

Survival gap is narrowed

THE draw against Spurs made Luton Town the only one of the four bottom teams to pick up a point this week. They are still in 21st place, but have narrowed the gap to four points from the safety line.

Goal difference keeps them below 20th-placed Ipswich—the Town's figure is minus 16 and Ipswich's minus 13. Coventry can be overhauled—Ipswich and the Town both have two games in hand of the Sky Blues, are three points adrift, and have better goal difference figures than Coventry.

Coventry were beaten 2-1 at Arsenal, their tenth away defeat of the season, an unhappy statistic matched only by bottom club Stoke, who also lost away for the tenth time, at Sunderland.

Aston Villa beat Ipswich 2-1 at Villa Park, and Ipswich have now lost five of their last six league games, despite reaching the sixth round of the Milk Cup and the fifth round of the FA Cup.

Newcastle, apparently safe in mid-table until November, have now dropped into the bottom five for the first time following a 1-1 draw at West Ham.

Sunderland are level on points with their local rivals, although their 1-0 home victory over Stoke ended a run of five consecutive league defeats.

At the top of the table Everton widened their advantage over Spurs by crushing Watford 4-0 at Goodison Park.

Southampton, who entertain the Town on Saturday, had a similarly satisfying result when they hammered QPR at Loftus Road, the third defeat of the season for the Rangers on their plastic pitch.

The First Division table:

	P	W	D	L	F	A	P
Everton	25	16	4	5	57	29	52
Spurs	25	14	6	5	51	27	48
Man. Utd	25	13	5	7	48	30	44
Arsenal	25	13	4	8	41	32	43
So'ton	26	12	7	7	34	29	41
Sheff. Wed	25	11	9	5	40	25	42
Liverpool	25	10	9	6	34	21	39
Not'm-Forest	24	12	7	6	37	34	38
Chelsea	25	9	10	6	41	30	37
Norwich	26	10	6	10	31	35	36
W. Brom	26	10	5	11	37	38	35
A. Villa	25	9	7	9	36	39	34
W. Ham	24	8	8	9	31	35	32
QPR	26	7	10	9	32	43	31
Leicester	25	8	6	11	43	46	30
Watford	24	7	8	9	35	46	29
Sunderland	25	8	5	12	30	36	29
Newcastle	25	7	8	10	38	50	29
Coventry	26	7	4	15	27	47	25
Ipswich	24	5	7	12	22	35	22
Luton Town	24	5	7	12	29	45	22
Stoke	25	2	6	17	17	53	12



appeal in vain for offside as Brian Stein turns after scoring the Town's first goal.



ON ITS WAY: Meka Nwajobi takes the ball off Ray Daniel's toes to score the second goal.

CLASSIC FIT FOR A CELEBRATION

ON A DAY destined for happy celebration, league football at Kenilworth Road served up an entertainment feast for the biggest crowd the ground has housed for two years.

With supporters back in good heart following the Milton Keynes decision, their only gripe was that the heart-stopping last six minutes, in which three goals were scored, could have been rendered irrelevant if the town had made their earlier superiority count.

Title contenders Spurs were more than glad to steal a point from a fast-moving encounter in which they were second best by a long way for the first 75 minutes.

Their expensive talent was outgunned in midfield, and there was no sign of the gap that divides the teams in the league table.

The failure to complete victory was a blow for Town supporters, but with a feeling that the club is now poised to win back the backing and affection it once rejected, external hope and optimism was the order of the day.

And Spurs manager Peter Shreeves is convinced the team that so nearly slaughtered his title pretenders is too good to deserve relegation.

He called it one of Spurs' least memorable performances. "Luton took the game to us and for a long time we weren't in it. I'm glad we salvaged a point," he said.

Town boss David Pleat took most delight from the general team-work and from a superb performance by Nicholas in midfield.

The new man slotted into a combination which drew the sting out of Spurs for most of the game. Reliable tackling, canny distribution and a dangerous shot were all put on view and Mr Pleat's four recent acquisitions look capable of sustaining a real fight to stave off relegation.

The re-shaped team has benefited twice over from the new strength. Ricky Hill and David Preece were able to take on more positive roles moving forward, and Tim Breacker's confident display against Tony Galvin enhanced his reputation.

Spurs were reduced to operating an offside trap as the Town swept forward in the first half, and a debatable decision by referee Neil Midgley after only four minutes cost the Town a goal which looked legal to

most of the Pressbox observers.

Hill timed his through-ball down the middle perfectly for Stein to outpace Graham Roberts and shoot past Ray Clemence. But Mick Harford was running to Stein's right, and the offside flag was raised against him, even though he did not get involved in the move.

The Town accepted the decision with good grace, and Harford underlined the new variety of options the Town have in attack with consistent winning of balls in the air as Spurs were forced back.

