

SPORTS NEWS 1

Verdict on the Town's week



Forging ahead

TWO CONSECUTIVE home victories this week, against promotion rivals Oldham and mid-table Cambridge United, have increased Luton Town's stranglehold on the lead in the Second Division. Tuesday's battle against a defensive-minded visiting side used up one of the Town's games in hand, but their relentless surge towards promotion must be frightening to see from places like Watford and Oldham.

With one game in hand on Watford, who won 3-1 at Orient on Saturday, and four in hand over Oldham, the Town are seven points clear at the top, and ten points ahead of fourth place.

None of the chasing group shows the same consistency as the Town. Barnsley, for instance, who were third in late November, have all but vanished as promotion contenders. They have only one victory to their name this year. They lost 0-1 at home to Blackburn this week, and that was the fourth consecutive match in which they failed to score.

Sheffield Wednesday continue to threaten more than they achieve. They moved up into fourth place on Tuesday night, but must have expected to go third again.



	P	W	D	L	F	A	P
Luton Town	25	17	5	3	53	25	56
Watford	26	14	7	5	44	28	49
Oldham	29	12	10	7	36	30	46
Sheff. Wed	28	13	7	8	37	36	46
Rotherham	28	14	3	11	41	34	45
Blackburn	29	12	9	8	33	26	45
QPR	27	13	5	9	34	23	44
Charlton	29	11	9	9	38	38	42

Palace obligingly missed a penalty as Rotherham won 2-0. Victory put them up to fourth place, their highest of the season although they dropped down a notch when Sheffield Wednesday drew on Tuesday.

Queens Park Rangers kept their hopes alive with a 1-0 win at Norwich, leaving them two points adrift of a place in the top three.

PILED RIVER ENDS THE FRUSTRATION

Luton Town 1, Cambridge United 0

A STUNNING GOAL by Brian Horton, his first in the league for the club, pushed Luton Town a step nearer the First Division at Kenilworth Road on Tuesday night. He ended 76 minutes of agony and frustration to give the Town victory over a stubbornly defensive Cambridge United outfit.

Six points from two home games in four days leaves the Town well clear of the rest at the top of the Second Division, yet mid-table Cambridge may have given the Town a foretaste of what to expect next season in the First.

Horton's spectacular match-winner 14 minutes from time ended the almost frightening possibility that Cambridge might hang on to a point or, even worse to consider, snatch two.

Manager John Docherty made it clear that he came to Luton with respect bordering on the edge of abject fear. For long spells Cambridge played with eight men at the back, although Docherty later explained that in fact he had played four defenders and five men across the middle.

He had three centre-halves in the side, and cheerfully admitted that his priority had been to try to stop the Town scoring, then hope to nick a goal. "It's not our job to come here and let Luton turn us over," he said when asked about Cambridge's ultra-cautious approach. "We came to prevent that happening."

"If you get into the First Division you are going to get a lot of teams who will make things difficult for you. We were unlucky not to nick a point, and we might have got all three if we had made our chances count."

Pushed hard by some questions, Mr Docherty very nearly admitted that he had not come to Luton to entertain, but it was significant that the chances created by his side stood out in his mind—the Town were caught only twice in 90 minutes by attacks that might have produced danger, with Roger Gibbins having a shot deflected by a defender and Tommy O'Neill being foiled by a spreading save by Jake Findlay.

