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CARDIFF ARE GIVEN A GOAL START

Gap at the top widens

ALTHOUGH the Town dropped only one place in the Second Division table after the defeat at Ninian Park, the gap between the leaders and the chasing pack is opening up.

The Town are eleventh, with 18 points from 19 games, nine points behind the nearest promotion place and four clear of the bottom three. West Ham, beaten only by the Town, took their tally to 28 points with a 2-0 home win over Swansea, watched by the day's biggest Second Division gate, 27,376 at Upton Park. David Cross and Paul Goddard got the goals, both in the second half. Chelsea moved up to second place, a point behind West Ham by winning 2-0 against Sheffield Wednesday at Stamford Bridge.

DRAW AGAIN
Notts County seem to be faltering. The former leaders drew for the fourth consecutive match on Saturday, 1-1 at Shrewsbury, and on Tuesday night went down to a 3-0 defeat at Burnley Park against Bolton, who come to Kenilworth Road this weekend.

It left County in third place in the table, level on points with Chelsea but with a poorer goal difference.

Bolton's Tuesday success lifted pressure off them. They were among the teams scrambling to pull away from the relegation area after dropping a home point on Saturday — they conceded a late equaliser to Grimsby.

SAD PAIR
Down at the bottom Bristol Rovers are in danger of losing touch, with only one victory in 19 games. They were held 1-1 by Derby at Eastville, and are 22nd, with 11 points. Bristol City supporters can hardly crow over their local rivals, because their team is 21st, with 12 points, after being beaten 2-1 at Cambridge.

FOR MORE than half the match at Ninian Park it was hard to believe that the Town side going through the motions of soccer was the same combination that had rocked table-topping West Ham just a week previously.

They seem to go to Wales expecting the worst. Manager David Pleat dislikes the place so much that he refused to spend Friday night in the principality. The team bedded down at Bristol, but the plans to stage a smash-and-grab trip across the Severn Bridge went hopelessly wrong.

The Town's first-half performance was as bad as anything they have produced this season, and they were lucky that Cardiff, for all their pressure, were not much brighter.

The manager denies that he has a deliberate policy of playing negative, boring football in away games. But the Town's lack of ambition in the first half was embarrassing to watch at times.

"I suppose they thought they had to be very careful," said Cardiff manager Richie Morgan. "We looked more likely to score, and they tried hard to give nothing away."

The Town boss confessed that his team had taken too long to move up through the gears. Cardiff took 53 minutes to score, and it turned out to be too late for the Town to get back.

But at least the last 30 minutes reminded us that Luton Town can play quick attacking soccer, and only a marginal offside decision robbed them of an equaliser when Steve White netted from close range.

"I wish Cardiff had scored in the first minute," said Mr Pleat. "We didn't show enough purpose until it was too late. In the last 30 minutes we did enough to be worth a point, but even if we had got it wouldn't have been happy with our general level of performance."

In the first half the Town seemed to be playing at half-pace, yielding the midfield to Cardiff, and slowing the game down at every opportunity.

TRAP

The offside trap was employed with marginal success. A linesman's mistake beat it once and forced Jake Findlay to produce a last-ditch save to tip a shot from Gary Stevens round the post. From the corner John Buchanan hammered the ball straight at the goalkeeper when he might have scored.

The Town had made a couple of early breaks, with David Moss having two efforts saved, but Findlay faced twice as many first-half shots as Ron Healey.

The same pattern early in the second half saw Findlay make another good save from Stevens, after Peter Kitchen's height enabled him to beat the Town's defence to a far-post cross.

There was a touch of wham - bang - run about

BRIAN SWAIN REPORTS FROM NINIAN PARK

Cardiff's play, but they produced their one moment of finesse to snatch the goal that mattered in the 53rd minute.

Mal Donaghy, who did not have a happy day in midfield, conceded a free kick on the edge of the penalty area. Cardiff varied the common play. Billy Ronson tapped the free kick short to Wayne Hughes, and as Town defenders raced out to close him down and block his shot, he pushed the ball sideways again, for Buchanan to crack a low drive into the net.

With so many defenders in front of him, Findlay saw the ball too late to do anything about it.

URGED ON

Cardiff's supporters found their voices and urged their team on, believing that the Town's lack-lustre display was cause to anticipate further goals.

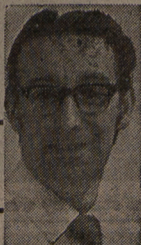
Within a couple of minutes Mark Aizlewood had to make a goal-line clearance after a corner skidded off Mike Saxby's head and looked like bringing a spectacular own goal.

But the rest of the game went the Town's way as they responded to the reverse with the sort of moves that accounted for West Ham.

Ricky Hill and Kirk Stephens caused problems down the right, and Moss, White and Brian Stein started to put moves together. It looked like a very good equaliser when White netted from close range in the 60th minute after Stein took a clever pass from Hill, turned his man on the flank and crossed low into the goal-mouth.

The linesman's flag was raised as the ball hit the net and the effort was ruled out, although Stein claimed later that the official was wrong because he had pulled the ball back, not passed it forward.

Hill led another break which ended with White passing his marker but having a shot well saved,



and a raking move from Findlay's clearance was carried on by White and Moss for Stein to glance a header narrowly wide. The Town had put Alan West on as replacement for Donaghy from the 63rd minute, and their surges had Cardiff on the defensive for most of the last half hour.