Nicholas almost got the opening goal in the 28th minute after Roberts had cynically body-checked Stein just outside the box. He was lucky to escape without a booking, and Spurs' luck held as the free kick was touched aside for Nicholas to blast a drive which caught a deflection, and perhaps Clemence's fingertips, as it crashed on to the bar and into the Oak Road crowd.

Another chance was wasted when Nicholas set Stein free for a run down the right. He tried to chip Clemence, but put the ball way over the bar, with Harford waiting in frustration, unmarked at the far post.

When the Town's opener finally arrived, three minutes after the interval, Spurs looked as good as finished. Preece started it with a run down the left. His cross eventually went to the right, aided by Steve Foster's header and Chris Hughton's half-clearance, Meka Nwajobi

slammed the ball back across goal and Stein turned it instantly past Clemence from six yards.

Nwajobi, unpredictable but undeniably talented, might have made it 2-0 when he jinked past Roberts and Hughton, but hammered his shot narrowly wide of the near post, and the game was an hour old before Spurs produced any real threat at the other end.

John Chiedozie, whose explosive pace and talent was checked by the Town's midfield determination and Mitchell Thomas's persistence, got down the right and crossed for Garth Crooks to deliver a point-blank-range header.

Les Sealey, playing better now than at any time since he arrived 18 months ago, made an important reflex save, and he produced another in the 81st minute to deny Crooks a second time.

Shreeves gambled by taking off Chiedozie and putting on Mike Hazard. It improved his team's midfield workrate and invention, and Roberts was released to make more forward runs.

Ray Daniel replaced Preece, and almost toe-poked a spectacular own goal past Sealey with an attempted clearance from a corner. But the second corner was only half-cleared. Gary Mabbutt drove in a shot from the edge of the penalty area, the ball was deflected off Foster, and Mark Falco hit a first-time equaliser.

That was with six minutes to go, but three minutes later

the Town looked like winners again when Stein went down the right wing and pulled back a pass which Daniel tried to control. The ball ran to Nwajobi and he smashed an 18-yard drive into the top corner.

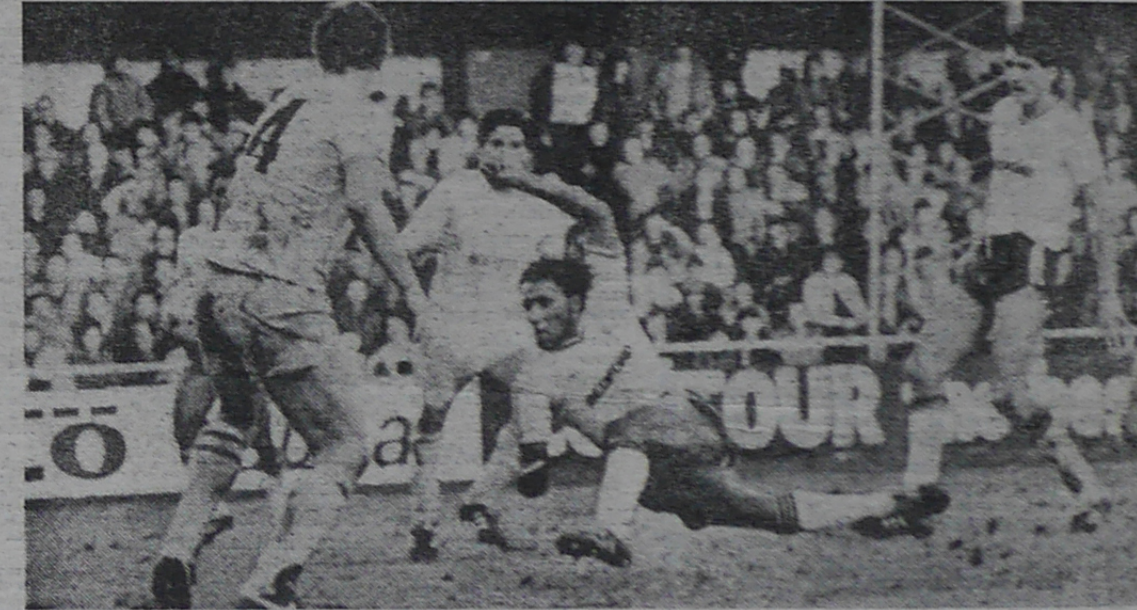
It hit the stanchion so hard that Clemence caught it, and cannily rolled out a clearance to a defender in the hope that the ref wouldn't have realised that it was a goal.

Back came Spurs, and with injury time already on the clock a long throw-in by Mabbutt was not cleared and all-action Roberts drilled in a second equaliser through a crowd of players.

It was a disappointment, but not enough to spoil the day's enjoyment for Luton people who had seen their club emerge at long last from the obnoxious shadow of Milton Keynes.



NEARLY: Graham Roberts gets in a crucial tackle as Brian Stein nearly snatches a winner in the last ten seconds. Steve Perryman watches and worries before the ball flies over the bar.



ACROBATIC: Ricky Hill in action with a first-half shot which Ray Clemence saved.

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