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Sports News

● YOU SMASHER: Phil Claridge, left, has just scored his first Luton Town goal, and Phil Gray, who made it, is pretty pleased about it too.

ROVERS MAKE A POINT IN THE ARTFUL FINISH

A BOARD that has decided to put cash balances before team success took the rap for Luton Town's continual plunge down the Division One table at Kenilworth Road on Saturday.

Manager **David Pleat** pointedly refused to criticise the fans who stayed behind again to chant 'Kohler Out', and voiced sympathy with them by suggesting that if only **Mick Harford** had still been in the side the first victory of the season would have been achieved.

Brian Swain reports from Kenilworth Road

Instead two home points were thrown away and the Town are now bottom but one of the league.

It is hard to criticise the boys who are being asked to do a man's job, particularly when the young team showed such precocious talent for the first 20 minutes.

Thrilling

That spell was the best football we have seen from a Town side in a long time: the Pleat style, with quick passing, sharp running, and eventually the goal it well deserved.

It was thrilling stuff, and Tranmere, on their first visit for 22 years, seemed to be in for a real pasting.

But then **John Dreyer** made an elementary mistake to allow the visitors to snatch an equaliser.

And the confidence drained when Tranmere, deadly on the break, scored again, with **Dreyer** and **Trevor Peake** taken out by a simple pass.

But at least it was not as bad as on the opening home day, when the Town never looked like scoring against Bristol City.

Wise

Tranmere certainly had the rub of the green, plus the wise old head of John Aldridge, doing for them what Harford should be doing for the Town instead of for Chelsea.

Phil Gray was one of the men out of luck, typified when a near-perfect downward header in the second half whistled the wrong side of the far post.

But he contributed to two of the goals before being subbed, while **Steve Claridge** had the strength and cheek to take on Tranmere with a performance that often had their back four on tenterhooks.

Backing

With **David Preece** full of skill and effort on the left flank, and **Jason Rees** having his best game yet on the right, there was not too much wrong with the Town's inventive atacking.

Defence was another matter, with Tranmere being allowed to score three goals from the four chances they made in the first half.

Both flanks were vulnerable when Tranmere broke, but against that **Dreyer** and **Des Linton** both played their parts in backing up attacks.

In Aldridge and Ian Muir, Tranmere had men who might have done more damage to **Darren Salton** and **Peake**, and it was to their credit that by the end Tranmere were the side holding out for the draw they did not deserve on run of play, but earned through clinical finishing.

If only...

If the Town had been able to match it early on the game would have been well won in the first 25 minutes.

Gray headed at Eric Nixon from a cross by **Preece**, who then volleyed over the bar when hard-working **Julian James** fed him.

The midfielder is looking like an adequate replacement for **Chris Kamara**, tackling well and showing discipline in not being drawn out of position.

Flair

Scott Oakes added a bit of flair in the centre of midfield, and tested Nixon with a long range low drive as the Town began with a barrage of attacking.

He brought another save from Nixon after a run past two defenders, and the goal the Town deserved came in the 21st minute.

It stemmed from a corner by **Rees** and a shot by **Gray**. It might have been on its way into the net, or Nixon might have had it covered, but **Claridge** intervened to deflect the drive with his chest and the goalkeeper was stranded.

Jolted

But six minutes later the confident start was jolted. In their second attack — Pat Nevin had shot over the bar from the first — Tranmere equalised, with Ged Brannon collecting **Dreyer's** attempted pass out of defence and setting up Aldridge for a sharp accurate drive low past **Andy Petterson.**

That took a lot of steam out of the Town, and they were deflated further two minutes later when Neil McNab's slide-rule pass pierced the centre of defence and Ian Muir rifled in a right foot shot.

Equaliser

The Town did well to pick themselves up and equalise when **Linton** hit the first league goal of his career after a sweet move involving **Oakes, Rees** and **Claridge.**

But once more Tranmere came back on the break, six minutes before the interval, with McNab going down their right to give Kenny Irons the chance to hammer in a powerful drive.

