

SPORTS NEWS 1

Town Match Verdict ★★ ★

Nearly Home...

'YOU'LL GO UP!'— BLACKBURN BOSS

PERFECTLY POISED to use Easter as the next stepping-stone to promotion, Luton Town this week convinced another rival manager that they are the best team in the Second Division.

Bobby Saxton had seen his Blackburn side opt for power and physical effort because they didn't fancy a contest of sheer skill. And they went home beaten on two counts — the Town were just as determined as the visitors, and produced the flair when it mattered.

"Luton could have scored a couple more," admitted Saxton, who had fallen victim to the classic dilemma every manager faces on a visit to Kenilworth Road.

With lingering promotion ambitions of their own, Blackburn had to be more positive than the teams who come with a determination not to be beaten.

On paper, with the strongest defence in the division — until the Town's two goals — they were well equipped to compete for three points.

They were well organised at the back, resolute in midfield, and quick on the break. But the Town still looked the better side throughout.

Noel Brotherston, often Blackburn's attacking danger man in past games, was blotted out by Kirk Stephens, and ruefully said afterwards that he was among those who had voted for Stephens as right-back in the PFA's Second Division side. "I was right, wasn't I?" he said.

Brotherston had only one chance, early in the second half, when Jake Findlay had to make a spreading save to prevent an equaliser, but the rest of Blackburn's shooting was off target or wildly optimistic.

"Plenty of physical effort and not enough good passing of the ball," was Saxton's criticism of his side. "You can't get by on sheer effort against teams like Luton."

He might have added that the Town more than matched Blackburn for effort and persistence in every department, without reaching the peaks we have seen at times this season.

There was a hint of nervousness, lifted in the 27th minute when Glenn Keeley and Derek Fazackerley, possibly the best centre-back pairing in the Division, were bamboozled by Brian Stein and Steve White.

PUNTED

Findlay punted a long clearance downfield and Stein competed in the air with Fazackerley. It should have been an unequal contest, yet Stein's airborne challenge prevented the towering defender getting clean contact with the ball.

His header glanced off and White, quicker on the uptake than his critics on the terraces, immediately headed the ball on, over and to the right of Fazackerley.

Stein did the rest, with pace taking him clear of

Report by Brian Swain Pictures: Mark Richards

Keeley and confident control taking him around goalkeeper Terry Gennoe before the shot was placed carefully into the net from an angle.

From then on Blackburn threatened little as the Town's midfield and defence came out to play.

Clive Goodyear powered a header narrowly wide from a corner and early in the second half Stein showed Blackburn how skill can always outweigh power and effort.

He robbed Keeley on the edge of the penalty area, twinkled down to the by-line and pulled the ball back to set up a perfect chance. White swung hurriedly and failed to make contact, and Ricky Hill, behind him, hit a first-time shot wide.

Some of the crowd were

howling for White's removal when that happened, but it turned out to be the start of the Town's match-winning spell.

Hill and White organised a two-man raid which ended with White beating his man and hammering a drive past Gennoe and on to the underside of the bar.

Ten minutes later, with 20 minutes to go, White hit the goal he deserved, and it was another cracker. He took a pass from Stephens, turned his man and shot low into the net for his 17th goal of the season, and the end of a run of nine games without scoring.

It was party-piece time after that, with Billy Jennings getting into the act as substitute when Ricky Hill, carrying an ankle injury, was taken off.

RULED OUT

Jennings proved that he still has plenty to offer after being released by Orient, and netted in the final minute from a pass by David Moss.

It looked a good goal to just about everybody, including the linesman, but referee Alf Grey ruled that Moss was offside and interfering with play as the shot was made.

Earlier this year Mr Grey made a worse mistake at the same end when he denied Swindon a goal in a cup-tie, so perhaps we ought not to complain too much.

Town manager David Pleat believes Mr Grey was right this time, and took quiet pleasure from the victory. "It was a powerful game, rather than deft and delicate," he said. "But I always thought we were the more likely side to score, although Blackburn deserve credit for having a go."

"I was pleased with all our side — they were up against a good team and they were deserving winners."



