

Lack of goals stumps Hatters

00/01

Luton Town 0 Wigan Athletic 2

Report by Bill Cole

A HOWLER from returning Hatters keeper Mark Ovendale helped seal the points for promotion-chasing Wigan.

Manager Lil Fuccillo agonised long and hard over whether to retain out-of-sorts Nathan Abbey in Luton's goal but in the end opted to give Ovendale, Hatters' £425,000 summer signing from Bournemouth, his first chance since October.

So when the keeper dropped a simple catch from Wigan's only corner of the game in the second half Fuccillo must have been tearing his hair out about what to do to prevent Hatters slide towards Division Three.

But once again it was ultimately a lack of scoring power which proved the Hatters downfall. For the second Saturday running a big-spending, promotion-chasing side showed the Hatters how it was done, the points lifting the visitors to second place in the table.

Simon Howarth proved the benefits that a big target man can bring when he rattled home a super volley after ten minutes, and Ovendale's bloomer presented the 'Latics with their clinching goal in the 53rd minute from Wigan's only corner of the game.

That statistic highlighted Athletic's tactics. They scored from their first meaningful attack, and stout defending with Arjan DeZeeuw at the forefront, made sure of the points □ albeit aided and abetted by some poor Town finishing.

Both sides took some time to come to terms with a hard pitch that had been completely cleared of snow by supporters in the morning □ but those fans who turned up at 8am to do the donkey work in return for a free match ticket will have left wondering why they bothered.

Spring warmed Derek Stillie's hands from much the same range as he opened the scoring in Tuesday's game. And Petri Helin played wall passes with Lee Nogan and Andrew Fotiadis before letting the ball run away from him in the box as the Town pressed.

Wigan produced some clinical play on ten minutes. Lee Ashcroft produced a great cross from the left that beat Julian Watts and Stuart Fraser, Howarth escaped them both to crispy

volley home making Ovendale's first touch for three months the unenviable one of picking the ball out of the net.

Adam Locke might have brought the scores level when his shot hit the back of Watts' head but the effort ricocheted agonisingly wide with the keeper helpless to do anything about it.

As the Town kept up the offensive DeZeeuw three times made important clearances then stopped Fotiadis in his tracks with a well-timed tackle when the striker looked certain to get in a shot.

Just after the interval it was Stillie's turn to deny the Hatters with a brilliant save from Nogan's firm drive that looked all over a goal inside the back post. Then Matthew Taylor caught Stillie out with a long cross that the keeper spilled but managed to retrieve right on the line.

A minute later it was Ovendale who dropped a simple catch from the one and only corner the 'Latics earned in the game. But the Luton keeper was not as lucky as his opposite number as it fell smack on to Stefan Bidstrup's head and looped into the net.

