

UNLUCKY - BUT WHAT NEXT?

LUTON TOWN 1 SUNDERLAND 2

NOW WHAT? On Saturday Luton stumbled to their first home defeat since the heart of last season after a disappointing, ragged second-half performance against a cracking Sunderland side. But so far manager Alec Stock is not talking about changes.

This was the culmination of a four-match session in which defeat has been looming inevitably. If I were in charge I would certainly be tossing the possibility of a couple of changes about in the dressing room.

Luton were lacking in midfield, at full-back, and, on occasions, in goal.

On Saturday Luton go to Hull. They were top last week but crashed at Cardiff at the weekend. So Luton have two possibilities — either upset a settled side in an effort to shake it into shape, or leave it as it is in the hope that it can now pull itself together and revert to the paths of victory that were expected as a matter of course a month ago.

Excuses

There were faint rumblings from the players afterwards that they were unlucky; that Sunderland were in it for only brief spells; that they didn't get the rub of the green. These are purely excuses.

The fact is that Luton did not play very well. They were unfortunate to go in a goal down after going close at least

half-a-dozen times, but good sides can ride these upsets.

Luton's misfortune began early when a Givens effort from the by-line was cleared from inside the goal, but the referee took the work of his linesman that it was out of play before being crossed.

Macdonald had one cleared off the line, and later nearly broke the crossbar from 10 yards after Givens had neatly headed on a Court corner.

Givens had a down-header clawed away by Montgomery, who is the best goalkeeper I have seen this season, and Hoy had one shot kicked away and saw another scrape the angle of the posts.

Then, with the biggest home league crowd of the season roaring them forward, Luton conceded a soft goal.

A weak clearance was headed out to Park who scuffed a low centre into the danger area, and Joe Baker, who was not being tightly marked for some reason or other, almost mis-kicked it low and slowly past Read, who

looked at one stage as if he would stop it.

You could have heard the corner flags flutter. Lutor trooped in with heads hanging, and after a brief spell of aggression in the second half they went to pieces. Sunderland took over and delighted with some fast, positive and well-balanced football.

Court was pulled off by Mr Stock, and didn't look too pleased about it. It could have been John Ryan or Hoy who was sacrificed for the introduction of Viv Busby — a strong-running forward.

Afterwards the Luton manager said: "It is one of those silly decisions you have to make. Someone had to come off to make room for another forward. After all, football is a 12-man game these days."

It worked. Luton began to push forward again, and after Montgomery had made a fantastic flying save to a superbly hit and placed free kick from Keen, Luton began to chug again.

Mac's volley

Jimmy Ryan, who had been well looked after by Martin Harvey, began to explore new inroads by cutting inside, and he redeemed some earlier failure by hitting over a positive cross after a clever dribble.

Waiting with a big smile on his face was Malcolm Macdonald. He leapt high to volley an unstoppable shot past Montgomery and the Luton

crowd let out a great roar of relief.

But it was not to be. Five minutes later, when really Sunderland could have been expected to be hanging on for a point, referee Dennis Pugh awarded a marginal obstruction decision against Luton in the box.

Baker chipped it over, and Bobby Kerr dived forward to head it past Read. And that was that.

Centre-half Chris Nicholl came through with most credit for Luton, and Moore did some good work. Up front Macdonald tried hard in the box and Givens, who has a lot of class, was unlucky early on.

Read was sometimes slow off his line, and he looked a bit on the lethargic side when he failed to stop Baker's goal.

John Ryan was not his usual assertive self, though he overlapped well later, while Slough did well in defence, but he did not take the opportunity to join the attack very often. Admittedly, this was not possible with losing the middle of the field to the game northerners.

For Sunderland the whole attack was strong running, and in Colin Todd they surely have one of the league's outstanding players.

Full-backs Irwin and Harvey were in a class of their own, while the goalkeeping of Montgomery will be long remembered at Luton.

As will Luton's first-half bad luck and second-half failure.

The refereeing was not good, and Hoy and McGiven were warned for having a scrap. Seconds later McGiven was carried off with a suspected cracked shin-bone after being tackled by Hoy.

Afterwards the Luton player asked anxiously about the condition of his opponent. "I know we had just been warned," he told me. "But I honestly did know it was him when I went into tackle. I hope the X-ray is clear."

MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Read; John Ryan, Slough; Hoy, Nicholl, Moore; Jimmy Ryan, Court (Busby), Macdonald, Keen, Givens.

SUNDERLAND: Montgomery; Irwin, Harvey; Todd, Pitt, McGiven (Chambers); Park, Porterfield, Baker, Kerr, Hughes.

REFEREE: Mr D. Pugh (Chester).

ATTENDANCE: 19,202.

GOALS: Baker (Sunderland, 40 mins); Macdonald (Luton, 78); Kerr (Sunderland, 83).