

THIS POINT COULD BE VITAL

CARDIFF CITY 0, LUTON TOWN 0

EXCEPT that the goals were missing, this match had much to appeal to spectators, because it was closely fought and ruggedly contested.

So the Town had to put up their hardest and most courageous fight of the season to secure a point that might well prove of inestimable value when the final reckoning is made.

With all due respect to Tony Read, for whom there must be the highest praise, my man of the match was Chris Nicholl, who, surely must be knocking at the door for recognition by England at under-23 level.

In fact, at this present rate of progress, he could well be a contender for a place in the next World Cup team.

Yet, it is not long ago since we were all wondering whether the Town had been precipitate in paying £30,000 for a comparatively unknown player from the Fourth Division.

Late last season, he lost not only his confidence, but his first team place, but he has shaken off that bad patch, to become a completely decisive, dominating defender.

From the first time he touched the ball with a firmly headed clearance on Saturday, he was in complete command of the penalty area.

Dominating

This was most marked in the second half when, with desperation for a goal lending Cardiff strength, he broke up raid after raid. Certainly, his power in the air could not have been greater, and he was tremendously firm in the tackle.

Read, this season, has had one or two uncomfortable patches, but the memory of this display should be worth its weight in gold to him as a confidence-builder, and he was certainly the saviour of his side on several occasions.

Completely fearless in his approach, he cut out all manner of crosses, sometimes some of the most awkward variety, and never hesitated to go down in the mud at the feet of an oncoming forward.

And there was plenty of mud about, presenting a slippery surface which made accurate football difficult. More than that, it was stamina-sapping in the extreme, and that these two teams could maintain such a fast pace until the end, was a high tribute to their fitness.

First consideration from the Town's point of view was to achieve tightness in defence, and this was evident from the start.

That it was necessary was made obvious by the liveliness and hard running of the Cardiff team who, however,

were sadly lacking in a specialist striker.

There was more than a little murmuring going on among their supporters about the selling of John Toshack to Liverpool without a suitable replacement being obtained. Yet, against a less formidable defence than the Town's, their front line might well have prospered.

Beforehand, there was some speculation in the Town camp about what effect the enforced absence of John Moore might have, but we need not have worried, because Slough slotted into his place with complete facility, and helped Nicholl to block up the middle.

This game was tailor-made for Hoy, whose main task was to cut down the mid-field approach danger of the clever Gibson. This he achieved by dint of some fierce tackling and this pair had a real battle, with Hoy coming out on top.

For Bannister, this was his first complete League game of the season, and he proceeded to give his usual, tidy, competent performance; and John Ryan produced one of his best displays of the season, never yielding an inch, and being most dogged in the tackle.

These were particularly testing conditions for Court, whose role calls for him to cover a lot of ground, and he was rather too frequently caught in possession, so that the other midfield man, Keen, with his clever interceptions, was again the more prominent.

Lone wolf

With the emphasis so much on defence and on not losing, at least in the first instance, the Town were apt to place too much reliance on MacDonald, who was often a lone spearhead.

Despite this and some uninhibited tackling by the rugged Murray, he contrived to give the Cardiff defence their most difficult moments, and was always willing to have a shot from any reasonable range.

Givens did much hard running without having much to show for it, and Jimmy Ryan was largely shut out, mostly because the support available to him was less than adequate.

Goalless the match might have been, but there were some close calls, including

the woodwork of each goal being hit.

John Ryan did so first, with a raking drive that left the competent Eadie groping before coming into play off the inside of the far post.

Phew !

Then, in almost the last minute, Phillips accomplished what no-one else had been able to do and beat Read's dive, only to see the ball thud against the foot of a post and be scrambled to safety.

Probably, Read's finest save of the afternoon came just before that incident when he went full-length to hang on to a stinging shot by Clark.

So ended a titanic, if not a classic, struggle between two sides full of determination and fighting spirit, and watched, appropriately enough, by Cardiff's biggest crowd of the season, 26,689.

CARDIFF CITY: Eadie; Carver Bell; Sutton, Murray, Harris Gibson, Clark, Phillips, Woodruff King. Substitute: Showers.

LUTON TOWN: Read; John Ryan Bannister; Hoy, Nicholl, Slough; Jimmy Ryan, Court, MacDonald, Keen, Givens. Substitute: Goodeve. Referee: I. T. Smith. Accrington.



TONY READ
A great game in goal.



Jimmy Ryan goes up to try a header, but is well covered



MacDonald grimaces as he and a Cardiff defender go to head a through ball in one of the Town's raids.