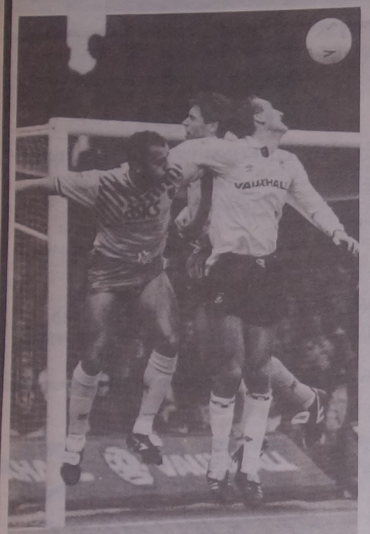
Sports News

ON SONG, BUT CANARIES LEAVE SINGING



● ROLE REVERSAL: Defender Graham Rodger in the attack — and forward Dale Gordon is one of the Norwich men defending.

Brian Swain reports. Pictures by Josh Levy

WHEN A TEAM loses an important home match, and the manager cannot find it in his heart to have a go at his players, you can be sure they have done better than the result suggests.

That was the case at Kenilworth Road on Saturday.

Norwich City came to play it tight at the back and hope for something on the break, and went home celebrating a smash and grab success.

CLASS

You had to feel sorry for the Town, who battered away at a defence which rode its luck but had the good fortune to be backed by a class goalkeeper who had an inspired afternoon.

The Canaries had only two serious shots at goal in the whole 90 minutes.

They scored from the first and messed up the second.

Otherwise the game was played almost entirely in their half, and at the end the Town manager said he could feel only sorrow for his men rather than anger.

They did their best and failed to get a just reward.

Jim Ryan was in no mood to criticise a team performance which was far better than the result.

I agreed with him, subject to the feeling that in the last 20 minutes or so the Town were getting a touch too desperate to make their pressure count.

That led to hopeful long ball football, and with the visitors packing their penalty area to outnumber attackers it was doomed to failure.

Yet it has to be said that there was little space to build passing movements, and with Lars Elstrup and Kingsley Black not at their best the use of the flanks was not as good as usual.

The day desperately needed an early Town goal to force a change in the Norwich tactics.

But as the Canaries scored on the break in the 21st minute the pattern was set for an afternoon of utter frustration for the Town and their fans.

QUIET

And the crowd did less than it might have: they seemed to get so much of the 'We won't score today' feeling that they failed to give the vocal backing the team's efforts deserved.

Iain Dowie was the Town's most likely man to put the record straight, but his luck was as bad as everyone else's.

Three powerful headers in the first half were close to goals: one was netted and disallowed because Elstrup had strayed offside; another flew just wide of the angle of post and bar; and the third was parried, only for Black to miskick in front of goal.

And the longer the Town's chase for an equaliser went on the more Norwich settled into their defensive bunker.

CLASSIC

Their goal had shown the value of a classic hit and run performance.

A Town attack broke down, David Phillips collected a clearance and hared clear on the left wing. He fed Robert Fleck deep in the penalty area, the ball was pulled back, and Tim Sherwood curled in a very good goal, carefully placing the ball into the far corner.

The former Watford man might have wrapped it up with Norwich's other real shot when he caught the Town stretched with five minutes to go.

He got into a one-to-one with Alec Chamberlain and the goalkeeper did the business, with two Norwich men racing up on the far side and screaming for a pass which would surely have been more useful than the shot.

Between times the Town attacked at one and on any other day would have scored two or three.

INSPIRED

But Bryan Gunn was in inspired form, at times stopping and at closing down men who got close.

Dowie, Elstrup, Preece and Black all suffered.

So did sub Richard Harvey, who was sent on at left back when Darron McDonough was injured.

With space to become an attacker Harvey had an excellent game.

The Town were so much on top that for the last 20 minutes they were able to take off defender Marvin Johnson and play three at the back with no great risk of falling further behind.

Sean Farrell was the extra attacker, and he was also frustrated by the goalkeeper.

One other frustration was referee Martin Bodenham, who often seemed loathe to make any decisions.

The Town were convinced he should have given two penalties, one for a trip on Black and the second for a handball by Paul Blades in a grounded tackle on Farrell.

I was sure about the second incident — but the ref was on the wrong side of it and absent from the usual diagonal running position which would have avoided giving him and his linesman the same obstructed view.

Mind you, it was one of those days when a penalty would either have been saved or gone wide.

Even Preece, normally so sure a striker of the ball, skied the day's last chance well off target.

The Norwich Press corps were well chuffed with what they had seen.

They said it made up for their agony a few days before when Norwich played Nottingham Forest off the park in an FA Cup quarter-final and lost to the only shot Brian Clough's men had in 90 minutes.

If these things really do even themselves out we will enjoy that overdue first win at Old Trafford on Saturday!

