

MISSING MYSTERY MANAGER

Orient 1, Luton Town 2

70/71

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS. As the estimated offers for Luton centre-forward Malcolm Macdonald grew falsetto with incredibility this weekend, and the rumours as to his future were tossed about thick and fast, Town manager Alec Stock went off on his own.

And nobody would say where he went. He did not travel with the team to Orient, and the best I could get out of anyone was: "He's having a look around."

Throughout the piece Mr Stock has stuck to his story. He assures me, and everyone else, that he has had no bids for Macdonald, who is said to be worth more than £150,000.

And in his absence at the weekend Town chairman Mr Robert Keens and secretary Bob Readhead echoed his denials. But nobody would say where the Luton manager was.

He could have gone to Manchester, Newcastle or Birmingham. All three of the clubs said to be interested in Mac were playing at home. Or he could have been having a weekend away from it all. Somehow I don't think that was the case.

Wherever he was, he missed a good Luton victory at Brisbane Road. And Luton have been a bit short of away victories recently. In fact they have not won on alien soil since they did so at Portsmouth on February 20.

Small mercies

It was not a great spectacle, but these days we have to be grateful for small mercies.

The wind spoiled it. As it gathered in strength so the skill deteriorated. This is understandable, and one felt for the players who were all doing their best. The first 15 minutes showed much promise. And Luton looked as if they were going to have a field day. Givens shot wide from close in in the first minute, and minutes later Court cracked a good shot against the Orient crossbar.

But then the game began to

flag somewhat, and it was a blessing when Busby headed past Goddard following a corner, which Macdonald had done supremely well to head back into the goalmouth.

Busby made the game his own with a real thriller of a goal in injury time at the end. An "anywhere" clearance from Keen, waiting for the final whistle, failed to find touch and Busby collected it. He beat a rough-looking tackle from Mancini and headed into the teeth of the wind for goal. He beat another tackle, drew Goddard out of position and netted.

Swirling wind

It was a magnificent effort, and even drew applause from Orient's Mark Lazarus who sportingly patted the young Luton man on the back.

And there was more to come. In the fourth minute of injury time a high cross from Brabrook was caught in the swirling wind to be lifted past the diving Barber into the far corner of the net.

To be truthful it was a finale the match never really deserved. And an end that Barber did not deserve. After a rather shaky start, he settled to give a fine performance, and his confidence grew measurably as he beat the conditions and started to field the high crosses from the heads of Dyson and Bullock.

Luton's defence benefited from the return of Nicholl, who has recovered from his foot injury. Afterwards he said it had ached, but he was quite happy with his progress.

Moore had another good game alongside the centre-half and full-backs John Ryan

and Slough put in commendable performances.

After a good start Givens faded a bit in midfield, and he had to hobble off six minutes from the end with a kick on the ankle.

Curious

He was replaced by Peter Anderson. And that is another mystery. On Friday Anderson was supposed to be playing. Last week against Sheffield Wednesday he was Luton's outstanding player. But he was left out. Said Jimmy Andrews: "We thought the side we fielded was the right one for this match. We won, didn't we?"

Curiouser and curiouser. Hoy was brought back into mid-field alongside Court and Keen. He and Keen fought hard, but could have tightened up on their accuracy.

Court was Luton's best player. He seems to have got his second wind after being left out for a long spell.

Macdonald and Busby looked a bit lonely up front, and they had a huge task in taking on a rugged defence double-handed. But they battled gamely, and were thankful for help on several occasions from Court.

Luton's victory can give them heart for their trip to Oxford on Wednesday. A winning run to end the season would ease the pain of having been kicked out of the championship tussle.

MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Barber; John Ryan, Slough; Hoy, Nicholl, Moore; Busby, Court, Macdonald, Keen, Givens (Anderson, 84min).

ORIENT: Goddard; Jones, Rofe; Bennett, Mancini, Allen; Lazarus, Brisley (Riddick, 75 min), Bullock, Dyson, Brabrook.

REFEREE: Mr Keith Walker (Maidstone).

ATTENDANCE: 6,339.

GOALS: Busby (34min), Busby (90min), Brabrook (90min).



Orient keeper Goddard punches the ball away from Viv Busby, the Luton forward in their match at Brisbane Road