

EARLY BATH PULLS PLUG ON QUALITY

COMMON SENSE is a commodity sometimes in short supply in professional football and on Saturday it was sadly lacking.

Referee Ray Lewis was technically correct to send Mitchell Thomas and John Aldridge off for allegedly kicking each other.

But he must surely reflect on the wisdom of his action. The brief incident had been forgotten by the guilty players almost as soon as it had begun.

And this off-the-ball event was so fleeting play continued happily until linesman John Biddle attracted the referee's attention.

The decision to deprive 10,626 paying

customers of enjoying the talents of Luton's England under 21 international and Oxford's leading scorer changed the whole nature of the game.

Oxford, their ranks previously decimated by injury, found themselves with no recognised striker.

And Luton had to reshuffle dramatically, with Nicholas moving to left-back and Stein

Luton pegged back after officials spoil it for the fans

**OXFORD 1
LUTON 1**
Report by
**GRAHAM
PUNTER**

playing almost as a spectators.

As ridiculous as the initial course of action was the decision to send Thomas and Aldridge out of the dugouts where, changed and wearing suits, they were watching the second half.

The game itself was generally ragged and disappointing for the Hatters.

The result was the destruction of the game as a First Division encounter. It remained entertaining and energetic but was never a match out of the top drawer.

By following the letter of the law Messrs Biddle and Lewis perpetrated a great injustice on the



Streets ahead in class, Luton allowed themselves to be steam-rolled into sharing the points.

Oxford, rather as the cup-tie underdog hurls itself at illustrious opponents in a do-or-die

effort, salvaged the game with two minutes to spare.

Mick Harford was back to lead Luton's attack after a two-match absence and his presence was felt immediately as he threatened Oxford's goal three times in the opening five minutes.

First he drove a volley into the ground which took the sting off the ball before it reached keeper Hardwick. Then he connected with a low, driven cross by Thomas and the ball struck Hardwick's legs. The third effort came when he latched on to a Foster header but the ball crept wide.

Hatters' defence never looked entirely happy and too often were caught square looking for offside.

Oxford's Andy Thomas, a midfielder converted to emergency striker, hit a post when he should have scored. Then Aldridge escaped and Foster had to pull him back to save the day, a manoeuvre that cost the skipper a booking.

With 22 minutes gone Thomas was again sprung past Luton's back line but squandered the chance once more by hitting a post.

Sixty seconds later Hatters, who had looked in charge despite Oxford's chances, took the lead when Harford headed down a long free kick and Stein sent a low drive past Hardwick.

As Luton had dominated the first half, so Oxford claimed the second. Their pattern had been disrupted less visibly by the dismissals and as the game wore on, Luton were worn down.

Andy Thomas wasted his third golden chance when he scooped the ball over the bar from five yards. Oxford's growing confidence to charge upfield led to breakaway chances for Luton.

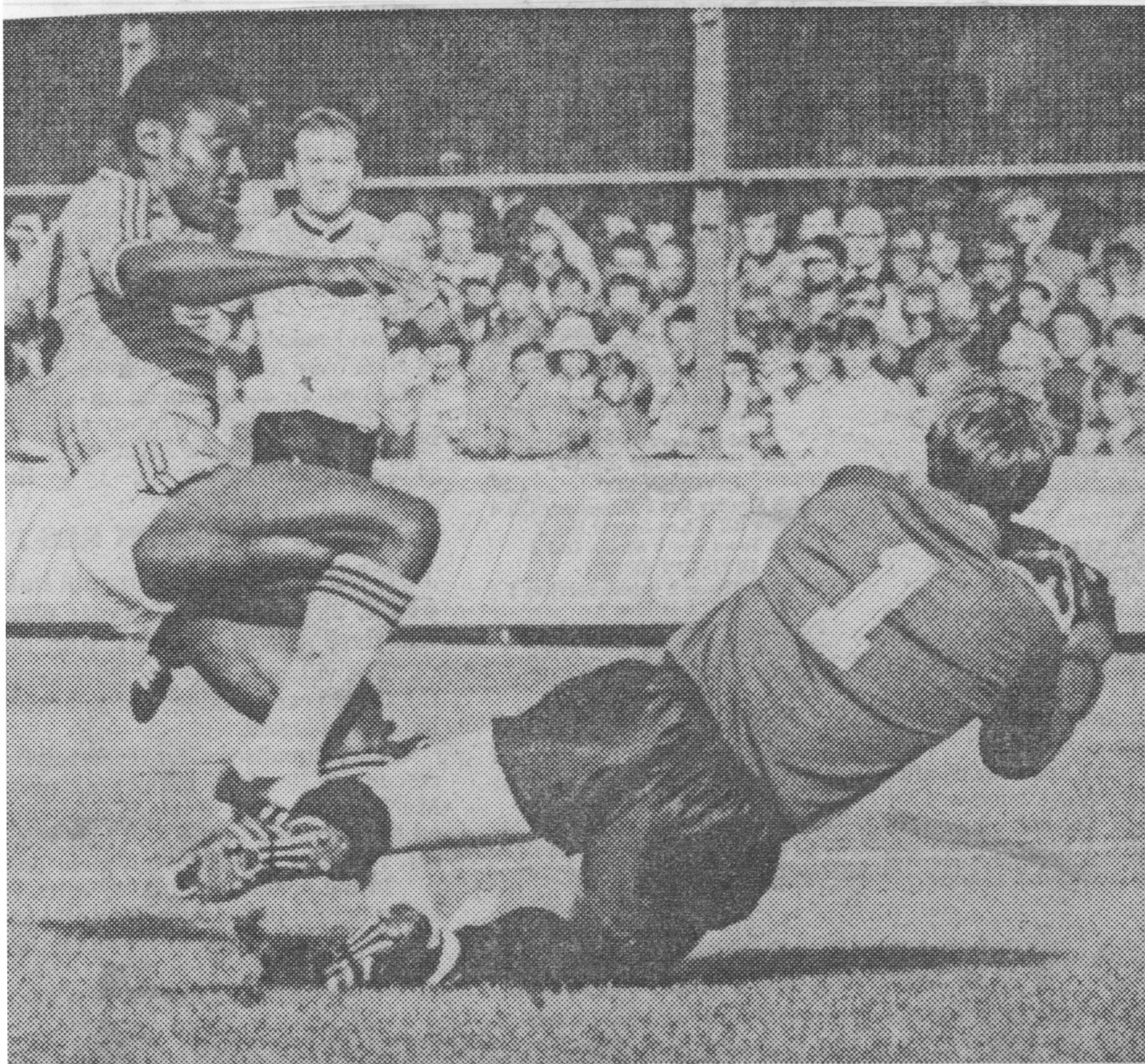
Nwajiobi hit the side netting and then jinked through the Oxford defence to hit a drive Hardwick could only parry.

Then it was Oxford's turn and Sealey saved brilliantly from Phillips' close-range header. Again play switched ends and Stein bounced a drive off Hardwick's chest.

Luton looked like weathering the storm to claim the points but with a minute remaining Trevor Hebbard connected with a cross by Peter Rhoades-Brown to head Oxford a point they deserved.

OXFORD: Hardwick, Langan, Briggs, Shotton, Slatter, Phillips, Hebbard, Houghton, Thomas, Aldridge, Rhoades-Brown. Sub: Charles.

LUTON: Sealey, Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Thomas, Hill, Nicholas, Preece, Stein, Harford, Nwajiobi. Sub: North (M).



● **FOILED:** Meka Nwajiobi's run for goal is ended by a save which left Steve Hardwick injured but happy.