Grumbles start as Town slip again

Big match facts

TOWN: Kelvin Davis; James, Steve Davis, Marvin Johnson; Alexander, Linton (Guentchev, 74 mins), Waddock, Gavin Johnson, Harvey; Oldfield, Marshall. Unused subs Peake and Evers.

READING: Sheppard; Bernal, Adie Williams, Wdowczyk (Jones 11 mins), Gilkes; Martin Williams, Parkinson, Gooding (Quinn 89 mins), Meaker; Nogan, Lovell. Unused sub Carey.

GOALS: 0-1 five mins: Dwight Marshall gift after keeper Sheppard and centre-half Wdowczyk attacked a through-ball by Gavin Johnson, collided 25 yards from goal and let in Marshall to walk the ball into an empty net; 1-1, 17 mins: Lee Nogan, chasing a through-ball and shrugging off an attempted tackle by Juliusz James before shooting home; 2-1 60 mins: Stuart Lovell penalty, after Des Linton was very harshly adjudged to have fouled Mick Gooding; 3-1 69 mins: Nogan again, after exchanging passes with Lovell and outpacing Steve Davis.

OTHER ATTEMPTS: Town seven saved, four wide and a corner by Alexander palmed onto the bar and cleared; Reading six saved and six wide. Corners: 9-8 to the Town.

REFEREE: Ken Leach, a Staffordshire policeman. The Town are convinced he was guilty of robbery over the penalty he gave Reading and one he didn't give 60 seconds later when Marshall was impeded by Tom Jones.

BOOKED: Gavin Johnson, James and Alexander, all for fouls.

ATTENDANCE: 8,550, Reading's lowest of the season so far.

ENTERTAINMENT: More agony for Town fans, watching decent players who did not look like a team.

● DANSE MACABRE: Reading goalkeeper Simon Sheppard is well out of his area to tackle his own man, Dariusz Wdowczyk, as Dwight Marshall chases a Gavin Johnson through ball. Sheppard missed the ball and flattened his centre-half, and Marshall pounced to open the scoring.

● SOLO ACT: Marshall in the clear and able to take his time to walk the ball into the net.

● JUMPING TO IT: Des Linton joins a Town attack after a corner. Skipper Steve Davis, another defender, is up there with him, and the Reading man nearest to him is Martin Williams, making his home debut for the Royals after being released by Luton in the summer.

BARELY A month into the season, Terry Westley's honeymoon with the fans came to an end at Reading when a group of about eight stayed behind to give the Luton Town manager a slagging off.

They call themselves loyal Luton supporters, follow the club everywhere, and despite their criticism of the team and the boss's tactics will be in Italy next month for the second stage of the Anglo-Italian Cup.

READING 3 LUTON TOWN 1
(Half-time 1-1)

Westley politely answered their questions, with chairman David Kohler watching and listening appreciatively.

But one victory from the first six games, and a slump to 20th place in the First Division, speaks for itself, and the poor team performance at Elm Park added to the supporters' frustration.

The manager speaks of his quality players, but not all of his signings are yet justifying that. And Reading were eventually able to stroll to their first win over the Town at Elm Park since 1935.

Westley is strong enough and chirpy enough to take the brickbats, but to me it looked as though the team was too much a bunch of individuals. It was certainly not a confident unit.

The manager points out that three key players were denied him again, but the replacements should surely be running their socks off to try to keep the pretenders out.

With a dodgy referee no help, it was a day when players had to dig in and scrap, and there was not enough fighting spirit to lift the fans.

Quality striking power was again a major shortcoming, and the Town cannot bank on too many sides matching Reading's generosity in giving away goals.

The Town should have settled to control things after an appalling mix-up gifted Dwight Marshall an early opener.

But two spells of 60 seconds proved crucial in settling matters in a game where the result was a little flattering to Reading.

