

THE DOLDRUMS

The cloud still hangs over Luton

By ROGER DUCKWORTH

IT DOESN'T half get difficult sitting at home every other Sunday and trying to pinpoint reasons why Luton can't do the only thing most other clubs can do — win at home. And I can't help wondering just how long the other clubs at the top of the Second Division are going to sit back and wait for the Town to pull their socks up.

The crowd, a mental block, being in a rut and playing on a narrow pitch have all been proffered as excuses for Luton's pathetic home form.

BALONEY.

There may be a grain of truth in them all. But none is the real reason. May I offer three of my own theories? The lack of a great big, tough, goal-scoring centre-forward; bad luck, and fear.

The last of those will wrinkle a few foreheads. I don't mean scaredy-fear, I mean apprehensive-fear. The sort of hollow stomach that is making every Luton player too anxious to do the right thing; too worried that he will not and that his own crowd will run him out of Town like an unwanted gun-slinger.

Great big tough goal-scoring centre-forwards are not that easy to come by. But they are around. And Luton must get hold of one.

Under pressure

With Viv Busby on his back in the Luton and Dunstable Hospital, people are beginning to realise just what a good job he was doing at the sharp end of the Luton attack.

Both Rod Fern and Vic Halom have tried to do the job since Busby was injured. Neither has been completely successful.

Both are midfield men who score their goals by coming from the back. Luton's system requires that the number nine takes the ball under pressure and lays it off — fast.

Halom worked hard enough on Saturday but he allowed himself to be niggled by the big Frank Burrows and the referee. Some of his distribution was good, but he did not look like scoring.

My third reason is purely and simply the good old fashioned rub of the green.

MATCH DETAILS

Luton Town: Barber, John Ryan, Thomson, Anderson (Fern, 67 mins), Faulkner, Garner, Jimmy Ryan, Slough, Halom, Hindson, Aston.

Swindon: Downsborough, Thomas, Trollope, Smart, Burrows, Potter, Peplow, Howells, Treacy, Noble, Butler. Sub: Hubbard.

Referee: Mr B. J. Home-wood (Sunbury - on Thames).

Attendance: 10,596.

Goal: Treacy (Swindon, 56 mins).

It's strange how the run of the ball deserts a side that is in the doldrums. And that's not something that any coach can put right. They just have to wait.

Take Saturday for instance. Had that fourth-minute power drive from Jimmy Ryan, from Halom's pass I hasten to add, gone a foot to either side I doubt if Downsborough would have seen it, let alone tipped it over the bar.

It shot straight down his focal path and his natural reaction was to fling up a hand to divert the ball upwards.

Dictated

Ryan had a fine first half, and had three or four shots which could well have brought goals. Slough and Aston also had some hard luck.

Luton dictated the first half, apart from a few minutes before the interval, and they should have crossed over three goals to the good.

But that doesn't happen when things are not going for you.

Fans have been calling for the return of wingers for years. Luton now play with two, and on Saturday they looked to be doing it to good effect. The only problem was



■ Swindon keeper Downsborough gathers the ball as Jim Ryan races in

that the big fellows at the back of the Swindon defence, Burrows, Potter and Thomas were winning everything in the air.

In fact Swindon's goal came from a similar piece of football. Peplow, who had a good match, nipped past Garner and crossed for Treacy to head hard past Barber who had been dragged out of position by the cross.

Garner was unlucky to let Peplow escape him. He was in the right place, but slipped as he set himself to tackle.

Both Garner and Faulkner, who did a lot of decisive clearing up, earned their keep. And Thomson and John Ryan completed a competent-looking back-line who, on the whole, came through well. So did goalkeeper Barber.

In midfield Anderson had some bright patches, but faded later, and walked straight to the dressing room when Fern was sent to sort out the mess in the 67th minute.

But he couldn't do it, even though Hindson, who looked talented, moved to centre-forward to let Halom have another go at his old job from midfield.

It very nearly brought Luton a point with Aston, Hindson and Halom all going close in the dying minutes.

But by this time Swindon were not keen to let their first away win of the season slip through their fingers.

Afterwards Luton manager Harry Haslam, not a man ever lost for words, said sadly: "It's the funniest thing in the world to define.

"But I'll say just one thing — Busby was missing. He paralysed them at Swindon.

"And don't give me that business about their big defenders. They haven't bloody well grown since we beat them on their own ground."

You can theorise all day, but it doesn't alter facts. Luton have not won at home since September 16. They have gone five matches without winning at home. They are now faced with trips to Portsmouth and Villa before Carlisle come to Kenilworth Road. Neither of those is going to be easy — in spite of Luton's impressive away form.