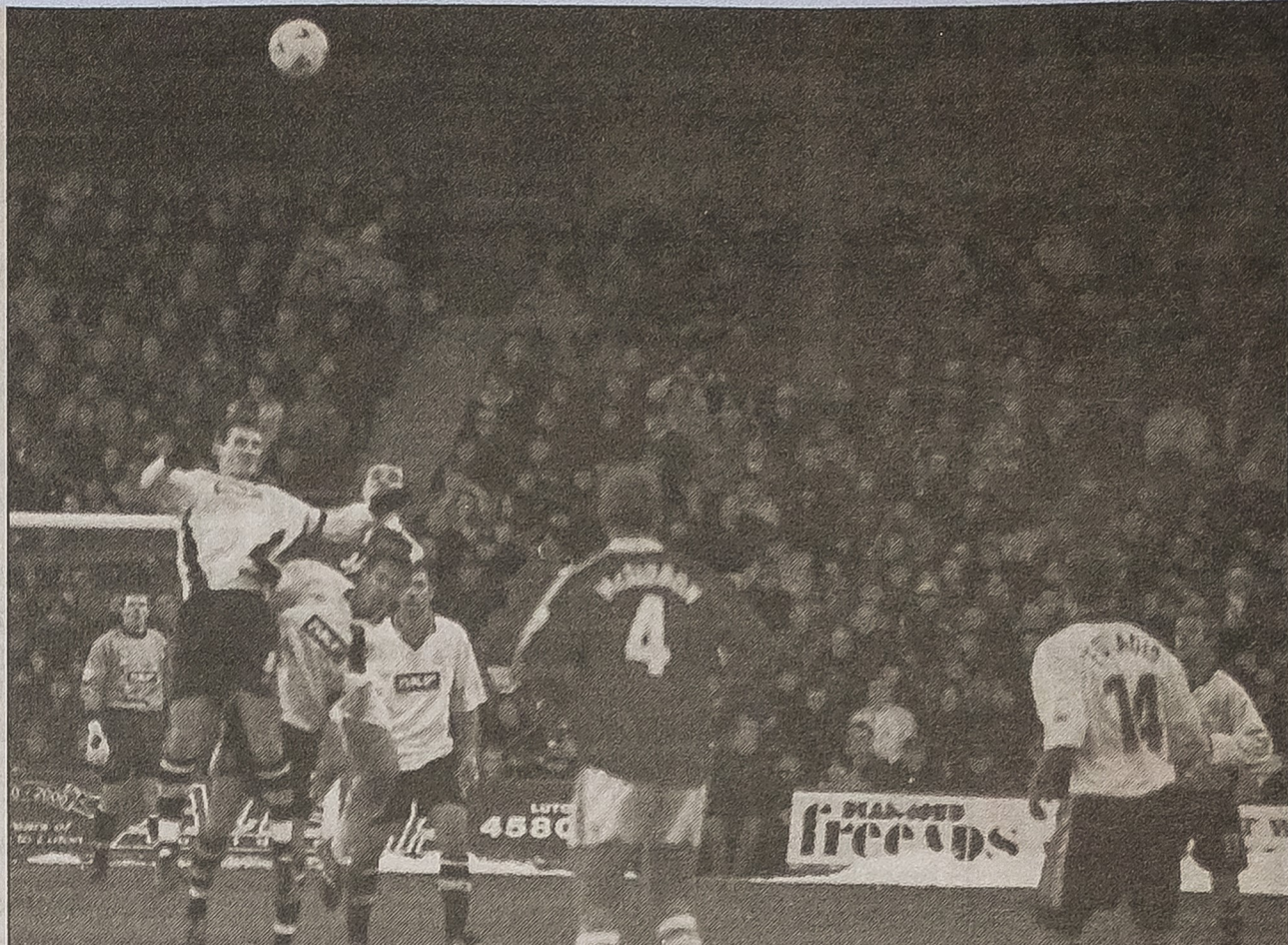
The Town refused to give up and Fotiadis could have done better than place a point-blank header straight at Stillie from Taylor's corner, and Nogan put a similar effort inches wide from another of the Town's series of flag kicks.

Stillie did well to punch another off Watts' head and when substitute Thomson at last produced a quality ball, Fotiadis, under severe pressure from DeZeeuw, fizzed a near post flick narrowly over.

The substitutions that included Mark Stein's totally ineffective return to league action, did not help Luton's cause and it was the visitors who picked up three vital points to help their charge at the right end of the table and keep Luton second from bottom at the other.

Luton Town: Ovendale, Whitbread, Watts, Fraser, Helin, Taylor, Locke, Spring, Holmes (Thomson 59), Fotiadis, Nogan (Stein 74). Subs unused. Breitenfelder, Stirling, Abbey. Attendance: 5,322.

Luton Man of the Match: Matthew Taylor.



■ Matthew Spring rises above the throng, above
■ Fotiadis in the thick of the action yesterday afternoon, below



Ryman reorganisation plans

BARTON Rovers' game at Northwood and Leighton's trip to Hungerford were, like so many games around the country, called off because of the weather.

In the hope of a thaw, Barton's game has been re-arranged at Northwood on Tuesday evening, kick-off 7.45pm.

On Saturday Barton entertain Walton and Hersham in what was expected to be a vital relegation clash.

However, there are now plans to restructure the Ryman League next season with a Premier Division, two regionalised First Divisions and a Second Division.

That would mean no relegation from the First Division at the end of the season.



■ My ball: Lee Nogan battles to keep possession from Wigan