The hierarchy at Elm Park is seeking a replacement for goalkeeper Shaka Hislop, who went to Newcastle in the summer for over £1.5million. They have Bulgarian World Cup keeper Borislav Mikhailov lined up, but were still awaiting a work permit at the weekend.

So they had to stick with Simon Sheppard, who looked every inch the Watford reserve he used to be.

They were rolling in the aisles in the fifth minute - Reading fans in disbelief, Town supporters in delighted laughter - when Sheppard decided to race out of his area to act as sweeper to a through ball by Gavin Johnson. Centre-half Dariusz Wdowczyk went for the same ball, and Sheppard demolished him. As the two went down - the defender had to be subbed a few minutes later as a result of the keeper's bruising assault - the ball ran loose, and Marshall was able to walk it into the net from 30 yards.

"Oh no, here we go again," was the Reading Pressbox wail.

But the home side began to outpass and outrun the Town, and Kelvin Davis earned his spurs on a day that should have done his confidence a power of good.

He has had the painful experience of being barracked by his own so-called supporters after aberrations against Derby and Perugia, and the way he responded at Elm Park made him a strong contender for the Town man of the match tag.

He made a double save from Lee Nogan and Stuart Lovell as Reading took command, but was left hopelessly exposed for the equaliser in the 17th minute. Nogan, trying to shrug off a disappointing debut for Wales in midweek, left Julian James on the deck and carefully put his shot wide of Davis.

For a time the Town looked capable of fighting back, and Sheppard produced a Watford version of the Colombian scorpion save, kicking off his own line in a scramble following a corner.

But if play was at that stage fairly even in terms of possession, Nogan and Lovell looked much more penetrative than Marshall and David Oldfield at the other end.

Richard Harvey saved the Town with a tackle on Lovell after he had got round Davis, and Michael Meaker managed to volley over the bar from about five yards from a left-wing cross by Adie Williams.

At the interval, I hoped that the Town had drawn Reading's sting, and for the first 15 minutes of the second half it looked as though they had.

Referee Ken Leach was determined to have a decisive involvement, and the first of several strange decisions went the Town's way, within a minute of the restart.

The Town were at the beginning of their best spell, and Reading's defence had the jitters when Andy Bernal sliced an attempted clearance straight to Sheppard, who made the catch to the relief and surprise of home fans. The ironic cheers turned to groans when the ref called it a back pass. It was a ludicrous decision, and perhaps justice was done when the indirect free kick, from six yards, was tapped to Steve Davis. His shot was charged down by the ten-man wall.

The Town were well on top at this stage, but Marshall, having gone on a good solo run, saw his low shot saved while Gavin Johnson waited in vain for a pass that might have been more effective.

Steve Davis volleyed powerfully but too high when a cross by Marshall was cleared to him on the edge of the box, and at that stage the Town were justifying the manager's assertion that they are capable of doing well.

But then came the two-minute long sequences that transformed the game and sent Reading's confidence sky high.

On the hour Mick Gooding was put in on a run for goal, and the Town defence was angry and very disbelieving when Mr Leach decided that Des Linton's tackle that took the ball was a foul. The protests had no chance of succeeding, and Lovell tucked away the penalty.

Within 60 seconds, with the Town and their fans still seething, Marshall tricked his way into the Reading box, and Tom Jones bodychecked him. It was more of a penalty than Linton's tackle, but not in the view of Mr Leach, and Reading thankfully cleared their lines.

Nine minutes later another 60-second burst finished the Town. They were showing signs of getting back into the game, and Graham Alexander's curling corner almost deceived Sheppard. It was close to creeping into the net, but the goalkeeper managed to palm the ball onto the bar, and a big boot upfield completed the escape. It also caught the Town stretched, and Nogan and Lovell were able to exchange passes to get beyond Steve Davis, with Nogan eventually in space to fire in his second goal.

And for the 20 minutes after that Reading were able to cruise, with the Town rarely looking dangerous. The introduction of Bontcho Guentchev for Linton, in a vain bid to add bite to the attack, made no difference at all, and it was painful to see the Town finish the game looking a very bedraggled outfit.

