Into the fight for survival

LUTON TOWN have now dropped into the bottom three of the Canon League First Division for the first time this season, with the goals difference figure part of the cause.

They have lost half their 12 league games to date. On Saturday night they were fourth from bottom, with Liverpool joining Watford and Stoke below them.

But the men from Anfield shot up to 13th on Sunday with their first league victory since they were at Kenilworth Road in September. They dished out Nottingham Forest's first home defeat of the season with a 2-0 televised victory.

The result that was as damaging to the Town came at Leicester, where the home side beat Aston Villa 5-0. That left Leicester with the same goals difference figure as the Town, but one place higher in the table through having scored more.

At Roker Park on Saturday night, local pleasure over the home win was augmented by news that neighbouring Newcastle had drawn 3-3 at Watford.

It meant that the Geordies, less popular in Sunderland than Watford are in Luton, dropped below Sunderland in the table on goal difference.

"Give Newcastle a beating for us next week," was the plea from the local Press at Roker Park on Saturday night.

Today's table:

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pt
Arsenal	12	8	1	3	26	16	25
Everton	12	7	2	3	24	18	23
Spurs	12	7	1	4	25	11	22
Sheff Wed	12	6	3	3	24	15	21
West Ham	12	6	3	3	20	19	21
Man Utd	12	5	5	2	20	14	20
Nott Forest	12	5	3	4	20	17	18
Sunderland	12	4	5	3	18	15	17
So'ton	12	4	5	3	15	14	17
Newcastle	12	4	5	3	24	24	17
Chelsea	12	4	4	4	15	11	16
Ipswich	12	3	6	3	14	14	15
Liverpool	12	3	5	4	14	14	14
QPR	11	3	5	3	19	21	14
Norwich	12	3	5	4	16	18	14
A Villa	12	4	2	6	17	27	14
West Brom	12	3	4	5	17	16	13
Coventry	12	3	3	6	9	14	12
Leicester	12	3	3	6	18	27	12
Luton Town	12	3	3	6	15	24	12
Watford	12	1	5	6	23	29	8
Stoke	11	1	4	6	11	26	7

● CROWDED OUT: Brian Stein tries in vain to thread a shot through the opposition at Roker Park.

Canon League, Division One

ADMIRATION IS WON, BUT NOT THE POINTS

THE DEFEAT at Roker Park should not have been as decisive nor as damaging to the Town's goals difference figures as it was. But crucial weaknesses in both penalty areas gave Sunderland a victory even their own manager thought unlikely at the interval.

At that stage the Town were showing every sign of being able to football their way back into the game, despite being one down.

"I was shooting myself at half-time," confessed Sunderland manager Len Ashurst later. Actually, he used a slightly different word than shooting, one more basic and down to earth, like the area and its attitude to football.

He had good reason to worry after a tremendously entertaining first 45 minutes. Sunderland had snatched the lead, survived strong penalty claims by the Town, and then been saved by keeper Chris Turner as the Town's adventurous approach threatened to save a point at the very least.

But a second penalty incident eight minutes into the second half snuffed out the Town's threatened revival, and gave Sunderland the confidence to go on and win deservedly, even if the final score-line was a little flattering to them.

The Town earned praise and admiration for contributing to an open and entertaining encounter, but Ashurst pointed out the irony of that.

A lot of teams go to Roker to tackle Sunderland's unbeaten home record with no greater ambition than to avoid defeat and close up the game. The Town helped to give the spectators good value for money—and were down in the bottom three of the First Division within 24 hours.

David Pleat accepted the praise but blamed himself for going to Roker and its intimidating atmosphere with a midfield that was short of defensive hardness despite its attacking flair.

Ricky Hill, Frank Bunn and Garry Parker all looked promising going forward, but once Sunderland had won the edge in midfield the Town were unable to defend well enough against fast and direct attacking.

It was particularly unfortunate for Hill. With England boss Bobby Robson watching, Sunderland detailed Steve Berry to clamp down on Hill's play-making ability, and Berry's victory in that contest helped to prove decisive.

Howard Gayle and Paul Atkinson gave Sunderland match-winning width and speed, and behind everything was the incredible Roker roar, a kind of inciting tribal war-cry demanding that the opposition should be humiliated, not just beaten. It was a roar of displeasure and criticism when Sunderland took it easy after going three up.

Sunderland played with a power and passion that muscled its way through the Town's attempts to be composed and constructive. At times it was reminiscent of Sheffield Wednesday's all-running performance at Kenilworth Road, with quick and comprehensive support from the back, allied with a fierce determination to press home attacks.

It was too much for the Town to cope with, and on top of everything referee John Hough hardly looked First Division.

There were no complaints about the penalty he gave to Sunderland against Mitchell Thomas, but Brian Stein and colleagues around him were sure that the Town should also have had a penalty in the first half when a typical Stein run sliced through Sunderland's defence and goalkeeper Turner brought him down.

Even Sunderland eyes in the Pressbox shared my view that the ref made a mistake when he gave a corner instead of a penalty which should have put the Town level.

Mr Hough's judgment also surprised Sunderland people when he gave the free-kick which led to the first goal, although the Town's defence compounded that possible error by poor marking from the set piece.

Luckless Thomas was tormented at times by Gayle's trickery and speed, collected a booking for one rash tackle on the winger, and conceded the penalty for another.

Jake Findlay got away with a couple of mistakes, but also made several important saves when Sunderland poured on the pressure for a spell after the first goal.

Wayne Turner defended doggedly at left-back, and perhaps his tackling ability might have made life easier for Mal Donaghy and Paul Elliott if it had been used in the centre of midfield.