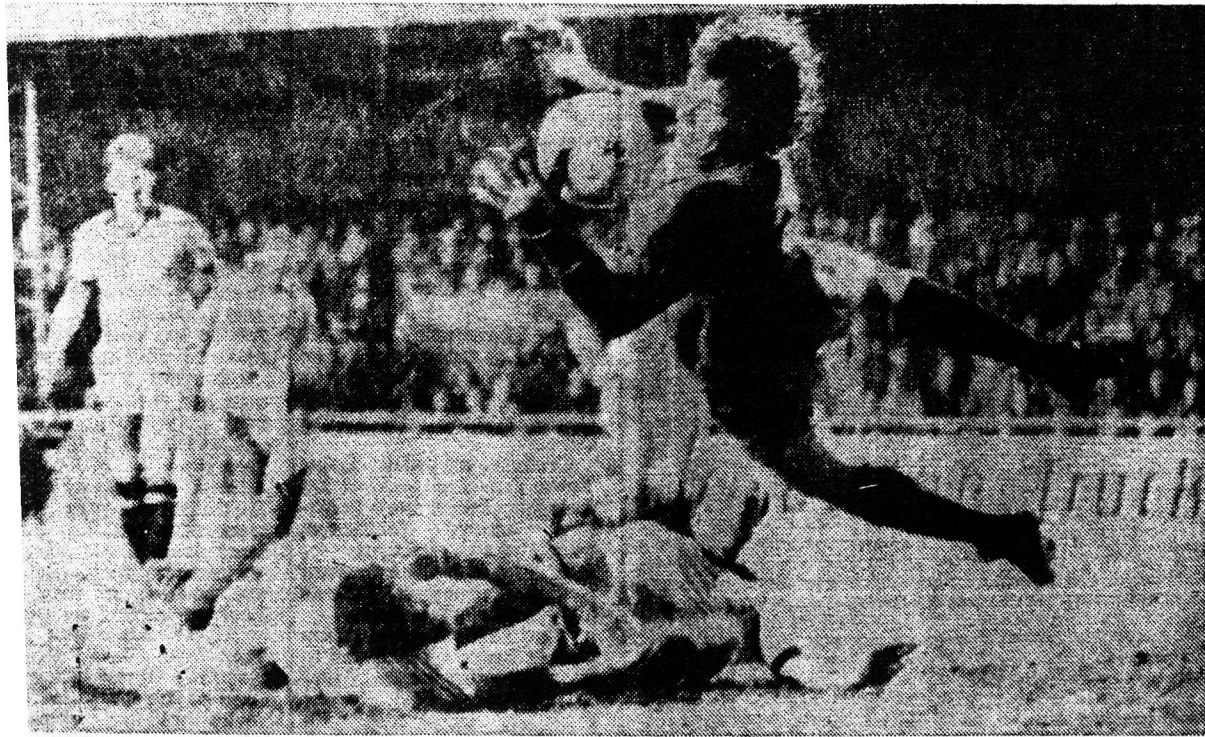
For more than half the game Cambridge managed to stifle the Town, and for the first half in particular the Town's passing was below par.

Cambridge were booed off the pitch at half-time for their negative approach, but the fans had more to cheer about after the interval when the Town really opened up.