REPORTS BY BRIAN SWAIN
PICTURES BY GARETH OWEN

FULL STRETCH: Reading sub Tom Jones toepokes the ball away to halt a Dewight Marshall run for goal.

How they stand

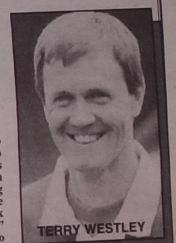
ENDSLEIGH LEAGUE FIRST DIVISION

	HOME					AWAY					
	P	W	D	L	F	A	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Leicester	6	2	0	1	7	5	2	1	0	3	2	13
Millwall	6	1	1	1	2	2	3	0	0	4	1	13
Barnsley	6	2	0	1	4	7	2	0	1	7	6	12
Charlton	6	3	0	0	7	3	0	2	1	1	2	11
West Brom	6	2	1	0	4	1	1	1	1	4	4	11
Birmingham	6	2	1	0	6	2	1	0	2	8	7	10
Ipswich	6	3	0	0	8	1	0	1	2	2	5	10
Norwich	6	2	1	0	4	2	1	0	2	5	6	10
Oldham	6	2	0	1	6	3	1	0	2	3	4	9
Huddersfield	6	3	0	0	7	3	0	0	3	2	8	9
Reading	6	2	0	1	7	5	0	3	0	1	1	9
Wolves	6	2	1	0	8	2	0	1	2	2	5	8
Tranmere	5	1	2	0	5	3	1	0	1	3	2	8
C. Palace	5	1	1	0	5	4	1	1	1	3	3	8
Sunderland	6	2	0	1	4	2	0	2	1	1	4	8
Portsmouth	6	1	1	1	4	3	1	0	2	5	6	7
Watford	6	2	0	1	7	4	0	1	2	1	3	7
Grimsby	6	1	2	0	2	1	0	1	2	3	7	6
Derby Co	6	0	2	1	1	2	1	0	2	4	7	5
Luton Town	**6**	**0**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**6**	**1**	**1**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**5**
Southend	6	1	1	1	2	2	0	1	2	2	5	5
Port Vale	6	0	1	2	1	4	1	1	1	2	2	5
Stoke	6	0	1	2	1	3	1	0	2	4	9	4
Sheff Utd	6	1	0	2	4	6	0	0	3	3	7	3

'How do they think I feel?' says Westley

IF BY some mischance Reading get into the Premiership – they lost in the play-off final last season – the many ground alterations they will be forced to carry out will include provision of a Press room, where managers can talk to journalists in a calm atmosphere.

Reading are the only First Division club without one, and because of it Terry Westley had to walk out to the post-match "interview area' on the edge of the pitch past a group of angry Town fans he later called yobboes.



TERRY WESTLEY

They went for him in no uncertain terms, saying the team performance was the worst they had seen in ten years, and questioning his formation and strategy.

The Town manager tried to speak calmly to them, and kept his cool under unnecessary provocation.

"They pay good money to follow us and are entitled to their view," he said. "It was just a pity that as I was on my way to attend a meeting with Press men, who are always polite, I had to walk past the eight yobboes first."

The manager's answer to the angry fans was a sound-bite or two out of the interview he gave to the Luton News this week, reported on today's back page.

He said at Elm Park: "I can understand supporters being disappointed. How do they think I feel?

"I know that to prove we are a top ten team or better we have to beat teams like Reading.

"It was level at half-time, and in the first 15 minutes of the second half we absolutely dominated. But then the game changed on a referee's decision. I believe even the referee might now think he made a mistake when he gave the penalty to Reading.

"I asked him where the ball went after Des Linton's tackle on Gooding. He said he didn't know. I do: the tackle took the ball cleanly, and it was not a foul. If Linton had taken the man the ball would have carried on. In fact it was a magnificent tackle. And not one of their players appealed for a penalty.

