

TOWN FIND IT HEAVY GOING

YOU'D NEVER have guessed that Luton Town were battling to get into Division Two by the insipid performance they put up at Halifax. If they make it, and continue to play like this, I dread to think what some of the crack sides will do to them.

It's not that they were all that bad — but lifeless. They looked more tired than Leeds United. There was a vein of skill running through the Luton ranks but they were not able to stamp any authority on a drab match.

Halifax had little to offer either, and Luton should have crushed their depleted side with a determined, promotion-conscious effort.

Macdonald missed a couple of chances, which seemed to make him lose heart, and I thought Busby was going to break the deadlock in the first half but he could not control the ball quickly enough in the goalmouth pressure.

With Collins playing in midfield and Harrison hampered by a strain from early on and not doing much as a result, Luton's attack was a bit limp.

Keen did his best to help out but he was needed too much to add bite in the middle of the field to be able to concentrate too long on helping the forwards.

Badly missed

French was badly missed. He would have had a field day against this Halifax side that was missing most of its best players through injury.

Indeed, before the start, manager Alan Ball told me: "I don't know how I've managed to get a team out today. I have only 15 professionals and I didn't have 11 who were fit."

And Luton manager Alec Stock pledged an all-out effort for two points. On this occasion the performance of the players was not up to the ambition of the manager.

Collins worked with a will and produced Luton's best shot which brought a fine save out of goalkeeper Smith. But when Slough tried to weigh in he was badly off target.

With Brighton losing and Bristol Rovers conceding a point at Plymouth this would have been an ideal opportunity to take the issue by the horns and head for the prize money. To win promotion you have to swamp teams like

HALIFAX 0 LUTON TOWN 0

By ROGER DUCKWORTH

Halifax. If you can't you have to take what's coming.

Luton have another tough one on Wednesday when they travel to Fulham, who are finding their form once again. The only optimism I can find in that is that the Town always play better against better sides.

Little to cheer

There was little to cheer about on Saturday and it's easy to see why twice as many people watch speedway at The Shay than watch football. There was almost a sense of relief when this match was over.

There were flashes of entertainment, but Freddie Trueman, covering the match for a Sunday newspaper, summed it up when a Halifax defender hit a hard long pass back to his goalkeeper. "That was the best shot of the match," quipped Fred.

Luton, who can do much better than this, must be kicking themselves today. They were obviously the better side and well in control — until they reached the penalty box. It was here that they erred time after time.

Just after half-time Harrison had to quit and Peter Phillips, preferred to Keith Allen as sub, went on. He worked hard

but not with any great success. After one good run he had hard luck with a cheeky little shot that Smith did well to hold.

Great save

Luton's honours go to Starling in goal, and to the back four of Ryan, Branston, Moore and Bannister. And even here there was a bit of panic sometimes, until the ball had been hacked clear of the muddy penalty area.

Early on Starling made a magnificent save to a hard downwards header from McCarthy, catching the ball cleanly on the line, and he dealt well with a fierce one, from Atkins in the second half.

Allen was left out because he collected seven stitches in a cut eyebrow while playing for the reserves at Fulham last week. I hope he's fit to return to Craven Cottage on Wednesday.

Luton can still do it but it really is looking a mammoth task now. What they need — and deserve — now is a bit of luck. The rub of the green can make all the difference and I believe that Luton are good enough to consolidate on their task if they find things going their way.

It's going to be darned close at the end.

MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Starling; Ryan, Bannister; Slough, Branston, Moore; Collins, Busby, Macdonald, Keen, Harrison (Phillips).

HALIFAX TOWN: Smith; Burgin, Lee; Shawcross, Pickering, Wallace; Chadwick, Robertson, Brierley, Atkins, McCarthy. Sub: Verity.

Attendance: 3,482.

Referee: Mr W. S. Castle (Sedgley).



Luton skipper Mike Keen collects a bash on the head from the fist of Halifax goalkeeper Smith at the Shay on Saturday. Terry Branston leaps in to lend a hand, but Smith punches clear in spite of the Luton pressure

