

SPORT AND MOTORING

Town Match Verdict ★★★★★



● UNDER FIRE: Watford's Dave Bardsley clears as Brian Stein competes for a second-half corner.

LOCAL PRIDE STINGS THE HORNETS

Report by Brian Swain
Pictures: Mark Richards

EVERY MAN in the team had cause to walk off with pride after Luton Town saw off Watford in a hectic and fascinating local derby.

Watford shaded the first half, lost the lead twice, and were outplayed after the break and are now pinned deeper in the relegation zone after only one victory in 11 league games.

The Town still have a long way to go to achieve mid-table comfort, and one of the things that made the game so entertaining was that both clubs had hit dodgy spells together.

For an hour there was little to choose between two teams who suffered trembles in defence, but who appreciated the need to score more goals than they conceded.

By the end the Town had imposed their brand of skill and thought on a Watford side that failed for lack of variety in the penalty area.

Several individual contests pointed up the changing pattern of the game, and in every one Town players came out on top when it mattered.

George Reilly, for instance, drew first blood in his confrontation with Paul Elliott, but was made to look very much second best after the interval, when Watford most needed to make Reilly's height and power count.

From 1 to 11 Town men came through their tests with final honours, even if all judgement has to be tempered with the reminder that Watford are not the team they were, particularly in confidence after a bad start to the season.

Jake Findlay, back in the First Division after 18 months because of Andy Dibble's injury, grabbed his chance like a starving man invited to a party. He made two crucial saves when Watford threatened to double their early lead, made only one mistake with a poor clearance kick, and was justified afterwards in his claim that he had shown he was good enough to set the manager a problem when Dibble is fit again.

Mitchell Thomas, facing the daunting prospect of holding England winger John Barnes, stuck with it through a difficult first 30 minutes, snuffed out the danger completely before the interval, and then became an extra attacker to help ensure that there was no way back for Watford in the second half.

Wayne Turner was in the No 3 shirt again, deputising for Ashley Grimes. He had not been entirely happy at left back against Sheffield Wednesday, but Graham Taylor won't take consolation from that today.

Les Taylor and Nigel Callaghan both tried to unlock the Town defence down Watford's right. Both failed against Turner's good tackling and positional play, and in the end Taylor abandoned the attempt when it became clear his central attackers were getting no service at all from the flanks.

Garry Parker returned impressively to midfield, and showed Watford that long passes are not the only way of breaching defences: he tackled well when he had to, and was unlucky not to score at least once with his strong running with the ball.

Paul Elliott and Mal Donaghy had to work hard early on against Reilly and Luther Blissett. The Watford men could claim to be ahead on points after 27 minutes, when each had scored once and the Town's defence was under pressure.



● THE WINNER: Steve Elliott leaves Tony Coton groping with the decisive goal.

I would like to see Stein score more goals as well, but his work in the ten yards or so outside the penalty box helped to keep Watford's defence at full stretch for long periods.

Frank Bunn, all work and heart, had a double bonus—two days after the match both managers announced that he had scored twice. Most people in the ground, myself included, thought the first equaliser was a spectacular own goal by Richard Jobson. But he and Bunn both said it was the Luton man's boot which made the decisive contact as they competed for the ball.

Certainly there was no doubt about the second, when Stein's shrewd pass put Bunn in for what is now his sixth goal of the season.

Steve Elliott's superb winner was his fourth goal in eight games. He has taken time to get back into the swing of First Division football, but any striker would have been proud of the 61st-minute decider.

Elliott took Hill's pass in his stride and whacked in a half-volley that left £300,000 worth of goalkeeper beaten from an angle.

To complete the full set of Town successes, Vince Hilaire filled the David Moss shirt with distinction. An early run and cross down the left wing almost provided the opening goal for Paul Elliott, but Hilaire's major contribution came after the interval when the Town cut through Watford's defence on both flanks.

Hilaire constantly drew two defenders to the left, leaving spaces for others to exploit, and in the end Watford were lucky to go home with only a one-goal margin against them.

Reilly had headed them into the lead from Callaghan's corner in the eighth minute, and Findlay had to make good saves from Barnes and Reilly to stop Watford running away with the early honours.

Jobson, under pressure from Bunn, tried his third

long back-pass in the 21st minute and a stunning chip sailed over the bemused Tony Coton for the equaliser, with Jobson's own-goal embarrassment only slightly relieved later when Bunn was credited with the last touch.

Blissett found an extra yard to go clear from Reilly's flick to restore Watford's lead, only for Bunn to reply within a minute from Stein's pass.

Parker had hit the top of the bar with a cross-shot in the first half, and as the Town took complete command after the interval Donaghy had a rising shot tipped on to the bar by Coton.

Elliott's decisive goal drained Watford of almost all resistance, and that is another reason why Town fans have to treat the result with a little circumspection—Watford are not the team they were.

But they're still the team to beat if you have any sort of feeling for Luton Town.

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 3, WATFORD 2
HALF-TIME: 2-2

TOWN: Findlay; Thomas, Donaghy, Paul Elliott, Turner; Hill, Parker, Bunn; Stein, Steve Elliott, Hilaire. Sub: Breacker, not needed.

WATFORD: Coton; Bardsley, Jobson, Sinnott, Rostron; Taylor (Gilligan, 82 mins), Callaghan, Jackett; Blissett, Reilly, Barnes.

THE GOALS: George Reilly header from Callaghan's corner, 8 minutes; Frank Bunn, getting touch to Richard Jobson's 25-yard back-pass over his own keeper, 21 minutes; Luther Blissett on the burst from Reilly's flick, 27 minutes; Frank Bunn from Brian Stein's incisive pass, 28 minutes; Steve Elliott, thundering angled drive from Ricky Hill's pass, 61 minutes.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town, six saved, seven wide, two hit the bar; Watford, seven saved and seven wide. Corners: 5-2 to Watford first half, 12-0 to the Town second half.

ATTENDANCE: 12,192—400 down on last season, 9,000 below the previous season, and at a time when First Division attendances elsewhere are going up.

ENTERTAINMENT: Good traditional local derby, with Watford lucky not to take a heavier beating.

REFEREE: Alan Robinson, Portsmouth—always well in control.



● DOUBLE DELIGHT: Frank Bunn cracks in the second equaliser, and his second goal of the game, within seconds of Watford taking a 2-1 lead.