Sports News

Down into the bottom three

THE ONLY good news to end a black week for Luton Town at Old Trafford was that the two bottom clubs in the First Division had both lost at home.

LOWEST

The Town's third consecutive defeat dropped them to their lowest place of the season, 18th, just one notch above the relegation spots.

Fortunately only two go down this year as the Football League expands, and the Town's six-point cushion makes them favourites to scrape clear.

SMASHED

And one win can work wonders, because the six teams above the Town are within three points of them.

They also have it in their own hands, because two of the last four home games are against Derby County and Sunderland.

Confidence at Derby is at rock bottom — they were smashed 7-1 by Liverpool at the Baseball Ground. A run of ten league games without a win has left Derby 12 points adrift of the Town's total of 32.

HAND

But they have matches in hand, and Sunderland have also played one fewer than the Town.

Defeat at Roker Park against Aston Villa took Sunderland's run to five games without a win.

The First Division

	HOME					AWAY					
	P	W	D	L	F	A	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liverpool	29	11	2	1	32	9	8	4	3	27	16	63
**Arsenal	29	11	4	0	33	6	7	6	1	18	7	62
C. Palace	30	9	4	1	21	14	8	3	5	20	19	58
Leeds	28	9	2	3	29	13	4	5	5	12	17	46
*Man Utd	30	8	3	4	27	14	4	7	4	19	21	45
Wimbledon	29	7	6	3	25	17	3	6	4	18	19	42
Man City	29	9	2	4	24	18	2	7	5	17	22	42
Tottenham	28	7	6	2	27	16	3	4	6	12	20	40
Chelsea	30	9	5	2	25	18	2	2	10	18	31	40
Norwich	28	7	2	5	21	23	4	3	7	12	19	38
Everton	29	7	4	4	21	11	3	3	8	15	23	37
Nottm For	29	5	4	4	21	17	3	7	6	20	22	35
Sheff Utd	30	7	2	6	17	17	3	3	9	10	27	35
A. Villa	28	6	5	1	20	12	2	5	9	14	21	34
Coventry	30	8	5	3	26	16	1	2	11	5	20	34
So'ton	30	6	4	4	25	18	3	2	11	20	36	33
QPR	29	6	3	5	20	17	2	5	8	13	27	32
Luton Town	31	6	4	5	19	15	3	1	12	16	37	32
Sunderland	30	5	4	6	13	14	1	4	10	18	32	26
Derby Co	28	2	8	5	17	28	2	0	11	9	27	20

** Two points deducted. * One point deducted.

● SHOOTING STAR: Kingsley Black tries his luck and Mike Phelan takes cover.

UNITED'S BIG SPEAKS

THE BOYS of Luton Town finally got turned over by the men of Manchester United at Old Trafford on Saturday.

For half the game a surprise looked possible after a lucky bounce had given David Preece a freak equaliser and knocked some of the confidence out of a team that had not won a league match since the middle of January.

But naive defending allowed United to go ahead for the second time soon after the interval and from then on the Town were second best.

In view of the loss of Iain Dowie — and that had upset many of the players — it was no surprise that the Town collected their 17th defeat in 17 visits to one of the world's great football arenas, in front of the largest and most hostile crowd they will meet this season.

CONTRAST

Everything about the day was a painful reminder of the difficulties a small club faces. The contrasts between Old Trafford and Kenilworth Road are enormous.

Give Jim Ryan £12 million or so to spend on stars and he too could build a team capable of reaching the semi-final of the European Cup-winners Cup and the final of the Rumbelows Cup.

Take two or three million quid out of his pool and wonder no more that relegation is much nearer than the championship.

But at least the Town gave United a run for their money before caving in when the pace and power was stepped up after the interval.

At one stage there was even a chance of a shock Town victory. "What a load of rubbish," was the chant from home fans near the Pressbox as United were on the rocks after Preece's first league goal in five years.

United had got off to a rousing start. In the first minute Alec Chamberlain saved smartly at the feet of Lee Sharpe after a bad back pass by David Beaumont.

FREE

The midfielder and Sharpe were victims of a bad bounce on an awful playing surface, the sort you would complain about on Stopsley Common.

But Sharpe was too quick and incisive for Marvin Johnson, and turned out to be the architect of the decisive moves to give United victory.

He won the first corner of the game off Johnson in the seventh minute, and took it himself. Gary Pallister was free for a header which Chamberlain blocked, but as the ball ran loose Steve Bruce got to it first to crash it into the net from close range.