In attack Vince Hilaire, Stein and Steve Elliott all looked capable of making their mark, particularly when Sunderland were caught stretched on the break. But the necessary sharpness never materialised.

With Barry Venison and Clive Walker suspended and Gary Bennett injured, Sunderland's reshaped team took more time to settle than the Town, who kept the side that had beaten Watford. Donaghy and Steve Elliott both went close in early Town raids before Mr Hough's first crucial intervention led to the first goal.

Match Details

SUNDERLAND 3 LUTON TOWN 0

Half-time: 1-0

TOWN: Findlay; Thomas, Paul Elliott, Donaghy, Wayne Turner; Parker (Breacker, 62 minutes), Hill, Bunn; Stein, Steve Elliott, Hilaire.

SUNDERLAND: Chris Turner; Daniel, Chisholm, Shaun Elliott, Pickering; Proctor, Berry, Hodgson; Gayle (West, 81 minutes), Wylde, Atkinson.

THE GOALS: Gordon Chisholm, 16 minutes, low drive after free-kick was headed back across goal to near the penalty spot; Rodger Wylde, penalty, 53 minutes after Mitchell Thomas tripped Howard Gayle; Nick Pickering, 75 minutes, from the rebound after Jake Findlay beat out a drive by Steve Berry.

OTHER STRIKES AT GOAL: Town eight saved and six wide, plus one defender's clearance hit the top of the bar; Sunderland nine saved, five wide. Corners: 7-4 to Sunderland.

REFEREE: John Hough, Macclesfield — made several decisions which mystified both sides.

ATTENDANCE: 15,280—but the home fans made it sound like 50,000 when they got behind Sunderland.

ENTERTAINMENT: Cracking first half, with the Town always in with a shout, but the early second-half penalty finished it as a contest.

He ruled that Donaghy had tripped David Hodgson in midfield. The free-kick was worked to Peter Daniel on the right and his long cross was headed back by full-back Nick Pickering. Centre-half Gordon Chisholm had time and space to slam in a 12-yard drive.

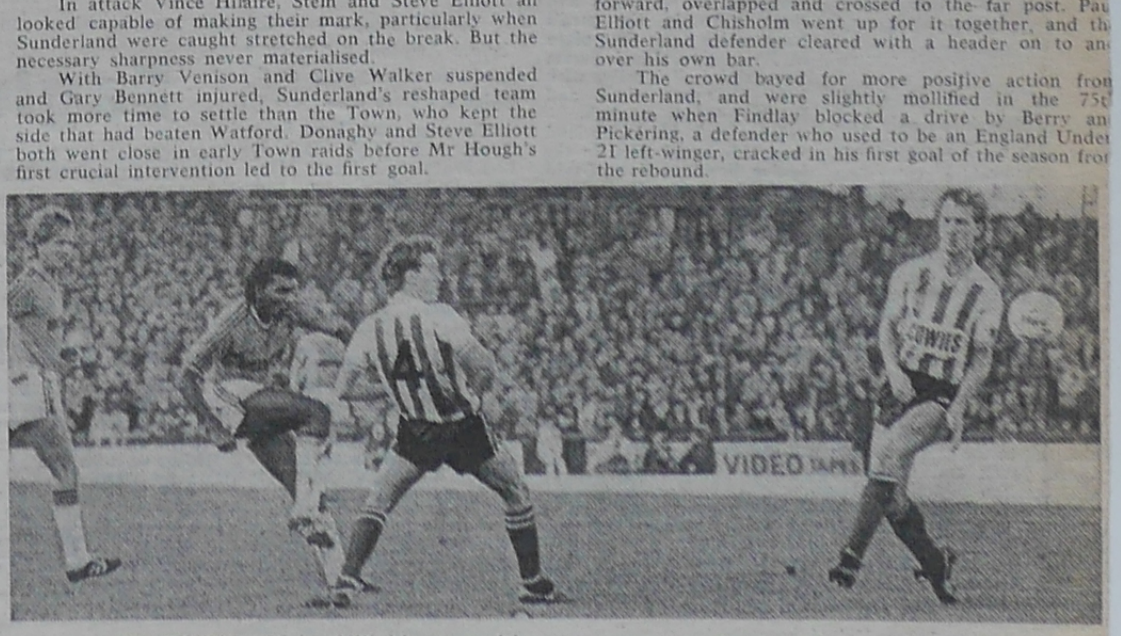
Sunderland pressed forward and Findlay saved well from Berry and Roger Wylde, and was rescued by goal-line clearances by Donaghy and Thomas when Atkinson and Wylde looked like scoring.

Stein's rejected penalty claim came in the 32nd minute, and later in the first half Sunderland were close to conceding at least one goal, with Hilaire, Parker and Steve Elliott all unable to convert chances of variable quality.

The Town threatened again early in the second half but two mistakes in rapid succession by Thomas changed everything. First he lost a tackle to Gayle, putting in Atkinson for a shot at goal. Findlay blocked it and Thomas, booked for an earlier foul on Gayle, tripped him again and Wylde converted the penalty.

Sunderland eased off a little after that, and nearly paid a high price when Thomas, looking better going forward, overlapped and crossed to the far post. Paul Elliott and Chisholm went up for it together, and the Sunderland defender cleared with a header on to and over his own bar.

The crowd bayed for more positive action from Sunderland, and were slightly mollified in the 75th minute when Findlay blocked a drive by Berry and Pickering, a defender who used to be an England Under 21 left-winger, cracked in his first goal of the season from the rebound.



● TRYING: Ricky Hill blasts a drive between two Sunderland defenders.