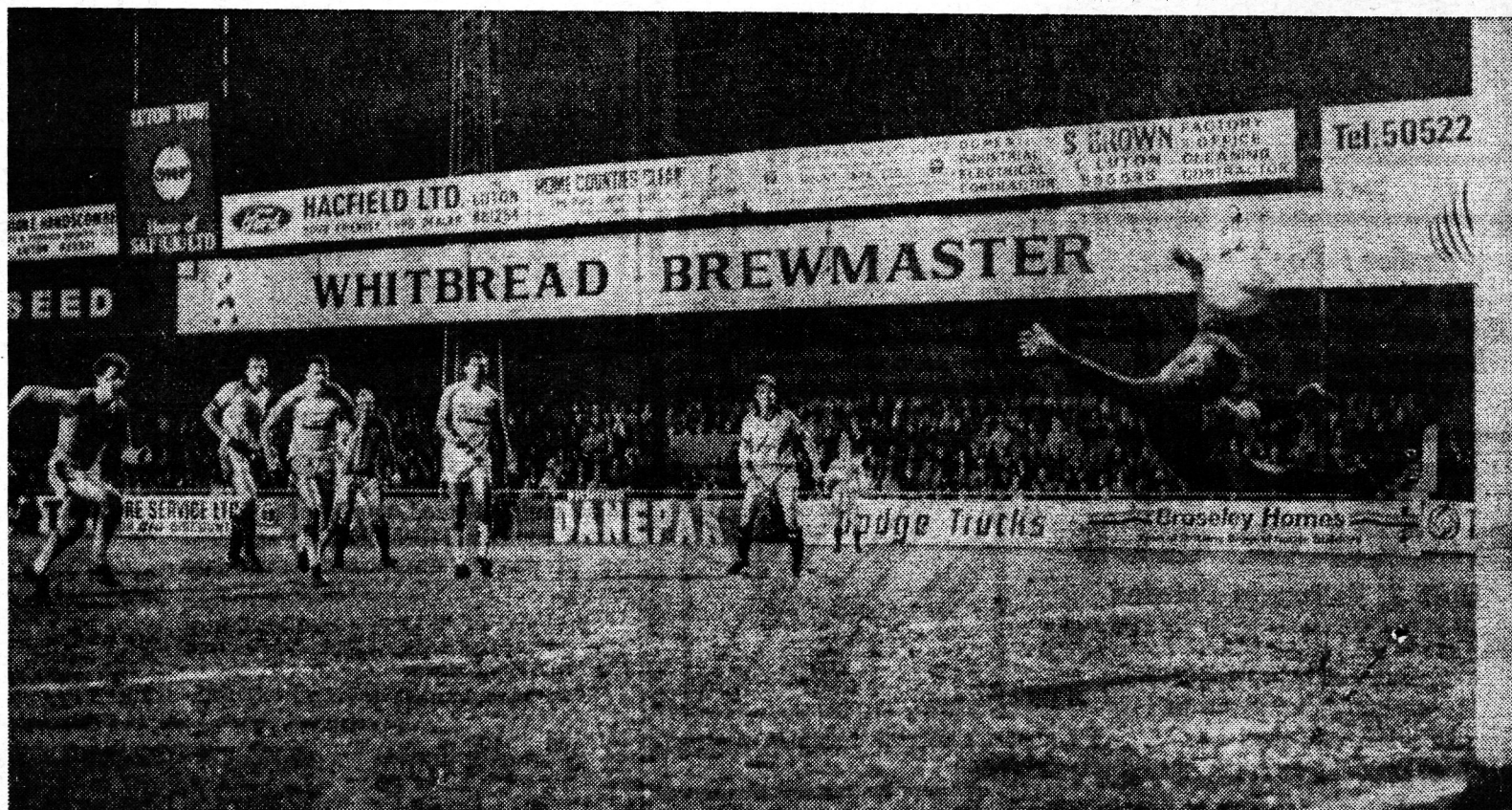
Defenders pushed forward, the midfield dragged opponents out of position, and Steve White and Brian Stein kept all three centre-halves busy.

The loss of the injured Lil Fuccillo did nothing to upset the Town's rhythm, and Cambridge had little to offer beyond brave defence, a good goalkeeper, and a little luck when they needed it.

Richard Key took the star billing as Cambridge took a pounding. He saved from David Moss with his legs, then did it again when a pass by Kirk Stephens



DEFIANT: Goalkeeper Richard Key, man of the match for Cambridge, makes another save, from a header by Ricky Hill.



STUNNER: Skipper Brian Horton, surrounded and 30 yards from goal, blasts in his spectacular match-winner against Cambridge.

Report by Brian Swain
Pictures: Mark Richards

gave Stein the cleanest chance of the match.

Between times, with the Town looking menacing with almost every move, Cambridge were saved as rocket shots by Stephens and Ricky Hill hammered against the woodwork. Hill finally netted in the 69th minute, but had the effort ruled out for a foul on the goalkeeper and as the minutes ticked away football faced a little local tragedy as Cambridge seemed destined to battle through to a 0-0 draw.

But Horton struck with a classic goal in the 76th minute. He was looking for the chance to set up another Town attack, about 30 yards from goal. Pressure from two defenders forced him to make a quick sidestep, and as a tiny gap

opened the skipper let fly with a thundering drive which was too good even for the admirable Key.

Even Docherty admitted: "The goal was worth the points. It was tremendous, and I can't have any complaints about the result."

Horton's goal did football a favour. Cambridge may not have been disgraced, but their approach to the game seems to question whether there is general realisation that the fans want entertainment. This was Cambridge's tenth game this year and their results have hardly been inspiring: four 0-0 draws, two 0-1 defeats, a 1-2 defeat and two 1-0 home victories. No wonder the crowd went crazy on Saturday when Cambridge

actually scored twice in one match to earn a draw with Grimsby.

Perhaps when a team is scoring an average of only half a goal a game, strong defence is the only option left open to a manager.

TOWN: Findlay; Stephens, Goodyear, Donaghy, Aizlewood; Hill, Horton, Fuccillo (Antic 50 mins); Stein, White, Moss.

