

UPHILL FIGHT ON THE SPOT

83/84

BIRMINGHAM CITY 1, LUTON TOWN 1 (Half-time: 0-1)

A CRUEL penalty nine minutes from time robbed the Town of their eighth away win of the season at St Andrews on Tuesday night.

But if referee Eric Read's decision to give Birmingham City a late reprieve was harsh, they probably deserved it after pounding away at an over-worked but defiant Town defence for most of the match.

But it was ironic that Thomas, who had had another superb game, should be the man to be penalised. He thought he had no chance of taking evasive action when Howard Gayle tried to drive in a right wing cross, but was adjudged to have handled and Birmingham skipper Billy Wright scored from the spot.

That wiped out a superb

early goal by Brian Stein. He broke his ten-match famine with a sweet strike in the fourth minute.

It was the Town's first attack, set up by a strong midfield burst and perceptive pass by Raddy Antic. It caught the Birmingham defence square and Stein controlled the ball quickly before whipping a low shot expertly into the net.

From then on Birmingham were all action hustlers, but for a long time their long ball tactics showed no sign of upsetting a cool Town defence, with Paul Elliott and Clive Goodyear taking everything in the air in their stride.

Midfield was largely bypassed for a long time, but Birmingham had ample opportunity to equalise long before they did.

Their best first-half effort came when a run down the right wing by Pat van den Hauwe saw him flick a pass inside Thomas and Gayle lobbed accurately towards the top far corner.

Les Sealey was off his line, but back-pedalled at high speed and made a marvellous save, finger-tipping the ball over the bar.

Almost the whole of the second half was a case of resolute Town defence, bolstered by midfielders, against non-stop Birmingham attacks.

The Blues won seven corners, had a string of shots charged down, and also managed to waste more chances.

Gayle threatened to cause immense damage, but was

held by Thomas, and it looked as though a hard-earned away win was on the cards until that late penalty.

Birmingham contributed to their own frustration by being over-anxious. Mick Harford, who had missed one difficult chance in the first half wasted a simple one in the second when he blazed over the bar from ten yards.

Thomas headed off the line from Tony Rees from a corner that was not cleared, and Rees missed a golden chance to snatch a Birmingham victory when he headed wide from eight yards in the last minute.

In attack Paul Walsh had no chance to impress watching Liverpool officials. Birmingham had obviously given deep thought to his reputation and he was so well policed by Wright and Blake that he didn't have a single shot on target. But nor did many other Town players.

DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Sealey; Stephens, Elliott, Goodyear, Thomas; Antic, Donaghy, Bunn; Stein, Walsh, Aylott. Sub Breacker, not used.

BIRMINGHAM: Coton; Roberts, Blake, Wright, Hagan; Broadhurst, van den Hauwe, Rees; Layle, Harford, Hopkins. Sub: McCarrick not used.

THE GOALS: Brian Stein for the Town four minutes; Billy Wright penalty for Birmingham 81 minutes.

OTHER STRIKES: Town three saved, two wide; Birmingham: eight saved, seven wide.

CORNERS: 12-2 to Birmingham.

REFEREE: Eric Read of Bristol.

ATTENDANCE: 9,592.

ENTERTAINMENT: Too hard a physical battle to include much sparkle, but always exciting.

AFTER moving into seventh place in the First Division after Saturday's draw at Norwich, the Town dropped back to eighth on Tuesday.

While they again shared the points at Birmingham, rivals Watford were beating Sunderland 2-1 at Vicarage Road and jumped two places to go a point ahead of the Town.

The First Division table after Tuesday's games:

	P	W	D	L	F	A	P
Man Utd	32	18	10	4	63	31	64
Liverpool	32	18	9	5	51	24	63
Nottm For	32	17	5	10	55	35	56
Southampton	30	16	7	7	39	25	55
West Ham	32	16	6	10	51	36	54
QPR	32	15	5	12	47	29	50
Watford	32	14	5	13	60	59	47
Luton Town	32	13	7	12	45	45	46
Aston Villa	32	12	9	11	47	49	45
Spurs	32	12	8	12	48	49	44
Norwich	32	11	10	11	35	35	43
Arsenal	32	12	6	14	50	47	42
Everton	31	10	11	10	28	34	41
Coventry	32	10	10	12	43	45	40
Birmingham	32	11	7	14	33	37	40
Leicester	32	10	9	13	53	54	39
Sunderland	32	9	11	12	32	43	38
West Brom	31	10	5	15	34	49	36
Stoke	32	9	8	15	30	51	35
Ipswich	32	9	5	18	38	50	32
Notts Co	31	7	7	17	40	60	28
Wolves	31	5	9	17	24	59	24