

SPORT AND MOTORING



● GETTING THE BLUES: Brian Stein's turn and shot is too quick for Birmingham's two defenders as the Town's equaliser is on its way into the net.

Goal difference edges Saints above Hatters

THE pair of points that escaped against Birmingham cost the Town one place in the First Division table. They are fifth, four points behind leaders Liverpool.

The Town and Southampton are the only sides in the division unbeaten at home in the league, but the Saints inched above the Town on goal difference with a 1-0 victory over West Brom at The Dell. They also have a game in hand, away to struggling Leicester.

Results at the top end of the table were kind to the Town.

Liverpool drew 2-2 at Spurs, after leading twice, in front of the day's biggest attendance, 45,032.

Manchester United lost second place, on goal difference, because while they were held 1-1 at Leicester West Ham were strolling to a 3-0 victory at Wolverhampton.

Coventry City. Four wins in their last five games have shot them up from 14th place to sixth, below the Town on goal difference only.

They beat QPR at Highfield Road, and the Rangers, third in the table on the morning of their defeat by the Town, have dropped six places after two consecutive defeats.

Down at the bottom Wolves are the only club without a single win, and a new failure record is looming. They have only three points from the first quarter of the season. They might be hard pushed to reach nine by Christmas, which was the Town's total in 1974 when they were en route for relegation—and it was only two points for a win in those days.

Notts County's troubles were hardly eased by a home draw with Norwich, and they have now gone 11 games without a league win.

But they and Leicester both crept a little nearer Watford, who were beaten 3-0 at Sunderland. Despite stirring deeds in their first season in Europe Elton John's men are not on song in the league.

They achieved their second victory of the season at Stoke in mid-September, and have since played seven games to earn just two more points.

Stoke are slipping into trouble as well—they have played five games without a win, but four of them have been draws, including this week's 1-1 result at Aston Villa.

TOP TEAMS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liverpool ...	13	8	3	2	23	8	27
West Ham ...	13	8	2	3	25	11	26
Man Utd ...	13	8	2	3	23	14	26
South'ton ...	12	7	2	3	14	8	23
Luton Tn. ...	13	7	2	4	21	16	23
Coventry ...	13	7	2	4	20	18	23
Spurs ...	13	6	4	3	20	17	22

THE STRUGGLERS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Stoke ...	13	2	5	6	14	24	11
Watford ...	13	2	4	7	18	24	10
Notts Co ...	13	2	2	9	11	24	8
Leicester ...	13	1	4	8	12	27	7
Wolves ...	13	0	3	10	8	34	3

● This week's important fixtures: Liverpool v Stoke, Luton v Spurs, Manchester United v Watford, QPR v Birmingham, Southampton v Notts County, Sunderland v West Ham, Wolves v Coventry.

DEADLOCK MAKES ITS POINT

WITH both managers believing their teams should have won, the draw between Luton Town and Birmingham City was probably a fair result.

But it was still a big disappointment for home fans, despite the retention of the unbeaten league record at Kenilworth Road this season.

One of football's ironies saw a patchwork Town side, with inexperienced youngsters thrown in to make up the injury-hit squad, saved and let down by the finishing of one of the most experienced attackers.

Brian Stein had one of those days when things wouldn't quite go right. He scored a valuable point-saver after Birmingham had taken an early lead, but missed

Report by Brian Swain Pictures: Mark Richards

two gifts which would have given him a hat-trick.

He suffered because of his own quick brain. Once in each half he cleverly anticipated that defensive-minded visitors were unlikely to try long back passes.

He nipped in and beat the

goalkeeper twice. He watched in horror as his first attempt, with the net unattended, saw a shot clip the top of the bar and go over. The second was belted clear by Jim Hagan, racing back at high speed after his goalkeeper had been beaten.

Disappointingly they were the only clear-cut chances created. Both goals were the product of luck so far as the build-up work was concerned.

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 1 BIRMINGHAM 1

(Half-time 1-1)

TOWN: Sealey; Stephens, Elliott, Donaghy, Thomas; Johnson, Hill, Parker (Antic, 83 mins); Turner; Stein, Walsh.

