

Town Match Verdict ★★

ALL IT NEEDED WAS A LITTLE COMMON SENSE

ONE CRUCIAL refereeing decision poisoned the atmosphere, wrecked a cup final dream for Watford skipper Wilf Rostron, and almost ruined five years of hard work by the two managers and their staffs as the Town and Watford met for the fourth time this season.

Inter-club respect and friendship, for which so much had been done since Graham Taylor and David Pleat became managers, could so easily have reverted to the old hatred.

A tempestuous afternoon at Kenilworth Road finished with just about everyone in the ground unhappy with events, including the winners.

Defeat was all the harder for Town fans to take because in the second half Watford had been put under almost constant pressure, with no Town player able to put the finishing touch on target.

Flashpoint came in the 39th minute, when Watford were leading by one goal, and deserving to on the run of play.

Paul Elliott chased back to cover Rostron's run down the left wing, the two fell over with legs entangled, and boots made contact as they tried to regain their feet. Then they stupidly stood and squared up to each other, pushing and shoving.

It was not fighting, but referee Roger Milford, a philately buff from Bristol, gave the incident a notoriety it did not deserve.

In football law, Mr Milford was able to justify calling it violent and sending both men off. Yet the law of common sense might have been added to his consideration.

Report by Brian Swain Pictures: Mark Richards

If he had settled for a quick reading of the riot act he might have been spared some of the problems he had when the game went through a bad-tempered spell.

Mo Johnston, for instance, dived like a high-board artist a couple of times to try to win free kicks and suggest that he had been mortally wounded. Brian Horton left his boot in to punish that gamesmanship.

The players calmed down eventually and once the vendetta objectives had been given up it became a good contest again, without reaching the heights of the two cup-tie meetings in January.

Each side was missing top men before kick-off. George Reilly and Kenny Jackett were injured and unable to play for the cup finalists. Mal Donaghy was completing his suspension, and Ricky Hill's absence is still a grievous blow to the Town's midfield strength, well though Garry Parker has played as his deputy.

The fates added to the day's disasters. John Barnes pulled a muscle after 15 minutes and had to go off, putting himself out of last night's England team.

Elliott, booked for a 22nd-minute foul on Steve

Terry, discovered when he went off with Rostron that he had been playing since the second minute with a dislocated shoulder... received in a second-minute collision with Rostron.

And worst of all David Moss, returning to form after a five-month lay-off, limped away in the 60th minute with a broken collarbone, and his disastrous season is now over.

With all those personal agonies and frustrations, the football could hardly help but be fitful and patchy, and the Town lost because they were found wanting in both penalty areas when it mattered.

Les Taylor hit the bar in the fourth minute, and Watford were worth the lead when they took it in the 18th minute. Lee Sinnott's long throw from the left found its way to beyond the far post, Johnstone knocked it goalwards, and Nigel Callaghan nipped in with a header to beat Sealey.

Brian Stein muffed a glorious chance to equalise when he was quick to move on to a through pass by Parker to get clear on his own, then too slow to finish as Taylor raced back to challenge.

With Horton dropping back into defence after Elliott and Rostron had left, the defence was caught



● CONSOLATION: Paul Walsh scores the Town's goal four minutes from time.

stretched as Watford scored their second a few seconds before half-time.

Watford switched an attack from right to left, substitute Worrel Sterling drew Kirk Stephens and passed inside, and Johnston was unmarked as he shot his 22nd goal of the season. Watford had shaded the first half, but they were second best after the interval.

But Frank Bunn and Paul

Walsh missed reasonable chances by being off target. Steve Sherwood made the best save of the game to push a header by Walsh round the post, and two possible penalties were refused.

One, when Sinnott downed Mitchell Thomas, was quite blatant. Mr Milford played the advantage rule as Bunn closed in, and the hurried shot wide left Town boss David Pleat complaining that when penalties are conceded the advantage rule should not exist.

