

SHEFFIELD SAVES A POINT FOR TOWN

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Luton 1
Gillingham 1

By
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LUTON were saved from a humiliating defeat by an 84th minute goal by Laurie Sheffield against Gillingham this afternoon.

It was a disappointing result after Wednesday's fine display against Bristol Rovers, especially as Watford lost last night.

A bright sun greeted the fans at Kenilworth Road but it lacked warmth and there was a cold wind knifing its way across the pitch.

Even so, there were long queues outside the ground an hour before the kick off. The fact that Watford, league leaders, lost at Stockport last night was enough to renew Luton's hopes of promotion.

Watford manager Ken Furphy came to watch and before the start said he was the most disappointed at what he called an "unlucky defeat."

The ground was dry and firm and looked ideal for two footballing sides.

Luton, who are riding along on the crest of the wave at the moment, were unchanged, fielding the same side that beat Bristol Rovers at Luton in mid week.

This was a match that both sides needed to win — for different reasons. Two points for Luton would give them a great chance of overhauling Swindon next week, and points were equally important to Gillingham, who are languishing in the bottom half of the table.

Substitutes

Today's mascot was 11-year-old Phillip Shayler, of Applehill Road, Flitwick. He led the Luton team out.

Freddie Jardine was again the Luton substitute after standing down in mid-week to make way for the return of Bruce Rioch, who made his first Saturday afternoon appearance for almost two months following his cartilage operation.

Former Luton leader Gordon Riddick led the Gillingham side out. He received a mixed reception from the Luton crowd.

Back into the Gillingham side came Brian Yeo at centre forward. He had been out with a knee injury. Derek Woodley was substitute.

Luton's first chance to show came following a Dougan free kick on the halfway line which was met by Slough, but his shot was wide.

Then, from a similar position on the left, as Luton attacked the Oak Road end, Bannister put a long free kick into the penalty area which was touched on by Lewis before Allen hit it wide.

Dangerous

Luton were starting once again in the usual forceful manner and after Williams had rather carelessly conceded a corner goalkeeper Simpson made a good save from French's flag kick before being fouled by Lewis.

And then after Rioch had moved inside, Sheffield found Dougan with a neat back pass and Lewis was only a fraction towards the corner flag.

After seven minutes Yeo sparked off a good Gillingham move from the right touch line



All action in the Gillingham goalmouth

and gave Simpson a very clever pass. But the half-back wasted the chance by pushing the ball too far ahead of the chasing Riddick.

Town really began to look dangerous once Allen got into the game. He put across two splendid centres from the left-wing position both of which caused Gillingham some trouble before they were beaten away.

Then Rioch put his class on show with a good run through the middle which he rounded off with a good pass out to Lewis. Lewis's kick-ahead went too far but Quirke was hurried into a big clearance that very nearly went up the players' tunnel.

The Luton defence had not been stretched in the early stages but when called into action full-backs Dougan and Bannister were both guilty of misdirected clearances.

Collision

After 13 minutes, Rioch had the briefest of chances to put the Town ahead. He ran into the centre to help out Sheffield, received an awkwardly bouncing pass which he hit a fraction of a second too soon and his shot thudded into the stout advert over the Oak Road goal.

Rioch was fouled for the second time by Simpson, and Bannister's short free kick set off another fluid-looking Luton move. Rioch received a back pass, hared down the wing, and received a peach of a return from Allen before Lewis centred. But it all came to nothing against the tall Kent defence.

The referee had a close look at David Quirke's eye after he had been involved in a heading collision with Sheffield. But the former Bedford player carried on immediately.

Luton's next big chance came in the 18th minute when a cross from Slough found Lewis on the by-line on the far side of the field. He executed an accurate overhead centre and Sheffield was just unable to reach the ball as it glided across the face of the goal.

Then in the 20th minute, Rioch very nearly gave Luton fans the moment they have been waiting for. He took a short pass in midfield and embarked on a thrilling dash through the middle before letting fly a fierce shot from the edge of the box. It was only an acrobatic save by Simpson, who turned the ball round for a corner, that prevented Luton from going ahead.

Gillingham scrambled the ball away from the corner and from a resultant free kick Rioch shot inches over the cross bar.

Hacked down

Gillingham hit back by winning a corner but this was easily cleared by the Town after it had swerved awkwardly in the tricky wind.

Another attractive move by Luton which came right across the field from Allen and French was spoiled when Lewis was hacked down by Riddick just to the left of the Gillingham penalty area.

