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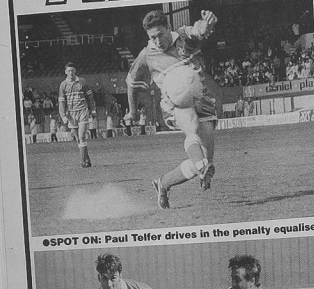
Sports News

TOWN MATCH VERDICT ★

Stoke City.....2
Luton Town...2
(Half Time 2-0)

Brian Swain reports. Action pictures by John Sherwood

Late penalty is a fitting finale to the season



●SPOT ON: Paul Telfer drives in the penalty equaliser.

TWO down at half time, Luton Town looked as though would see out the season at Stoke on Sunday with little more than a whimper.

But in a remarkable second-half transformation, an early pot by Scott Oakes gave them a lift, and a penalty, taken after a stoppage for a red card and a short pitch invasion by fans, earned the 53rd point of the season.

Two more than last season, it also turned out to be two points more than the survival mark as they finished in 20th place, the same as a year ago.

With safety assured before the kick-off, manager **David Pleat** gave 17-year-old **Kelvin Davis** his debut in goal, and the lad from Leighton Buzzard had a day to remember. But for his good work the Town would have been buried by half-time.

"We were sluggish in the first half," said the manager. "It was men against boys. Stoke must be the oldest team in the league while ours is the youngest.

"But we were much brighter after half-time."

Stoke boss Joe Jordan was niggled with his men for not keeping up the pressure.

"Some of our people thought they had the game won by half-time," he said. "We allowed Luton back into the game, and paid the penalty.

"But the result did not reflect the performance. I am disappointed, but you can't afford to drop a gear, which is what we did."

The drama reached its peak with one minute to go, when **Paul Telfer** converted a penalty, the Town's third this season.

Keith Donovan surged through and fired a shot.

OTHER ATTEMPTS: Town hit the post three times; Wise fired in a shot from one yard and led to a goal-mouth scrap for the Town (Sensible).

REFEREE: Paul Durkin. Lots of patience, insistent early on when Stoke indulged in a bookings or two.

SENT OFF: Michael Thomas (Stoke) for a dangerous tackle on Davis, resulted in the ninth minute of the first half-fighting. The red card was the result of a second yellow, the first being given for a dangerous tackle.

ATTENDANCE: 16,843. Injury time goals were scored by Stoke in the first half and by Luton in the second.

ENTERTAINMENT: Lots of fine passing and some good goals. Apart from the first half-hiccup, these players were fully committed to the cause, and offering a tantalizing glimpse of what a promotion with the Football League pitch was related.

The full match details

LUTON TOWN: Davis; Linton, Greene, Peake, James; Telfer, Hartson, McLaren (77 mins), Thorpe, Hughes; Oakes (Campbell 60 mins). Hartson. Goalkeeper sub Sommer.

STOKE: Fendhoe; Butler, Cranson, Overson, Sandford; Wallace, Cleghorn, Gynn (Orlygsson 89 mins), Adams; Biggins, Regis. Sub is Bonnetter and goalkeeper Sinclair.

GOALS: 1-0 16 mins: Wayne Biggins, scorching right foot drive in the top corner after the Town failed to clear a long throw-in.

2-0 32 mins: Dave Regis, after David Greene's mistake put a fast, 2-0 32 mins: Dave Regis, after David Greene's mistake put a fast, Walters, who was brought down by the ball run loose;

Regis converted the chance when the Town failed to clear a long throw-in.

2-1, 46 mins: Scott Oakes, sweet 20-yard drive after Stoke had cleared out by Vince Overson, straight to Oakes;

2-2, 80 mins: Paul Telfer, penalty, after Ian Cranson handled a pass beyond keeper Jon Thorpe.

OTHER ATTEMPTS: Town four saved and six wide; Stoke in another six wide, one hit the bar and one netted by Micky Adams but ruled for offside. Corners: 7-5 to Stoke.

REFEREE: John Key, Sheffield: One of the most experienced in the Football League, he, with a neat way of dealing with the inevitable crowd invasion at the end; he had arranged with the tea manager which way the teams would kick, and in the last minute played to the crowd behind the goal he was to defend, so that he could watch his signal. He mopped his brows, the sign for him that it was time to shake goalkeeper Kelvin Davis, who threw it straight back to allow goalkeeper Kelvin Davis, who threw it straight back to allow players were running for safety as he blew the last final whistle of the season.

SENT OFF: Ian Cranson, for using his hand to tip Thorpe's bouncing header over the bar.

ATTENDANCE: 15,911. Slightly under Stoke's average, but they produced an excellent atmosphere for a Sunday afternoon game that attracted little to neither side.

ENTERTAINMENT: Very good, eventually. The Town were very dull in the first half, but then raced the pace and the second half crackling good contest, with the late penalty adding the icing on the cake. An early end-of-season pitch invasion which was soon seen off.

●ON TARGET: Scott Oakes lets fly for a super goal.

Drama before survival jubilation

THE FINAL HOME GAME OF THE SEASON: LUTON TOWN 3 WEST BROM 2

THE NIGHT that saw the Town save their Premier Division live could hardly have been more dramatic.

