

OLDHAM STRIKES PAINFUL



STUDS IN: Mark Pembroke takes on his man with some bravery to try to get the Town on the attack.



● **NEARLY:** Imre Varadi shoots wide of Jon Hallworth and the post.

THE LIFELINE to Luton Town's First Division survival was pared down to a precarious thread after early promise turned into a big flop at Boundary Park.

The scoreline may have been harsh, and questions about the refereeing justified, but those aspects of the thumping by Oldham could not hide the painful difference between the sides.

Service to strikers

Both defences were dodgy, but in Graeme Sharp and Andy Ritchie Oldham had the extra touch of attacking quality that counted.

And in left winger Rick Holden they had a man able to deliver a better service to the central strikers than anything the Town could produce.

Sharp collected four goals, which is more in one match than any Town player, except Mick Harford, has managed all season in the league.

The Town had every reason to feel aggrieved about the fairness of two Oldham goals.

That was particularly

Brian Swain reports

true of the important first, when not even the local Pressmen would have been surprised if it had been ruled out for a foul on Alec Chamberlain.

Harford equalised, only for the Town to give away a second goal 35 seconds later through awful covering and marking at the back.

Still in it

At the 80-minute mark they were still in with a chance, only 2-1 down, and producing some nice little bursts of football.

The pitch, relaid last summer by the same company who did the Town's after their plastic was ripped up, was an awful bare earth surface, and Oldham coped with it better.

They also handled the

Town's attack with more composure than we saw at the other end. As David Pleat said afterwards, we may just be in line for a soccer rarity, a whole season without a single away win.

And if the Town are to be relegated, that fact, allied with the dreadful away goals against column, will be largely responsible.

You could not fault the Town for effort at Boundary Park.

And the last three goals came in the final ten minutes, when the Town had to gamble and try to snatch something.

But that should not have arisen, because earlier bursts of good football had created scoring opportunities that should have been taken.

BOUNDARY PARK DETAILS

OLDHAM ATH 5 LUTON TOWN 1 (Half-time: 2-1)

TOWN: Chamberlain; James, Dreyer, Peake, Harvey (Rees, 82 mins); Stein, Kamara, Pembroke, Preece (Hughes 67 mins); Varadi, Harford.

OLDHAM: Hallworth; Fleming, Marshall, Jobson, Barlow; Adams (Bernard 77 mins), Milligan, Henry, Holden; Sharp, Ritchie (Palmer 80 mins).

THE GOALS: Graeme Sharp four for Oldham: 10 minutes, from a left wing cross by Andy Ritchie, with a challenge that looked to most like a foul on Alec Chamberlain; 26 minutes crisp shot, unmarked from right wing cross by Neil Adams; 80 minutes from a block by Chamberlain to Ritchie's shot (and he looked offside); 88 minutes, with the Town still pushing up, simple header from chip by Paul Bernard; Mike Milligan for Oldham, 82 minutes, from another Chamberlain parry to a drive by Sharp. Mick Harford for the Town, 25th-minute equaliser after Imre Varadi shot against the bar. Oldham went 2-1 up 35 seconds afterwards.

OTHER ATTEMPTS: Town four saved, five wide and one hit the bar and led to a goal; Oldham seven saved, seven wide, and an injury-time 'goal' by Bernard disallowed for offside. Corners: 7-5 to Oldham.

REFEREE: Robin Hart, Darlington: Upset the Town by two crucial decisions, the first to give a goal to put Oldham into the lead when Graeme Sharp looked as though he had fouled Chamberlain, the second when Ritchie looked offside before laying on Sharp's third goal with ten minutes to go.

ATTENDANCE: 13,210, with a good following from Luton but Oldham fans out in force because manager Joe Royle had done well to persuade them and his players that this was the game Oldham needed to win to ensure Premier League football next season.

ENTERTAINMENT: Oldham and neutral fans would have loved it. The bare earth pitch was no help to either team, but the Town produced some good football, some atrocious defending, and precious little in attack to match the smart play of Ritchie, Sharp and Holden.

QUALITY TEACH A LESSON

Action pictures by Josh Levy

As early as the fifth minute Harford robbed Ian Marshall in midfield and sent Imre Varadi on a run.

He went clear of the Oldham back four, only to shoot weakly straight at Jon Hallworth.

Then Richard Jobson got away with a dubious tackle that looked like a foul to many, but not to the ref, to stop Mark Pembroke's burst into the danger area.

The tough midfielder, particularly in the first half, looked real class, with the power and strength to go at defenders.

But so did Ritchie, the man playing off Sharp, and he paved the way for the first goal.

Ritchie collected the ball on the left, drawing Trevor Peake out of the middle. He beat the Town skipper and sent over a quick cross.

Chamberlain went up for the catch, but could not hold on to the ball under a challenge by Sharp.

