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Sports News

TOWN MATCH VERDIC

★ ★ ★

Portsmouth 1
Luton Town 0
(Half-time: 1-0)

Brian Swain reports

Action pictures: John Sherwood

First defeat of th season so close t an unlikely dra

TO BE positive about the mixed performance that saw the Town's first-league defeat of the season, they could easily have held her promotion favourites Portsmouth to a draw.

As at Cambridge in the Coca Cola cup (they had an awful first half, improved in the second, but paid for inability to snatch the limited chances created to sneak a surprisingly

STAR MEN

Over the 90 minutes, the result was about right; on a day when two commanders stood out for the man of the match honours: goalkeeper **Juergen Sommer** for the Town and 21-year-old right winger Paul Hall for Pompey.

Making his full league debut for them after a £100,000 transfer from Torquay late last season, Hall made it a nightmare afternoon for left back **Marvin Johnson**.

Luckily for the Town Hall's crossing was not consistently up to the standard of his pace and trickery as he destroyed the Town's left flank. Not that it was, the giant goalkeeper was outstanding at commanding his area, boxing himself high and wide to make a mixture of marine and diving interceptions.

NO HELP

One of the bad things was that on other players it looked as if Johnson's agony. He needed help and cover, and did not get it from a midfield that rarely anything remotely looking like a defensive strength.

They were promising enough going forward, although Portsmouth soon showed they had appreciated the need to

Match details

PORTSMOUTH 1 LUTON TOWN 0

LUTON TOWN: Sommer; James, Peake, Dreyer, Aldr Telfer, Hughes, Preece, Oakes (Benjamin MT); Dixon, Wi (Houghton 68 mins). Goalkeeper sub: Petterson.

PORTSMOUTH: Knight; Neill, Symons, Awford, Stoc Hall, McLoughlin (Aspinall, 68 mins), Blake, Burns; Clap Walsh (Horne 82). Goalkeeper sub: Price.

THE GOAL: Clinical strike by man of the match Paul Hall his full league debut for Pompey, in the 40th minute, Kerry Dixon gave the ball away to Andy Walford on the the penalty area.

OTHER ATTEMPTS: Town six saved and one wide; ho nine saved, two wide and one netted by Lee Chapm disallowed for offside. Corners: 8-6 to Portsmouth.

BOOKED: Julian James for hands, John Dreyer for stan in front of the ball to delay a free kick; Scott Houghton ludicrously, for an alleged bad tackle on Mark Stimson.

REFEREE: Graham Poll, Berkhamsted: Kept a very tight g but was sometimes over-fussy.

ATTENDANCE: 12, 246, with about 600 from Luton shod to the end.

ENTERTAINMENT: Awful in the first half, when the Tow were lucky to be only one down. They improved consider after the break, and might have pinched a draw, but paid price for having almost no tackling power in midfield allowing right winger Paul Hall far too much room. and Marvin Johnson a nightmare afternoon. And it was worse that no-one though to give him more help and cover.

Mental approac is under fire in Coca Cola Cup

Cambridge 1 Luton Town

THE MANAGER blamed it on players' attitude the Town lost the first leg of the Coca Cola cup rested at The Abbey stadium to a side relegated the First Division last season.

The Town were dreadful in the first half, allo Benjamin, standing in for Kerry Dixon at the sw swes up front, with the five-strong midfield behind clutered and untidy.

"The mental approach was not right," said Pleat. "We had no urgency."

Steve Claridge headed in from a Brian Gunn post corner in the 17th minute, but after that Pompey, strong by the manager's half-time pep talk, were fluent and aggressive and should have pulled out. The nearest they came was when Jason Rees cut out a stranded goalkeeper, but hit the bar.

The corner crowd saw the story: Ed Jones ... in the first half, 7-0 in the Town's favour.

Match details

CAMBRIDGE: Flino; Jeffrey, Herbert, Dale, Mc Middleton, O'Shea, Clayton; Dennis; Butler, Claridge, not used: Fowley, Lynn, Sheffield (sub).

LUTON TOWN: Sommer; James, Foster, Pe Johnson, Telfer, Rees (Houghton 46 mins); Chapman, Quinn, Benjamin, Enmed (subs: Campbell and Stu

THE GOAL: Steve Claridge, 17th minute, ...

OTHER STRIKES: Fowley drew the near post, ... the bar; Cambridge four saved and three wide, and ... to the Town.

REFEREE: Roger Wiseman, Kent.

ATTENDANCE: 4,065.

ENTERTAINMENT: Awful first half for Town ... much better in the second.

● MIDFIELD ATTACKER: Paul Telfer lets fly after one of the Town's better moves, in the second half. The keeper made a good save.

● ONE THAT GOT AWAY: Portsmouth skipper and goalkeeper Allan Knight foils Kerry Dixon.

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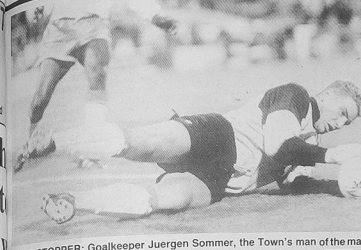


● TOP STOPPER: Goalkeeper Juergen Sommer, the Town's man of the match in his second game for them in Division One.

But the problem of who should partner Kerry Dixon away have left a little nearer to a solution. **Martin Williams** had the job for the first half.

BALANCED

Perhaps realising that the Town took off **Scott Houghton**, who had missed a couple of early chances and sent on **Jim Benjamin** to play alongside Dixon.

It gave the Town a more balanced look, but the overall impression was of a group of hard workers up against a team that was often quicker to the ball and more astute in winning it.

For all their neat touches in midfield, the Town were able to make few telling challenges, and the contrast need to be made. Back in their own penalty area could have ... with Sommer's heroics behind 5 minutes.

