

Lower place is high price of a late equaliser

BECOMING the draw experts of the First Division, the Town dropped another place in the First Division table when the controversial late equaliser pegged them back at Roker Park.

They have now drawn half their 14 league games, and so often it is not so much a point gained as two lost. Each of the last two draws has seen them drop a notch in the table.

Having been eighth a month ago, the Town are now 18th—Ipswich overtook them this week with a 1-0 home win over Manchester City—and only two points clear of the dreaded third-from-bottom place.

Statistics can have the emphasis you choose. The Town have lost only twice in their last ten league outings. But they have won only twice in the last ten.

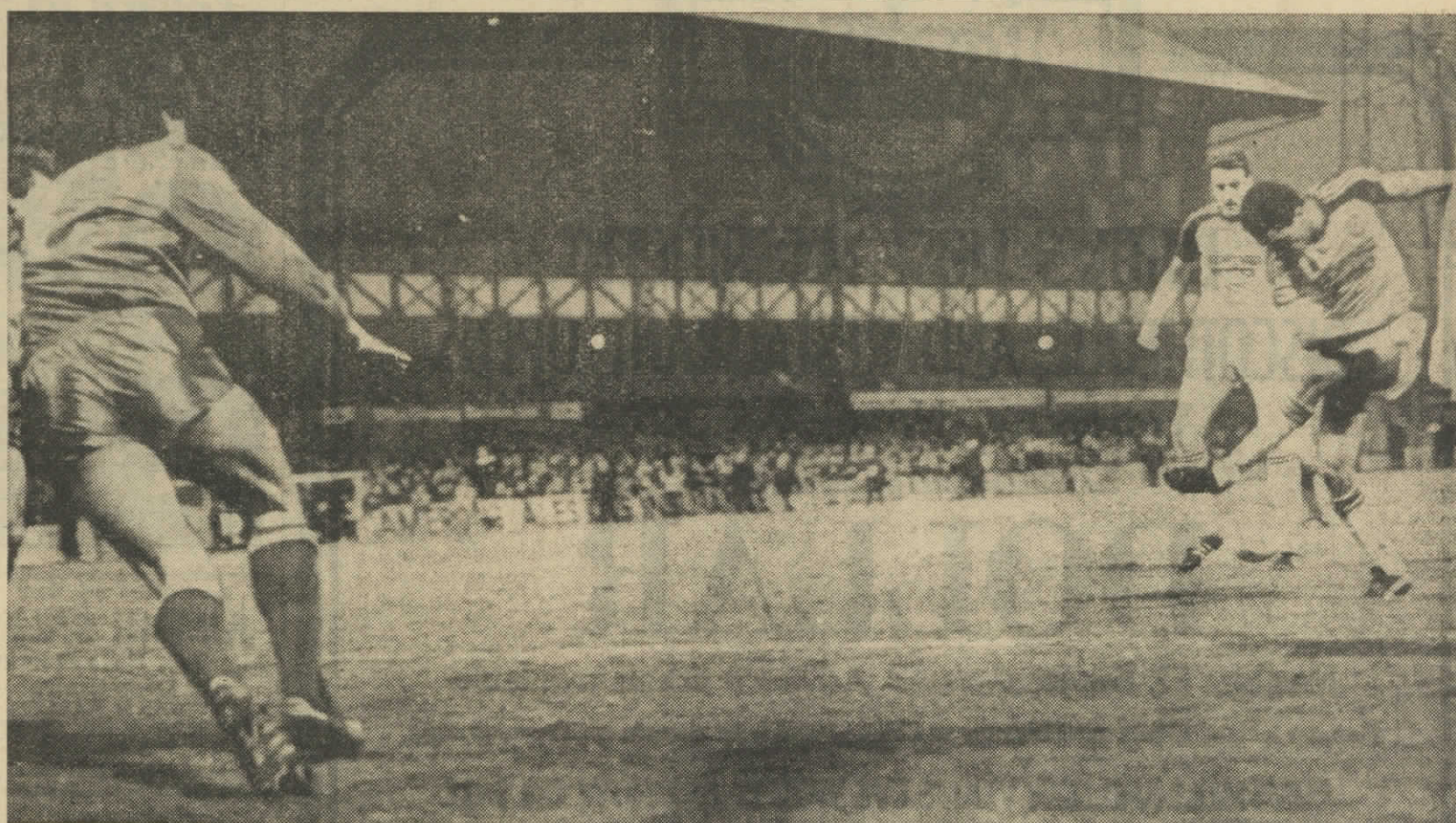
Teams who might envy that record include Norwich, who sank into bottom place this week for the first time this season. They have won only once in the last ten, and were beaten at West Ham by a Sandy Clark goal.

Norwich have 11 points, fewer than the Town, and are one point below Birmingham. The Blues moved off bottom spot for the first time in six weeks after a 0-0 draw at Notts County.

Sunderland are 20th, two points ahead of Birmingham, and Southampton are 19th, a point below the Town, after a 1-1 draw with Nottingham Forest.

Lower reaches of the First Division today:

Rank	Team	Played	Points
11	Everton	14	18
12	Swansea	14	18
13	Coventry	14	18
14	Notts Co	14	18
15	Brighton	14	18
16	Ipswich	14	17
17	Arsenal	14	17
18	Luton Town	14	16
19	Southampton	14	15
20	Sunderland	14	14
21	Birmingham	14	12
22	Norwich	14	11



● **NASTY SURPRISE . . . for Sunderland.** Brian Stein sees the ball go past, nicely in line for David Moss to hit the Town's goal on the break at Roker Park. Pictures: MARK RICHARDS

A CASE OF MALICE IN BLUNDERLAND

THE REFEREE and a linesman took the blame at Roker Park as Luton Town saw a much-needed victory snatched away by a disputed equaliser three minutes from time.

