

The Southern League.

LUTON v. BRISTOL ROVERS.

Played at Bristol on Saturday. Result:—

Bristol Rovers	3 goals.
Luton	1 goal.

The teams were as follow:—

Luton—Thompson; Bennett and McEwen; F. Hawkes, Holdstock, and R. Hawkes; Durrant, Eaton, McKee, Turner, and Allsopp.

Bristol Rovers—Cartledge; Dunn and Pudan; Tait, Appleby, and Gray; Wilson, Elmore, Beats, Smith, and Marriott.

Referee, Mr. J. W. Bailey (Leicester).

Ever since a Bristol team has figured in the Southern League our visits to that city have proved a blank so far as points are concerned. Indeed, I think I am correct in stating Bristol Rovers have inflicted the heaviest Southern League defeat for the past two seasons, and I sincerely trust it may prove to be so this season. It will be observed the margin against was two goals for the first time during the present season, and it was certainly a new experience, which it is hoped may not be repeated.

White's ankle being still weak, Holdstock again figured at centre-half, while the forwards were constituted much in the same way as before Christmas. Moody had not been able to train properly during the week on account of a severe cold, and it was thought advisable to turn out the attacking brigade as sound as possible in such a stiff encounter.

On arrival at Bristol the players found the elements far from pleasant, rain falling heavily, while there was almost a hurricane blowing. It will be remembered it was under similar weather conditions the match was played last year, and hopes were entertained that McEwen might be successful in winning the toss, as it would undoubtedly prove a big factor in the result. But unfortunately he was no luckier than Lindsay last time, and Luton were therefore compelled to face a strong wind, although the rain kept off for a time in the early stages.

For the first twenty minutes play was practically confined to the Luton half of the field, but the defence stood the strain in the usual effective way. Indeed, considering the force of the gale, Thompson had very little to do, for the halves were well backed by Bennett and McEwen, and they held off the opposing vanguard in fine style. Still, it was not to be expected they could keep out a string of forwards who have now scored a larger number of goals than any other five in the League.

Wilson was the first to get the ball home some two or three minutes after the start, but he was palpably offside, and Mr. Bailey had no hesitation in awarding a free kick to Luton. A minute later Pudan almost netted with a long shot from near the half-way line, but it touched someone and passed out a trifle wide. Less than ten minutes from the commencement, however, Wilson notched a legitimate point after the ball had been bobbing about, practically on the goal-line, from a centre from Marriott. Two or three times it was kicked away from the mouth of goal by Bob Hawkes, but the wind prevented it leaving this vicinity, and ultimately Wilson had only to touch through.

At this stage of the proceedings Wilson was always a dangerous customer, and a really fine effort on his part was only spoilt by Beats putting over the bar when it looked a certain goal. Thompson saved the situation in good style when Smith sent in a hot shot from decent range, and immediately after he again brought off a magnificent save by coming out of his goal. Pressure was relieved for a moment when Appleby fouled McKee, but McEwen's place kick went straight to Beats, who quickly brought the ball down again, passing out to Wilson who, taking aim, caused Thompson to concede a corner.

Twenty minutes from the start saw Luton really dangerous for the first time, through some clever work on the part of Turner and Allsopp. The ball was put in the centre to Holdstock, who gave Durrant a nice opportunity to equalise, but Pudan came to the rescue and kicked out near the goal-line. Not to be denied, the left wing came along once more, in good style, and McKee caused Cartledge to handle right in the goal-mouth. On the opposite wing Durrant made a fine run, and passing to his partner with good judgment, enabled Eaton to get in a cross shot which the Rover's custodian, however, got away.

This change in the scene was scarcely to the liking of the crowd, who, as the interval was fast approaching, saw visions of a possible defeat with only a single goal to the credit of the home players. But a fine burst through by Beats enabled Smith to net a second goal from long range, the ball travelling right across the goal-mouth and entering the net in the extreme corner. Again Wilson got the ball past Thompson from a centre from Marriott, but as the Rovers' outside-left was offside, no score resulted.

As the interval approached, Luton again took up the running, and caused the home defence some anxious moments. On one occasion it almost looked as if the lead would be reduced previous to crossing over, for Holdstock gave McKee a fine opening right in front, but the referee whistled for offside. In my opinion, this was a big mistake, for both backs were between Mao and Cartlidge, and I understand Mr. Bailey admitted afterwards he was in error in stopping the game. This was most unfortunate for Luton, as a goal at this stage would have meant a deal.

I have no wish to slate the referee for a single mistake, however, for taking the game right through he did wonderfully well and was far in advance of the whistle-holders we usually meet away from home. About the last item of interest before lemon-time was another run on the part of Durrant, and from the centre McKee forced an unavailing corner.

