

83/84

Late penalty denies drab Hatters

THE CHANCE to become best travellers in the First Division was snatched from Luton nine minutes from time.

They were that far from their eighth away victory — one more than Liverpool, Forest, West Ham and two more than leaders Man United.

But justice was done with Billy Wright's late penalty on a miserable, cold Tuesday night in front of Birmingham's smallest crowd this season. For Hatters were not best anything on this showing.

They could not even hoof the ball as high or as hard as Birmingham, though the difference was minimal.

Manager David Pleat, distressed by his injury-hit side's lack of finesse, was restrained afterwards.

He asked the Press to concentrate on the match, not his comments. Apart, though, from

BIRMINGHAM 1 LUTON 1 by Dominic Biggs

Brian Stein's fourth minute opening goal, there was not a lot more to be mentioned.

What there was came best from the manager.

"I suppose the people that didn't come tonight were fortunate," he admitted. "We never put any moves together and they certainly didn't. I wouldn't have been very proud if we had won 1-0 the way things were going.

"Still, it's about the players you have at your disposal, therefore it's unfair to criticise Birmingham."

It looked better than that though, when Raddy Antic — even at 34 the only composed player on view — bared Brum's defences with a through-ball to Stein, who shot crisply, low past the diving Coton.

That early promise was soon forgotten, with Blues punting the ball at will and Town keeping

Les Sealey on overtime as they backpedalled furiously with a series of negative passes.

Sealey was called to do some real work when he brilliantly recovered to tip over a lob from Howard Gayle.

Harford, who missed a tempting first half header, blazed over an open goal soon after half time, before fiery City winger Robert Hopkins injected some light relief.

The cruel joke running round St Andrews was that his 12th booking, putting him in line for his fourth suspension this season, gave him more points than the Blues.

Mal Donaghy unexpectedly broke through, sending a shot just wide for Luton and the only other two moments of excitement were produced by Hatters' 19-year-old full-back Mitchell Thomas.

First — for the third time in four matches — he stunningly headed clear from his own goal line, this time cheating Tony Rees.

Then in the 81st minute, after Harford's pass went clean across Luton's penalty area, he handled Gayle's cross.

Wright was, for once, able to make constructive use of his heavy kick by smashing the penalty past Sealey.

The remainder, like the rest of Luton's now six-match unbeaten run was, as the manager said, a case of "hanging on, but we're doing quite well at it".

Attendance: 9,592.

BIRMINGHAM: Coton, Roberts, Hagan, Blake, Wright, Broadhurst, Gayle, van den Hauwe, Harford, Rees, Hopkins. Sub: McCarrick.

LUTON: Sealey, Stephens, Thomas, Antic, Elliott, Goodyear, Donaghy, Stein, Walsh, Aylott, Bunn. Sub: Breacker.