CAMBRIDGE: Key; Donaldson, Smith, Fallon, Turner; Murray, O'Neill (Cartwright 89 mins), Spriggs, Gibbins; Reilly, Mayo.

THE GOAL: Brian Horton 76 minutes, 30-yard piledriver. OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town ten saved, two wide, two hit the woodwork, one netted but disallowed for a foul; Cambridge three saved and three wide. Corners: 9-7 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 10,597, lowest at Kenilworth Road since November.

REFEREE: David Letts, Basinstoke.

BOOKINGS: Chris Turner for a foul on Steve White, Roger Gibbins for a foul on Mal Donaghy.

ENTERTAINMENT: Poor in the first half, but better in the second when the Town got into their stride. Cambridge were interested only in avoiding defeat and were lucky to escape a hammering.

SENDING-OFF IS A CONVENIENT EXCUSE

COMPLAINTS over a sending-off, with Lil Fuccillo being accused of play-acting to accomplish it, gave Oldham manager Jimmy Frizzell the chance to steer thoughts away from the harsh truth at Kenilworth Road on Saturday.

He had seen his third-placed side all but over-whelmed by a Town performance which never had to hit the heights to collect three more points.

Mr Frizzell must have been concerned that some of Oldham's wounds were self-inflicted. They gave away an early penalty and then lost all hope of snatching a point when Darren McDonough was sent off in the 28th minute.

Their ambition had looked limited from kick-off, when they strung four men across midfield in an attempt to deny the Town space to build attacks.

Even after the early goal that policy showed no sign of being changed.

Paul Fletcher, who had a tremendous match apart from one fatal error, was trying to do a covering job when he pulled down Brian Stein, and David Moss netted his ninth penalty goal of the season.

Oldham tackled hard, but McDonough overstepped the mark in the 28th minute, when his studs ripped down the side of Fuccillo's calf in a crude late tackle.

Frizzell complained that the sending-off decision, apparently harsh by today's standards, was made because Fuccillo stayed down a long time. Strangely, he made no comment on the fact that the tackle might easily have broken Fuccillo's leg for a third time.

Fuccillo and his manager angrily dismissed Frizzell's accusation. "There's nothing fake about these," said Fuccillo, showing stud-mark cuts stretching from just below the knee down to his ankle. "I stayed down because I was hurt and in pain."

The Town cantered through the rest of the match, and the effect of facing only ten men did them little good — they often seemed to be playing without real urgency,

LUTON TN 2, OLDHAM 0
(Half-time 1-0)

as though they knew that the points were safe.

They sometimes tried one pass too many, but some of the build-up work was a delight to watch. Goalkeeper Peter McDonnell kept Oldham's scoresheet respectable, but the Town were so much on top they should have scored four or five. When the keeper was beaten, a 25-yard drive by Mark Aizlewood crashed against the post.

Kenny Clements was booked for dissent, and Ged Keegan was lucky to escape with no more than a booking for a dreadful foul on Brian Horton as Oldham struggled to compete against a side that was much too talented for them to handle.

Sadly for McDonnell, all his good work was unavailing, and he took the blame for the second goal, in the 55th minute, when Moss curled an inswinging corner into the net at the angle of near post and bar.

McDonnell palmed the ball in, and the Kenilworth Road scoreboard unkindly called it an own goal. Moss and players in the goalmouth were sure the ball was over the line before McDonnell realised the danger, and that his intervention made little difference.

Match details

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

OLDHAM: McDonnell; Edwards, Clements, Fletcher, Ryan; Keegan, Heaton (Anderson, 73 mins), McDonough, Atkinson; Wyke, Palmer.

THE GOALS: Moss penalty, 8 mins, after Fletcher downed Stein; Moss direct from a corner, 55 mins.

OTHER STRIKES AT GOAL: Town pine saved, 13 wide and one hit a post; Oldham two saved and three wide. Corners: 11-5 to the Town.

SENT OFF: Darren McDonough, 28 mins, foul on Lil Fuccillo. Booked: Kenny Clements for dissent, Ged Keegan for a foul on Horton.

ATTENDANCE: 11,506.

REFEREE: Maurice Robinson, Sutton Coldfield.

ENTERTAINMENT: Spoiled a little because Oldham were so poor that it was no real contest. The Town might have done better if they had been faced by 11 enthusiastic players for the whole game.