West put Moss in with a chance which was saved, and from the rebound Paul Price's shot was blocked.

I had the feeling that it was a case of rough justice on the Town. They could easily have snatched an equaliser in the late stages, but their early approach had not been worthy of a team that really wants to attack the opposition.

But the last half hour did give the crowd more excitement and entertainment, and Cardiff manager Morgan said: "Luton are a good side to play against."

"They'll turn a lot of sides over this season, and I will be amazed if they are not in the top six within the next couple of months."

Match Details

CARDIFF CITY 1, LUTON TOWN 0
Half-time: 0-0

TOWN: Findlay; Stephens, Aizlewood, Saxby, Price; Donaghy (West, 63 minutes), Grealish, Hill; Stein, White, Moss.

CARDIFF: Healey; Lin Jones, Thomas, Pontin, Dwyer; Hughes, Ronson, Giles; Buchanan (Lewis, 67 minutes), Kitchen, Stevens.

THE GOAL: John Buchanan, 53 minutes, 25-yard low drive from short free-kick routine.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town ten saved, six off target, one disallowed for offside; Cardiff 12 saved, three wide.

ENTERTAINMENT: Good stuff for the home fans, mainly because the Town were made to look second best until Cardiff's goal forced them to be more positive.

ATTENDANCE: 6,064—better than the average for Cardiff, despite a gloomy, wet day.

REFEREE: Maurice Robinson, Sutton Coldfield. At least he got going from the first whistle, which was more than the Town did.

BOOKINGS: Tony Grealish for a foul on Jones; Keith Pontin for a foul on Jake Findlay.

DAVID PLEAT'S VIEWPOINT

THEY OFTEN SAY that football is a funny old game. It can provide immense pleasure and delight for fans and players one week, then knock them flat the next.

And when it happens that change of fortune hits managers just as hard, as I can testify after our experience at Cardiff.

We have done a lot of talking about the match this week, trying to pin down the reasons for losing a game which we should have won handsomely.

While I respect every opposing side, I went to Ninian Park convinced that this was a game we would win.

Quite simply, I thought we were a better side than Cardiff. But we had to earn the right to that belief. We wanted both points and went into the match believing that we could get them.

Perhaps on the day we kidded ourselves too much in the first 15 minutes.

There was a small crowd, not much atmosphere in the stadium, and perhaps we thought it was going to be too easy.

If that was the feeling, the defeat will have done some good. We allowed the first 45 minutes to drift away without reward, and

EXCLUSIVE: THE TOWN MANAGER'S COLUMN

paid for it in the end.

Thankfully, our play did improve considerably later, and some of our soccer was really brilliant in the last half-hour.

We got back to playing quick inventive football, and could quite easily have had two or three goals.

I thought we had scored a good equaliser when Steve White netted, and it must have been a very close offside decision. But you have to accept that some marginal decisions go for you and some against, and we are not making that incident any excuse.

It is, however, an illustration of the narrow margin between success and failure. I had confidence that if we could get the equaliser we would have gone on to take both points, and certainly we played some terrific football after they scored.

The lesson for all of us, and the subject of a lot of our talking this week, is that we have to be more consistent — match by match, and minute by minute in each game as well.

RUN NEEDED

The contrast between our matches against West Ham and Cardiff reinforced the point and the players are well aware that their ambition to play in the First Division needs a good long run to be put together quickly.

My feeling is that the overall excellence in the Second Division is not so great this year and that the promotion race will be wide open for quite a long time yet.

Our problem is that the gap between us and the top places is getting bigger every time we lose. But at this stage we still have plenty of opportunity to put things right.

Nothing is impossible in football. My feeling is that West Ham are the best side in the division and they are rightly favourites to win promotion this year. They faltered at the end of last season, but this time I expect them to learn their lesson.

Chelsea are the other popular favourites, but they have plenty to do yet



—like playing us at Kenilworth Road on Boxing Day.

I don't know if Chelsea can sustain their current form long enough, but it is obvious that at the end of the season there will be one or two dark horses coming through at the critical time.

I wanted ten points out of ten before the Chelsea visit, which means that it is now more important than ever to collect maximum points from the next four games.

Every one is vital for us and we fully expect to return to better form against Bolton on Saturday.

ADJUSTING

They have taken time to adjust to Second Division life after relegation and are going through a period of team changes.

We had them watched last week, and on Tuesday night when they beat Notts County at Burnden Park. Younger players are being brought in, and are doing well, and Bolton seem to have a good mixture of youth and experience.

I know that the introduction of young men can work wonders for any team and Bolton have some very experienced men as well, like Reid, Gowing, Kidd and Whatmore.

They've had a taste of First Division life and will be keen to get back. We have a lot of young players who are just as keen for a chance to shine at the top level, so it should be a good game. We will go in to win it, and we think we can. If we start the way we left off at Ninian Park there is little doubt about the result.

We want to give our supporters what they want, and we are looking forward to meeting more of them at Cesars Palace on Monday night.

It's a pre-Christmas party for players and fans to meet away from a football ground, and I am looking forward to it. But even more we're looking forward to two points on Saturday, to give us extra cause for celebration.