

Half-way promise vanished

IF THE TOWN'S second half of the season had matched the first, they would now be preparing to play in Europe for the first time in their history.

At the half-way point of the campaign — a defeat at Sunderland was their 21st league match — they were sixth in the table with 35 points.

The next 21 matches produced only 16 points out of the 63 at stake. They finished three points above Birmingham City, who collected the third relegation place this week when they were held 0-0 at St Andrew's by Southampton while other endangered teams were winning.

The Town had one more away match in their first 21 matches than in the second half of the season. They won six and lost five away matches up to the half-way point. One win out of ten was the away record in the second half, when they also lost six out of 11 at home.

The Town's home and away record for the two halves of the season.

Home													Away				
	P	W	D	L	F	A	W	D	L	F	A	Pts					
Aug/Dec:	21	5	2	3	21	14	6	0	5	15	16	35					
Jan/May:	21	2	3	6	9	19	1	4	5	18	17	16					
Total:	42	7	5	9	30	33	7	4	10	23	33	51					

The Town's highest spot was on Boxing Day, when they won 3-0 at Notts County, and were third in the First Division for a few hours, two points behind Manchester United above Liverpool.

The big two kept their positions for the rest of the season.

Saturday night's league table saw the Town down to 16th, their lowest of the season. They edged ahead of West Brom on Monday night when Southampton won 2-0 at The Hawthorns, but on Tuesday the Town reverted to 16th when Norwich overhauled them with a 1-1 draw at Liverpool.



● HELLO: Stacey North, making his First Division debut, in competition with Cyrille Regis at The Hawthorns.



● FOILED: Paul Barron saves and holds on to the ball as Brian Stein and Frank Bunn wait hopefully for a rebound.

SEASON DIES QUIETLY

Boss faces a major team rebuilding job

REPORT BY BRIAN SWAIN
PICTURES: MARK RICHARDS

A SEASON which held so much hope for Luton Town at the half-way stage ended in depressing stagnation at The Hawthorns with a performance as poor as the result.

Sadly, men who will not play for the club again failed to make any memorable impression in the last game.

With at least four experienced players going out, manager David Pleat faces one of the hardest jobs in football this summer, trying to build a new team on a shoestring budget.

If he can avoid another relegation battle next season, he will have worked wonders.

West Brom, still in danger themselves before Saturday's kick-off, looked a pretty ordinary bunch. But if they were short on outstanding talent they did at least have the spirit and willingness to fight for survival.

They needed a lucky break to end the stalemate, with the game hanging towards a typical end-of-season

son bore draw until Tony Morley scored in the 63rd minute from what looked like an offside position.

For the Town, having beaten relegation threats with a fair performance at Coventry a week earlier, it was a game that didn't matter in terms of results, and it showed.

Kirk Stephens was out injured and Mitchell Thomas and Ruddy Antie were dropped. Wayne Turner was recalled at left back, Trevor Aylott returned to attack, and Stacey North, 19, was given his First Division debut in the centre of defence.

Morley, ineffective when he was up against Stephens before his transfer from Aston Villa, carried too much pace for Mal Donaghy, who was switched to right back.

PLEASURE

But at least the Irishman kept fighting. The same went for Turner, and despite the result North can look back on his debut with some pleasure, with Cyrille Regis's power and pace so very nearly blanked out.

Midfield and attack was the problem. Age has caught up with Brian Horton, but he never shirked the huge responsibility that has rested on him between two inexperienced players.

Frank Bunn, as ever, was a willing trier, and Garry Parker, full of promise and potential, has had to be asked to stay in the first team a little too long after

his initial breakthrough.

The summer's rest will doubtless improve matters, and on Saturday's showing at The Hawthorns Brian Stein and Paul Walsh had also reached a point where they were jaded and overplayed.

Neither looked like making much impression on a basic but effective Albion defence. Although the Town made few incisive attacking moves, Stein missed a chance to put them ahead with a good early break.

Neat passing by Horton and Walsh set Stein scampering clear down the middle, but his shot lacked decisive power and Paul Barron failed to save.

Walsh seemed to be dreaming of faraway places like Anfield and rarely looked like discomforting Mirryn Bennett or Ken McNaught.

Tony Grealish raised his game to meet one of his former clubs, and Steve Hunt and Steve MacKenzie combined with him to give West Brom a midfield advantage which they seldom used effectively.

Les Sealey had a quiet afternoon as the season appeared to be dying in its sleep, although some idiot among the West Brom fans went to the game with a spooker ball in his pocket, and duly flung it at the keeper.

His aim matched that of the forwards until that point, and although referee Keith

Hackett took a lenient view and decided not to report the incident perhaps football needs to think harder before dismissing such matters as unimportant.

Both managers played it down after the game, yet if the ivory missile had hit Sealey on the head it would have caused injury at least, death at worst.

Sealey reacted angrily at the time of the incident, running 30 yards to the ref and flinging his ball down at his feet in a temporary rage. I didn't blame him.

OFFSIDE?

Ten minutes later he had to charge out again because Hunt's over-the-top pass from midfield sent Morley clear down the left. He looked offside as Sealey raced out to try to sweep up. The goalkeeper missed with an attempted clearance and Morley put Albion ahead, with Clive Goodyear close to making a miraculous save on the line.

The Town raised themselves briefly after the setback, and had their only spell of real pressure with out being menacing enough in the box.

With ten minutes to go, the manager took a do or die gamble, sending on Ruddy Antie for his last taste of First Division football.

He replaced Turner, the Town pushed men upfield, and were punished for it, with Regis scoring from close range in the 85th minute after MacKenzie used the space vacated by Turner's removal, and MacKenzie helping to make it 3-0 in the last minute.

Match Details

WEST BROM 3 LUTON TOWN 0
Half-time: 0-0

LUTON TOWN: Sealey; Donaghy, Goodyear, North, Turner (Antie, 80 mins); Parker, Horton, Bunn; Stein, Aylott, Walsh.

WEST BROM: Barron; Whitehead, McNaught, Bennett, Statham; Hunt, Grealish, MacKenzie; Cross, Regis, Morley. Sub: Forsyth, not needed.

THE GOALS: Tony Morley, 63 mins, looking offside from Steve Hunt's through-ball; Cyrille Regis, 85 mins, and Steve MacKenzie, 89 mins, both from breaks when the Town were pushing upfield with more hope than heart.

OTHER STRIKES: Town five saved and six off target; West Brom four saved and five wide. Corners: 7-6 to West Brom.

REFEREE: Keith Hackett, Sheffield. Always well in control, and if Morley's opener was offside, that was a linesman's mistake.

ATTENDANCE: 12,400—2,500 below West Brom's average this season.

ENTERTAINMENT: Poor, with the Town never looking like a class football team and West Brom only slightly better because of their commitment and determination.



● GOODBYE: Skipper Brian Horton, on his farewell appearance, challenges Steve Hunt in midfield.



● FOILED AGAIN: Barron gets between Stein and Trevor Aylott to end another Town attack.