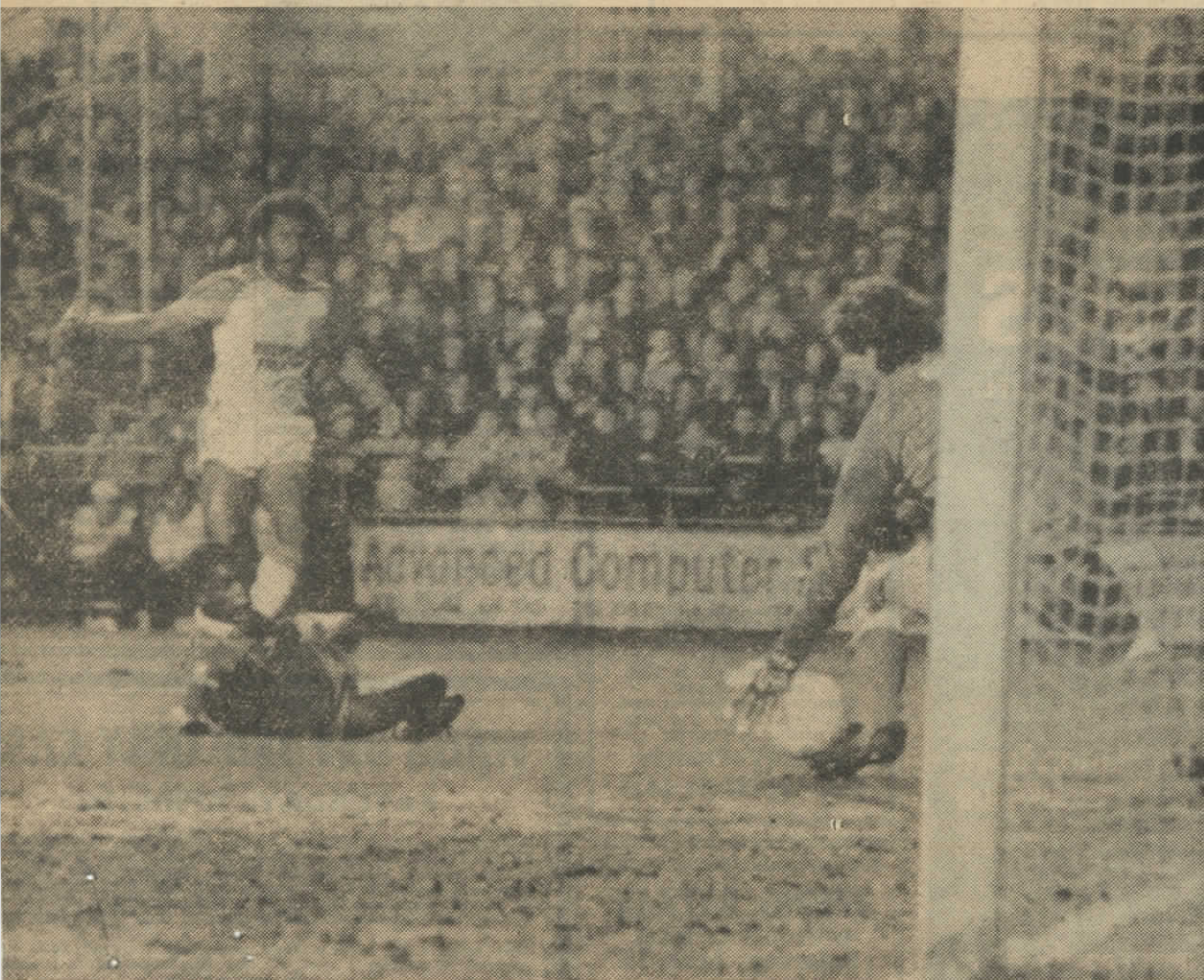


RELEGATION FEAR EASED BY A DOUBLE



● **MAGIC:** Ricky Hill crowns his superb first half with his second goal at the end of a solo run through the Birmingham defence.

EURO-CHAMPIONS BEATEN

Moss produces perfect finish

LUTON TOWN 2, ASTON VILLA 1

DAVID MOSS, at 31 nearing the end of a striking career in the First Division, answered his critics with a dramatic injury-time winner to send the European champions to defeat at Kenilworth Road on Saturday.

Socks rolled down to ease cramp, Moss justified his manager's persistent faith in his ability to produce the occasional flash of inspiration that can win a game, lunging instinctively into the goalmouth to poke home Richard Money's low cross.

For Town fans, and for the player who is not exactly a universal favourite any more, it was the perfect ending to a splendid contest.

Manager David Pleat has grown used to questions about why Moss has been one of those to escape the axe in team changes designed to find a winning formula.

The answer has been a consistent declaration of faith in the outstanding talent that the winger brought to Luton five years ago. "He's always likely to produce one moment of magic and turn a game for us. He's worth his place for that."

Villa boss Tony Barton had no moans about the result, despite being sickened at conceding the winner two minutes to injury time.

Luton's commitment and fire, he said, particularly in the second half, deserved the points, and he was sure that that level of performance could be matched for the rest of the season Luton could forget relegation worries.

The Town, despite the absence of Brian Horton, were back to their early-season best, with the added ingredient of passionate endeavour after the interval when Villa backslided and tried to settle for a draw.

DEPRESSING SEQUENCE ENDED

Every member of the Town side looked sharp and eager to end the run of four successive defeats, and their first goal, hooked in by Trevor Aylott from Mal Donaghy's cross in the 30th minute, was well deserved.

Gary Shaw, with a superb solo ball juggle and volley, cracked in the equaliser four minutes before the break, but it was one-way traffic after that.

