

RICH BLEND SETS TOP DOGS APART

83/84

**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.

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 0 MANCHESTER UTD 5
Half-time: 0-2

TOWN: Sealey; Stephens, Elliott, Donaghy, Thomas (Antic, 72 mins); Hill, Horton, Bunn; Stein, Walsh, Aylott.

MANCHESTER UNITED: Bailey; Duxbury, Moran, Hogg, Albiston; Moses, Wilkins, Robson, (Graham 81 mins), Muhren; Stapleton, Whiteside.

THE GOALS: Robson shot after midfield burst, 37 mins; Whiteside header from Muhren cross, 40 mins; Robson from another well-timed run, 79 mins; Stapleton from Whiteside's pass, 81 mins; Whiteside from Stapleton's cross-shot, 85 mins.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town eight saved, eight off target; United six saved, eight wide, two hit the woodwork. Corners: 7-6 to the Town.

REFEREE: Alan Robinson, Hampshire—had a good game, although he missed an offside flag before giving a throw-in which led to the second goal.

ATTENDANCE: 11,265, including 3,000 United fans. Television has a lot to answer for.

ENTERTAINMENT: ITV loved it for their final live league game of the season. It was too humiliating for Town supporters to enjoy.