Petterson did well to save it, but Pat Nevin scored easily from the rebound.

The 2-3 half-time scoreline was a sick joke, but the Town came out full of spirt for the second half, and did enough to deserve more than they got.

Save

A header by **Rees** from a cross by **Preece** was foiled by a briliant tip-over save.

Another centre by **Preece** was met with a thundering header by **Gray** wide of the far post, with Nixon beaten.

When Tranmere broke again, **Petterson** prevented further disaster by flying across his goal to keep out a 25-yarder by Irons.

If they had got to 4-2 then, with 25 minutes to go, Tranmere would probably have won, but instead the Town hit back three minutes later, with **Oakes** equalising after **Gray** had knocked another pinpoint centre by **Preece** into his path.

Solo run

As the Town went for a winner **Gray** had a shot saved, **Claridge** put a drive just wide after a solo run forced defenders to back off, and Nolan scooped a header by **Oakes** out of the danger area after a good cross by **Claridge.**

The frustration for the Town, and their fans, was that it was a day when winning on points was not good enough: the knock-out puncher was busy elsewhere, scoring for Chelsea again, at Liverpool.

The season so far

● RESULTS showing Town score first, Town goalscorers, attendances and league position:

Barclays League Div One

1992

AUGUST

15 Leicester (a) 1-2 Campbell	17,428	-
22 Bristol City (h) 0-3	7,926	22
29 Charlton (a) 0-0	6,302	21

SEPTEMBER

2 Newcastle (a) 0-2	27,054	21
5 Tranmere (h) 3-3 Claridge, Linton, Oakes	6,801	23

APPEARANCES (as sub in brackets): Ever-presents with five each: Petterson, Linton, James, Peake, Dreyer, Gray, Preece, Claridge 4(1), Oakes 3(2), Salton 3, Rees 3, Hughes 3, Campbell 2(2), Kamara 2, Johnson (1). Number of players used: 15 (32 last season).

GOALS: Campbell, Claridge, Linton, Oakes one each.

ASSISTS: Gray 2, Hughes 1, Claridge 1.

Keegan gives credit

KEVIN KEEGAN gave the best summing-up of a night at St. James's Park when the dismal away record continued, despite a lot of bright spots in the Town's performance.

He spoke of Newcastle being carried along on "a tide of emotion" as they delighted a big crowd by taking their opening run to four wins out of four. It became a club record of five at Bristol Rovers three days later as Newcastle, with a huge squad, confirmed their promotion credentials.

NEWCASTLE UTD 2 LUTON TOWN 0

Took a battering

"A lot of things I saw in our team excited me," said the manager.

"But Luton deserve credit: they took a bit of a battering, but they wouldn't lie down, and it's not doom and gloom for them.

"I thought the 2-0 lead at half-time flattered us, but in the second half, when we turned on some very good football, we didn't get the reward we deserved. But the result was right in the end."

Bloodied but defiant skipper **Trevor Peake** embodied a gutsy Town display on a ground where they have not won a league game for 54 years. He played on, swabbing a nasty mouth gash with a sponge, and was one of the defensive heroes.

Another was **Andy Petterson,** who made some amazing saves when Newcastle gave his goal a tremendous pounding for a ten-minute spell early in the second half.

The match was not so much as Luton Town losing: Newcastle were a superb team, as good as anything I have seen for a long time.

The Town held out for 35 minutes, but once Lee Clark had scored the first goal the travelling fans knew that was the end of the contest. David Kelly got the second, at the end of a brilliant move down the left as **Des Linton** was by-passed, and once more there was little sign that the Town could hit back with a goal of their own.

Third midfielder hurt

They were not helped by injuries, with **Chris Kamara** and **Ceri Hughes** out before the kick-off, and **Jason Rees** being carried off seven minutes after the break with a twisted knee. Fortunately it was not serious, and he continued his good form three days later against Tranmere.

