

SPORT AND MOTORING

Town Match Verdict ★

NO GOALS, NO FLAIR, NO THANKS...

IT WAS 31 matches ago when Luton Town fans last saw their team in a goalless game. And an away point at Villa Park, where only two visiting teams have won so far this season, would leave some managers delighted.

But for manager David Pleat the result was little compensation for a team performance which fell a long way short of the sort of flowing, attacking football he believes in.

It was frustrating and disappointing, and one match fact sums up the off-day misery: Aston Villa goalkeeper Nigel Spink didn't have a single shot to save in the whole of the 90 minutes.

A solid defensive display by Paul Elliott and Mal Donaghy was the only encouraging feature of a match which left most spectators, including Mr Pleat, baffled.

Villa manager Tony Barton shared the bewilderment and admitted that the Town's play had ruined his pre-match planning.

"We know how Luton normally play. We were ready for them to attack us, and hoped to get them on the break. But it just didn't happen... Luton didn't come forward in numbers."

Villa veteran Des Bremner was even more disappointed. Fighting for his First Division place, he has

Report by Brian Swain
Pictures: Mark Richards

been converted from mid-field to defence, and is competing with Brendan Ormsby for the No 5 shirt.

"I was expecting to be under pressure and hoped I would be able to show that I can play well in defence," he said. "But Luton never gave me the chance..."

"We did nearly all the attacking, but things didn't seem to drop for us around the box."

Barton complained that for all their possession Villa were short on variety of ideas, and didn't get round the back of a Town defence which was under a lot of pressure but never got into serious difficulty.

Alan Curbishley and Mark Walters threatened to get round the back of Mitchell Thomas and Kirk Stephens,

but invariably wasted the ball when they did achieve promising positions.

If the defending was reliable enough, the Town's failure to push full-backs forward like they usually do played a major part in Spink's 90-minute siesta.

More telling still was a lack of attacking support from midfield. Brian Horton spent most of his energy on defensive duties, and the inexperience of Frank Bunn and Garry Parker got nowhere against Curbishley, Dennis Mortimer and Steve McMahon.

Villa had almost a free run up to the edge of the Town's penalty area, but their passing and shooting was pathetic, and for all their considerable possession they rarely looked like

getting to close quarters. Paul Rideout looked more menacing than the suspended Pete Withe had done at Kenilworth Road in October, and at least got two shots on target. Les Sealey dealt with both efficiently.

The only scares for a Town defence which was remarkably unruffled when full-back Colin Gibson overlapped and hit an attempted centre which bounced on to and over the bar, and a couple of hopeful penalty appeals.

It was optimism of the cheekiest order when Villa claimed hands against Donaghy, who blocked an attempted cross by Walters at close range. But I have seen penalties given for the sort of "save" Stephens made when the Town defence was pulled apart for once by Walters and Rideout's shot hit the defender and went for a corner.

Referee Roger Dilkes called it accidental hands, and had been equally unimpressed in the first half when Brian Stein tried to go through on his own and fell dramatically when challenged by Allan Evans.

With very little service from midfield, Stein, Trevor Aylott and Paul Walsh still contrived to cause the odd problem to a Villa defence which was in danger of going to sleep through inactivity.

Ironically, for a team outplayed in terms of possession, the Town created the clearest chance of the match in the 30th minute. Walsh burst through the middle, drew two defenders, and passed accurately to give Parker a clear run at goal. But his hot, from the edge of the penalty area, was well wide of the far post.

We had to wait until the last five minutes, after Sealey's good finger-tip save from Rideout, for the Town attack to show some of its potential.

Both teams left the field to a chorus of boos from customers who hadn't had much entertainment for their money. They expected a Town team with attacking flair and a rocky defence. On the day, things were exactly the opposite. The defence was much too strong for a Villa side short of variety, while the Town attack was almost non-existent.