"They are all professionals, the same as ours who protested about it. Then within a few seconds Dwight Marshall was pulled back after he had got round his man, but nothing was given.

"But that's football. We can talk about the good play we produced in spells, but all people are interested in is the result, and that is one thing I have had rammed home to me since I became manager.

"When I was youth team coach, results were less imortant than the job of producing good players. If you lost games but produced a John Hartson you had done your job well.

"At first team level results are all that matter – and you can't win games if you let in three goals. We were too open at the back, even when we switched to 4-4-2 in the second half."

He was asked if he felt under pressure, and if Luton Town faced a crisis, and quickly regretted his reply, which was a very personal one. He spoke of someone very close to him who had been seriously ill, but had recovered. That's a real crisis he said, making it clear he knew better than to accept Bill Shankly's oft-quoted remark that football is more important than life or death.

Reading's joint manager Mick Gooding said he was happy to accept the ref's decisions, and was well pleased with his side's second win of the season.

"In our last home game we turned in an excellent team performance," he said. "We should have won it. But things went wrong after a penalty decision went against us, and Millwall won 2-1.

"Until today we had been playing well in spells. But against Luton I thought we dominated for longer periods."

Fans stay away and miss a fold-up

LUTON TOWN 1 PERUGIA 4

THE SMALLEST crowd to watch a first team game at Kenilworth Road since 1933 suffered agonies as the Town played some of their best football of the season for the first half-hour in the Anglo-Italian Cup, then folded up like a bunch of Sunday pub footballers with hangovers.

Manager Terry Westley ordered his players to do a day's extra training on the practice pitch to try to remind them of the need to get rid of the soft centre that spoils a potentially sweet combination.

A penalty in injury time at the end of the first half gave the Town a lifeline after they had gone two down, but they failed to grasp it, conceding two more soft goals after the break to a team struggling to get away from the foot of Serie B in Italy.

The brightest feature for home fans, who were eventually singing "We're not singing any more' was the debut of 17-year-old Sean Evers, a spindly-legged midfielder who might be the next David Preece, or even a George Cummins.

Composed and confident beyond his years, he was on the way to becoming an instant star as the Town played possession football without adding the final punch in the early stages.

Ceri Hughes, part way through his suspension, sparkled and the Italians were getting rattled until they were given two quick goals. Non-existent marking from a free kick let in Marco Negri in the 35th minute, and an upfield jaunt by Kelvin Davis that failed to get the ball gifted Giovanni Cornacchini another two minutes later.

The penalty came when Hughes was through on goal from Richard Harvey's pass, and was brought down. Bontcho Guentchev scored from the spot.

The potential revival never materalised because Perugia's first corner, a few seconds after the interval, led to another case of no marking, and Andrea Cottini headed in. Davis's nightmare was complete in the 59th minute when he brought down Negri, who converted the penalty.

Westley was angry about the silly goals against, but added: "We're not a million miles away. But we're as soft as they come in the box."

In a late surge Steve Davis stormed upfield to force the keeper to make a couple of good saves, and sub Jamie Woodsford suffered the same fate with a drive which was brilliantly tipped over. Three minutes from time Dwight Marshall hit the bar, long after the crowd had started singing "What a load of rubbish."

LUTON TOWN: Kelvin Davis; James, Steve Davis, Skelton; Linton, Hughes, Evers, Harvey; Guentchev (Marshall 68 mins), Thorpe (Waddock 68 mins), Oldfield (Woodsford 68 mins).

PERUGIA: Fabri; Camplone, Cottini (Beghetto 71 mins), Tasso, Materazzi; Pagano (Boiocco 61 mins), Atzori, Tedesco, Notaristefano; Negri, Cornacchini (Meacci 57 mins).

GOALS: Negri and Cornacchini for Perugia, 35 and 37 mins; Bontcho Guentchev penalty for the Town, 45 mins; Cottini and Negri (penalty) for Perugia, 46 and 59 mins.