Scott Oakes came the nearest to breaking the away goals duck, with a shot which Tommy Wright misjudged.

The ball trickled against a post and was cleared. Newcastle, with their passionate crowd behind them, were never in similar trouble again.

The match details

LUTON TOWN: Petterson; Linton, Salton, Peake, Dreyer; Rees (Campbell 52 mins), James, Oakes, Preece; Claridge, Gray. Other sub: Johnson.

NEWCASTLE: Wright; Venison, Scott, Howey, Ranson; Carr, Clark, O'Brien, Sheedy; Peacock, Kelly. Subs: Quinn and Brock, not used.

GOALS: Lee Clark, 36 mins, from a through-ball by Liam O'Brien, and after Andy Petterson blocked his first attempt; David Kelly, 44 mins, tap-in after brilliant work down Newcastle's left flank by Gavin Peacock and Kevin Sheedy.

OTHER ATTEMPTS: Town three saved, four wide and one hit a post; Newcastle 12 saved and four wide. Corners: 8-5 to Newcastle.

REFEREE: John Kirkby, Sheffield. Did very well not to be pressurised by the partisan home crowd.

BOOKED: Darren Salton of the Town and Gavin Peacock of Newcastle, both for fouls.

ATTENDANCE: 27,054 — Newcastle's lowest of the season!

ENTERTAINMENT: A cracking match, with Newcastle playing some superb football and the Town battling all the way to try to contain it and the roaring passion of the crowd.

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Town match verdict ★★★

● POINT-SAVER: Scott Oakes is about to take a tumble, but the equaliser is on its way underneath the body of goalkeeper Eric Nixon.

Pictures: Josh Levy

Pigeon pair?

THE BACK pass rule has not been taking up the entire thoughts of the Town's goalkeepers.

Alec Chamberlain's wife gave birth to Natasha Louise a fortnight ago, and on Friday Andy Petterson became a father for the first time when his girlfriend Paula had a daughter, Ellen Sheila.

Because the birth was imminent, Petterson had been a doubt for the trip to Newcastle and Juergen Sommer had been on stand-by for the midweek game.

The First Division

	HOME					AWAY					
	P	W	D	L	F	A	W	D	L	F	A	P
Charlton	6	2	1	0	7	2	3	0	0	4	0	16
Newcastle	5	3	0	0	7	2	2	0	0	4	2	15
Wolves	6	2	1	0	9	5	2	1	0	3	0	14
Birmingham City	5	3	0	0	5	1	1	0	1	3	4	12
Swindon	5	2	0	0	5	1	1	1	1	7	7	10
Leicester City	6	3	0	0	6	3	0	1	2	2	7	10
Bristol City	4	0	2	0	3	3	2	0	0	7	3	8
Portsmouth	5	2	0	0	5	0	0	1	2	4	8	7
Watford	5	1	1	0	3	1	1	0	2	5	6	7
Tranmere	4	2	0	0	4	1	0	1	1	3	4	7
Millwall	4	2	0	0	5	2	0	1	1	1	3	7
Brentford	5	2	0	1	6	4	0	0	2	1	3	6
Peterborough	4	1	0	1	2	3	1	0	1	4	4	6
West Ham	4	1	0	1	2	2	1	0	1	1	2	6
Oxford Utd	4	1	1	0	2	1	0	1	1	2	4	5
Grimsby	4	1	1	0	4	3	0	0	2	2	5	4
Notts County	5	0	1	2	3	6	1	0	1	3	2	4
Barnsley	5	0	1	2	0	2	1	0	1	3	2	4
Sunderland	4	1	0	1	1	2	0	1	1	0	1	4
Bristol Rovers	6	1	0	2	6	7	0	0	3	3	8	3
Southend	5	1	0	1	3	2	0	0	3	3	7	3
Cambridge	5	1	0	2	1	4	0	0	2	1	6	3
Luton Town	5	0	1	1	3	6	0	1	2	1	4	2
Derby Co	5	0	0	2	4	6	0	1	2	2	4	1

Still paying the price of player sales

MANAGER **DAVID PLEAT** was in good form in the Pressroom as he fielded pointed questions after Saturday's match.