Protests

As the ball dropped out of the goalkeeper's hands Sharp headed in, and the Town's protests that Chamberlain had been fouled fell on deaf ears.

It should have gone

to 2-0 before the Town equalised, because when Ritchie robbed Chris Kamara and put Nick Henry clear down the left Oldham had three men unmarked in space beyond the far post as a deep cross was pumped over. But Sharp got no power in the drive and Chamberlain saved.

Quick reply

A few seconds later came the equaliser, from a left-wing corner curled towards the far post by Brian Stein.

Harford's first effort was blocked by the keeper, and Varadi shot against the bar, with Harford following in to convert the rebound for his tenth league goal of the season.

Wasted

It led to a rush of blood, because straight from the restart Neil Adams was sent away down Oldham's right, into space behind Richard Harvey, and with the Town's central defence apparently on a walkabout he passed across the corner of the penalty area and Sharp placed his shot beyond Chamberlain to regain the lead.

Before half-time, with both defences pro-

ne to mistakes, Varadi and Harford both had good chances with headers, and wasted them by not getting on target.

For Oldham Ritchie and Sharp did the same, and at half-time, with the home side 2-1 up, it was a game that could go either way.

It should have been a dream afternoon for both sets of forwards as the contest flowed back and forth, with plenty of open football making it a good game to watch, until it all went horribly wrong in the last ten minutes.

Close

Harford, Dreyer and Varadi went close as the Town enjoyed a good share of the attacking.

But they were forced to go for broke after Sharp completed his hat-trick in the 80th minute.

The Town thought Ritchie was offside when he was unmarked in the penalty area to receive a diagonal cross from Andy Barlow.

Nothing was given and Ritchie shot hard and true. Although Chamberlain made a stop, he could not hold the ball and it was a gift for Sharp.

Two minutes later the

striker turned Dreyer and Peake inside out on the edge of the box, and although again the drive was parried Mike Milligan had got up from midfield and converted the rebound.

Taken off

Harvey twisted his knee trying to prevent the goal, but as he was stretchered away the agony was still not over for the Town.

In the 88th minute, just as Kenny Sansom was conceding a vital own goal at Meadow Lane to lose a match for Coventry, Sharp made it 5-1.

Oldham's two subs, Roger Palmer and Paul Bernard, swapped quick incisive passes to set up a chance for Bernard.

For the third time, a parry by Chamberlain led to a goal.

Another gift

He blocked Bernard's angled drive, but from the rebound Bernard chipped a sweet little cross to the far post, and Sharp accepted yet another gift.

It might have been worse because a minute into injury time Sharp crossed for Bernard to head into the net.

An offside flag prevented it being six of the worst.



● **HAVING A BALL:** Julian James and Andy Ritchie in competition.

Crafty manager winds them up

OLDHAM MANAGER Joe Royle had done a very good psychological job before kick-off.

Most would think that his team's total of 44 points before kick-off was enough to safeguard Oldham from any real threat of relegation.

But in the build-up to the Town's visit he managed to persuade his players and fans that Oldham still needed one more win to be sure of a place in the Premier League next season.

He admitted he was a little concerned when Mick Harford got a first-half equaliser because he could see that both defences were less than watertight, and liable to concede further goals.

Oldham's season has been remarkable for goals: Saturday's match took their totals to 60 scored and 61 conceded.

At half-time, with Oldham 2-1 ahead, his advice to his team was: "If we keep pushing on there are a few more goals in for us."

Not much consolation

David Pleat took little consolation from hearing neutral Pressmen comment that the Town had played well in patches, and had been harshly treated by the first goal. The general view in the Pressbox was that Graeme Sharp fouled Alec Chamberlain.

The Oldham striker defied the video evidence and claimed: "I never touched him."

Chamberlain was in no doubt. Sharp made bodily contact just as he grasped the ball, and the striker's shove was a foul.

Said Mr. Pleat: "It's no good moaning about things like that, although I thought it was a foul. It happens in football — it was the sort of decision you must expect to go in favour of the home side."

He added that he took any blame for the last three goals: they came at a time when the Town were doing everything to try to win, with the result that they left Chamberlain too exposed at the back, and Sharp and Andy Ritchie had been experts at cashing in.

Defended badly

"We defended badly when we went for the game," he said. "I think the second goal, so soon after we equalised, was the biggest killer."

"We had half-chances and some of our football was good, but in the end we got punished by some very good forward play on the break."

"Holden crosses it well, and Ritchie and Sharp are very good players."

"Michael Harford played magnificently up front for us, we didn't have enough sharpness around him to take advantage of any half-chances that were created."

"The lads worked hard, and the final scoreline was cruel."



● **EQUALISER:** Mick Harford stoops to head his tenth First Division goal of the season.

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