The season so far

THE TOWN'S record to date in league and cups:

BARCLAYS LEAGUE DIV 1

August		
25 C. Palace (h) 1-1 (Dowie)	9,583	—
28 Arsenal (a) 1-2 (Elstrup)	32,723	—
September		
1 Southampton (a) 2-1 (Elstrup 2)	14,878	8
4 Man United (h) 0-1	12,576	8
8 Leeds Utd (h) 1-0 (Black)	10,185	8
15 QPR (a) 1-6 (Hughes)	10,196	11
22 Coventry (h) 1-0 (Dowie)	8,336	7
29 Norwich (a) 3-1 (Elstrup 3)	12,794	6
October		
20 Sunderland (a) 0-2	20,025	8
27 Everton (h) 1-1 (Elstrup)	10,047	7
November		
3 Derby (a) 1-2 (Black)	15,008	8
10 Liverpool (a) 0-4	35,2017	13
17 Man City (h) 2-2 (Dowie, Dreyer pen)	9,564	12
24 A. Villa (h) 2-0 (Black, Elstrup)	10,071	9
December		
1 N. Forest (a) 2-2 (Elstrup 2)	16,498	10
8 Arsenal (h) 1-1 (Dreyer pen)	12,506	11
16 C. Palace (a) 0-1	15,195	12
22 Spurs (a) 1-2 (Dowie)	27,007	12
26 Sheff Utd (h) 0-1	10,004	12
29 Chelsea (h) 2-0 (OG, Black)	11,050	12
1991		
January		
1 Wimbledon (a) 0-2	4,521	14
12 Southampton (h) 3-4 (Elstrup, James, Dreyer pen)	9,021	15
19 Leeds (a) 1-2 (Elstrup)	27,010	16
February		
2 QPR (h) 1-2 (Black)	8,479	16
23 Liverpool (h) 3-1 (Black, Dowie 2)	12,032	15
March		
2 N. Forest (h) 1-0 (Dowie)	9,577	14
5 Man City(a) 0-3	20,404	14
9 A. Villa (a) 2-1 (Mountfield OG, Pembridge)	20,587	13
13 Coventry (a) 1-2 (Rodger)	9,521	13
16 Norwich (h) 0-1	8,604	14

LEAGUE APPEARANCES, including as sub in brackets: Chamberlain and Dreyer ever-presents, 30 each; Elstrup, Preece and Black 29; Dowie 26 (3); Beaumont 22 (3); McDonough 19 (4); Johnson 19 (2); Harvey 18 (3); Hughes 17; Williams 15 (1); Pembridge 10; James 9 (3); Rees 8 (7); Rodger 7; Farrell 4 (9); Nogan 1 (4); Holsgrove (1); Breacker 8. Number of players used, 30 games; 28. Last season's total: 27.

LEAGUE GOALS: Elstrup 12; Dowie 7, Black 6; Dreyer 3 pens; Hughes 1; James 1; Pembridge 1; Rodger 1; OG 1 (Cundy, Chelsea; Mountfield, A. Villa).

THE FA CUP

January		
5 Sheff Utd (a) 3-1 (Farrell, Elstrup 2)	11,882	
26 W. Ham (h) 1-1 (Black)	12,882	
30 W. Ham (a) 0-5	25,403	

APPEARANCES: Three each by Chamberlain, James, Dreyer, Harvey, Pembridge, McDonough, Preece, Elstrup and Black. Farrell 2(1), Williams 2, Dowie 1 (1), Beaumont 1. One as sub: Rees and Johnson.

GOALS: Elstrup 2, Farrell and Black one each.

THE RUMBELOWS CUP

September		
25 Bradford (h) 1-1 (Harvey)	5,128	
October		
10 Bradford (a) 1-1 (Black) — lost on pens	8,108	

APPEARANCES: Chamberlain 2, Dreyer 2, Beaumont 2, Hughes 2, Preece 2, Black 2, Dowie 2, Harvey 2, Rees 1 (1), James 1 (1), Nogan 1 (1), Breacker 1, Elstrup 1, Williams 1, Johnson (1).

GOALS: Harvey and Black one each.

THE ZENITH DS CUP

December		
19 W. Ham (h) 5-1 (Farrell 2, Rees, Elstrup, Black)	5,759	
February		
18 Chelsea (a) 1-1 (Dreyer). Won on pens	5,845	
26 C. Palace (a) 1-3 (Rees)	7,139	

APPEARANCES: Chamberlain 3, Dreyer 3, Elstrup 3, Rees 3, Pembridge 3, James 2 (1), Beaumont 2 (1), Harvey 2, Preece 2, Dowie 2, Johnson 2, Rodger 2, Farrell 1 (2), Black 1, Williams 1, McDonough 1. One each as sub: Nogan and Jackson.

GOALS: Farrell and Rees 2 each. Elstrup, Black and Dreyer one each.

LUTON TOWN F.C.

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Town match verdict ★★★

HIT AND RUN THE LOSERS THE BLUES

● OUCH: Gunn goes in where it hurts and Iain Dowie, who might easily have had a hat-trick, is foiled again.

● MISSED: Kingsley Black goes close, but Bryan Gunn has the shot covered.

