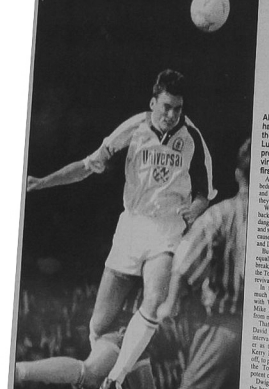
NUMBER ONE: Scott Oakes, in the white shirt, gets in front of his marker to head the Town's first goal of the season, to take a point against West Brom.

Oakes goal offers hope of a more comfortable time



HAPPY PEOPLE: Kerry Dixon is first to congratulate Oakes, as the Kenilworth Road fans show their delight at his goal.

ALTHOUGH it took them half the game to shake off the summer hangover, Luton Town eventually produced hints of a good vintage to come in their first match of the season.

At half time they looked a little bedraggled, trailing to an early goal, and offering only slight hope that they could cancel it out.

West Brom were strong at the back, composed in midfield, and dangerous on the break, where pace and strength on the ball threatened to cause big problems for Trevor Peake and David Greene.

But once Scott Oakes had equalised, four minutes after the break, it was a different story, and the Town should have completed the revival with all three points.

In terms of attacking they had much the better of the second half, with West Brom's veteran skipper Mike Pinder forced to drop deeper from midfield to organise defence.

That was in response to manager David Pleat's tactical change at the interval. Dixon had been used early on as the second striker alongside Kerry Dixon, but once he dropped off, to play a free role a little deeper, the Town looked a much more potent outfit.

Dwight Marshall had been left on the bench, and his fans had to wait 81 minutes to get a hint about the pace he might offer to an attack that needs it.

He replaced Steve Houghton, a busy player on the wide left of midfield, who was out of luck with a cracking, first-half drive. It was pulled away, with some difficulty, by Stuart Naylor.

The Town had been thrown out of gear by conceding the first goal anywhere near this season at the First Division. Four minutes and 13 seconds after kick-off left hack Paul Edwards chipped an inviting pass into space, down West Brom's middle-left channel.

The match facts

LUTON TOWN 1 WEST BROM 1 (Half-time 0-1)

TOWN: Sommer; James, Peake, Greene, Johnson; Telfer, Skelton (Linton 73 mins), Preece, Houghton (Marshall 81 mins); Oakes, Dixon.

Goalkeeper sub: Barber.

ALBION: Naylor; Parsley, Burgess, Herbert, Edwards; Ashcroft (Donovan 54 mins), McNally, Phelan, Hamilton; Taylor, Hegi; Otto (subs Raven and goalkeeper Lange.

THE GOALS: 0-1 four mins; Bob Taylor angled drive, with some defenders claiming in vain he was offside when he collected a pass by Paul Edwards; 1-1 49 mins: Scott Oakes, rather post header from brilliant cross on the run by Paul Telfer.

OTHER STRIKES: Town nine saved and eight wide; West Brom eight saved and three wide. Corners: 13-5 to the Town.

REFEREE: Graham Poole, Bishops Stortford. Did OK, and David Pleat backed him on the offside decision when Otto was not given when West Brom scored.

BOOKED: Julian James of the Town for delaying a West Brom throw in. Craig Herbert and Daryl Burgess of West Brom, both for dissent.

ATTENDANCE: 8,640; 3,400 fewer than for West Brom's visit for the festival.

ENTERTAINMENT: Good value, with the Town lacklustre in the first half, well on top in the second, and unlucky not to start with a victory.

REPORT: BRIAN SWAIN
PICTURES: GARETH OWEN

Speedy Bob Taylor escaped from Greene, whose run forward to gain an offside decision had been too slow, and the shot was hit with admirable precision past Jurgen Sommer.

The rest of the first half was painful to Luton eyes as the team struggled.

But it was a much happier story after the break, with the Town opening up with a burst of attacking straight from the restart.

David Preece outshone Phelan as the balance of power shifted, and provided a cross which led to Dixon's header for the top corner being dropped over the bar by Naylor.

But the keeper had no chance with the next attack, after 49 minutes. Julian James sent the tireless Paul Telfer down the right wing. The pass seemed to be overhit, with Telfer having to chase right to the goal-line. But miraculously the young Scot reached it, and incredibly hit a perfect cross, on the run at full tilt.

Oakes powered in at the near post to head the Town's first goal of the season.

Aaron Skelton had a steady game in midfield on his debut, before giving to make way for Dan Linton, of five men ruled out of the starting line- up by injuries and suspensions.

Either side might have scored the winner after that. The good news was that the Town made the best chances. The bad news was that they were squandered, with Otto the major culprit.

But at least the attack showed it could get to close quarters, when it is in the mood, and if the rest of the season is as good the fans will be spared the usual heart flutterings of the last day.

HAPPY PEOPLE: Kerry Dixon is first to congratulate Oakes, as the Kenilworth Road fans show their delight at his goal.