Lewis had to have treatment but recovered sufficiently to take the free kick himself. He curled it across the goalmouth and Branson very nearly got his head to it.

Two minutes later Moore blinded a shot over the top.

A second useful looking raid from Gillingham produced an accurate Yeo centre which Davie had to climb high to collect off the head of Smillie.

Although Luton were having more of the play they were looking somewhat disjointed in the middle of their attack and this, coupled with the fact that Gillingham were covering well, caused a deadlock.

Bad error

Allen was showing some neat touches in cross-field play but for my money right-winger French was not being brought into the picture often enough.

The referee had a word with Lewis after he spotted him getting his own back on Riddick but Williams' free kick petered out harmlessly.

A bad error by Bannister let in Smillie, but Allen was alert to the situation and raced back to rob the Gillingham inside forward in timely fashion.

Three minutes before half-time lack in decision in mid-field by Luton allowed Riddick all the time in the world to take the ball away and he and Smillie worked upfield before Davie was forced to concede a corner under heavy threat from Yeo.

A minute before the break Gillingham took a rather surprising lead.

Again Luton seemed at sixes and sevens as Smillie burst through and brought a fine diving save out of Davie. But the ball went out to Simpson on the right and his low cross seemed to mesmerise the Luton defence who backed away at it unsuccessfully before Yeo darted in and scored just inside the far post from close range.

This upset for Luton was no more than they deserved. They had had most of the ball but had never seriously dictated the fortunes of the game. Some of their attacks were atrocious.

HT: Luton 0, Gillingham 1.

After watching Luton's inept performance in the first half, Watford manager Ken Furphy had real cause to smile behind his cup of tea. I would love to have been plugged in to the Luton dressing room to hear the half time pep talk that they must have received.

Gillingham again started well and a smooth move between Bailey, Riddick and Meredith was well checked by French.

He cleared to Rioch, who was crudely felled by Williams, who was booked by the referee.

But the free kick brought nothing. The Luton passing still seemed to lack firmness and the crowd began to get angry at the lack of results.

Close call

In the 52nd minute Luton were denied a penalty when Lewis was fouled in the penalty box by Williams. The

referee would have none of it and dismissed the appeals.

But Luton could have been in further trouble when the tricky Meredith baffled their defence with a low cross but there was nobody on hand to make use of the situation.

Then Davie saved Luton. Again Meredith started the trouble by bringing the ball cleverly out of defence and from Simpson's centre Smillie nearly rounded the defence only to have Davie collect the ball off his toe.

French and Rioch strived together to create a situation but it was wasted by Moore, who hit his shot high into the open terrace.

Meredith set off again and it took a good tackle by Moore and a clever pass back to Davie to erase the danger.

Clearance

Seconds later Dougan nearly surprised Simpson with a well directed and forceful low shot which the Gillingham goalkeeper did well to collect near the foot of a post.

Simpson, in goal, was again in good form when he caught a hard free kick from Rioch by the end of his fingers to repel yet another challenge on his territory.

Luton's next danger point came when Dougan failed to reach Davie's throw clearance and Meredith took the ball passed him to win a corner off Branson's outstretched leg.

The referee was rather lenient with French who caught Green a nasty crack with a back heeler as they tacked for possession on the touch line. The Luton winger got away with a quiet word from Mr Counsell.

Just as it was beginning to look as if all hope of a Luton goal had been frittered away Sheffield equalised for Luton.

The goal came just six minutes from the end. French worked his way down to the by line and pushed a low ball into the crowded goalmouth.

Sheffield took possession and after finding his road to goal blocked he calmly took the ball a couple of yards back before turning and hitting it through the defensive middle — past Simpson and into the net.

Finale

The Luton fans went wild and the last few minutes produced some really hectic football. A deafening roar went up every time a Luton player touched the ball and the songs from the Oak Road choir were once again about victory.

But with the seconds running away Moore wasted the final chance of the match.

TEAMS

Luton Town: Davie; Dougan, Bannister; Slough, Branson, Moore; French, Allen, Sheffield, Lewis, Rioch. Sub: Jardine.

Gillingham: J. Simpson; Weston, Green; T. Simpson, Williams, Quirke; Bailey, Riddick, Yeo, Smillie, Meredith. Sub: Woodley.

Referee: Mr D. Counsell (Somerset).

GOALS

YEO (Gillingham) 44 minutes
SHEFFIELD (Luton) 84 minutes

Attendance: 14,562



The man who saved Luton's home record, Laurie Sheffield (9), in the thick of things