Match Details

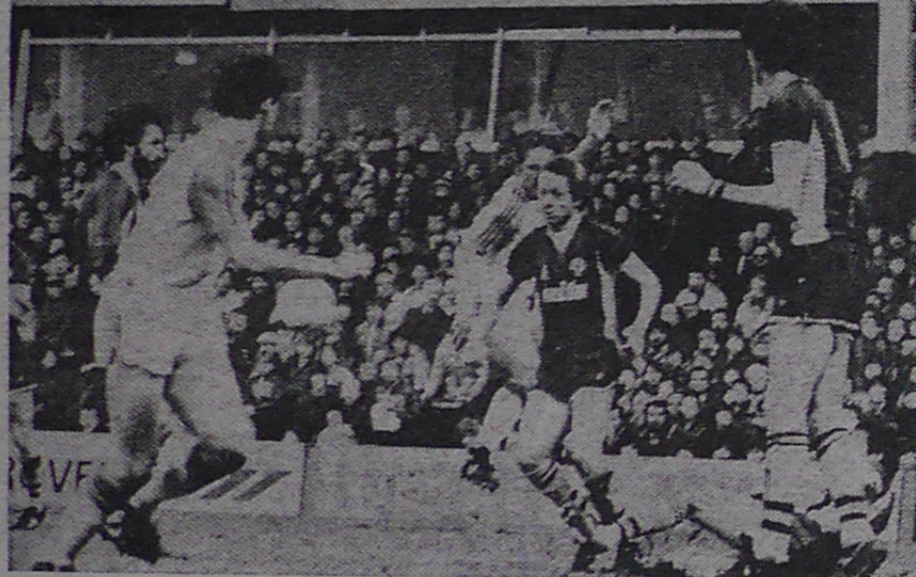
ASTON VILLA 0 LUTON TOWN 0
TOWN: Sealey; Stephens, Elliott, Donaghy, Thomas; Parker, Horton, Bunn; Stein, Aylott, Walsh. Sub: Goodyear, not used, lucky man.
VILLA: Spink; Williams, Evans, Bremner, Gibson; Curbishley, Mortimer, McMahon; Walters, Rideout, Shaw. Sub: Walker, not used.
GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town none saved, six wide; Villa five saved, eight wide, one mis-placed centre clipped the top of the bar. Corners: 10-3 to Villa.
ENTERTAINMENT: Quite dreadful, with the Town pushed back on to almost continuous defence, and Villa too inept to make it count.
ATTENDANCE: 18,656, Villa Park's second lowest of the season despite a good following from Luton.
REFEREE: Roger Dilkes, Mossley, Lancs. Both sides thought he should have given them penalties, but he played better than most on the pitch.
BOOKED: Frank Bunn for a foul on Mark Walters.



● RISING STARS: Trevor Aylott gets too high for Allan Evans.



● TAKE COVER: Brian Stein ducks as Kirk Stephens lets fly in a rare Town attack at Villa Park.



● CROWDED OUT: Villa close ranks to end an attack.

Leading pair draw blanks as well

TOP teams Liverpool and Manchester United shared a disappointing statistic with the Town this week—both played in goalless draws for the first time this season.

Liverpool were held at Roker Park by Sunderland, while United and Norwich slugged it out at Old Trafford.

The Town remain in seventh place in the First Division with 39 points, 13 behind leaders Liverpool and 19 above the relegation zone.

Nottingham Forest lost third place because they were also involved in a draw. Spurs took a point from the City ground when Chris Hughton scored the fourth goal of the game in injury time.

That let in West Ham to reclaim third place with a 3-0 home win over Stoke City. Wolves lost again, at Southampton and Notts County were beaten 4-1 at Everton, leaving a wider gap between the bottom three and the rest.

Things are looking desperate at Molineux,

because Wolves are 11 points adrift of the safety area. Notts County and Stoke have 20 points, three more than Wolves, but nine fewer than Birmingham, who are fourth from bottom.

Arsenal and Done Howe had further problems when QPR beat the Gunners at Highbury, leaving Arsenal in 11th place.

On Tuesday night Manchester United, West Ham and QPR all crept a little closer to Liverpool while the leaders were engaged in a 2-2 draw at Anfield with Third Division Walsall in the first leg of the Milk Cup semi-final.

United missed the chance of closing the gap to two points when they drew 2-2 with struggling Birmingham City at St Andrew's, their seventh draw in 12 away league matches.

