

Town need to sharpen claws

Sheffield United 2

Luton Town 1

LUTON WERE given a taste of what they will be sampling every week if they get into Division One, by high-powered United on Saturday. For there is no doubt in my mind that the Blades are the best side in the Second Division and that they will be one of the two clubs to go up.

The Town cannot be too enamoured with what they saw. Given little chance to attack, they hung on in the first half. I cannot accept Luton's pleas that they gave as good as they got before the interval.

Brilliant winger Woodward did much as he pleased and left his marker Slough, and Luton goalkeeper Read, arguing as to the best way to cope with him.

Woodward stood out like the moon on a frosty night, and the manner in which he helped himself to a couple of goals underlined his skill — and freedom to do as he wished.

Luton started with two forwards — Macdonald and Givens — and ended with none as this pair had to drop back to help out where it was hurting.

Bleak winter

They were left to go it alone for most of the time with no wingers to serve them.

With their impetus fading to a crawl, Luton must pull themselves together before the visit of Watford on Saturday. To lose to them at home would be the end.

But I don't think Luton are too depressed. They seem to have an off patch about this time every season, and don't usually do badly. And let's not forget they are two games in hand on leaders Hull — and only three points behind. Both their outstanding matches are at home.

So after a bleak midwinter — which has brought them

only two points from four games, Luton face a period of consolidation.

On Saturday they escaped a thrashing — even though Currie hit the bar from a penalty, and a post with another effort. And Dearden also hit the bar.

Sheffield's football was far more flowing than Luton's, whose main source of progress seemed to be from free kicks and long throws.

Jimmy Ryan was held back by a midfield policy, but he lacks the weight and tackling know-how for this job. He made up for lapses in this department by grabbing Luton's goal from a Hope mistake when Luton were two down, and sparking a late fight.

Nicholl stars

Hoy and Court worked hard enough in the middle, but the ball never seemed to go for them as it did for United's Currie and Hockey.

Keen came back from a sprained ankle lay-up and worked his fingers to the bone — but he did not look fast enough against Sheffield's speed.

Luton's best player was centre-half Nicholl who seems to get better in the air every week. I don't think he was beaten once. Alongside him Moore, making a return from a long injury lay-off, looked strong, but a couple of times he was left flat-footed by Currie.

Read did well in Luton's goal, although he failed to intercept a low ball from the left which gave Woodward his first goal. He didn't have an earthly for the second, and during the afternoon pulled off some confident saves.

John Ryan had a lot to do at the back, and did not have the chance to do his usual amount of overlapping. None-the-less, he played with clenched teeth, which is the sort of mood Luton need at the moment.

Woodward hit United's second after a piece of sustained pressure on the Town goal. Currie again did a lot of the spade work.

New keeper

The Blades' new goalkeeper from Newcastle — John Hope — is one of those jugglers. His biggest goof was when he dropped Slough's free-kick for Jimmy Ryan to net. But on many occasions he took two tries to catch the ball.

Sheffield's other two newcomers, Ford, only the fifth man to play for both Wednesday and United, and Hockey, both looked fine acquisitions. And they combined with their new colleagues to give Luton a hard time.

Even so, we must remember that this is perhaps the hardest fixture of the season for Luton. I suppose it's not bad to come out of it only defeated 2-1 — the margin by which Sheffield lost at Luton.

Town manager Alec Stock agreed that Sheffield were the better side. "I thought the score was fair," he said afterwards. But this was one he badly wanted to win, and there was no hiding his disappointment.

There's still a long way to go. This week Luton must sharpen their claws. They are due a big win — and there's nobody they'd rather do it to than Watford.

MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Read; John Ryan, Slough; Hoy, Nicholl, Moore; Jim Ryan, Court, Macdonald, Keen, Givens. Sub: Bannister.

SHEFF UTD: Hope; Badger, Hemsley; Powell, Colquhoun, Hockey; Woodward, Ford, Dearden, Currie, Reece. Sub: Salmons.

Referee — Mr Ken Burns (Stourbridge)

Attendance — 30,986.

Goals — Woodward (Sheff Utd) 47 mins, 65 mins. Jimmy Ryan (Luton) 68 mins.