The home fans sat back to watch a massacre, but slowly the Town fought their way back into contention, with gritty defending and occasional slight threats on the break.

With Darron McDonough out, John Dreyer moved to centre half, and Richard Harvey returned to give a very good account of himself at left back.

But there was a difference in class between the two attacks.

LUCKY

Sean Farrell did his best, and will surely become a good player, but not surprisingly he did not compare with, for instance, Mark Hughes at the other end.

Sharpe looked a better flank player than Lars Elstrup, and Kingsley Black was given little scope because United took care to shadow him — and to dish out a bit of rough stuff when he threatened danger.

The midfields were not so far out of balance: Bryan Robson played like an old man with more spite than ability, and Mark Pembridge rattled him so much that the 34-year-old warhorse was reduced to using brute force instead of skill to stop the youngster, and was lucky to collect nothing more than a ticking-off from the ref.

Preece was not as accurate as usual with his use of the ball, but that was a problem for everyone on the bumpy patchwork pitch.

United suffered as much as the Town, more so in the first half when the equaliser came out of the blue, at a time when United were failing to get to close quarters despite having more possession.

Black set up Pembridge for a run and a cracking 25-yarder which missed the post by inches, and a couple of minutes later Black back-heeled a pass to Preece, who tried his luck from 30 yards.

Les Sealey dived confidently and had the low drive covered until it hit a divot just in front of him. The ball reared into the net and United and their fans were stunned.

CHANCE

Sharpe got past Johnson and fired wide and Brian McClair headed over the bar from close range as United struggled to get their game together, and at half time there was a real chance that the Town could capitalise on United's ebbing confidence.

Instead another goal was conceded two minutes after the break. United's confidence returned and the Town's all but vanished.

Again it was a corner by Sharpe and reaction by Bruce which caused the damage. This time the defender belted in a thundering header — a picture goal except for Town fans wondering why no-one was competing with Bruce for the ball.

The two goals were sweet revenge for Bruce. The last time he met the Town he was sent off for a 'pro foul' on Dowie at Kenilworth Road.

This time the Town had no-one with the aggression and fire of Dowie.

United produced it, and with the Town playing with little conviction the second half was painful to watch.

United turned up the power.

Their third goal was flicked in by Mark Robins from another left-wing cross by Sharpe, and the fourth was a late strike by McClair after a very sweet passing movement down the middle.

And it could have been worse: the last goalouth action was a header by Hughes which hit the bar.

Sports Editor Brian Swain reports

Match Details

MANCHESTER UTD 4
LUTON TOWN 1

Half-time: 1 – 1

TOWN: Chamberlain; Johnson, Rodger, Dreyer, Harvey; Pembridge, Beaumont (Rees 84 mins), Preece; Elstrup, Farrell, Black. Other sub: Allpress.
UNITED: Sealey; Irwin, Bruce, Pallister, Blackmore; Robson, Phelan, Sharpe; Wallace (Robins 38 mins), McClair, Hughes. Other sub: Donaghy.
GOALS: Steve Bruce for United, shot after failure to clear a seventh-minute corner; David Preece for the Town, 34 minutes, 30-yard low drive which bobbled over Les Sealey's dive on a cabbage patch pitch; Bruce for United, 47 minutes, header from Lee Sharpe's corner; Mark Robins, 68 minutes, close-range flick from Sharpe's low cross; Brian McClair, 84 minutes, crisp shot after swift passing cut through the Town's central defence.
OTHER STRIKES: Town two saved and four wide; United four saved, eight wide, one hit the bar. Corners: 8-1 to United.
ATTENDANCE: 41,752 — easily the highest at any Town match this season, and the gate included United's one millionth customer of the campaign.
REFEREE: Keith Lupton, Cleveland — not bad and at least he had the nerve to get a grip on Bryan Robson for a nasty dig at Mark Pembridge.
ENTERTAINMENT: Woeful for Town fans once United had been given their second goal so soon after the interval Things had looked reasonably promising until then, but United stepped up the power and pace in the second half.

● OUCH: Marvin Johnson in the wars as Mark Robins digs in with an elbow.

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Town match verdict ★★

● DOUBLE BLOCK: Sean Farrell is held off by Steve Bruce as Les Sealey gathers the ball.

A pitch that will never replace plastic!

THERE WAS something all too cruelly appropriate when Jim Ryan limped out to meet the Press at Old Trafford with one leg in plaster (See back page).

