

LUTON NEAR TO DANGER

71/72

LUTON's luck left them after 89 minutes at St Andrews on Saturday. Until then the Town had clung on gamely and it looked as if they were going to keep a point until Bob Hatton banged in a close-range shot from a corner.

For Luton it was like having crossed a chasm on a tightrope and falling off at the last step. Their over-worked defence could not quite see them through.

Now they are only a couple of points clear of danger, which is rotten luck for goalkeeper Keith Barber.

Praised

He had a fantastic match, pulling off incredible save after incredible save as high-powered Birmingham fought so hard for the goal they so badly needed for their promotion push.

It was only Barber's third appearance since he came back at the expense of Tony Read, but on this form he has a bright career ahead.

Even the partisan Birmingham crowd clapped some of

By **ROGER DUCKWORTH**
Birmingham City 1 Luton Town 0

Barber's efforts, and on one occasion City centre-forward Bob Latchford patted him on the head for a commendable save at his feet from Smith.

Afterwards Luton coach Jimmy Andrews praised his goalkeeper. "He's the nearest thing I have seen to Peter Bonetti," he said. He's very quick and has a good pair of hands."

And Barber himself was pleased with his performance. "It was one of my best games," he admitted. "But the lads in front of me must share any praise that's going. I thought the defence had a terrific afternoon."

They did. Especially Alan Garner and Alan Slough. Both had tremendous afternoons in the clearance department. Garner tailed top-scorer Latchford like a detective in a mad-movie following a baddie.

And Slough gave him tremendous cover when he was looking in trouble.

For the first 25 minutes the Luton defence never had a breather. Birmingham attacked from all angles, and with Gordon Taylor in fine form Don Shanks was given a hard time. But he stood up to his task manfully and came through with flying colours.

So did John Ryan, whose

two clearances off the line almost saved the day for Luton. His tackling was as good as his positional sense and anticipation.

With Birmingham pressing so hard, midfield men Keen, Court and Givens spent most of the afternoon defending. Court just about had the edge in this department, but Keen and Givens both worked with a will under massive pressure.

Keen injured

Near the end Keen had to have treatment for a cut tongue which he collected after bravely sticking his head in the way of a power-drive from Latchford. He was in the wars in the first half, too, when he collided with Anderson as they both went for a good cross from Busby. "I didn't see him at all," said the Luton skipper afterwards.

Anderson ran bravely for the Town, but he had no support. His colleagues were usually too busy at the other end of the field and often he went to help them.

Busby escaped twice, and on the first occasion I thought he should have scored. But with goalkeeper Dave Latchford, brother of the centre-forward, running straight at him, he shot against his opponent's body.

Busby and Anderson were caught many times in the Birmingham offside ploy, which made Luton's task even more difficult.

Their forward colleague, Jimmy Ryan, had a quiet match, and he too often had to fall back to help out.

Luton only just survived the first half. In a mysterious fourth-minute of injury time Hatton hit the foot of the right-hand post with shanks and Barber beaten.

For a spell in the second half some of the zing left Birmingham. They were frustrated by Luton's ability to hold out whatever they threw at them.

It's a shame that Luton could not mount more attacks, for I felt that the Blues' defence was not nearly so good as their attack, and they looked as if they might give something away under pressure.

But Luton were not able to muster much in this department. Slough saw a good shot go just over, but this turned out to be Luton's best effort of the match.

There was less than a minute of normal time left when Court was forced into conceding a corner. There was no harm in this because Luton had been doing it all afternoon.

But this time it went wrong. Smith curled the corner over, Latchford headed at goal. The ball struck a Luton defender and fell at the feet of Hatton, who gleefully netted.

Luton's disappointment was intense. After holding out like that it's hard to take a last-minute goal. As manager Alec Stock said: "After all that we wanted something for the sake of the young players."

Luton came through with credit in spite of losing. And Barber and Garner proved that there is oceans of free talent knocking about if you look in the right places.

MATCH DETAILS

BIRMINGHAM CITY: Latchford (D); Page, Pendrey; Smith, Hynd, Harland; Campbell, Francis, Latchford (R), Hatton, Taylor. Sub: Bowker.

LUTON TOWN: Barber; John Ryan, Shanks; Keen, Garner, Slough; Jimmy Ryan, Court, Anderson, Busby, Givens. Sub: Moore.

REFEREE: Mr H. Williams (Sheffield).

ATTENDANCE: 34,395.

GOAL: Hatton (Birmingham, 89 mins).



Luton's Peter Anderson tries a right-hander past Dave Latchford's head, but the Birmingham keeper holds on to the ball. Number 7 is Alan Campbell and Mike Keen is the other Luton player.