

In danger of being marooned

THE FIRST goal-less draw of their season left Luton Town still heavily involved in the scrap for survival at the bottom end of the First Division.

They have taken only one point out of the last nine, and only failings by other teams prevented the home draw against West Brom being a disaster.

Saturday's results left the Hatters in 18th place, three points above the bottom three, with two difficult away matches next on their fixture list, at Nottingham Forest and Arsenal.

They have games in hand on most rivals in distress, but the one over Norwich vanishes on Saturday when the Canaries are involved in the FA Cup quarter-finals with an away game against 21st-placed Brighton.

Luckily for Luton, all four teams below them lost this week, but they are in danger of being marooned as one of five teams five points adrift of the rest.

Birmingham are back in bottom place after being beaten 3-1 at Ipswich. Brighton are a point above the Blues, having played two games more.

Two late goals beat them at West Ham, and Brighton's run is now only one victory in their last 12 league games.

Swansea are level on points with Brighton. Southampton beat them at The Dell and John Toshack's men have won only once in 13 league outings since they beat the Town at the Vetch in early December.

Norwich, beaten 3-2 at Aston Villa, have managed only one victory in the last six league fixtures, against Watford.

Proof that teams can earn their own salvation is provided by Sunderland and Southampton. Bottom at the turn of the year, Sunderland had a 2-1 home win over Everton and their

BATTLE FOR SURVIVAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	P
Sunderland	29	9	9	11	35	34	36
Luton Town	28	7	10	11	47	57	31
Norwich	29	8	6	15	31	48	30
Swansea	30	7	7	16	36	46	28
Brighton	30	7	7	16	28	56	28
Birmingham	28	5	12	11	24	39	27

Brighton and Norwich meet in the FA Cup-tie at the Goldstone Ground on Saturday.

League fixtures involving the relegation battlers: Nottingham Forest v Luton Town; Stoke v Sunderland; Swansea v Manchester City.

run of 11 games with only one defeat has seen them claw their way to a reasonably safe position, five points ahead of the Town.

Southampton's progress has been even more remarkable. When they came to Kenilworth Road in November and drew 3-3 with Luton, the Saints were 19th in the table, a point below the Town.

Since then they have lost only three times in 14 league matches, and the win over Swansea pushed them up to sixth place and gives them a good chance of qualifying for UEFA soccer next season.

At the top of the table, Liverpool are 14 points clear of Watford and Manchester United after a 5-1 home win over Stoke. Watford are 21 points above the Town.



● **HEADING FOR THE TOP:** Paul Elliott beats Paul Barron in the air to power a header just wide of the post from one of the Town's nine first-half corners.

STALEMATE SUITS NEGATIVE ALBION

Report by Brian Swain
Pictures: Mark Richards

FOR ONLY the second time this season, the Town got through a First Division match without conceding a goal when West Brom were the visitors to Kenilworth Road.

That was the good news so far as manager David Pleat was concerned. The bad news for the supporters was that for the third time this season the Town failed to score at home, and that allowed West Brom to do a major dis-service to a game that needs to entertain and provide goals to survive.

Albion were the most negative team we have seen this season. It was their fourth consecutive score-less draw.

LONG BLANK SPELL

Anyone unlucky enough to have paid money to watch their last five games has been short-changed—Albion's current record is six hours and 40 minutes of soccer without a goal at either end.

Manager Ron Wylie was slightly apologetic about it, blaming a crop of injuries which have upset his team planning.

Cyrille Regis was the major absentee, and Gary Thompson, an expensive import from Coventry—he scored for them against the Town at Highfield Road—looked second-rate against the Town's new-look defence.

The happiest feature of all was the performance of Paul Elliott at centre-half, on his debut following a £100,000 transfer from Charlton.

The tall defender took very little time to settle in

and found he had a surprisingly easy introduction to the First Division.

Still only 18, he looked capable of becoming the perfect partner for Clive Goodyear, with Elliott the major stopper and Goodyear picking up the bits and pieces just behind him.

Mal Donaghy switched to left back to prove again that he is reliable as well as versatile. Ricky Hill stole the honours in midfield, but Wayne Turner deserves credit for battling through on the other flank and putting the Ipswich nightmare behind him.

The attack was fitful. Albion pulled midfield men back even before danger threatened, and John Wile and Ali Robertson had few problems with so much support.

They didn't so much blot out Steve White and Paul Walsh—they simply smothered all attempts to make a contest of it. Albion settled for continuous defence, and even counter-attacks were half-hearted.

WRONG SERVICE APPROACH

We needed two or three more Ricky Hills to run at men—and we might have enjoyed more entertainment if Walsh and White had received more consistent service. Too often they were asked to compete in the air with Wile and Robertson, and asking Walsh to go in for an aerial battle is like picking Enoch Powell to open for the West Indies.

Oddly, Albion created the cleanest chances when the Town were caught stretched. Nicky Cross missed the first, in the 19th minute, when he shot over the bar with Donaghy trying hard to recover.

The same player was foiled by Jake Findlay's legs early in the second

half when Gary Owen and Derek Statham worked a quick move down Albion left wing.

Otherwise it was a mixture of midfield stalemate and Town attackers forced to try their luck from long range.

Elliott, who fancied himself as a striker when he came to Luton at 14 and scored twice in a trial game, was as close as any one to scoring. He beat goalkeeper Paul Barron in the air from a corner, but the header powered wide and another went too high.

Hill and Turner both forced Barron to make saves, but the visitors rarely looked like dropping the guard.

