

STEIN MAGIC SAVES POINT

MATCH DETAILS

MANCHESTER CITY 1 LUTON TOWN 1
HALF-TIME: 1-0

LUTON TOWN: Sealey; Johnson, Foster, Donaghy, Grimes; Wilson, Nicholas, Hill; Brian Stein, Newell, Harford. Sub: Breacker, not used.

MANCHESTER CITY: Suckling; Gidman, Clements, McCarthy, Wilson; Lake (Moulden, 55 mins), Brightwell, Redmond, McNab; Varadi, Barnes.

THE GOALS: Paul Lake for City, on his home debut, after under-hit back pass from Rob Johnson in the 43rd minute; Brian Stein for the Town, curling 18-yard free kick, 61st minute. Other strikes: Town three saved and seven wide; City three saved, six wide. Corners: 4-3 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 17,507, Maine Road's lowest league gate since their return to the First Division 18 months ago.

REFEREE: M. D. Reed, Birmingham. Got a few decisions wrong, but no-one on the pitch was perfect.

ENTERTAINMENT: Very poor. The first half was quite awful, with the second half better once the Town had started to look more like their normal selves. And they could have won it.

BY DRAWING a game they should have won, Luton Town took their unbeaten league run to seven games despite making it difficult for themselves at Maine Road.

Lethargic and out of touch in the first half, they did not start to play until they had gifted Manchester City a goal just before the interval.

Brian Stein saved their blushes with a brilliant equaliser against a struggling team that should have been taken apart.

City manager Jimmy Frizzell, and the Blues' supporters, said it was the Maine Road

club's worst performance for some time.

They are fighting relegation, remember Luton Town only too well for the Raddy Antic match in May 1983, and had more spirit than skill.

Their respect for the Town might have been their undoing, because at the first hint of danger midfielder Steve Redmond tracked back to become a fifth defender, with orders to mark Stein.

It was cruel irony for teenager Redmond that he should be the man to trip Stein for the free kick which gave the Town the equaliser.

Reports: BRIAN SWAIN

Pictures: MARK RICHARDS

Mr Frizzell denied that he had set out to play with five at the back. He claimed it was forced upon his men by the Town's attacking.

He must have watched a different first half than I did.

Town boss Moore got it right: "It didn't look like anyone was going to score until we gave them a goal to gee them up and encourage them."

The fans had become progressively more restless for 43 boring minutes before that happened. Both sides had given the ball away as though it were an aids carrier.

Rarely have I seen the Town

belt it so hard and hopefully, and some of the long back passes did nothing to improve their reputation.

Ricky Hill was back in the side, after his latest two-match absence, with Tim Breacker dropping out, to sub. Ashley Grimes was moved back from midfield to left back, with Rob Johnson going to the right again.

Robert Wilson kept his place on the right of midfield, with Hill on the left, but for the first half the Town were all over the place.

I sighed for a winger, although Peter Barnes, the only one on the pitch, hardly looked the incisive player he used to be.

A David Moss, or a fit David Preece, would surely have given City a much harder shove towards the Second Division.

But Mike Newell came close to compensating for absence of genuine wing power. His running off the ball, to spaces on the flanks, was one of the bright features.

It could have been a match-winner if more use had been made of the holes in the middle his work produced, but when midfield men did get in to them the shooting was wayward.

There were few highlights in a first half in which City looked frightened to play, and the town looked as though they didn't need to.

With passing of both sides a long way short of First Division standards the goalkeepers were almost redundant.

Hill put an early shot wide from about 20 yards. Imre Varadi did the same at the other end, and Hill smashed a shot into Mick McCarthy's midriff after City failed to clear a corner and Steve Foster lobbed the ball back to the edge of the area.

With a couple of minutes to go the thought of Bovril and meat pie was the only attraction that seemed possible in a ground less than half full.

But the uneasy near-silence, interspersed with groans and jeers, was turned to delight for the home fans when City were given a goal.

Varadi made a forward run, played a hopeful pass to the edge of the penalty area, and saw Rob Johnson make an interception.

He tried to pass back to Les Sealey, but under-hit the ball from about 15 yards. Foster bought an involuntary dummy, expecting the ball to reach its target, Peter Nicholas and Mal Donaghy saw the danger too late, and Paul Lake, 18, marked his home debut in the First Division with as simple a goal as he will ever score.

"It was a gift, but we can't afford to turn them down, can we?" said Lake.

The chat in the Town dressing-room at half-time was less easy going. "Shorten the passes and sharpen up your game," was the instruction from Mr Moore and coach Ray Harford.

The instructions were heeded, and the entertainment increased considerably.

Not that the home fans appreciated it, because once the Town got it together only their handful of supporters had much to enjoy.

The defence got over its jittery patch, and Johnson and Grimes got more involved in attacking.

Johnson hoisted a long diagonal ball into the penalty area and Newell timed his run and header perfectly, only for Perry Suckling to make an equally good save.

Lake limped out of the action in the 55th minute, and City hearts lifted as sub Paul Moulden appeared. He scored seven in six games after making his league debut earlier in the season, but then had two months on the injured list.

As a boy he earned a place in the Guinness Book of Records with 281 goals in a season for Bolton Lads' Club. But he never met defenders like Foster and Donaghy in those days, and his impact turned out to be minimal against them.

Varadi was being asked to do too much on his own in the City attack, and Foster cheerfully left him to his colleagues to get his own front line moving.

The skipper's surge forward led to the equaliser in the 61st minute. He laid off a short pass to Stein in the inside left position, and Redmond tripped the striker.

It was close to being in the area, but City breathed again when Mr Reed gave the free kick right on the line. Every light blue shirt was back in defence as Stein, in the Town's dark blue change strip, waited for them to settle.

The free kick was a gem, almost identical to the one he scored against Liverpool at Kenilworth Road. City's Clive Wilson unaccountably left his defensive position on the post as Stein stepped up for the kick, and the ball curled over the wall and into the top corner.

After that the Town almost stamped their authority on proceedings. They looked the better passing side, even though Mick Harford got little change out of McCarthy and Kenny Clements.

Newell forced a poor headed clearance out of McCarthy to give Wilson a sight of goal, but he shot wide, and so did Nicholas at the end of the best move of the game after he had swapped five passes with Johnson and Hill.

It came as a shock in the last ten minutes when City created two chances against the run of play. Fortunately for the Town both fell to Varadi. He got past Foster and then shot straight at Sealey, then danced clear of Donaghy and Nicholas before shooting wide.

Mr Frizzell, well aware of his need to strengthen his team, had mixed views over the result.

In City's position, it was a case of two home points lost. But he added: "Once Luton had equalised only one team looked likely to win... and it wasn't us."