a left-wing cross. Tainton drove the ball back, Price cleared off the line and Mabbutt knocked in the rebound.

QUIET

The Town never looked like picking themselves up after that. They lost their calmness, and the only attacking ploy that looked like causing problems was a series of brave runs down the right wing by Kirk Stephens.

But, Brian Stein was kept quiet, Harrow had given all he had after less than a week in full-time training, and Moss all but disappeared.

LIKELY

I thought Steve White might have been put on to try to inject a little more thrust into the attack. Mr Pleat said he thought about it, but decided that the men on the field looked likely to score.

He complained that in terms of football quality, the Town had again done enough to earn two or three goals. We'll be saying the same in the Third Division if the goals don't start flowing again soon.

● ONE THAT GOT AWAY: One of the Town's best chances against Notts County at Kenilworth Road came before the visitors had scored. Brian Stein, left, is pictured as he makes a close-range volley from Ricky Hill's headed pass. He is just on the six-yard line, but the ball went over the bar. Picture: MARK RICHARDS

Match Details

BRISTOL CITY 2, LUTON TOWN 1

Half-time: 0-1

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

BRISTOL CITY: Cashley; Sweeney, Hay, Whitehead, Merrick; Gow, Fitzpatrick, Ritchie; Tainton, Mabbutt, Smith. Sub: Mann, not used.

THE GOALS: Mike Saxby for the Town, 38 minutes, after shot by Paul Price was charged down; Tom Ritchie for City, 58 minutes, penalty for a handball against Mal Donaghy which did not look intentional from the stand; Kevin Mabbutt for City, 64 minutes, from rebound after Paul Price stopped a shot by Tainton on the line.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town four saved and eight off target; Bristol City two saved and five wide.

REFEREE: Bert Newsome, Broseley: The Town players were convinced he boobed with the penalty decision which let the home side back into the game.

ENTERTAINMENT: Bristol City looked a very poor side. The Town played some good approach soccer, especially in midfield. The trouble is that pretty football is not bringing enough goals or points.

ATTENDANCE: 7,014, lowest of the season at Ashton Gate.

BOOKING: Tony Grealish for dissent.