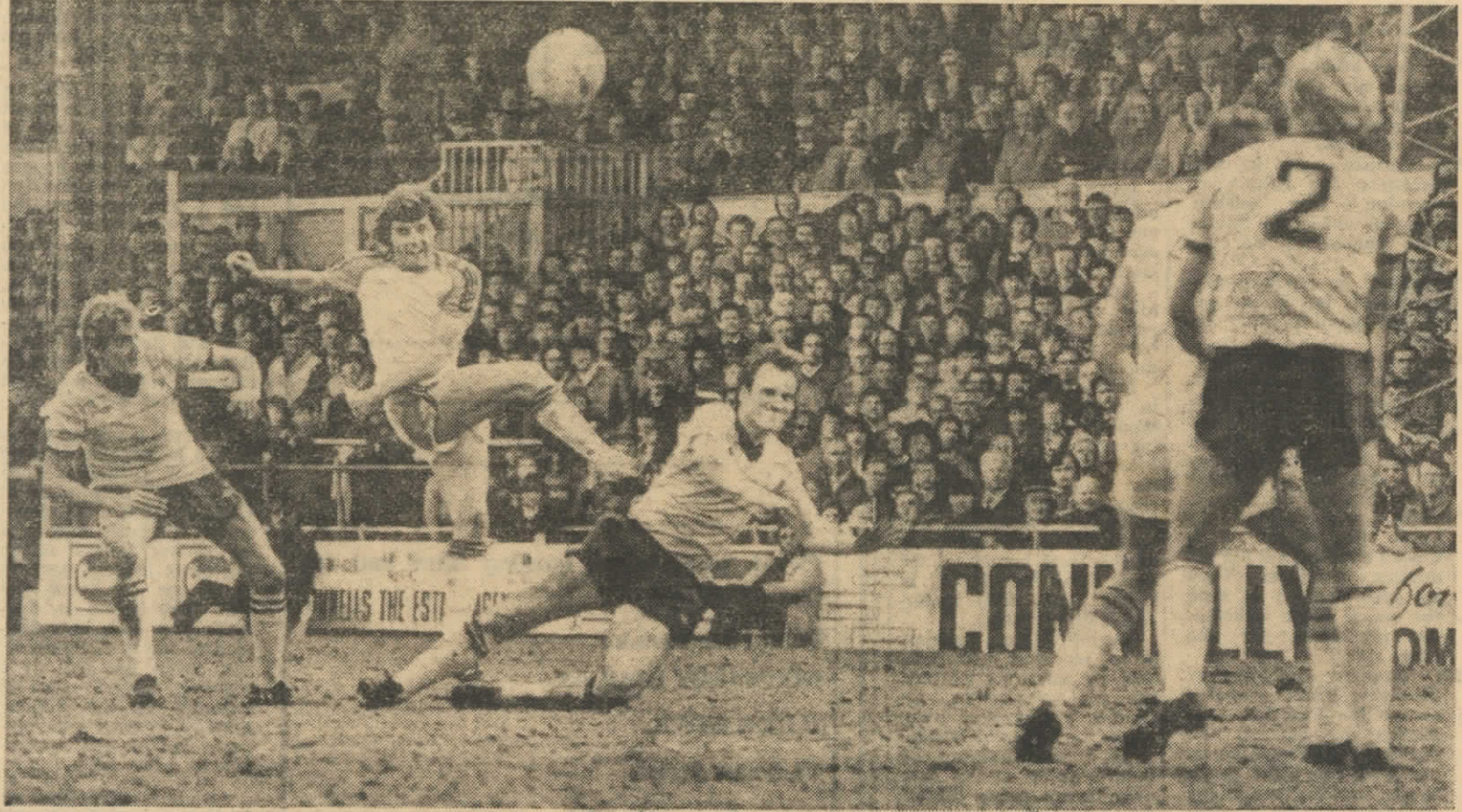
GRIM

It was a grim approach to the game by Albion, and the point apparently satisfied them and their manager. They managed only four shots at Findlay's goal in the whole 90 minutes.

It's a pity for football that they were able to get away with it.

And it was an even greater pity for the Town and their followers that Albion's tactics weren't smashed out of sight.

Every point is valuable says Mr Pleat, but with two away games to come Saturday's draw looks like two points lost rather than one gained.



● **BACK TO FRONT:** Defender Mal Donaghy joins the Town's attack to shoot for goal.

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 0, WEST BROMWICH ALBION 0

TOWN: Findlay; Stephens, Elliott, Goodyear, Donaghy, Hill, Horton, Turner; Walsh, White, Moss, Sub: Daniel, not used.

WEST BROM: Barron; Bennett, Wile, Robertson, Statham, Zondervan, Jol, Owen, Eastoe; Cross, Thompson, Sul, Whitehead, not used.

GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town three saved, 11 wide; West Brom two saved, two wide. Corners: 11-4 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 10,852, second lowest of the season for a league game at Kenilworth Road, but 600 higher than the last time Albion came to Luton in the First Division.

ENTERTAINMENT: Not quite as poor as 0-0 suggests but the Town ought to have beaten the most negative side to visit this season. Albion were content to defend solidly for their fourth consecutive goal-less draw. They might get into Europe with it, but who will want to watch them?

REFEREE: Ray Lewis, Great Bookham, Surrey—might have let the game flow more with better use of the advantage law, but at least he added on a couple of minutes to compensate for West Brom's time-wasting.