But he turned in a good performance, defending the club as reporters invited him to moan about the difficulties of keeping a team in the First Division when directors had sold off around £3million worth of talent in the last 18 months and given him only £25,000 to spend since he became the manager in January last year.

SOLD

"Luton have always had to sell players," he said. "When I was a player they sold Malcolm Macdonald because they needed the money. We're paying First Division wages and expenses on gates of around 10,000, so we have to sell."

He was much keener to talk about the young men who have been given their chances because others have left.

And he reiterated his belief that they could keep Luton Town in the First Division.

"We gave away a goal a minute or two after half-time, and that was the last thing we wanted.

"It was doubly disturbing because we gave it away from a set piece, just as we had done the first.

"We picked ourselves up after going behind and even in the second half we played some nice football, but without threatening their goal too much.

"I suppose we played a little young. We looked what we are — quite a young team."

And the boss is determined to get some reward out of adversity: sales have led to young men gaining experience and even the taste of defeat at Old Trafford could be useful in future.

"Sean Farrell came in and I thought he did well for us, so there's a little bonus.

"And Mark Pembridge played well and handled himself well in difficult circumstances."

Mr. Ryan joined in the pleasure at seeing a David Preece goal — "They're about as common as hen's teeth!"

And he refused to let the fact that a wicked bounce had as much to do with the equaliser as the shot — "If you don't have a pot at goal you can't score, and David hit it well."

There was also a little perverse pleasure for Luton earls as a glamour club like Manchester United came in for stick for the state of the pitch.

Said the boss: "We're used to it being the other way about so it's nice to hear the other team's pitch coming in for criticism."

GRASS

The playing surface, worn, marked and rutted was one of the worst the Town have met this season, and United manager Alex Ferguson joined in the debate.

With a broad grin he said that the FA had issued an edict saying that next season Luton Town, Oldham and Manchester United would be ordered to play on grass!

Mr. Ryan said: "To be fair I don't think the pitch helped United because I rate them as a passing team."

Ferguson suggested that his side have a habit of improving after half-time, and felt they deserved to win for the way they opened up after the interval.

Mr. Ryan did not quarrel with that summing up, and accepted that the second United goal, early in the second half, had been crucial. "Their confidence went up and ours dipped a little bit, but I didn't think generally we did too badly.

"United's third and fourth goals came when we were pushing forward. From the point of view of possession it probably was not a genuine 4-1.

"But United's attacking play was more dangerous than ours and they were more likely to score than we were."

The question of United's power and physical strength also came under debate. It was said to see Bryan Robson, now 34, looking like a non-playing captain. He walked about a bit and put his foot in, and not always legally.

Pembridge was the victim of one nasty "tackle" but got on with his job without complaint.

United's team had cost around £12million to assemble, and for men like Jim Ryan there is pleasure in being in the same league.

He said: "We operate on a budget which is probably the same as Manchester United's laundry bill.

"It's an imperfect world and we just have to do the best we can with what we have.

"And I think we are good enough to stay in the First Division. It would be a shame if we went down because we endeavour to play football the right way, and I think we would be a loss to the First Division.

But I don't think we will be relegated."

MONEY FOR ITSELF

Old Trafford pictures by Josh Levy

The managers' viewpoints

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
23 Man Utd (a) 1-4 (Preece)	41,752	18

LEAGUE APPEARANCES, including as sub in brackets: Chamberlain and Dreyer ever-presents, 31 each; Elstrup, Preece and Black 30; Beaumont 23 (3); Johnson 19 (2); McDonough 19 (4); Harvey 19 (3); Hughes 17; Williams 15 (1); Pembridge 11; James 9 (3); Rees 8 (8); Rodger 8; Farrell 5 (9); Nogan 1 (4); Holsgrove (1); Dowie 26 (3); Breacker 8. Number of players used, 31 games: 20. Last season's total: 27.

LEAGUE GOALS: Elstrup 12; Dowie 7, Black 6; Dreyer 3 pens; Hughes 1; James 1; Pembridge 1; Rodger 1; Preece 1; OG 2 (Cundy, Chelsea; Mountfield, A. Villa).

THE FA CUP

January		
5 Sheff Utd (a) 3-1 (Farrell, Elstrup 2)	13,897	
26 W. Ham (h) 1-1 (Black)	12,087	
30 W. Ham (a) 0-5	25,659	

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)	5,120	
October		
10 Bradford (a) 1-1 (Black) — lost on pens	6,180	

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	3,849	
26 C. Palace (a) 1-3 (Rees)	7,170	

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.

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