

Barracking fans anger Alec Stock

By ROGER DUCKWORTH

TOP-OF-THE-TABLE Luton Town scrambled to an unconvincing 2-0 home win over Rochdale on Saturday to the background of an angry crowd who barracked and heckled them into worse mistakes than they had been making previously. And after the match manager Alec Stock hit back.

Referring to the recent John White award won by the Town supporters, Mr Stock said angrily: "We have become the best supporters in the land. Who for, us or the opposition?"

MATCH FACTS

LUTON TOWN: Davie; Ryan, Bannister; Keen, Branston, Slough; Collins, Macdonald (Harrison 75min), Tees, Allen, French.

ROCHDALE: Harker; Smith, Ryder; Leech, Parry, Ashworth; Whitehead, Rudd, Buck, Jenkins, Butler. Sub: Clarke.

GOALS: Collins (76min), Allen (86min).

REFEREE: Mr C. Thomas (Treorchy).

ATTENDANCE: 15,876.

"Our supporters all think they are managers. Look, we have lost two games in the last 37. Some of the players are most upset. They wonder what's going on. After all, we are top of the table.

"Quite honestly, I don't think the supporters are capable of doing my job. When they are struggling, the side needs driving on, and I expect the crowd to be on our side. I am frightened about it."

When he talked about the fans being managers, Mr Stock was referring to them baying for the appearance of substitute Mike Harrison.

The crowd had a point. They were frustrated by the inept performance of the Town, whose passing was badly off beam. They were trying to "gee up" certain players who were having a bad time. They were remembering that they had paid to go in.

But Mr Stock has an equally good point. When they are performing badly, the players are only too aware of the fact, and need urging along by their supporters.

Old fashioned

For my own view, I say Luton were lucky to win. As I left the stand an official said: "I think a draw would have been a fair result." He looked a bit askance when I replied: "I think a win for Rochdale would have been fairer."

The Lancastrians ran Luton off their feet, and gave a

skilled and willing performance. They made good use of two wingers and gave an orthodox show of down-to-earth old-fashioned football. And it darned nearly came off.

Luton were pegged back for much of the first 75 minutes. Then Harrison made his appearance at the expense of of the out-of-touch Macdonald, and things began to look better. Not that Harrison had anything directly to do with it, but Luton immediately scored.

Graham French, again Luton's most accomplished player, switched to the right and carved an opening for Collins, who redeemed himself brilliantly by crashing a good shot past Harker.

That was in the 76th minute. Ten minutes later Collins began a move that ended with Allen nodding number two over the advancing Harker's head.

Breathed again

And Luton breathed again as clear leaders of the Third Division. Before this Rochdale had looked the side most likely to succeed. Butler smashed a shot against the crossbar, Leech slammed one just wide, Jenkins missed a couple of golden opportunities and Buck suffered a similar fate.

This was uncharacteristic of the division's leading scorers, but afterwards their manager, Len Richley, explained: "That's how it goes. We are just not sticking them in at the moment. It'll come back and we will be OK again. I was disappointed, because we played well."

Packed defence is no use to Rochdale. They want to score goals. Modern thinkers in the game will scoff at me for saying this, but I believe that success is only 80 per cent of the matter for the fans, the other vital 20 per cent is entertainment.

After all, the end product of football is still to see a player thump the ball as hard as he can at goal. The pleasure comes when it either rips into the net — or the goalkeeper flies across the goal to stop it. Everything else is just working up to this.

There was a certain amount of shakiness throughout the Luton side on Saturday. In goal Davie did some dodgy punching, and the defence was often stretched. Bannister and Ryan did quite well, and Slough was in good form. Branston, sometimes a bit slow to turn, enjoyed a bruising afternoon with big-hearted Jenkins, a player of the same ilk who derived a similar amount of enjoyment from their tough, but sporting, encounter.

Thoughtful

It was in the middle where Luton struggled. Keen and Collins had poor games, and Allen did not seem to run with as much purpose as usual, though this did not detract from his work-rate and he deserved his goal.

There was nothing doing for either Tees or Macdonald, who fought lone battles against the solid Parry and Leech.

Mr Stock must have had a thoughtful weekend. Luton will have to do better than this against Fulham tomorrow night.



Hard work with no reward. This assesses the contributions made by Matt Tees and Malcolm Macdonald to Luton's victory on Saturday. Above, both players in action, with Tees diving full length to reach the ball and below, Tees tangles with Rochdale defender, Ryder

