

SPORTS NEWS 1

Town Match Verdict ★★

Stretching the lead

TEN POINTS clear of third and fourth place, Luton Town can afford a month of disasters and still win promotion to the First Division for the third time in their history.

They have held first place in the Second Division for ten games, since their win at Orient on October 3, and victory against Rotherham took their recent run to nine league and cup wins out of the last ten fixtures.

And they have a bigger lead over their rivals than West Ham did a year ago. If you convert the league table to the old system, two points for a win and one for a draw, the Town would be top with 27 points, with Watford and Oldham on 22 and QPR and Sheffield Wednesday on 21.

A year ago, when the leading teams had also played 17 league games, West Ham and Notts County were level on top with 26 points, with Chelsea a point behind, Sheffield Wednesday on 22 and Swansea on 21.

Faltering

This season's also-rans are still being led by Watford, but they have won only once in their last four league matches. Sheffield Wednesday, one of David Pleat's tips for promotion, beat them 3-1 at Hillsborough.

QPR, another team highly rated by the Town manager, slipped back into third place with a 2-0 win over Cardiff, and Luton are still the only visiting side to take three points

THE TOP TEAMS

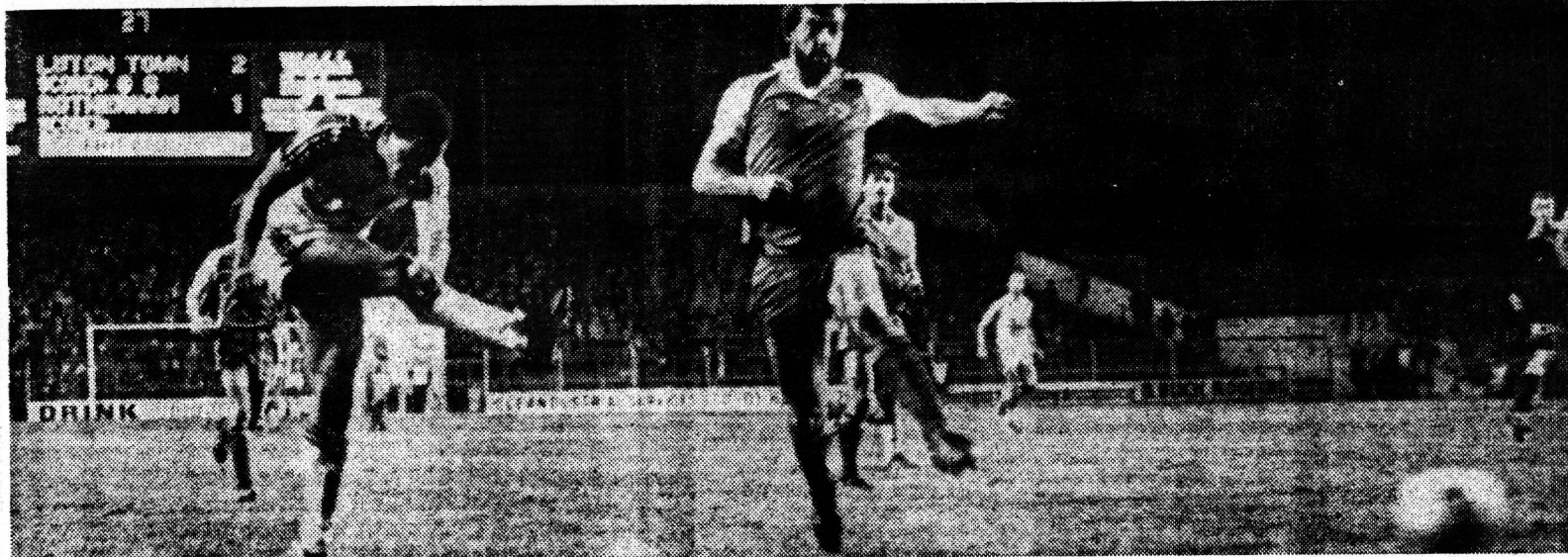
	P	W	D	L	F	A	P
Luton Town	17	13	1	3	39	17	40
Watford	16	10	2	4	25	17	32
QPR	17	9	3	5	26	15	30
Oldham	17	8	6	3	24	16	30
Sheff Wed	17	9	3	5	21	20	30
Barnsley	17	8	3	6	28	20	27

on the plastic pitch at Loftus Road.

Oldham are mounting another challenge, and are fourth after a hat-trick by Roger Wylde gave them a 3-0 win at Wrexham.

Things are stirring at the other end of the table. Shrewsbury, who meet the Town this week, became the latest victims of the Orient revival, whose 2-0 home win lifted them out of the bottom three for the first time in three months. In eight games since Ken Knighton became manager, Orient have lost only twice.