The Town came home convinced they had been robbed. Wayne Turner insisted he had headed the ball off the line and every other Town player in the overcrowded goalmouth backed him up.

But a linesman thought differently, and his flag waved goodbye to two of the three points the Town wanted.

The ref had not had a very good game, but had no choice over the most crucial of the afternoon's decisions, and all the arguing in the world was not going to change his mind. David Moss collected a booking for dissent before the penny dropped.

From the centre of the main stand it was impossible to know who was right. But Sunderland were

REPORT BY BRIAN SWAIN

sure that the ball had crossed the line before Turner made the clearance.

And if the Town were robbed, they contributed to the crime. They soaked up pressure in defence with commendable skill and determination, yet rarely

turned on the little extra sparkle which might have made all the difference.

Sunderland certainly fought hard enough for a draw, with energy and commitment attacking the Town's more composed approach. Both sides were so far short of First Division quality that perhaps neither really deserved to win.

The home side were anxious and direct, hammering long hopeful passes

forward, apparently frightened of trying to match the Town's ability. It looked like muscle power denying skill time to assert itself.

The Town's midfield had to spend a lot of time on defensive duties, and did that part of its job superbly. But Ricky Hill was rarely able to show his power breaking forward, and with no domination in that area the Town's normal short-passing game was not played with enough consistency.

SO NEAR

Yet they so nearly came home with a classic hit-and-run victory based on the admirable ability to frustrate Sunderland's near-desperation.

Clive Goodyear failed a fitness test, and the centre-back pairing of Mal Donaghy and Richard Money battled away effectively. Turner, tenacious and determined, did more than he should be asked for in the First Division.

Kirk Stephens, on the right, worked like a demon, but spoiled a lot of good defensive work by failing to use the ball effectively after

winning it.

Too often attacks were beaten off but not turned into counter-attacks, and when the Town did break forward Brian Stein and Paul Walsh got very little change down the centre.

SAVED

Billy Kellock got on the end of one of the best early counter-attacks, but his shot was saved easily by Chris Turner. Moss headed down the left wing to deliver a far post cross which Walsh headed over when he might have scored, and soon after that Turner pulled off a flying save to keep out a header by Kellock after good work by Hill and Stein.

All that happened in the first 15 minutes, but Sunderland took the initiative for the next hour.

Alan Judge saved well from Atkins to keep the score-sheet blank at the interval, and was on top form again in the second half with saves from Nick Pickering, Ally McCoist, Stan Cummins and Gary Rowell. The tip-over from Rowell's overhead kick was the save of the match.

Between times Sunderland thought they should have had a penalty when Walsh, back helping his over-worked defence, tangled with Cummins, whose fall was worth 9.6 for style.

Referee David Allison made several decisions which were difficult to understand, but I have seen penalties given for less than that tackle.

The flow of the game as it reached the last quarter of an hour made a goal-less draw look likely, with a narrow win for Sunderland the second-best bet.

CAUGHT

The Town hadn't even won a corner at that stage, but Sunderland were rocked in the 76th minute. They were caught stretched by a clearance. Walsh, always the most inventive attacker on the field, set off down the left wing, dragging two defenders towards him. Stein and Moss accelerated down the middle and although Stein missed with his attempt to meet the cross Moss made no mistake and drove home his eighth goal of the season from the edge of the penalty area.

Walsh put Stein through for another chance in the 83rd minute, but Turner made a spreading save to stop a goal which would have finished Sunderland.

They gathered their resources for a last do-or-die spell of pressure, and their 15th corner of the game brought the disputed equaliser. Linesman Little signalled the goal, and frustration and resentment continued throughout the Town camp—on the bench as well as on the field—for the remaining three minutes of play.

ALMOST

Yet the Town almost grabbed a winner in the final minute, when Moss broke at speed and Walsh got in a header which was matched by a marvellous save from Turner.

The unwelcome conclusion I drew was that the Town really should have been good enough to beat a rather stereotyped Sunderland side, with something in hand. I am convinced they are a better footballing side than the Roker Park performance



● **NEARLY:** Billy Kellock's header produces a super-save from Chris Turner.

Match Details

SUNDERLAND 1 LUTON TOWN 1
Half-time: 0-0

TOWN: Judge; Stephens, Donaghy, Money, Turner; Hill, Horton, Kellock (Bunn for last 22 seconds); Stein, Walsh, Moss.

SUNDERLAND: Turner; Munro, Atkins, Elliott, Venison; Nicholl, Cummins, Pickering; Rowell, McCoist, West. Sub: Cooke, not used.

THE GOALS: David Moss, 76 minutes, after run and cross from the left by Paul Walsh; Ian Atkins, 87 minutes, header after corner not cleared, much disputed by the Town. Wayne Turner's clearance was adjudged by the linesman to have been made from behind the line.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town four wide and five saved. Sunderland eight off target, five saved. Corners: 15-2 to Sunderland.

REFEREE: David Allison, Lancaster. Made a lot of decisions which baffled players and crowd alike, and neither team was too happy with him.

ATTENDANCE: 14,238, Sunderland's second lowest of the season so far.

ENTERTAINMENT: Not a top quality First Division game, but fascinating contest between contrasting styles, with Sunderland bashing away with little attacking finesse and the Town only rarely putting their football together.

BOOKINGS: Nicholl and Atkins of Sunderland; Wayne Turner for kicking the ball away after the whistle had gone for a throw-in; Billy Kellock for a foul on Cummins; David Moss for dissent over the 87th-minute equaliser.