Luton Town's season at a glance

DATE... OPPONENTS... RESULT... TOWN SCORERS... ATTENDANCE... LEAGUE POSITION

ENDSLEIGH LEAGUE DIV I

August 1995

13	**Norwich**	(H)	1-3 (Guentchev, pen)	7,848 –
19	Southend	(A)	1-0 (Thorpe)	4,630 –
26	**Leicester**	(H)	1-1 (Hughes)	7,612 16
29	Grimsby	(A)	0-0	...4,289 10

September

2	**Derby**	(H)	1-2 (Marshall)	6,427 17
9	Reading	(A)	1-3 (Marshall)	...8,550 20
13	Millwall	(A)		
16	**Sunderland**	(H)		
23	Wolves	(A)		
30	**Portsmouth**	(H)		

October

7	Tranmere	(A)
14	**West Brom**	(H)
21	Ipswich	(A)
28	**Charlton**	(H)

November

4	Stoke	(A)
11	**Oldham**	(H)
18	**Birmingham**	(H)
21	Watford	(A)
25	Barnsley	(A)

December

2	**Tranmere**	(H)
9	**Wolves**	(H)
16	Portsmouth	(A)
23	**Huddersfield**	(H)
26	C Palace	(A)
30	Port Vale	(A)

January 1996

1	**Sheffield U**	(H)
13	**Southend**	(H)
20	Norwich	(A)

February

3	Leicester	(A)
10	**Grimsby**	(H)
17	**Millwall**	(H)
21	Derby	(A)
24	Sunderland	(A)
27	**Reading**	(H)

March

3	**C Palace**	(H)
9	Huddersfield	(A)
16	**Port Vale**	(H)
23	Sheffield U	(A)
30	**Ipswich**	(H)

April

2	West Brom	(A)
6	Charlton	(A)
9	**Stoke**	(H)
13	Birmingham	(A)
20	**Watford**	(H)
27	**Barnsley**	(H)

May

4	Oldham	(A)

COCA-COLA CUP (First Round)

August 1995

15	**Bournem'th**	(H)	1-1 (Marshall)	2,728
22	Bournemouth	(A)	1-2 (aet) (M Johnson)	4,844

(Bournemouth win 3-2 on aggregate).

ANGLO ITALIAN CUP

September 5 1995

Perugia (h) 1- 4 (Guentchev pen) 2,352

Who's who

APPEARANCES... GOALS

League appearances (as sub in brackets)

M Johnson	6
Hughes	3
Oldfield	6
Harvey	6
Taylor	3 (2)
Guentchev	4 (2)
Alexander	5
Sommer	2
James	5
S Davis	5
Marshall	5
Thorpe	1 (3)
Thomas	1 (1)
Waddock	2 (1)
Peake	1 (3)
K Davis	4
G Johnson	4
Linton	3
Woodsford	(2)

League goals

Guentchev	1 pen
Thorpe	1
Hughes	1
Marshall	2

Assists

Alexander	1
Taylor	1
Guentchev	1
G Johnson	1

Coca Cola Cup

Sommer	2
M Johnson	2
S Davis	2
Oldfield	
ZAlexander	2
Marshall	2
Taylor	
Guentchev	2
Harvey	2
Thoma	1(1)
Hughes	1
James	1
Waddock	1
Thorpe	(2)
Matthews	(1)

Cup goals

Marshall1	
M Johnson	1

Assists

S Davis 1	
Alexander	1

Anglo Italian Cup K

Davies	1
James	1
Skelton	1
S Davies	1
Evers	1
Thorpe	1
Linton	1
Guentchev	1
Hughes 1	
Harvey 1	
Waddock	1
Marshall1	
Woodsford	1

Goals

Guentchv	pen

Assists

Hughes	(1)

FA Cup dates

Round 3	Jan6
Round 4	Jan 27
Round 5	Feb 17
Round 6	Mar 9
Semi-Final	Mar 30

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