

SPORT AND MOTORING

Two places
lower in
the table

WHILE Manchester United supporters could sit back at home and enjoy their side's climb back into third place in the First Division, TV soccer fans of Norwich City had something to cheer about too.

Without kicking a ball, Norwich moved up into eighth place above the Town because of goal difference.

Their 3-1 home win over Aston Villa on Saturday left them level on 39 points with the Town, with a goal difference of plus three. The Town kicked off against United with a plus five goal figure, and the fourth goal was enough to drop the Town down to ninth.

But on Tuesday night Norwich were beaten 2-0 at Loftus Road by Queens Park Rangers, a result that narrowed the gap to just one goal—and the Town have two matches in hand.

They dropped one place on Saturday when Spurs overtook them with a 3-2 home win over Leicester.

Liverpool stayed clear at the top with a 2-1 win over Arsenal at Anfield, and Nottingham Forest held on to second place by winning 1-0 on the plastic pitch at Queens Park Rangers.

United needed to win at Kenilworth Road because West Ham had won 2-1 at Coventry on Saturday. That left the Hammers third until United's victory put them a point above West Ham.

It all adds up to the development of a "Super League" at the top of the table, with the leading four clubs now well clear of the bunch.

The consolation prize for the rest is the odd place or two in the UEFA Cup left for the best of the also-rans.

The First Division table:

	HOME Goals					AWAY Goals				
	P	W	D	L	F	P	W	D	L	F
Liverpool	27	9	3	2	28	8	7	4	2	17
Notts Forest	27	9	3	2	31	13	7	1	5	22
Man Utd	27	9	2	3	29	14	5	7	1	22
West Ham	27	9	2	3	11	11	6	3	5	14
QPR	26	9	3	3	25	9	5	1	1	20
Southampton	26	8	3	7	18	10	4	4	5	12
Tottenham	27	6	3	4	22	19	5	4	5	24
Norwich	28	7	4	3	23	14	3	5	6	10
Luton Town	26	5	2	6	24	24	7	1	5	17
Coventry	26	5	3	4	17	13	5	4	18	26
Watford	27	6	3	4	26	22	5	1	8	22
Aston Villa	26	9	3	2	22	15	1	4	7	16
Everton	26	5	5	3	11	8	4	3	6	10
Arsenal	27	5	3	6	21	19	5	1	7	21
Sheff Wed	26	7	2	4	24	14	2	3	4	12
Sunderland	26	5	5	3	17	11	3	3	7	9
WBA	27	6	2	5	17	18	3	2	9	13
Birmingham	27	5	2	6	13	12	3	4	7	14
Leicester	27	5	4	4	21	21	2	4	8	21
Sheff Sat	26	3	3	6	22	28	0	5	9	7
Notts Co	26	3	3	6	22	28	2	1	10	14
Wolves	26	2	5	7	12	23	2	1	9	9

● **TOP HATTER:** Paul Elliott rises well above Graeme Hogg to meet a free kick in a Town attack early in the second half. Elliott's leap and header led to a shot by Frank Bunn which produced the save of the match

RICH BLEND SETS
TOP DOGS APART

Report by Brian Swain
Pictures: Mark Richards

WITH champions and league leaders Liverpool the next visitors to Kenilworth Road, Luton Town aren't the only club today who must realise that the gap between the top and middle of the First Division is immense.

Manchester United were ruthless in exposing it to the nation at Kenilworth Road. Manager David Pleat was hoping to show an audience of millions that small town clubs can compete in terms of quality and entertainment.

Instead United, who can afford to spend a million on one player, proved that most clubs in the First Division can expect to get poorer while the minority get richer.

ITV got the entertainment they wanted, with five goals for United, two efforts hitting the woodwork, and the Town's goalmouth full of incident and near-misses. The odd thing was that

the Town had nearly as many shots at goal as United, and not until the last 11 minutes, after a major reorganisation in the Town formation, did Ron Atkinson's men wrap up a flattering result for their best win of the season and the Town's worst home result since Mr Pleat became manager.

United created cleaner openings, and their finishing was clinical. Every slight mistake was punished, and that included in midfield, where United's four hustled and harried and tackled ferociously.

They had physical power and pace, and two England stars who oozed class, Ray Wilkins and Bryan Robson.

Wilkins was always on hand to tidy up just in front of his defence, and turn the pattern of the game when

the Town threatened to push forward.

Robson, fast and direct, was one of the few men the Town have met this season capable of powering past Mal Donaghy.

The return of Ricky Hill, despite his lack of match practice in the past month, added more attacking threat from the Town's midfield, but that department demonstrated the harsh facts of life at football's top levels.

Mr Pleat can't afford to go and pay £100,000 or so for a man to strengthen midfield and get its balance right. When United had a similar problem they paid £1.75 million for Robson.

The talk of a super-league is short on facing facts—it's already in existence and flourishing in the top four places of the First Division.

Clubs like Luton Town can challenge, and now and again they will make an impact.

On their day the best 11 men Mr Pleat can muster can compete with the best from Anfield or Old Trafford. The problem was that United weren't prepared to let Luton Town have their day at their expense.

Mr Atkinson's view was that it was not just a case of Luton Town playing badly, even if they were all a notch below what they can be. United, he said, hit top form.

For Town supporters, the TV recording will always be something of a video nasty. The scale of defeat was more humiliating than most of the pattern of the game, but defensive frailties were mercilessly exposed.

United just about deserved their half-time lead, scoring twice in three minutes after the Town had

competed well enough for the first 37. Robson's strength took him through in pursuit of a clearance to fire in the first, and Norman Whiteside got on the blind side of Donaghy to loop a header into the net for the second.

The best Town attempt came 11 minutes after the break when Gary Bailey had to produce the smartest save of the match to tip a left-foot scorcher by Frank Bunn over the bar.

It could have been a good contest if Bunn had scored. With 18 minutes to go Mitchell Thomas, who had come through some harrowing moments with his confidence and determination intact, went off injured.

Raddy Antic went on as sub into midfield, Bunn moved forward and the town, believing in a do-or-die approach, took chances with only three at the back.

United were content to settle for control for a spell before scoring three in the last 11 minutes. Robson

chased a through ball and scored from the edge of the box despite opposition from Donaghy and Les Sealey; Whiteside laid on the fourth for Frank Stapleton and Stapleton returned the compliment for Whiteside to get his second in the 85th minute.

On top of that Moses and Whiteside hit the woodwork and Kevin Moran put a free header over the bar, leaving Mr Atkinson claiming that United could have got into double figures.

Paul Walsh and Brian Stein threatened often enough, and probably Walsh's long-term future still lies in Old Trafford or Anfield.

Big money will always talk in football, and the way Walsh and Stein are playing either would be at home in the multi-talented team Mr Atkinson can afford to build.

Perhaps they and other Town players will prove the point against Liverpool on Saturday.

Town Match Verdict ★



● **FOILED AGAIN:** Gary Bailey gets above friend and foe alike to fist clear under pressure, with Paul Walsh, on the left, waiting in vain for the ball to drop his way.



● **TAKING COVER:** Kevin Moran puts his back into it to block a shot by Brian Stein, with Mike Duxbury the United defender unable to intervene.