Nigel Spink was continually in action as the Town pounded away at his goal, with all the defenders getting to support attacks.

Some of the finishing was wayward but the tension evaporated in a roof-lifting roar to greet Moss's tenth goal of the season to make the score-line a reflection of the run of the game.

THE MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Godden; Stephens, Elliott, Donaghy, Money; Hill, Turner; Walsh, Aylott, Moss, Sub: Burn, not needed.

ASTON VILLA: Spink; Williams, Evans, McNaught, Gibson; Mortimer, Jenner, Cowens; Shaw, Withe, Walters. Sub: Curbishley, not used.

THE GOALS: Trevor Aylott, 30 mins; Gary Shaw, 41 mins; David Moss, two minutes into injury time.

OTHER STRIKES: Town ten saved, nine wide; Villa two saved eight to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 10,924. Those who stayed at home missed a treat, and coverage could not capture the sheer excitement and suspense of the end half.

ENTERTAINMENT: Smashing, thanks to the perfect ending.

REFEREE: Les Burden, Corfe Mullen, Dorset.

The battle to stay up

BOTTOM of the First Division a week ago, the Town are now 19th, four points clear of the three relegation places.

Today's places at the foot of the table:

	P	W	D	L	F	A
Man City	37	11	8	18	43	64
Morwich	35	10	10	15	40	52
Luton Town	35	10	10	15	57	72
Swansea	36	9	9	18	45	58
Brighton	36	8	11	17	34	62
Birmingham	36	7	13	16	32	53

Birmingham are involved in an FA Cup semi-final against Sheffield Wednesday on Saturday. League games involving the relegation zone: Coventry v Birmingham, Manchester City v West Ham, Notts County v Luton, Swansea v Stoke.

RELEGATION fears may not be completely dead yet, but the Town's second successive victory, over bottom club Birmingham at Kenilworth Road on Tuesday evening, suggested that the side's ability and determination is a cut above the real strugglers.

The nervous tension apparent in the run of three defeats in a row vanished as Birmingham were thrashed in the first half, to complete a double to match the one that disposed of Brighton.

I think those are two teams who deserve the drop, and the third could well be Swansea, the next team to visit Kenilworth Road.

Ricky Hill timed his return to peak form, for half the game at least, to perfection, with two cracking goals to remind watching England boss Bobby Robson that the talented midfielder has a right to be on the international scene.

Yet football's lovely quality of being different to every man who watches enabled defiant Birmingham boss Ron Saunders to claim that he was robbed.

He's still waiting hopefully for his first away win of the season, and it sounded as though he were kidding himself when he claimed that his goalkeeper never had a serious shot to save, and that Birmingham created the better chances.

He might have added that their finishing was barely Second Division standard, and Hill's devastating striking had ended the contest with half the match still to play.

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 3 BIRMINGHAM CITY 1
Half-time: 3-0

TOWN: Godden; Stephens, Elliott, Donaghy, Money; Hill, Horton, Antic; Walsh, Aylott, Moss (Stein, 79 minutes).

BIRMINGHAM: Coton; Van den Hauwe, Stevenson, Blake, Hagan; Broadhurst (Phillips, 49 minutes), Gayle, Halsall, Hopkins; Ferguson, Harford.

THE GOALS: Ricky Hill, four minutes, from Trevor Aylott's headed pass to Paul Walsh's cross; Brian Horton, penalty, eight minutes, after Jim Hagan tripped Walsh; Hill, 42 minutes, thrilling solo run and angled shot; Bob Hopkins for Birmingham, 66 minutes, after fumble by Godden under pressure from Mick Harford.

OTHER STRIKES: Town four saved, eight wide; Birmingham four saved, seven wide, one hit the bar. Corners: 6-1 to Birmingham.

ATTENDANCE: 12,868—not bad for a visit by the bottom team.

REFEREE: Alf Grey, Great Yarmouth. Birmingham thought he was wrong to give the Town their penalty.

ENTERTAINMENT: Superb in the first half, but the game lost some of its sparkle when the result was settled so early.

With confidence rebuilt by the victory over Aston Villa, the Town murdered Birmingham in the first half. Saunders complained that the second goal was from a penalty which should not have been given, and that his team had shown enough character and fighting spirit after the break to be worth a point.

His problem was that the Town showed the skill and sparkle, with Hill the arch exponent.

But the flowing incisive football, reminiscent of the Town's early-season performances, slipped in the second half. They knew Birmingham were beaten, and the urgency disappeared.

They were let off twice by poor finishing before the break. Mick Ferguson blasted the first chance of the game well wide early on, and when the Town were two up he hit the bar with a header after Mick Harford had beaten Paul Elliott in the air to flick a headed pass forward.

But Birmingham had no-one to match the skill and control of Hill and Paul Walsh, and it was fitting that they should be involved in the highlights. Trevor Aylott was not far behind, and his clever headed pass from Walsh's cross set up Hill for the first goal in the fourth minute.

He took it beautifully, and after Walsh had been downed by Jim Hagan four minutes later Brian Eerton's penalty goal effectively ended the contest 82 minutes early. Hill's solo run and low shot for the third goal was pure perfection, and although Rob Hopkins pulled one back in the 66th minute after Godden had fumbled the ball under pressure from Harford the result was never in real doubt.

REPORTS BY
BRIAN SWAIN
PICTURES
BY **JOHN SHORTHOUSE**



● **SAVED:** Trevor Aylott, who scored against Aston Villa and helped create the first goal against Birmingham, loses out to Blues' goalkeeper Tony Coton.