'It was just one of those days...'

DAVE Stringer was the happy manager at Kenilworth Road on Saturday night.

"We did to Luton what Nottingham Forest did to us to knock us out of the cup in our previous game," he said.

"We had a lot more of that match but were done by a goal on the break."

So was it a fair result? "Nothing's fair in football, nor in life" replied the Norwich manager.

He paid tribute to the quality of the goal on the break and to the outstanding performance by his goalkeeper, and added: "We rode our luck at times."

Jim Ryan agreed with that assessment, and said that while he was choked at another home defeat he could not give his men a roasting for losing.

"I really couldn't blame the players for their attitude and application. I got as much as I could expect from them. What they needed was a little bit of luck.

"It was one of those days when the goalkeeper felt no-one could beat him.

"We spent most of the afternoon in Norwich's half and on a normal day with the chances we made we would have won by two or three goals."

Norwich had been good defensively and the sad fact was that there was not much more the Town could have done to get the result they deserved on the run of play.

"Some days it is just not going to happen for you and this was one of those days.

"Perhaps we could have done with a little more coolness in the box but the coolest finisher we have in the club is Kingsley Black, and it was a day when even he couldn't take one of our best chances.

"And in the last minute one fell to David Preece. Normally he is a very sure striker of the ball, but he skied it.

"It was one of those days, but hopefully luck like this evens itself out."

Managers' viewpoints

A boos problem

COVENTRY C 2 LUTON TOWN 1

THE RESULT at Highfield Road in midweek had also been unkind to a team that deserved at least a point, although it did not produce the sustained pressure we saw against Norwich.

The Town had a very good first half and were unlucky to be only one goal ahead at the interval. The only criticism was that they did not have as many goal attempts as their possession and swift passing warranted.

Home fans booed their team at half-time and manager Terry Butcher gave them a verbal going-over in the dressing room. The supporters had every right to complain, he said.

The second half was vastly different, Coventry raised the pace, chased the long ball in determined fashion and profited from two isolated defensive slips.

The turning points were two refereeing decisions: Peter Jones of Loughborough turned down what looked like justified appeals from the Town when Kingsley Black was clear and tripped from behind by Trevor Peake near the edge of the box. It looked like a ref being frightened to show a 'pro foul' red card so deciding that there was no offence.

A penalty in the 28th minute would have put the Town in a position to go two up after Graham Rodger had converted John Dreyer's thundering far post cross 17 minutes before.

Coventry did get a penalty in the 60th minute, courtesy of a mistake by Rodger, although Alec Chamberlain insisted that he made a clean challenge at Kevin Gallacher's feet as he chased a bad back pass. Brian Borrows converted the spot kick and seven minutes from time Andy Pearce headed the winner from a long free kick by Ray Woods.

MATCH DETAILS

TOWN: Chamberlain; Johnson, Rodger, McDonough, Dreyer; Pembridge, Beaumont (Farrell 87 mins), Preece; Elstrup, Dowie, Black. Other sub: Harvey.

COVENTRY: Ogrizovic; McGrath, Pearce, Peake, Borrows; Emerson, Gynn, Woods; Gallacher, Regis, Smith. Subs, not needed: Hurst and Clark.

GOALS: Graham Rodger's first for the Town, 11 minutes; Brian Borrows penalty for Coventry, 60 minutes; Andy Pearce for Coventry, 83 minutes.

OTHER STRIKES: Town two saved and four wide; Coventry three saved and six wide. Corners: 6-2 to Coventry.

ATTENDANCE: 9,521, Coventry's lowest of the season.

REF: Peter Jones, Loughborough.

BOOKINGS: Alec Chamberlain, dismissed over the penalty, and Lars Elstrup for a foul.

ENTERTAINMENT: Nice first half, shame about the second.

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 0 NORWICH 1

Half-time: 0-1

TOWN: Chamberlain; Johnson (Farrell 70 mins), Rodger, McDonough (Harvey 57 mins), Dreyer; Pembridge, Beaumont, Preece; Elstrup, Dowie, Black.

NORWICH: Gunn; Culverhouse, Blades, Polsten, Bowen; Crook, Goss, Phillips; Gordon, Sherwood, Fleck. Subs, not needed: Fox and Butterworth.

THE GOAL: Ti Sherwood, nicely curled low shot into the far corner after a break down the Norwich left by David Phillips and a good lay-back by Robert Fleck.

OTHER STRIKES: Town nine saved, eight wide and one netted as an offside whistle blew; Norwich four saved and three wide.

Corners: 5-4 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 8,604 — a drop of 400 on last year's visit by Norwich. And did they all have to be so quiet when the Town were trying so hard?

REFEREE: Martin Bodenham, Looe. Shy of making the important decisions, like a couple of penalties.

BOOKINGS: Darron McDonough for the foul on Robert Fleck which led to him limping off with a hamstring injury.

ENTERTAINMENT: Difficult for Town fans to enjoy a performing attacking performance when they failed to produce the result they deserved.

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