Half time jelly for the players

MANAGER David Pleat hopes he has found a sweet recipe for success at Kenilworth Road, with players on a drink and diet regime that has been proved in top-class athletics.

The traditional half-time cup of tea has been scrapped. Instead the players were told to down as much Lucozade as they could. And for energy they had to scoff raisins, bananas, chocolate and jelly cubes.

In the build-up to matches they are asked to ban fry-ups and go for carbohydrate foods, particularly jacket potatoes, pasta and white bread.

Said the Town manager: "I don't think clubs generally have appreciated how important diet is in professional athletics."

Last season he was impressed by the power and stamina of Crystal Palace as they raced to a runaway victory in the First Division. And he discovered that a controlled diet was part of the Selhurst Park plan.

So he arranged for his players to spend an hour or so during the pre- season programme with Peggy Wellington, a sports nutritionist expert who looks after such matters for the British Olympic squad.

Physio John Sheridan, back at Kenilworth Road on a consultancy basis, backed all the advice she gave.

He said: "Football is catching up with other sports in realising the importance of diet and nutrition. For three days before a game you should build up carbohydrates to give you energy and cut down on proteins and fats. And take plenty of liquid.

"The idea of bananas, raisins, jelly and chocolate at half-time is to top up the carbohydrates, to maintain energy levels. For the same reason players now have sports drink instead of tea. And after the match we ask them to drink about a litre of it.

"It's traditional for players to go and have a couple of pints of beer after games, and that's all right, so long as they also drink plenty of water or sports drink as well. Beer does no harm at all in moderation.

"Years ago footballers used to be given steak before matches, but that is now known to be a mistake. It doesn't give you energy, but lays on the gut and probably slows you down.

"Athletics has been on this sort of nutrition programme for years, and from my experience of Italian football, when I went to help Lazio with treatment for Paul Gascoigne, they are also well aware of it.

"The Italians put a tremendous emphasis on diet, and control it very carefully. Players there eat large amounts of pasta, and they are given mega shoots for the whole week.

"I can see that becoming commonplace here as well. I think you have got to listen to the experts, as Luton Town have done. They know what they are talking about, and they have proved it works - every Olympic athlete is monitored very carefully, and co-operates because he or she knows it matters in finding that little bit extra in competition."

Goals ordered from Oakes

GOALDEN boy Scott Oakes, the Town's leading scorer with 13 last season, is under orders to hit a few more in the new campaign.

But on Saturday night he deflected some of the praise heaped on him after his near-post header opened this season's account: "The cross by Paul Telfer was brilliant," he said.

"The players were disappointed at their full-time go at one better after the equaliser, but pleased to have the first point of the season in the bag even if they did squander a few chances late in the second half.

Oakes added that the team knew goals had to be shared around, and disclosed that manager David Pleat has set him a target. "He says I should get at least 20 goals a season, and I suppose he's right," he said.

Mr Pleat admitted that he was more nervous than his players as he waited for the first point of his kick off. "You never know what to expect, despite all the work you have done in pre-season games," he said.

"But I have told the players they can go home feeling satisfied.

"I thought we should have had two or three more goals. There weren't enough goal chances made in the first half, but we were much better in the second.

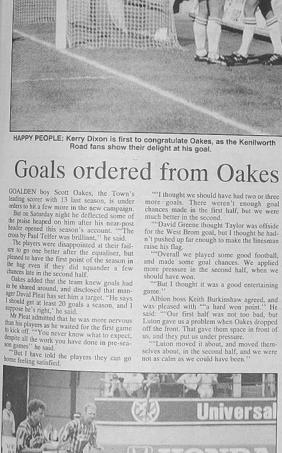
"David Greene thought Taylor was offside for the West Brom goal, but I thought he hadn't pushed up far enough to make the linesman raise his flag.

"Overall we played some good football, and made some goal chances. We applied more pressure in the second half, when we should have won.

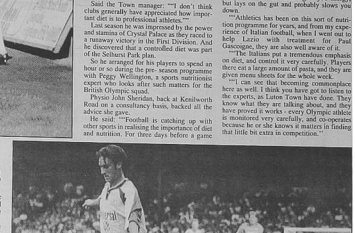
"But I thought it was a good entertaining game."

Albion boss Keith Burkinshaw agreed, and was pleased with "a hard won point." He said: "Our first half was not too bad, but Luton gave us a problem when Oakes dropped off the front. That gave them space in front of us, and they put us under pressure.

"Luton moved it about, and moved themselves about, in the second half, and we were not as calm as we could have been."



DEFENDER ATTACKS: Des Linton, a second-half sub, is foiled by West Brom keeper Stuart Naylor as the Town look for the winner.



BREAKING CLEAR: Oakes makes off with the ball, with a defender grounded

HELD UP: Scott Houghton, back in the side after nearly going to Walsall, tussles for possession with Lee Ashcroft