The ingredients: five goals, four keepers beaten, three men hospitalised, two sent off, and the visiting chairman doing his nut.

The biggest league attendance of the season turned up for the last home game, and were rewarded with a cracking match against visitors equally desperate to win because of their relegation worries.

In the event, West Brom were lucky to be within one goal of the Town, in the final half they were taken apart by the best Town attacking performance for a long time.

They had only one goal to show for it, a 20-yard drive by David Preece after good work by Julian James, Alan Harper and Paul Telfer.

The half-time corner count was 11-0 to the Town as a very basic but determined West Brom defence whacked the ball anywhere for safety.

The visitors' willingness to concede corners: the final tally was 17-0 to the Town - eventually cost West Brom dear, but we had a shock when they equalised in the 51st minute, with Bob Taylor shooting home after a strong solo run took him past Trevor Peake and John Pemberton.

On the hour defender Daryl Burgess was stretched off with concussion after a collision with Juergen Sommer, and the Town keeper also had to go off a few minutes later, and missed the games at Bolton and Stoke as a result.

The Town regained the ascendancy, and West Brom lost another key man when goalkeeper Stuart Naylor had to go off with a broken cheekbone after colliding with John Hartson. Sub Tony Lange's first duty was to pick the ball out of the net after James put it there with a header from a corner by Hughes.

A sweet first-time by Hartson, from a right-wing cross by Scott Oakes, made it 3-1 in the 76th minute, but the Town defence caved in again to another individualistic effort, with Kevin Donovan turning in a shot through them. His shot hit a post and Lee Ashcroft converted the rebound.

West Brom's management was dead gracefully, but not chairman Trevor Summers: he complained that he was going to petition the Football League about the decision to send off the pitch on the instructions of David Pleat.

"We did it to improve the entertainment," said the Town manager. "Good for him - it worked beautifully!

And West Brom will not pursue their protest. On Sunday they beat the drop by winning at Portsmouth, while Middlesbrough, Oxford and Birmingham City to relegation, along with Peterborough.

The match details

LUTON TOWN: Sommer (Pettersson 65 mins); Jones, Harper, Dreyer, Thomas; Telfer, Harper, Preece, Hughes; Oakes (Thorpe 89 mins), Hartson, McLaren (Linton).

WEST BROM: Naylor (Lange 66 mins); Burgess, Raven, Robinson, Hamilton; Smith, Strodder, McInally, Osborne; Hamilton, Smith; Ashcroft, Taylor, Donovan.

GOALS: 1-0, 39 minutes: David Preece, from 20-yard drive; 1-1, 51 mins: Bob Taylor, solo run and shot; 2-1, 70 minutes: Julian James header from Carl Hughes left wing corner; 3-1, 76 minutes: John Hartson, swerving right-foot first-time from Scott Oakes low cross; 3-2, 78 minutes: Lee Ashcroft from the rebounded after Keith Donovan surged through and hit a post.

OTHER ATTEMPTS: Town hit post three times; West Brom hit post once, one hit a post and led to a goal-mouth scrap for the Town (Sensible).

REFEREE: Paul Durkin. Lots of patience, insistent early on when Stoke indulged in a bookings or two.

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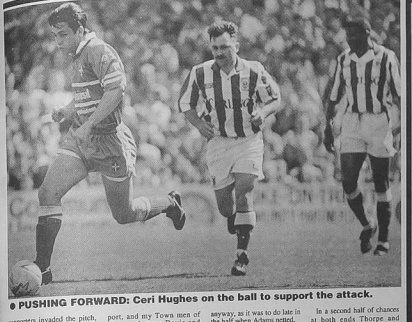

●PUSHING FORWARD: Ceri Hughes on the ball to support the attack.

supporters invaded the pitch, but the threat of an abandoned match melted when they accepted loudspeaker pleas to resume their places.

On run of play Stoke deserved to win, and the first half was almost embarrassing for Town fans.

In defence David Greene was paired with Julian Peake, with John Dreyer left in the cold.

Thorpe came in for **David Preece**, and hard though he worked the Town missed the Preece touch of passing class.

Telfer and Scott Oakes looked jaded and in need of a summer's rest, while Ceri Hughes was not the incisive player he can be.

In attack John Hartson struggled without much support, and rey Town men of the match were Davis and **Julian James**.

My nomination for the most improved player of the season is Des Linton, who confirmed that the right back spot is now his by right.

But none of the defence could take a lot of pleasure from the first half, when the Town were lucky to concede only two goals.

Wayne Biggins whacked the first after 16 minutes with a screaming drive into the top corner after the Town failed to clear a throw-in.

Biggins later hit the bar with a header, with Davis pulling off an acrobatic save from Micky Adams's effort from the follow up.

But the offside flag waved anyway, as it was to do late in the half when Adams netted.

But by then Greene, looking a little vulnerable, had been robbed by Mark Walters in the build-up to the second goal, after 32 minutes.

