

SPORT AND MOTORING

Town Match Verdict ★★★★★



● **WINNER:** Paul Elliott is still airborne as his header hits the back of the net, with Trevor Aylott the other Town player in view.



● **ATTACKER:** Full-back Wayne Turner joins the front line for a crack at goal.

HEAD-BANGERS LOSE TO THE BRICK WALL

A COUPLE of years ago a young QPR player was sent off at Watford for head-butting an opponent. It was, said his manager, a bad decision by the referee.

At Loftus Road on Saturday the same player, now an England international, was sent off for kicking Luton Town goalkeeper Les Sealey. It was, said his manager, a decision made by the referee under pressure from a Town player.

"I don't think the referee had a clear view of the incident," said Terry Venables.

And his complaints about the dismissal of John Gregory seemed to be the only excuse he could dredge up after seeing the Town repeat their success when they inaugurated the plastic pitch two years ago.

Even with 11 men for 70 minutes the Rangers had been second best at coping with the artificial surface. They were a goal down, attacking hopefully but without any real sharpness, and looking highly vulnerable at the back.

And Gregory was as guilty of violent conduct this week as he was on the day he got sent off for butting Jan Lohman. In consecutive home matches Rangers have now been beaten on their own plastic park by Liverpool and Luton. A week earlier I had asked Joe Fagan how they had prepared for the match.

"Forget the pitch, and just try to play your normal football," he said. "You'll be beaten by the bounce sometimes, but that happens to QPR as well."

He was absolutely right, particularly about Rangers when they were reduced to a kick and run optimism after the Town soaked up their efforts to break through with close passing.

Match Details

QUEENS PARK RGERS 0 LUTON TN 1

Half-time: 0-1

TOWN: Sealey; Stephens, Elliott, Donahy, Turner; Parker, Horton, Hill; Stein, Aylott, Walsh. Sub: Antic, not needed.

RANGERS: Hucker; Neill, Wicks, Fenwick, Dawes; Waddock, Stewart, Gregory, Micklewhite; Allen, Stainrod. Sub: Fillery, not used.

THE GOAL: Paul Elliott, 10th minute, header from right wing cross by Gary Parker after short corner by Brian Horton.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town five saved and six off target; Rangers four saved, seven wide. Corners: 14-6 to Rangers.

ATTENDANCE: 15,053—higher than at the day's games at Norwich, Nottingham Forest, Stoke and West Brom, but second lowest of the season at Loftus Road.

REFEREE: Les Burden, Dorset—Rangers moaned about his sending-off decision, but he wasn't the man who kicked Les Sealey.

SENT OFF: John Gregory of QPR, for violent conduct. Booked: Simon Stainrod in a separate incident for petulant dissent.

ENTERTAINMENT: Fascinating contest through the second half, when the Town defended stubbornly against an attack lacking variety and invention.

Report by Brian Swain
Pictures: Mark Richards

The Town's success was all the more worthy when you saw the unfamiliar line-up. After the midfield flop at Anfield, Raddy Antic was dropped and Wayne Turner returned to left-back in place of Mitchell Thomas.

Trevor Aylott returned after injury, and played at centre-forward, with Paul Walsh mostly on the left and Brian Stein on the right.

Gary Parker, 18, who made his debut at Old Trafford last season, was brought in, and because his natural position is on the right of midfield the apparently risky decision was taken to move Ricky Hill over to the left.

It worked triumphantly, to suggest that the long-term solution to the problem of the left side of midfield

might be solved from within the Town's own ranks.

But the real stars were in the Town's defence, where the back four stood up to the sort of testing that brought regular disaster a season ago.

With England boss Bobby Robson watching, Paul Elliott was an outstanding man of the match. He may have been lucky to get away with a handball in the penalty area in the fourth minute, but everything else he did was superb.

In the tenth minute Aylott's hard work won a corner. Horton rolled it to Parker, and Elliott timed his run perfectly to meet Parker's accurate cross with a powerful header into the net. Rangers were outplayed for a long time, and didn't have a single shot on target in the first half.

Hill and Aylott both missed reasonable chances, and Peter Hucker made the first of several fine saves to tip a drive by Mal Donaghy over the bar.

From the first move of the second half the Town should have wrapped it up, with Aylott set free by Parker's through ball, but denied a goal as Hucker advanced quickly to save.

Rangers raised their work-rate, if not their skill, and Sealey made a tremendous save from Simon Stainrod's shot and caught a header by Clive Allen.

He foiled Stainrod again with a flip-over save, and several other Rangers' attempts whistled wide of the target. Many more were blocked on the edge of the penalty area as Turner, Elliott, Donaghy and Kirk Stephens were helped out by the midfield men.

For all their defensive sweat, the Town ought to have punished Rangers with some sharp counter-attacking, with Stein, Walsh and Parker all unable to hit the net with only Hucker to beat.

And the sending off, with 20 minutes to go, was hardly damaging to Rangers. Gregory had done little anyway, and had earlier hurled the ball at the ref and got away with it.

His challenge had also caused Horton's facial injury which had to be stitched, and even Venables should know that a kick at an opponent carries only one punishment in football law.

The Rangers' manager might have said that the dismissal encouraged the remaining ten to try even harder, which it did.

But they were a collection of head-bangers up against the Town's defensive brick wall. Perhaps football on plastic is a game for nutters.



● **PASSER:** Gary Parker, who laid on the goal, leaves Warren Neill to examine the plastic at close quarters.

Poised to push home tilt for Europe

with a 3-0 win over Everton at Anfield on Sunday.

Last season they hit the top in the last week of October and stayed there for the rest of the campaign.

Manchester United slipped up at home, losing to Aston Villa in front of 45,077 customers, the weekend's largest crowd, while West Ham moved up a place, to third, after a 2-1 home win over Ipswich.

Spurs also moved up a place, to one point below the Town, with a 1-1 draw at Stoke.

Down at the bottom Notts County, Leicester and Wolves are

in danger of losing touch with the rest.

Problems for Wolves continued with a 5-0 thrashing at Nottingham Forest and Derek Dougan is coming under greater pressure as chairman as his team still looks for its first win of the season. They have taken just one point out of the last 21 available.

Watford and Leicester fought out a 3-3 draw at Vicarage Road, leaving the club that considered and rejected a plastic super-stadium in 21st place.

Notts County's recent record is

the worst of the lot. They lost at West Brom, where the gate was under 11,000 and have taken only one point from the last ten league games. They haven't won since August.

TOP FIVE . . .

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liverpool	12	8	2	2	21	6	26
Man Utd	12	8	1	3	22	13	25
West Ham	12	7	2	3	22	11	23
LUTON TN	12	7	1	4	20	15	22
Spurs	12	6	3	3	18	15	21

. . . AND BOTTOM

Watford	12	2	4	6	21	24	10
Stoke	12	2	4	6	13	23	10
Notts Co	12	2	1	9	10	23	7
Leicester	12	1	3	8	14	19	6
Wolves	12	0	3	9	8	31	3



● **FIGHTERS:** Part of the visiting fans' enclosure at Loftus Road.