

HANGOVER BLUES DEPRESS TOWN

Luton Town 1, Millwall 1

APART FROM the odd park kick-about, this was the worst match I have seen for a long, long time. It was a Fourth Division wolf masquerading in the fluff of a Second Division spring lamb. It also pressed Luton's promotion hopes back into the ground, leaving only the tip of their ambitions showing.

Some blamed a pedantic referee for slowing the action. To my mind the worst thing he did all night was blow his whistle to start this fiasco.

Luton play Birmingham on Saturday and their manager Freddie Goodwin must have left Kenilworth Road last night chuckling behind his hand. The second half of last night's match will be left to soccer's Black Museum.

It began promisingly enough but Luton were slow to find their rhythm. Busby had the ball in the net in the first minute but Macdonald was offside. And for about half an hour that was that.

Hangover

The massed defence of the Millwall goal made it very difficult for Luton to create chances. Full-backs John Ryan and Bannister, who was making a worthy return to the side, both took part in some enthusiastic overlaps. But their good work was largely cut out before it could bear fruit.

Then, on the half hour, Luton skipper Mike Keen gave manager Alec Stock a 54th birthday present. Givens worked hard to win a corner against plucky goalkeeper King. Jim Ryan placed it immaculately and Keen blasted home a picturesque header.

In the next minute John Ryan had to clear a reciprocal effort from his own goal-line.

Millwall were showing the match was far from lost.

Postponed from Boxing Day, this match developed into a real Christmas hangover. The more fast and furious Luton played, the more effective the frustrating tactics of Millwall became.

I suppose it was never going to be a classic with Luton desperate for both points and Millwall not noted for being the most thoroughbred of sides. But it was hard luck for the paying customers when it developed into a long kicking match between two goalkeepers with the rest of the players doing their best to get the ball back to them to carry it out.

The boredom was punctuated by some good moves from Luton. In the 32nd minute Macdonald was unlucky after a great move involving Jimmy Ryan and Hoy, and a couple of minutes before the break Keen went close with another good header from a Jim Ryan corner.

Millwall used the offside trap to good effect and whatever the fans think of it this is a facet of the modern game. It is often used by Luton. Fast-tackling Millwall made few mistakes at the back, giving Luton little leeway in which to carry out their skills.

Town goalkeeper Read had

very little to do but he was almost surprised by a good left-foot shot from Possee in the 64th minute.

With a couple of energetic and promising-looking runs, Macdonald woke the dozing fans. But one of his efforts sailed over the bar and the other had hard luck at the feet of Givens and Busby.

Then a Busby effort was turned round after a good run. Luton's game deteriorated with the distribution of Hoy and Keen beginning to fail. Keen had lined himself up for the man of the match in the first half, but this slipped away in the second.

Fair match

Luton's best player was undoubtedly Alan Slough who stood in for the injured Chris Nicholl. He played former England international Barry Bridges out of the match.

Moore had a fair match but was unable to stop full-back Brown equalising for the Londoners three minutes from the end. But then neither could two or three defenders who were muddled up in the incident.

During the second half Lions manager Benny Fenton was warned about coaching from the touchline. He was lucky not to have been booked after having an animated conversation with Dunphy on

the touchline.

Afterward I asked him what he had said: "I told them how to score a goal," he said. "It worked too, didn't it?"

There were some long faces in the Luton boardroom after the match. But one of them did not belong to Mr Stock. "It was a bit grim, I know," he told me. "But we are far from out of it. We aim to make it with a late run-in."

Disappointed

And coach Jimmy Andrews said: "All over? Far from it. We are in with a chance as long as there are games to be played.

"I was very disappointed with the second half but we played quite well in the first. We got back into some of the bad habits of last season — pumping long balls up the middle.

"It was so frustrating. Millwall always play like that. They make you desperate."

Macdonald and Busby were left with little chance against Kitchener and Dorney both of whom had splendid games. The high balls aimed for them were usually headed clear.

In spite of the rockiness of their present position, Luton's chances of promotion must not be scrubbed. We all know they have the ability and resilience to bounce back. With high-riding Birmingham coming to Luton on Saturday, the Hatters have a chance to hit back.

The fans must forget last night's display. Birmingham will be bringing anything up to 10,000 supporters with them. The Luton fans must rally round their team to give them a fighting chance.