

A JITTERY DEFENCE SINKS TOWN

By ROGER DUCKWORTH

LUTON TOWN manager Alec Stock did not write off the club's chances of Second Division promotion after yesterday's 3-2 defeat against Bristol City at Ashton Gate. He said: "There are still matches to play. We'll talk about that in a fortnight."

So today it looked as if £35,000 David Court and £20,000 Roger Hoy would be given another chance. "I think we shall go back to the old 4-3-3 formation," he said. But Mr Stock was not naming his side until shortly before this afternoon's kick-off at The Den.

What went wrong at Bristol then? Just about everything. At half-time Luton had the points sewn up with a comfortable two-goal lead.

But a defence that had as many holes as a ten-year-old Gruyere mucked the whole thing up in the second half.

I have rarely seen Luton's rearguard so jittery. Nicholl did not look fully fit in spite of stringent fitness tests on Friday. So John Moore had extra work to do and he found the going tough.

Mistakes

So did Slough, and John Ryan came through with most credit at the back. There was help from Keen and Givens but both made mistakes.

The sodden pitch made the going tricky all round but once Luton survived City's initial burst they began to settle and played some cool football.

Even so it was only Bristol's inability to score from simple positions that kept Luton in it.

Galley missed three sitters and Garland two in the first half.

They were made to pay for being so thriftless in the 22nd minute when Busby thumped in a great volley from a Macdonald pass.

Then Macdonald netted three minutes before the break after a couple of near misses. And all Luton had to do was to cruise home. Instead they steamed straight on to the reef.

In the early stages of the second spell Luton looked to have the confidence of promotion contenders; Bristol the desperation of relegation strugglers.

How things changed. Highly-rated Chris Garland fought magnificently to get back in the game and on the hour he headed against a post with Read well beaten and centre-half Rooks blasted home the rebound.

Goodeve on

Five minutes later Garland made up for his earlier misses by netting through a hesitant defence. A minute later he won the game for Bristol by slamming in number three with Read stranded yards out of his goal.

Goodeve was sent on in place of Anderson in a vain attempt to salvage some pride. But there was nothing for Luton.

In fact Garland should have increased the City lead but with feet fumbling in excitement at the prospect of a spectacular hat-trick he missed a sitter. This followed a ghastly mistake by Givens.

Macdonald and Busby came through with a fair measure of credit, both going close on other occasions. But Rookes had a fine afternoon against Macdonald.

There was some brave running from wingers Anderson and Jimmy Ryan. But at this stage of the season courage is not enough. Both could have found themselves out of work at Millwall today.

Tossing away these points — and possibly promotion — must have been a great

BRISTOL CITY 3
LUTON TOWN 2

disappointment to Luton. It certainly was to their 500 supporters who braved the rail go-slow to see this match.

"It's the story of our season," said Mr Stock, "losing matches that look won."

"Football is not like any other job. You can't go into work on Monday and say: 'We'll do treble time today to make up for that'."

"Once you have lost, that's it. It's all over. It's final. It's already in the history books."

MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Read; John Ryan, Slough; Givens, Nicholl, Moore; Jim Ryan, Busby, Macdonald, Keen, Anderson (Goodeve, 67 mins).

BRISTOL CITY: Cashley; Jacobs, Dripdale; Wilson, Rooks, Hill (Merrick, 56 mins); Tainton, Garland, Galley, Wimshurst, Gow.

Referee: Mr D. Nippard (Bournemouth).

Attendance: 18,846.

Goals: Busby (Luton, 22 mins); Macdonald (Luton, 42); Rooks (Bristol, 60); Garland (Bristol, 65); Garland (Bristol, 66).