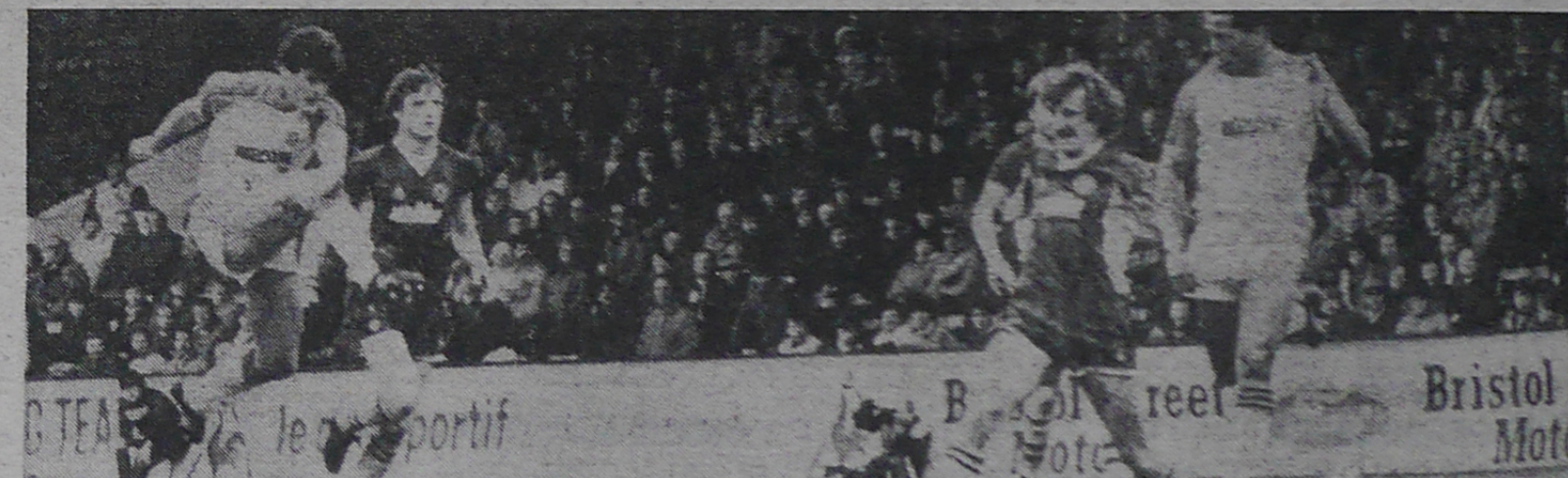
The top two could hardly have asked for a better result than the 1-1 draw QPR and West Ham played out at Loftus Road. Both clubs were

using up a game in hand, and effectively dropping two points each, although the draw took Rangers a point above Southampton.

The First Division table:

	HOME	AWAY	GOALS
	P W D L F A	P W D L F A	
Liverpool	26 8 3 2 24 7	7 4 2 1 12 5	52
Man Utd	26 9 2 3 29 14	6 7 1 17 15	48
West Ham	26 9 2 2 30 11	5 3 5 12 14	47
Nottingham For	25 9 3 2 31 13	5 1 5 16 18	46
QPR	25 8 3 2 23 8	5 1 6 20 15	43
Southampton	25 8 2 2 17 9	4 4 5 12 13	42
Luton	25 4 3 5 24 19	7 1 4 17 17	39
Coventry	25 3 3 16 11	5 5 4 18 20	38
Aston Villa	25 3 2 22 15	1 4 6 15 23	37
Norwich	26 6 4 3 20 13	3 5 5 10 16	36
Arsenal	26 5 4 2 21 19	5 1 6 20 18	34
Walsford	26 6 3 4 26 22	4 1 8 17 23	34
Tottenham	25 4 3 16 17	5 4 5 24 21	34
Everton	25 5 3 11 8	4 2 9 18 34	34
Ipswich	25 7 2 4 24 14	2 3 7 12 20	32
Sunderland	24 5 3 17 11	3 2 6 8 21	31
WBA	25 6 1 4 16 12	3 2 9 13 27	30
Leicester	26 5 4 2 21 21	2 4 7 19 25	29
Birmingham	26 5 1 13 12	3 4 7 14 21	29
Notts Co	26 3 3 19 23	2 2 10 14 29	20
Stoke	26 4 3 5 15 18	0 5 9 7 29	20
Wolves	25 2 5 7 12 23	2 0 9 9 30	17

● Not including last night's fixtures: Spurs v Sunderland and West Brom v Nottingham Forest.



● TRYING: Frank Bunn puts in one of the Town shots that flew wide of the target.