Hatters open up five point lead

Patchy in parts, but good enough

81/82

By ERIC HARRIS

MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Aleksic (Antic); Stephens, Aizlewood, Horton, Goodyear, Donaghy, Hill, Stein, White, Fuccillo, Moss.

BOLTON: McDonagh, Whitworth, Bailey, Henry, Jones, McElhinney, Chandler, Thompson (Foster), Carter, Cantello, Hoggan.

REFEREE: J. Hunting (Leicester); **ATTENDANCE:** 8,889; **GOALS:** Stein (68), Moss (78).

LUTON successfully re-opened a five-point gap at the top of the Second Division last night when they finally brushed aside Bolton's stubborn resistance to record a valuable 2–0 home victory.

But it took the Town 68 minutes to wear down the defensive blockade of a team haunted by the possibility of relegation, and it was a game where the Hatters often failed to find the fluent form which has made them favourites to win the championship.

But once Brian Stein had hammered them in front with his first goal since September 26, Luton cantered to a victory which gave them another three precious points.

The final result was fully justified, and it was significant that Luton recorded their seventh clean sheet this season and are now ten points clear of third-placed Barnsley.

That must surely point Luton in the clear direction of the First Division with just over a third of their League programme completed.

Luton last night stuttered occasionally, but there was never any doubt they had the ability to give brave Bolton the brush-off — although it could have been vastly different if Mick Carter had not squandered an easy scoring chance ten minutes before the Town went in front.

Despite Luton's niggling inability to emphasise their higher class throughout the game, there were no complaints from manager David Pleat.

Evaluate

"The result was right and I have no complaints about any of our players," he said. "We showed skill, and were determined and positive.

"It was difficult to evaluate how good we were, but I feel we could have finally won by more than two goals and it could have been a white-wash."

Once the Town had managed to find direction with their passes, they began to bubble and Stein could have given them an 11th minute lead.

He displayed another typical example of his jinking footwork when he took on and beat two defenders to shoot wide after Steve White had won a free kick.

Moss wasted another chance by knocking his free kick over the top with no defensive wall to beat after 17 minutes. And, three minues later, White cursed himself when he flicked the ball wide after Mark Aizlewood demonstrated Luton's passing ability with an excellent through ball.

Until then, Bolton had failed to penetrate Luton's defence although there was a brief sign of panic at the back in the 26th minute. The visitors made a rare excursion into the Town's penalty area when the ball bobbled about before Clive Goodyear hacked it clear.

But that isolated threat quickly evaporated three minutes later when keeper Jim McDonagh raced out of his area to chest the ball down when White again threatened to burst through and open the scoring.

The keeper then made another important save when he went down at White's feet after Goodyear had flicked the ball on from a corner.

The first of two strong penalty appeals was rejected when Bolton claimed Mal Donaghy handled and the Town then survived another scare when Horton cleared the ball off the line from Dave Hoggan's shot.

After Hill and Lil Fuccillo shot over within three minutes of the restart, Bolton should have taken the lead. Chris Thompson sneaked through Luton's offside trap and pushed the ball through to Carter.

He was faced with only Milija Aleksic, who enjoyed a quiet night, but shot wide. It was an agonising mistake and one which the visitors paid for in the 68th minute.