BIRMINGHAM: Coton; Hagan, Blake, Wright, Van den Hauwe; Stevenson, Phillips, Handysides, Hopkins; Gayle, Khul. Sub: Rogers, not used.

THE GOALS: Robert Hopkins for Birmingham, eight minutes, rebound after Paul Elliott blocked Martin Khul's shot, and Les Sealey was already committed; Brian Stein, 16 minutes, from rebound after Mal Donaghy's shot was deflected to him.

OTHER STRIKES AT GOAL: Town four saved, six wide and one clipped the top of the bar; Birmingham three saved, six wide. Corners: 7-5 to Birmingham.

ATTENDANCE, 11,111 — boosted by a big following from Birmingham, but nearly 2,000 down on the last visit by the Blues.

REFEREE: Trevor Spencer, Salisbury. Did well, although Town fans and players thought he was not decisive enough when Ricky Hill and Stein both might have had penalties.

ENTERTAINMENT: Too much of a hard graft contest to be sparkling, but the result was in doubt to the last whistle.

BRIGHT PROSPECTS: Five of the Town side were 21 or under, with Rob Johnson settling in very quickly on his league debut.

Town Match Verdict ★★

drive from a difficult angle which hit the side netting.

Ricky Hill took control of organising the midfield, but the lack of a genuine winger seemed to me the main reason why Birmingham's well-organised defence survived so well.

Noel Blake and Billy Wright were tough and resilient against Stein and Paul Walsh, and the visitors worked hard at getting men behind the ball when the Town were in possession.

THREAT

They also threatened to cause damage by drawing Town men forward and then using the space behind them on quick counter-attacks.

But Paul Elliott and Mal Donaghy were just as solid in the other penalty area, and they both moved forward when they could to try to push home attacks.

Birmingham were never that positive, but their smothering defensive play gave them the deadlock they sought.

Things looked bleak in the first ten minutes, when Birmingham had more of the play than the Town.

Les Sealey had to dive to save from Byron Stevenson after a corner had not been cleared properly, and Birmingham's next attack produced a goal.

BLOCKED

Martin Khul's shot was blocked by Elliott, but the rebound fell for Robert Hopkins to score, with Sealey stranded, having gone for Khul's shot.

Mental attitude then came

into play: the Town responded with an immediate improvement, while Birmingham pulled men back to defend.

Every single blue shirt was behind the ball when the equaliser was scored in the 16th minute. From a free kick outside the penalty area Donaghy's shot rebounded to Stein, and he put the chance away with no fuss, with the referee over-ruling an offside flag.

CLEVER

Stein had missed his first open goal chance four minutes before that, after cleverly lobbing Tony Coton. His second miss came in the 53rd minute.

Otherwise it was a case of two good defences keeping opponents at bay. Walsh had but one moment of magic, turning Wright all ways before sending a drive narrowly wide of the far post.

QUALITY

Town fans will look for a little more from the team for Saturday's clash with Spurs. They'll probably get it, if only because of the quality of the opposition.

It takes two teams to produce entertainment, and Birmingham are never going to be one of them while avoiding defeat is their main ambition.



● SO NEAR (1): Brian Stein watches his first-half shot at the empty net rise too high.



● SO NEAR (2): Stein leaves Tony Coton beaten in the second half, but the shot was cleared off the line.

Double-ton milestone

CONGRATULATIONS to Kirk Stephens, who is due to make his 200th full league appearance for the Town against Spurs on Saturday—not bad for a £5,000 bargain buy from non-league soccer.

He was dropped for the only time

in his Luton Town career two years ago, but "Basher" came back to become one of the best tacklers in the First Division.

The only other Town players in the current squad past the 200 league appearance mark are Mal Donaghy (219 to date), Ricky Hill (260) and Brian Stein (208).

David Moss will be making his 196th league appearance for the Town, after 217 for Swindon, when he returns after injury.

But for real experience Brian Horton is well ahead of the rest: his league appearance record is 232 for Port Vale, 217 for Brighton and 93 so far for the Town, a total of 542.