Their recovery leaves Bolton on the bottom, with Wrexham and Grimsby nearest to them.



● FINISHER: Brian Stein lashes in the Town's third goal, to end Rotherham's resistance.

ANOTHER BOSS IN LUTON FAN CLUB

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 3 ROTHERHAM UTD 1
Half-time: 0-0

TOWN: Aleksic; Stephens, Goodyear, Donaghy, Aizlewood; Hill, Horton, Fuccillo; Stein, White, Moss. Sub: Antic, not needed.

ROTHERHAM: Mountford; Forrest, Stancliffe, Green, Taylor; Rhodes, Gooding, Henson; Towner, Moore, Fern (Seasman, 72 mins).

GOALS: Steve White, 49 minutes, from cross by Ricky Hill; Rod Fern for Rotherham, 63 mins, glancing header from free kick; Mal Donaghy, 63 mins, header from David Moss corner; Brian Stein, 64 mins, from through-ball by Hill.

OTHER STRIKES: Town nine saved and seven wide; Rotherham one saved, six off target and one disallowed for offside ten minutes from time. Corners: 5-4 to Rotherham.

ATTENDANCE: 11,061, third highest of the day in the Second Division, and 500 up on the Town's average home gate so far.

ENTERTAINMENT: Not sparkling, but still pretty good, with Rotherham contributing by being willing to go forward, particularly in the second half.

REFEREE: Jeff Bray, Hinckley—played well and earned respect from both sides.

THREE MORE goals kept the Town on course for promotion and the Second Division championship. But after they had disposed of Rotherham United at Kenilworth Road, visiting manager Emlyn Hughes pinpointed the Town's trump card as the defence rather than the attack.

As a former Liverpool and England defender, his judgement may have been slightly biased, but he had no moans about the justice of the final result, even if Rotherham had looked like snatching a point at one stage.

Two goals in a minute half-an-hour from the end finished them off to give the Town the sort of victory they will have to look for in most home matches for the rest of the season.

Visiting sides come to Luton with an inbuilt inferiority complex. So they should, knowing they are meeting the team which looks like running away with the championship, and has the best scoring record in the Second Division.

Priority has to be given to trying to frustrate the Town's attack, and hope to catch them on the break now and again.

Visitors will work to try to stop the Town playing their natural flowing football and Rotherham managed that for the best part of an hour. They kept the score-sheet blank until half-time, and might have been a goal up at the interval, because Ronnie Moore put a clean chance wide in the fifth minute.

The excitement, and triumph of class over honest hard work, came after the break, even though Rotherham pinched an equaliser after the Town had at last gone ahead.

Said Hughes: "At 1-1 we had done what we set out to do. We had frustrated Luton, but they had defended well. I think they defend better than they attack. Teams get drawn in, and then Luton put the goals in at the other end."

Rotherham's only real attacking threat came from the pace of Tony Towner, and it took Mark Aizlewood a long time to keep him quiet. But the full-back came through to accomplish that vital job after some early scares, helped by the good covering of his back four colleagues, and Rotherham's 57th-minute equaliser came as a distinct shock.

The day's individual star was again Ricky Hill. The Town used more long-

REPORT BY BRIAN SWAIN PICTURES: MARK RICHARDS

ball passing than usual, but when he was given a chance to use his talents Rotherham were on the rack.

Time and again he combined his two most impressive skills — the ability to take men on and go past them with the ball, and then the perception and skill to deliver a telling final pass.

In the 49th minute he did it down the Town's left-wing, to give Steve White his 12th goal of the season from a low cross to the far post.

The Town defence was in disarray when Rotherham got back into the game in the 57th minute. A long free-kick by Gerry Forrest was allowed to go through into the net, with Rod Fern claiming that he got the final touch with a wisp of hair to score against one of his old clubs.

White and Brian Stein began to increase the pressure on their markers, and David Moss, playing deep for much of the time to start Town attacks, got better each minute.

His deep corner regained the lead in the 63rd minute — a move practised regularly in training paid off again when Mal Donaghy raced up beyond the far post to send a looping header into the net. Within a minute, Hill's brilliant through-pass produced finishing power to match it as Stein cracked in the Town's third.

Manager Hughes, cheerful and friendly, took defeat with very good grace, and became the latest in a long line of managers who think the Town are now too good for the Second Division. He's quite right, too.



● ONE UP: Steve White squeezes in the close-range shot which put the Town into the lead after Ricky Hill's cross reached him on the far post.



● DIVING IN: Brian Stein's persistence contributed to the goal, picture on the left. The shot above was taken a split second before White scored and shows how Stein's brave attempt at a diving header risked a boot in the ear as it helped to confuse the Rotherham defence.