Paul Walsh, still full of tricks and turns, and Steve Stoutt had all the ... on Clive Wilson, **Trevor Peake** and James Dreyer trying to work hard to keep them in check.

The heading power of Mark Chapman, brought in Leeds for £50,000, was another contrast, and allied to Walsh's dismissal of one wing, it was a quality the Town could not match at the other end of the pitch.

Yet they might have taken the lead before Portsmouth settled down, with Oakes having two shots saved in the first ten minutes.

But Pompey soon discovered the way to turn the Town at the back, and concentration on their right flank paid handsome dividends.

They looked to have scored a picture goal in the 11th minute, when overlapping fullback Warren Neill skipped past Johnson after exchanging passes with Hall. The cross was driven hard towards the near post, and Chapman flew in with a powerful header into the top corner, exploiting a weakness that had cost the Town a goal from a corner at Cambridge.

An offside flag cut short the celebrations.

And at least there was good defending when Portsmouth had another chance two minutes later.

Dreyer, chasing back with Chapman, beat him to the ball, and lobbed it towards his own goal. Sommer had no choice but to make a high catch, and referee Graham Poll surprisingly called the tackle/clearance a legitimate back pass.

I disagreed, but the Town had to face a free kick on the six-yard line. They put nine men on the goal line, and the wall managed to block the drive by Alan McLoughlin.

But Portsmouth were looking like a team that would not be denied, and after Sommer had done well to keep out efforts by Walsh and Chapman the Town ... their luck once too often.

They cleared a corner in the 40th minute, but Dixon, trying to help his defence, hit a weak clearance attempt straight to Andy Awford on the edge of the box, on Portsmouth's left flank.

He made a couple of yards, pulled back a simple pass, and Hall lashed in a low drive that even the excellent Sommer could not reach.

Walsh should have scored soon afterwards, but after getting round Sommer after the benefit of no offside flag, took too long to hit the shot and **Julain James** did well to make a last interception.

Thankfully, the Town were more competitive in the second half, after Benjamin went on to add more experience to attack.

STABILITY

Williams, hardly in the game as the first half partner of Dixon, was able to see more of the ball on the wings of the field, and I thought that **Paul Telfer**, switched to a central midfield role, introduced more much-needed stability.

And for the first time Pompey's confidence looked a little shaky.

The Town even managed to produce a top class attacking move, with James, Telfer and Dixon cutting open a route down the middle for Telfer to get in for a low shot which was well saved.

Hall was still a major threat in Portsmouth's attacks, but the flow of play was much more even, and the Town defence settled to look a lot more comfortable against Chapman.

WORRYING

And the introduction of **Scott Houghton** for Williams, gave the home fans a worrying last 20 minutes.

The red had a bit of a brainstorm when he hooked Houghton for a tackle on Mark Stimson, but at least it showed that someone in a white shirt was prepared to dig in when it could matter most.

Sommer had to make a splendid save from a header by Chapman, and the Town made two breaks in the closing minutes which could have produced goals.

Dixon broke clear in a strong one that was fouled when he took the ball a yard too far and Alan Knight made a brave save at the feet.

And Houghton should have had an equaliser in the 88th minute. Benjamin's cutate pass put him clear, but the speedy run veered too wide, and Neill did remarkably well to get back to cover and clear.

A draw might have been a bit of a steal, but it was nearer to know that the Town were so close to it.

● RISING STAR: Martin Williams goes in where it hurts against the goalkeeper.

Old pals share the man of the match honours

IT WAS REUNION day for old pals at Fratton Park, when the game's two best players, Juergen Sommer and Paul Hall, shared the man of the match plaudits.

Nearly a year ago they were both in the Torquay team, helping it to pull away from the drop out of the Football League.

Sommer played ten league games on loan from the Town, and became good friends with Hall during that time.

On Saturday, he could not help but congratulate his old pal for the quality of the strike that brought the only goal of the game.

Skipper Trevor Peake put his finger on the biggest problem: the midfield was neat and always looking to get on the move forward, without having any great defensive ability.

He said the Town were grateful at half-time to be only one down, after 45 minutes in which Marvin Johnson had been isolated and exposed, and needed more help than he got in trying to deal with Hall.

He added that Johnson and the Town won't forget Hall's debut in a hurry, and will be better prepared for him if he is still in the Portsmouth side when they come to Kenilworth Road in February.

Sommer, 22, still carrying the scars of a stitched eyebrow following his Town debut, handled Press interviews as expertly as he had dost done the ball.

He admitted that for all the compliments he attracted for his display in the first half it was life the pleasure to be part of a defence under pressure.

"But we had a lot of the play in the second half, and created three or four good chances, but things just didn't fall our way.

"And being one down put more pressure on us. We had to get people forward, and we did that, but we couldn't find the back of the net."

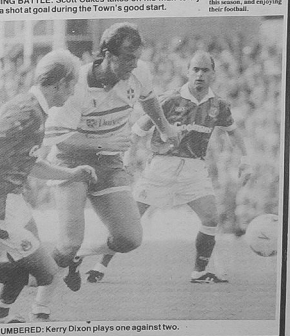
CAPABLE

He said he knew Hall had the potential to be a very good player from his time at Torquay.

Sommer added that David Pleat had done well to let him go there on loan, as with Alec Chamberlain was the first choice for the Town.

"Going to play for Torquay helped me to develop confidence," he said. "And because of that it was less of a shock when I got into the Luton side at the start of this season."

And the American, hoping to win a place in the USA squad for the World Cup next year, believes that the Town are capable of doing well this season, and enjoying their football.



● RUNNING BATTLE: Scott Oakes takes on his man to try to get in a shot at goal during the Town's good first half.

● OUTNUMBERED: Kerry Dixon plays one against two.