

Cup win eases Luton's tension

Luton Town 2 Crewe 0

72/73

FOR ABOUT 20 minutes on Saturday Luton Town played football as if they actually enjoyed it; as if they had suddenly discovered long-lost skills and ambitions. The transformation of a team came from the relief at a goal headed by winger Jimmy Ryan in the 72nd minute of this third round FA Cup tie.

Until then, Luton had looked like the Fourth Division side and Crewe like the Second. But that goal worked wonders. The tension hissed out of the Luton side like gas out of a pricked balloon.

And manager Harry Haslam beamed afterwards: "I reckon that's it. The tension's off. You should see the lads in the dressing room. They are different people than they were before the match.

Saturday's success over spirited Crewe was the buffer at the end of a four-month line without a home win. It's been an uncomfortable trip for a side that has been doing so well away from home.

A risk

Now Luton must whistle up a few home League victories and give their long-suffering, and perhaps short-tempered, fans something to shout about for the rest of the season.

Luton's win came from a calculated risk by Mr Haslam. He dropped Vic Halom, whom he said had not been playing the type of game he had been told to play, and he was forced to leave out Peter Anderson because of a strange injury.

Anderson saw a specialist on Friday and was ordered to take a complete rest for a fortnight to cure a "chronic abdominal strain."

And the Luton boss decided to give 18-year-old Steve Litt his chance. Litt played in midfield, and while he had the energy of a young colt, he was a bit out of his depth as he discovered the pace of the Second Division.

A kick on the knee opened the stitches in a recent wound, and he left the proceedings in the 63rd minute. To be fair to the lad, he did not receive the best of help from his colleagues during Luton's hour of bad play.

By ROGER DUCKWORTH

Gordon Hindson substituted, and he had been on for nine minutes when Luton scored that much-needed goal that won them back their pride.

But all is not right in the Luton camp. John Ryan has had the captaincy taken off him so he can concentrate his considerable energy on putting his game right.

He is finding it hard work to change his role to midfield, and has been so upset by the jeers he has received from the terraces that he asked his manager if it would be better for the club if he made a move.

Mr Haslam told me in the dressing room before the match: "If they don't stay off John Ryan I'll sell him. I have told him that it's not the right time for him to go, and that we have to get the crowd to want him back. I have taken the responsibilities of skipper off him."

So the match did not get off the ground in the best of manners. Ryan was trying too hard to sort himself out, but some of his tackling was good.

And Alan Slough, who returned to the side, had an impressive match in the middle three.

But there was little semblance of a Luton attack, especially in the first half when the Town were well and truly outplayed.

Crewe forwards Humphreys and Terry Nicholl looked to have too many bright ideas for Luton, and there was some panic around the Garner-Shanks area from time to time.

Even so, the Town defence kept its head and improved as the match went on, with Garner and Shanks getting a grip.

Thomson had an outstanding match, while Moore gave another no-nonsense display.

Relax

With the middle trio still not doing everything right, Luton's attack struggled in the first half. But they began to grow in confidence when they saw that goalkeeper Barber, playing in his first FA Cup tie, was too good for their wily Crewe counterparts.

When Butlin headed Luton's second goal, with another prodigious leap to a Slough cross, Luton were home and dry.

Aston and Jimmy Ryan began to beat their men, and the highly-strung Luton forwards began to relax and play the way we know they can.

Luton almost had a third in the last minute when Crudgington made a fine save to a hard drive from Hindson's left foot.

Young Nicholl, kid brother of Chris, the former Luton centre-half, showed some grand touches, but was booked for his second show of dissent.

Man of the match Thomson kept the Luton side together when they looked like going down, but credit must be given to an entire Crewe team who came south really believing they could win — and damned nearly did.