With the wind at their backs, Luton naturally were more in evidence on crossing over, and Cartlidge was kept busy for some time. From a corner kick the ball could not be got away for several seconds, and the spectators were evidently relieved when Cartlidge at length got to it and threw away, with several Lutonians close in. A moment or so later he was compelled to concede another corner by tipping a good shot from Luton's right wing over the bar. But it was difficult to place corners with such a wind blowing, and this was put behind.

A long attempt by Allsopp looked dangerous, but the elevation was a trifle too high, and the ball passed over the bar, although it deserved a better fate, for Cartlidge appeared well beaten. But some seventeen minutes after the re-start Allsopp earned the usual handshake by a beautiful shot from almost the identical position he had put in the attempt previously recorded. The ball went into the net at a terrific pace, and the Rovers' custodian was beaten all the way.

With only one goal between them, it looked any odds on Luton at least drawing, but a breakaway by the Rovers' left wing gave the Luton players considerable anxiety. Smith got the ball as it cannoned off Bennett in midfield, and sailing away towards Thompson, the Luton goalie came out to meet the shot, but could not quite reach it, and the ball went towards the uprights in a most dangerous fashion. Luckily, it struck the post and rebounded into play, and Hawkes rushing up, kicked out of danger. It was an extremely fortunate escape, as there was no one between the sticks, and another couple of inches would have made all the difference.

At this point rain began to fall, and the game was contested under most uncomfortable conditions. Durrant soon after once more put the ball past Cartlidge from a good centre from Allsopp, but the whistle had gone for offside. Again offside negatived a good chance to equalise when Turner made a dash for the ball near the Bristol uprights, and it was a pity that he did not leave it to Allsopp, who was close behind but well onside when the ball was last played.

All hope of saving the game went when Wilson, taking advantage of an opening through a misunderstanding on the part of the Luton defence, was left completely unattended. Thompson made a gallant attempt to retrieve the situation by coming out to meet the ex-Northampton player, but of course had practically no

chance, as Wilson kept fine control of the ball, and letting drive at the opportune moment, sent into the net without difficulty.

This incident happened when there was only thirteen minutes to go and quite settled the result. The Rovers appeared content with their two goals' lead, and Luton could not engineer any really dangerous openings. Once Appleby kicked the ball over his own goal-line from near the half-way line, but the corner came to nothing, and the players retired with the score 3-1 in favour of the Rovers.

Although the Luton defence was beaten three times, they came out of the struggle with honours, for it was a most difficult task to face such a gale as the one that was turned on at Bristol. As usual under such conditions, the side that wins the toss enjoys a big advantage, and the players have so much taken out of them before crossing over that it is almost impossible for them to do themselves justice when they get the advantage of playing with the elements in their favour.

But for a couple of slips in the second half, when his backs were beaten and he had either to leave his charge or take his chance with a shot from close range, Thompson played his usual cool game. My own opinion is that it is the right policy to make the opposition take the shot from the longest range possible, and several times during the present season Thompson has prevented a goal by exactly similar tactics to those he used at Bristol.

At no time could it be said the Luton defence broke down, although the pressure was very severe during the first half. Bennett and McEwen certainly gave as good a display as the home backs when they faced the wind and rain after change of ends. With the playing pitch as soft as it was on Saturday, White was decidedly missed. Still Holdstock by no means did badly, although F. Hawkes was the best member of the middle line. "Bob" Hawkes put in some delightful touches, and his passing was greatly admired, but undoubtedly he prefers a faster pitch than we have seen lately.

On the whole, the front rank did better than in some recent matches, Allsopp being the shining light, for in addition to scoring the only goal for his side, he put in a series of grand runs such as would surprise not a few Lutonians. It is a curious fact that Tommy seems to reserve his most effective displays for away fixtures. Durrant also did some fine aggressive work, especially in the second half, but the Luton forwards did not finish in the effective way their opponents did, and this was the real cause of the defeat.

Otherwise the game could be said to consist of two distinct periods of pressure, for undoubtedly so far as midfield play was concerned, each side held the upper hand in equal proportions. But the Luton attack were unable to drive home the openings worked for, and thus the lack of goals to their credit.

Apparently the Luton players have no liking for soft playing pitches, for since beating Southampton on a hard frosty ground they have not won a game of any sort, and the chances of Southern League championship have almost faded away. It will need a bad fall by the present leaders to enable us to have another chance, and as they have now retired from pot-hunting, I have little hope of this happening.

In the other Southern League matches, Queen's Park Rangers and Fulham made a draw, Millwall beat Swindon 3-1, Reading beat Kettering 3-0, Wellingborough beat New Brompton 1-0, and Northampton beat Brentford 3-0.

The game of most interest to Lutonians was that at Brighton, where Plymouth had to be content with a draw. Brighton are to be our visitors next Saturday, and their performance against Plymouth is an indication, if one were needed, that they are not a team to be despised.