He enjoyed a splendid match, full of entertainment, but not the result.

And he was diplomatic without being too unhelpful when Fleet Street wanted to talk about the 'Kohler Out' demo that followed the game.

He said that a team that had done well would have done even better if only there had been a Mick Harford to lead the attack.

Best football

"We played our best football for a long time in the first half hour," he said. "When we went one up we were the better team, and I was certain we were going to win. It looked a question of how many we would win by."

But Tranmere had shown the value of the art of making a lot out of a little attacking.

"We have some good boys, but I know I have to be patient. They're good on the ball, but perhaps not so good off it.

"Steve Claridge is a real fighter — he runs and runs, and I was delighted with him. He's a terrific worker and their centre-halves will be pleased to get on the Tranmere bus to go home.

Manager's viewpoint

'If only he had a big target man to play off...'

The manager spoke of his hope that the painful financial work already done would not continue for ever.

"If I can keep the young ones we have, we will be a side," he said. "But it won't happen tomorrow."

The attendance was the Town's lowest in the league for nearly four years, but the manager was full of praise for those who had turned up and done their best to give the team a lift.

He accepted that those who stayed behind to let the directors know what they felt about player sales had the right to be heard.

"I can only ask our players to keep on doing their best, even if they are naive at times," said Mr. Pleat.

"And I can only ask the fans to keep on supporting the team on the pitch.

"It is going to be an interesting season. But it would be a tragedy if we get stuck at the bottom, and chasing. We don't have the money to do anything about it.

"Against Tranmere we had 90 minutes of football which should make anyone who saw it want to come to the next game, and bring a friend with him.

"It was splendid entertainment, but I am disappointed in the result because I know we should have won."

THE FULL MATCH DETAILS

Luton Town 3 Tranmere Rov 3 (HT: 2-3)

LUTON TOWN: Petterson; Linton, Salton, Peake, Dreyer; Rees, James, Oakes, Preece; Claridge, Gray (Campbell 81 mins). Other sub: Johnson.

TRANMERE ROVERS: Nixon; Brannon, Vickers, Garnett, Nolan; Morrisey, McNab, Irons, Nevin; Aldridge, Muir. Subs, not used: Malkin, Mungall.

GOALS: Steve Claridge for the Town, 21 minutes, chesting in a drive by Phil Gray; John Aldridge for Tranmere, 27 mins, on the break from Ged Brannon's through pass; Ian Muir for Tranmere, 29 mins, from Neil McNab's precision pass; Des Linton for the Town, 34 mins, to complete a move engineered by Scott Oakes, Jason Rees and Claridge; Pat Nevin for Tranmere, 39 minutes, converting the rebound after Andy Petterson did well to save from Kenny Irons; Scott Oakes for the Town, 69 minutes, after Phil Gray knocked down David Preece's deep left wing cross.

OTHER ATTEMPTS: Town nine saved and 12 wide; Tranmere six saved and four wide. Corners: 6-1 to the Town.

REFEREE: Peter Foakes, Clacton. Played well and allowed the game to flow.

BOOKED: Julian James, for a foul on John Morrisey.

ATTENDANCE: 6,801, lowest league gate since March 1988, when Portsmouth were the visitors for a midweek evening match. A hundred or so stayed on to call for the departure of MD David Kohler.

ENTERTAINMENT: Cracking stuff, except that for home fans it was a huge disappointment that the Town failed to win after the first 20 minutes of sheer brilliance.

● TWO ON TO ONE: Steve Claridge on the ball prepared to to take on Tranmere defenders two at a time. While David Preece and Jason Rees shared the man of the match marks offered by Fleet Street, manager David Pleat picked out Claridge's contribution as one of the most important as the Town at last showed signs of being able to score goals.