● KILLER GOAL: Steve White hammers in the shot that finished off Blackburn as the Town went two up with 20 minutes to go.



● LUCKY ROVERS: White beats Terry Gennoe with the shot that hit the bar.



● ON THE WAY: Brian Stein gets clear of his marker and the goalkeeper to score the Town's first goal.

Cardiff did the Town a favour by beating Watford 2-0 at Ninian Park, and Sheffield Wednesday, who had a day off, held on to third place.

Newcastle are mounting a late challenge. Their 1-0 victory at Charlton took their recent run to one defeat in 11 games, and put them a point behind Wednesday with a match in hand. They used up that advantage at Wrexham on Tuesday night and missed their chance of going into the top three for the first time this season. Battling to escape relegation the Welshmen ran out 4-2 winners — the first time this year they had scored more than twice in a match, and Newcastle's first experience this season of conceding four.

The top ten teams can still count themselves in with a chance of going up, with Leicester the dark horses. They are eighth and have enough games in hand to sneak into the top three.

FA Cup dates have put them behind with league fixtures, but their push for Wembley ended when Spurs beat them 2-0 in the semi-final.

QPR may have done their promotion chances no good at all by beating West Brom in the other semi-final. But if they have got half their thoughts on Wembley there was little sign of it on Tuesday night when they beat struggling Orient at Loftus Road. Their 3-0 win pushed them up into seventh place, three points short of the top three.

Remaining fixtures for the challengers suggest that the Town have the best run-in to the end of the season, with six games at home and four away. Watford have four at home and five away and Newcastle and Sheffield Wednesday each have four home and four away.

If every challenging team could win every remaining match — and that's impossible because some of them, including the Town and Newcastle, play each other — the maximum points obtainable are 96 for the Town, 89 for Watford and 84 for Leicester. Sheffield Wednesday and QPR can, in theory, reach 80 points, a total beyond Newcastle, Rotherham, Blackburn and Barnsley.

So 81 points will ensure promotion — and if the Town win their home games and lose the away ones they will be on 84.

Today's target for the championship is 90 points, but that comes down by three each time Watford lose and the betting is that the Town's notional 84 will land the title.

Looking at the First Division for clubs who will come down to make way for Luton Town and two others, there is an irony in the chance that Middlesbrough will be relegated — they won promotion in 1974, the same year as the Town, as runaway leaders.

● Brian Horton's view: Page 43.

FIGHT FOR PROMOTION

	P	W	D	L	F	A	P
Luton	32	19	9	4	63	32	66
Watford	33	18	8	7	58	35	62
Sheff Wed	34	16	8	10	45	39	56
Newcastle	34	16	7	11	42	33	55
Rotherham	34	17	4	13	49	39	55
Blackburn	34	15	9	10	40	30	54
QPR	33	16	5	12	45	31	53
Barnsley	33	15	7	11	49	34	52
Leicester	31	14	9	8	44	33	51
Norwich	33	15	5	13	44	44	50

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 2
BLACKBURN ROVERS 0
Half-time: 1-0

OWN: Findlay; Stephens, Goodyear, Donaghy, Money; Hill (Jennings, 75 mins), Horton, Turner; Stein, White, Moss.

BLACKBURN: Gennoe; Branagan, Keeley, Fazackerley, Rathbone; Miller, Speight, Stonehouse; Bell, Garner (Hamilton 75 mins), Brotherston.

THE GOALS: Brian Stein gem, 27 minutes, solo run and angled shot after being put through by Steve White; White, 70 minutes, sharp turn and shot just inside the area from pass by Kirk Stephens.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town three saved, six wide, one hit the bar, and late "goal" by Billy Jennings ruled out because David Moss was offside; Blackburn six blocked and six wide. Corners: 7-7.

REFEREE: Alf Grey, Great Yarmouth—found it an easy game to control, and on the late disallowed effort he was sharper than his linesman.

ENTERTAINMENT: Too much reliance on physical effort, particularly by Blackburn, stopped it being a classic, but it was still good to watch.

ATTENDANCE: 10,721 — sounds pathetic for the top team in the division, but it was the day's highest in Division Two although Barnsley had 23,059 the night before for a local derby with Rotherham.