

A BRUCE RIOCH SPECIAL CLINCHES IT

It's cheers all the way for Luton

67/68



By ROGER DUCKWORTH

LUTON TOWN'S loyal band of followers were given the justification to chant the victory slogan they have been practising all season at 4.32pm on Saturday. Their: "We are the Champions", echoed round the hollowed bowl of The Shay and up the towering slopes of the overshadowing Beacon Hill.

And they added to this a tribute to Bruce Rioch, who scored Luton's winning goal. "He's the greatest inside forward in the land," they roared, after his 20-yard drive had flashed the Town into Division Three.

Then there were drinks all round for the players; there was a BBC interview by telephone for Town manager Allan Brown; and there was a great send off for the team coach through an avenue of singing fans.

So promotion is assured and so, surely, is the title. There is one qualification but it is so infinitesimal that it is barely worth consideration. But if Luton lose their remaining four matches 4-0, and if Barnsley win their last fixtures 4-0, then Barnsley will finish with a better goal average than the Town.

And who really thinks that will happen? Town are unbeaten at home this season, and three of their last four matches are at Kenilworth Road.

Restraint

But while the fans are acclaiming the Hatters as champions, manager Allan Brown, though absolutely delighted, is exercising some of his Scottish restraint.

"We are not champions yet," he said. "One must not forget that anything can happen in football and we must remember that the title is not officially ours yet. The lads must keep their feet on the ground and their heads out of the clouds. We want to beat Crewe on Wednesday and go for the championship points record."

While argument and speculation about the decimal points continues, and the slide-rule experts try to work out the football futures of the title challengers, let it not be overlooked, Luton Town are now a Third Division club.

They have won promotion and this is a tremendous fillip to the people of Luton who have been in something of a soccer wilderness in recent years.

I expect them to turn out in force on Wednesday night to fete the Town and urge them to success over second-placed Crewe. That much-talked-of gate of 20,000 is quite likely to be topped.

Promotion was ensured by Town's 25th win of the season on Saturday. It was a match in which tension seemed to play a big part and, as a result, was mainly a battle of defences.

Lethal

Both sets of forwards looked dangerous on occasions, but both lacked penetration.

A goalless draw looked a certainty until Rioch hammered home one of his specials eight minutes from the end. It was his 19th League goal of the season and the one that put Luton's promotion beyond doubt.

A draw would have put the Town in the Third Division — but it's better to be safe than sorry!

Graham French picked up a through ball, cut inside and was turning for goal when he was tripped from behind by Les Massie.

As the Halifax defence was trying to sort out its protective wall, French tapped the ball to Rioch's lethal left foot, and he scored from 20 yards.

Three minutes earlier Slough had left the field to be substituted by Billy McDermott, who must take a lot of credit for the way he helped quell Halifax's final onslaught, and for the coolness with which he held the ball and took it clear of danger.

Otherwise there was a competent all round show from Luton, who made it 18 matches on the run without defeat.

Luton's promotion received a sporting reception from the Halifax players. And before the match their chairman, Mr Alan Maden, asked Mr Brown if Luton would do a lap of honour if they won.

But after the match Luton headed for the dressing room, and by the time they could-reappear most of the crowd had drifted away. I feel Luton will want to save their lap of honour for their own crowd on Wednesday.

LUTON: Read; Dougan, Jardine; Slough (McDermott), Branston, Moore, Brown, Buxton, Allen, Rioch, French.

HALIFAX: Smith; Russell, Wallace; Pickering, Holt, Hampton; Flower, Massie, Morris, Ryden, McCarthy. Sub: Wooller.

Referee: Mr R. Capey (Crewe). Attendance: 5,091.