

Luton's sorry tale of missed chances



John Aston shoots with Viv Busby, left, and Rodney Fern helping out. But no joy for Luton. More pictures Page 17

THE DISAPPOINTING size of Luton's crowd last night showed that the Town's potential followers have not been fully convinced by the good reviews their team has been getting since the start of the season.

Those who stayed away last night proved a point.

For Luton, who were pushing for a weekend spot at the top of the table, slipped off the surfboard that has been speeding them along the wave tips.

Oxford's goal came nine minutes from the end but Luton lost this match in the first half when they failed to establish their attacking ability.

By ROGER DUCKWORTH

Their ambitions were snuffed by the fast-tackling, fast-running and fast-thinking of Oxford. But with a quiet, contemplative crowd waiting to see all they had heard about, it was disappointing that Luton could not deliver the goods.

Raids

Afterwards manager Harry Haslam said: "I am not moaning, but you can't make them and miss them." He was referring to Luton's 30-minute barrage of the Oxford goal in the second half, during which the United defence was creaking like a seat at the Bijou.

Let's forget the first half for

a minute and analyse Luton's rip-roaring raids. If any team should have scored, Luton should. The second half started like this:

46 minutes — Roberts headed an Aston cross into his own net, but Halom was offside.

47 minutes — Aston controlled a Busby cross and shot wide from a good position.

53 minutes — Oxford keeper Burton made an amazing save to Halom's header from Aston's centre.

59 minutes — Jim Ryan headed a good chance wide from Thomson's cross.

61 minutes — Busby shot

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wide of an open goal after beating the offside trap.

63 minutes — nobody in position to deal with a great cross from Fern.

Good work

66 minutes — Fern shot over.

69 minutes — Fern wide following good work by Halom.

70 minutes — Halom through but harassed into shooting weakly.

78 minutes — Aston netted from an Anderson pass — but given offside.

82 minutes — Halom headed Aston's cross wide.

What a tale of woe. Luton will have to get some target practice before the weekend. As Mr Haslam said: "You don't mind so much if a goalkeeper stops everything, but it's hard to take when nearly everything is shot wide."

But I thought it was a most enjoyable match from a soccer point of view. Both teams gave everything they had and Oxford are to be congratulated on holding out, beating Luton at their own game of enthusiasm, and grabbing a late winner.

It was a goal I could always see coming. Barber had been called upon to make superb saves to Cassidy (twice) and Derek Clarke in the first half and in the middle of Luton's second-half siege, which I have

chronicled above, Clarke combed a parting up the Oak Road Choir with a rising shot.

There was a question mark over Luton's defence on occasions and I feel Faulkner could have been more decisive. Garner was mobile and enthusiastic but neither looked as sure as colleagues John Ryan and Thomson.

I think this was because they sometimes got carried away with Luton's attacking thing and wanted to go out of

position to join the fun and games on the other side of the halfway line.

Still, it could all have been so different had Faulkner's third-minute header not been so brilliantly stopped by Burton. Nobody would have blamed him for deserting his post then.

There were flashes of the Anderson of recent weeks but Oxford were wise to his style and they had the players of a similar mould playing the

same terrier-like game from midfield.

Halom again gave a spirited performance but Fern and Aston were the thoroughbreds of Luton's attack. All they needed last night was the rub of the green and Luton would have had goals.

Unlucky

One Luton fault was that they used too many high balls through the middle. The tall Oxford defence dealt easily

with these. Even so Busby never stopped working in an effort to shake off the shackles of Roberts and Colin Clarke.

Jimmy Ryan also tried his hardest against a hard-tackling defence and was unlucky not to grab a goal. When Alan Slough went on for Busby in the 76th minute he played some refined football. He must be in the side before long.

Oxford deserved their win for their doggedness. Cassidy scored the winner in the 81st minute when a Colin Clarke free kick caught the Town defence woolgathering. Derek Clarke headed down and Cassidy shot under Barber's diving body.

Three players were booked by a rather whistle-conscious referee. They were Oxford's Sloan for having a few ill-chosen words with the ref, Oxford's Lucas for retaliation after a strong challenge by Aston, and Luton's John Ryan for a foul tackle.

But these were not the low spots of the night. That belonged to the ignorant bunch who cheered during a minute's silence in memory of Prince William. The anger of the rest of the crowd was obvious.

MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Barber; John Ryan, Thomson; Anderson, Faulkner, Garner; Jim Ryan, Fern, Busby (Slough, 76 mins), Halom, Aston.

OXFORD UNITED: Burton; Lucas, Shuker; Roberts, Colin Clarke, Evanson; Sloan, Atkinson (Fleming, 80 mins), Derek Clarke, Cassidy, Aylott.

Referee: Mr Tony Oliver (Leigh-on-Sea).

Attendance: 10,891.

Goal: Cassidy (Oxford), 81 mins.