Relieved

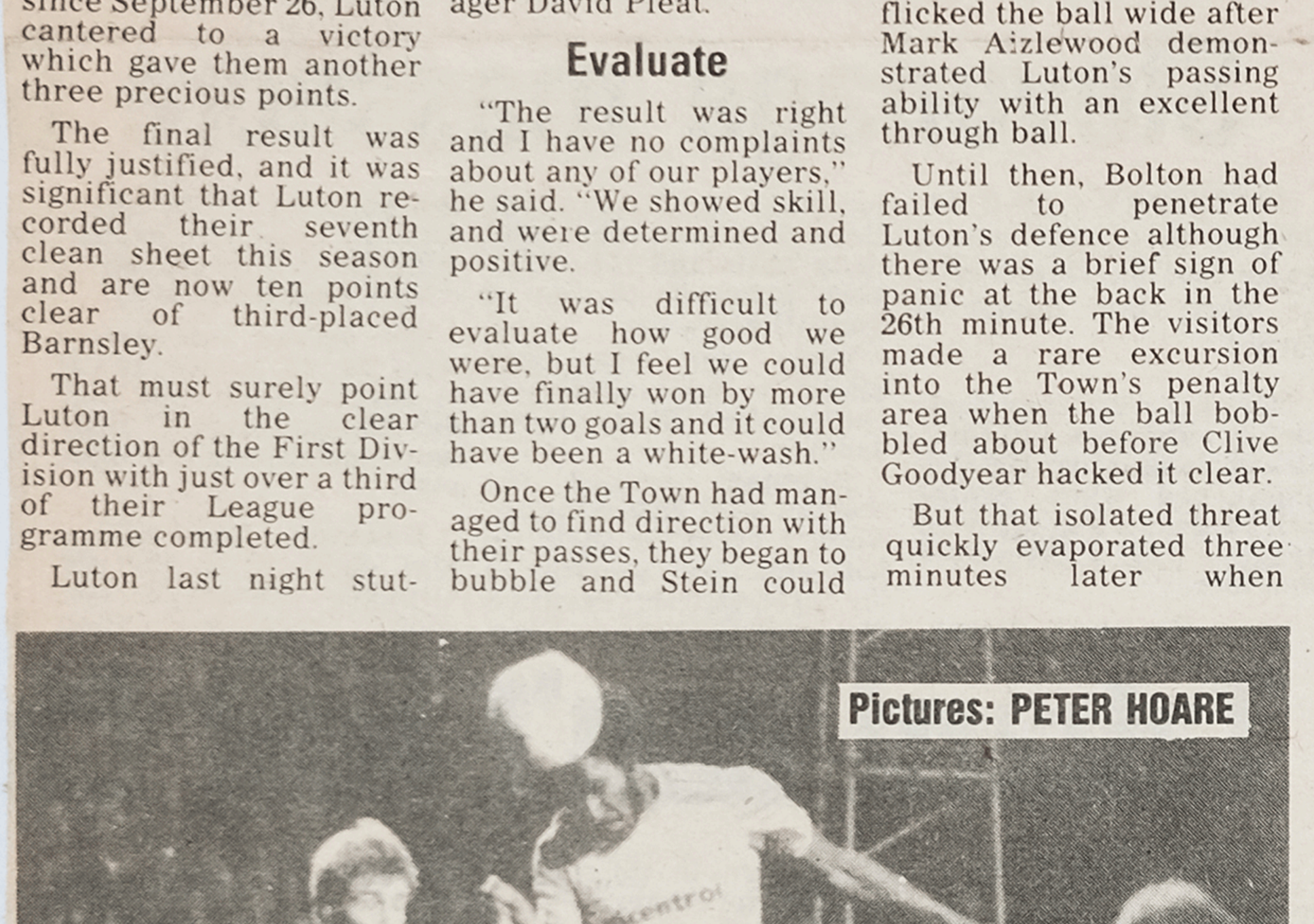
Aizlewood pumped the ball into Bolton's defence with his left foot and Stein hammered Luton into the lead from close range.

That goal relieved some of Luton's tension and Hill could have added another with a powerful header which was a fraction off target.

McDonagh denied Hill with another fine save when he palmed away the midfield player's cross before Luton finally put the result beyond any doubt 12 minutes from time.

It stemmed from a free kick awarded after White had been fouled on the edge of the box. Bolton pulled 11 players back into the area but Moss cheekily lobbed the ball over the wall and beat McDonagh with a shot which took a slight deflection off Thompson.

Aleksic had to go off injured two minutes from time after diving at a forward's feet, but it was more a precautionary measure by Pleat. Mal Donaghy took over in goal.



Pictures: PETER HOARE

HIGH FLYER . . . Ricky Hill gets up well to thump a first half header just wide