

Town Match Verdict ★★

SPORTS
NEWS 1Seven points
to spare in
race to go up

A GOAL-LESS draw at The Valley on Tuesday night left Luton Town perfectly poised for promotion, seven points clear of their nearest challengers and 11 points ahead of fourth place in the Second Division.

Oldham had the chance to close the gap at Cardiff last night, but the Town and third-placed Watford both have three games in hand on the Lancashire club.

Watford missed the chance to go second and close the gap on the Town when their home game with Newcastle was one of the six in the division to beat the weekend weather.

But they went down to a surprise defeat, their second at home this season. Newcastle took revenge for Watford's 1-0 victory at St James's Park on the first day of the season with a 3-2 success, with two goals by debut boy Kevin Todd and a late winner by Imre Varadi.

Despite some notable cup performances, and a brave defeat at Ipswich in the League Cup quarter-finals on Monday night, Watford's Second Division record over the past couple of months must be worrying their supporters.

A home win over Blackburn in November has been their only league victory in their last eight league outings.

Queens Park Rangers missed the chance of reclaiming a place in the top three when Wrexham, battling to escape from the relegation zone, became the fifth visiting team this season to take away points from the plastic pitch, thanks to a 1-1 draw and a missed penalty by Simon Stainrod.

PROMOTION
BATTLERS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	P
Luton Tn	20	14	3	3	44	20	45
Oldham	22	10	8	4	33	24	38
Watford	20	10	5	5	31	24	35
QPR	21	10	4	7	28	20	34
Sheff Wed	20	10	4	6	26	25	34
Chelsea	21	9	6	6	26	29	33
Blackburn	23	8	8	7	27	24	32
Barnsley	19	9	3	7	30	21	30
Charlton	23	8	6	9	30	33	30

● Not including Oldham's match at Cardiff last night.



FOILED: Charlton defender Leighton Phillips makes a timely interception to foil Steve White as the Town turn on the pressure.

MUDDY BATTLE IS
A HARD CUP TEST

WANTING A TOUGH TEST to sharpen up his team for Saturday's cup-tie with Ipswich, Luton Town manager David Pleat found almost all his wishes granted at The Valley on Tuesday night. The only disappointment for the big Town following was that a highly entertaining clash in atrocious conditions failed to bring any goals.

Defences at both ends looked less than perfect on a pitch which made mistakes inevitable, but good covering and goalkeeping, mixed with some off-target shooting, left both teams knowing they could easily have been the winners.

Bobby Robson probably learned less than he had hoped as he watched the Town in preparation for Saturday.

Skipper Brian Horton missed his first game for the club since signing in the summer, but will be back to add a little more bite to midfield.

And every Town player will be hoping that the Kenilworth Road surface will be a lot drier than the mudpatch they had to contend with at The Valley.

Charlton played four men across the middle against the Town's three,

Report by Brian Swain
Pictures: Mark Richards

but the clogging mud beat them all.

Too often Town attacks broke down simply because midfield men could not beat the underfoot conditions when they tried to run with the ball.

The Town looked the better side in the first half, then withstood a spirited Charlton attempt to snatch the points in the second,

and I thought the draw was about right, even if the score-line should have been 3-3 or 4-4.

Both goalkeepers did well, although Jake Findlay's clean sheet cost him another booking, for a first-half "professional foul" on Martin Robinson, who had beaten the offside trap and looked a scorer until Findlay upended him outside the area.

Findlay was happy enough to use the laws of football for the benefit of his team, and so was Mr Pleat, but for the good of the game another more suitable penalty needs to be devised for such occasions.

Findlay's only other serious work in the first half was a save from Steve Gritt. Nicky Johns did well



● LET-OFF: A lucky first half escape for Charlton as the ball skidded across the face of their goal and Brian Stein just failed to get the touch.

Match Details

CHARLTON ATHLETIC 0, LUTON TOWN 0

TOWN: Findlay; Stephens, Goodyear, Donaghy, Aizlewood; Hill, Antic, Fuccillo; Stein, White, Moss. Sub: Johnson, not used.

CHARLTON: Johns; Naylor, Berry, Phillips, Ferns; Ambrose, Elliott, Gritt, Robinson; Hales, Walsh. Sub: Smith, not used.

GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town six saved and ten off target. Charlton five saved, nine wide. Corners: 6-5 to the Town.

REFEREE: Tony Glasson, Wiltshire—not the best performer on the park by a long way, and spoiled things for both sides by not playing the advantage rule properly.

BOOKINGS: Mark Aizlewood for hands, cutting out a through-pass; Jake Findlay for charging out to down Martin Robinson, who had got clear by beating an offside trap.

ATTENDANCE: 7,013—better than Charlton's average, thanks to a good following from Luton.

ENTERTAINMENT: Far better than the score-line suggests. Both defences creaked at times on a pitch that was a mudbath down the middle. It might have been a game of seven or eight goals with better finishing.



● JAKE FINDLAY

at the other end to block a shot by David Moss, but both keepers were given an easier night than they should have had.

Johns had more work to do than Findlay, and made two vital saves after the interval, from Brian Stein and Moss.

Strangely, the Town looked more likely scorers in that second half, when they had to do more defending and look for quick breaks.

Better use of the drier parts of the pitch on the flanks might have brought reward for both sides, but towards the end of a night of all-out endeavour and hard work the Town's most satisfying feature was the way the defence steadily knitted into a more reliable unit.

A more sobering thought is that Charlton didn't have an Eric Gates to get round the back of them, or an Alan Brazil to take the half-chances that were bound to crop up on a slippery energy-sapping surface.



● TOO HIGH: Ricky Hill beats off a challenge to get in a shot that flew just over the Charlton crossbar.