Davis dived at Stoke winger's feet, and it looked like a penalty and a probable red card for the keeper. But the ball ran loose and Dave Regis cracked it into the net - sure John Key the leader of spoiling the last day with a sending-off... until the 30th minute.

The recovery was given a marvellous boost when Oakes struck a perfect volley from 20 yards into the net 7-2 seconds after the interval, after Vince Overson's clearance header dropped nicely to him.

In a second half of chances at both ends Thorpe and Hartson had opportunities to snatch an equaliser, but fluffed them.

Stoke also missed chances, and when they did get them on target Davis was acrobatic and surprisingly on the ball. Watch out; **Juergen Sommer** and **Andy Petterson!**

And others will also know they have another man ready to mount a challenge for a first team place: **Paul McLaren**, from the youth team, went on as a late sub for out of touch **Alan Harper**, and looked very comfortable and confident.

Ten men battle at Burnden

Bolton W 2 Luton Tn 1

TWO goals in the last eight minutes decked the Town's hopes of pinching off an unlikely third away win of the season at Burnden Park.

Reduced to ten men for the last 61 minutes after a red card for John Hartson, they shook Bolton by grabbing the lead in highly unlikely fashion at the end of the half, and then battled magnificently for most of the second in a spirited little bid to survive.

With Juergen Sommer injured, Andy Petterson was given his second start of the season, and responded with a display which was a joy to see, until he made a mistake from which led to Bolton's winning.

But the Australian born lees responsibility than fery Wehmann Hartson, despite the claims that it was accidental when he gave Alan Stubbs the elbow in the 29th minute.

Referee John Kirkby took no time to show the red card, the fourth the Town have received this season.

Hartson had tried to simply jumping for the ball, with no malice intended. Manager David Pleat suggested that the young striker did not even realise Stubbs was in close.

Perhaps so. But with football needing to be half of even the instinctive use of elbows to increase jumping power, Hartson had little chance of staying on the field. He was down the tunnel before the ball had finished crashing home.

Yet for a long time it looked as though Hartson's absence would inspire the Town to change the game completely.

They needed to do something, and it was that chose to use three centre-backs - Greene, Peake, and John Dreyer and Julian James. The idea was that Des Linton and Mitch Thomas should push forward on the wing-backs.

They did not manage it with any consistency, and the formation began to look too a ten very well drilled back five.

Keith Branagan, who had a good game, was called upon to make a few good saves, and he was well protected by his defence.

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Bolton had little chance of staying on the edge of the penalty area was met by Hughes with a cosely-taken right foot shot into the far corner.

But the Town were unable to match the attacking driving force that Bolton showed in the second half.

They were 17 corners as the Town were forced to put more men on defensive duties.

And Petterson, who had to be taken out at the firing line when he was seen as the successor to Alec Chamberlain 18 months ago, had an important part to play until the crucial final disappointment.

The Town held out until the 82nd minute, but Bolton, who were much on top in the second half, only got one goal it would be two minutes later.

Yet as the allied sides tucked by and the Wanderers made a mess of a smash and grab victory.

Petterson made five excellent saves, and Linton, Dreyer and Hughes were all on the rescue with goal-line clearances.

But one by Peake, to back-pass a drive by Stuart Whitaker, led to the equaliser. The clearance went straight to John McGinlay just inside the box, and the First Division's top marksman struck his 33rd goal of the season through a crowd of players.

The winner was a tragedy for Petterson. Everything else had aimed perfectly, he was caught out four minutes from time.

He decided to go for a cross hit by David Lee into a very crowded penalty area. The young keeper missed, and Alan Thompson headed the winner.

On the run of play Bolton deserved it, but they were made in strain every minute to get it, even if it was a game that mattered little in terms of league points.

Match details

LUTON TOWN: Petterson; Linton (Preece 26 mins), Greene, Dreyer, James, Thomas; Telfer, Peterson, Harper, Hughes (Thorpe 82 mins); Oakes, Hartson. Goalkeeper sub Sommer.

BOLTON (Division, Sponsor, Seagraves, Stubbs, Phillips, Lee, McAteer, Pollitt, Whitaker, McGinlay, Thompson; John on sub Coyle. Goalkeeper Walsh.

GOALS: 1-0 82 min: Ceri Hughes, angled drive into the corner from good work by Paul Telfer and David Preece; 1-1, 82 mins: John McGinlay, from through a crowd of players after Trevor Peake cleared off the line from Stuart Whitaker; 2-1 84 min: Alan Thompson, from after Andy Petterson, magnificent until then, was beaten by a deflected shot.

OTHER ATTEMPTS: Bolton hit post twice and hit bar and lost wide. Corners: 31-3 to Bolton.

SENT OFF: John Hartson, for elbowing Alan Stubbs as they both went up for a cross in the 29th minute.

REFEREE: John Kirkby, Sheffield: played well, and however accidental they claim it was, the sending-off was right. He seriously challenge his major decision, and had not previously proved major decisions.

ATTENDANCE: 7,102. Bolton's second lowest of the season.

ENTERTAINMENT: A cracking match if you didn't mind the result, with the Town's new defence doing very creditably and nearly sicking a way they did not deserve on the run of play.