Horton no doubt would have been more calm and collected with a spot kick than Bunn had been with a moving ball and defenders trying to close him down.

The Town finally got the breakthrough too late to win the point their dominance of the second half deserved. Walsh placed his 15th goal of the season neatly past Sherwood after Stein's pass had released him in the 84th minute.

It was a day when the referee was destined to have the last word. He did, booking Walsh for dissent in the final minute.

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 1 WATFORD 2
Half-time: 0-2

TOWN: Sealey; Stephens, Elliott, Goodyear, Thomas; Parker, Horton, Bunn; Walsh, Stein, Moss (Antic 60 mins).

WATFORD: Sherwood; Bardsley, Terry, Sinnott, Price; Taylor, Atkinson, Rostron; Callaghan, Barnes (Sterling 15 mins), Johnston.

THE GOALS: Nigel Callaghan and Mo Johnston for Watford, 18 and 44 minutes; Paul Walsh for the Town, 84 minutes.

OTHER ATTEMPTS: Town six saved, nine wide. Watford six saved, seven wide and one hit the bar. Corners: 7-7.

REFEREE: Roger Milford, Bristol. So keen to try to do it by the book he forgot to use a little common sense. He was lucky that both sides calmed down after he upset everyone with the sending off that denies Wilf Rostron his chance of leading Watford in the Cup Final. Paul Elliott's two-match suspension looks insignificant beside that.

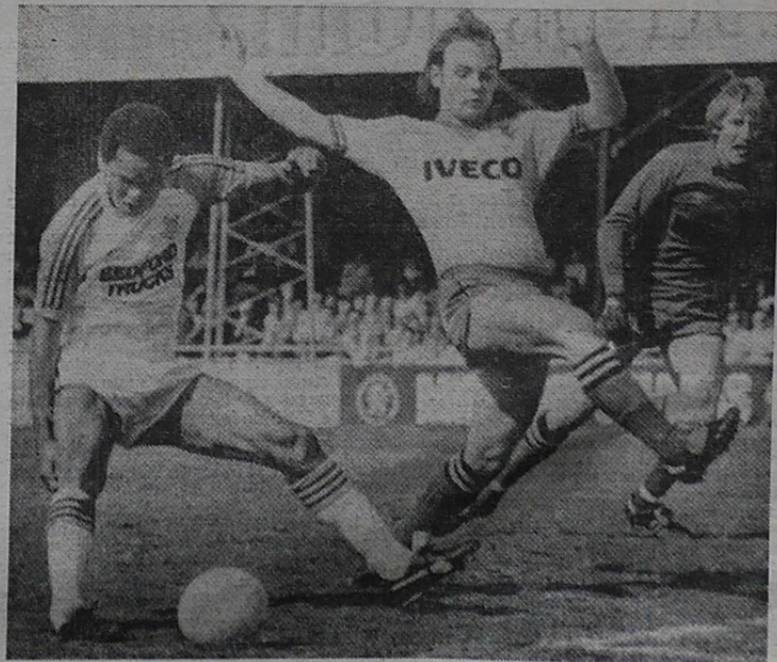
SENT OFF: Rostron and Elliott after a tangle in the 39th minute. Booked: Elliott for a foul on Terry, 22nd minute; Paul Walsh for dissent over a throw-in 89th minute.

ATTENDANCE: 12,594—lowest for any derby game for 12 years.

ENTERTAINMENT: Ruined by a spell of nastiness that crept in after the ref upset both sides, but much better when the Town so nearly earned an equaliser with a good second-half performance.



● TRYING: Paul Walsh, watched by an England representative and by two scouts from AC Milan, produces an overhead volley to put Watford under pressure. The visitors were happy to see the ball loop a few inches over the bar.



● CHANCE SLIPS: Brian Stein fails to complete the good work after that left goalkeeper Steve Sherwood, far right, hopelessly out of position. Les Taylor challenges, and the chance of an equaliser is gone as Stein loses his balance.