

Town Match Verdict ★★

LATE EQUALISER MAKES HARSH POINT



● **SMASHER:** Meka Nwajiobi, recalled in place of Vince Hilaire, celebrates his return by side-stepping Ray Stewart and cracking in the goal that put the Town 2-1 ahead early in the second half.

Report by Brian Swain Pictures: Mark Richards

lifted the Town, and Parker introduced a welcome crispness and accuracy into the passing quality.

The equaliser, however, was a gift the Town needed to boost confidence. Steve Walford underhit a back pass and Brian Stein nipped in for his sixth goal of the season.

That was in the 36th minute, and the balance of play swung completely towards the Town. It should have been 2-1 at half-time because Breacker made a thrusting run down the right, Meka Nwajiobi knocked the far post cross back in to the goalmouth and Frank Bunn lashed a shot over the bar from close range.

The miss seemed less important two minutes after the interval when Nwajiobi, recalled in place of Vince Hilaire, produced a superb goal through clever control and awesome shooting power. Parker's pass put him free down the left, he side-stepped to make a yard on Ray Stewart, and thumped a 20-yard drive from the edge of the box into the far corner.

It really looked as though

the Town would win for the next half-hour or so. It was a fascinating contest, with both sides looking for attacking openings, and there was a gritty determination about the Town's resistance.

West Ham failed to win a single corner in the second half until the 82nd minute. But then they forced four in quick succession, scoring the equaliser from the last of them.

Mr Lyall had pulled off defender Walford and sent on sub David Swindlehurst as an extra attacker, and the gamble paid off.

There was some doubt about whether Findlay had been fouled in conceding the fourth corner, but no doubt of the power and direction of skipper Alvin Martin's header as Paul Allen's kick dropped accurately for him.

Both sides had created chances before that, and Hammers goalkeeper Tom McAlister had been forced to the best saves, from Parker and Mal Donaghy.

And he had been lucky when a raking Town move starting with Nwajiobi's

powerful run from the half-way line had left the defence in total disarray, with Stein's shot bouncing off Stewart for a fruitless corner.

When you're second from bottom in the league table you can't expect too much luck. Teams have to make their own, primarily through being accurate in attack and stubborn enough in defence not to lose a lead in the last six minutes.

Jack Charlton called it unprofessional when Newcastle conceded a late equaliser at Kenilworth Road earlier in the season.

On that occasion it was no more than the Town deserved. Perhaps this time West Ham deserved it too, having been silly enough to give away the equaliser in the first half.

But that's little consolation for Town fans who see a relegation battle getting harder week by week.

But at least it was proved that the Town can create chances, against one of the best teams in the First Division. And the entertainment and excitement, as we worried and hoped alternately when the Town were 2-1 up, made it a game to enjoy.



● **THANKS:** Tom McAlister is out quickly, but still too late as Brian Stein accepts a back pass from Steve Walford to score the equaliser.

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 2 WEST HAM 2
HALF-TIME: 1-1

TOWN: Findlay; Breacker, North, Droy (Parker, 33 mins), Donaghy; Hill, Turner, Bunn; Stein, Elliott, Nwajiobi.
WEST HAM: McAlister; Stewart, Martin, Gale, Walford (Swindlehurst, 79 mins); Allen, Bonds, Whitton, Pike; Goddard, Cottee.

THE GOALS: Steve Whitton for West Ham, 22-yard free kick, 9 mins; Brian Stein for the Town, after bad back pass, 36 mins; Meka Nwajiobi for the Town, 47 mins, brilliant side-step and angled drive; Alvin Martin for West Ham, 84 mins, header from a corner.

OTHER STRIKES: Town four saved and seven wide; West Ham four saved and six wide. Corners: 10-6 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 10,789—5,000 fewer than on West Ham's visit last season.

REFEREE: Keren Barratt, Coventry—kept a very tight grip and occasionally saw offences that were not obvious to the crowd.

ENTERTAINMENT: Very good, particularly in the second half before West Ham's late equaliser took the shine off the result.

SADSPOT: Micky Droy's home debut lasted only 33 minutes before he went off with a hamstring injury.

● **ONE THAT GOT AWAY:** Skipper Mal Donaghy is well up in attack for a chance to put the Town 3-1 up. Meka Nwajiobi had headed a corner back across the face of the goal, but McAlister was able to make a save.

