

FIERY FRENCH IS OUT OF LUCK

THE SCORELINE says it all. No goals and little else for the faithful, if somewhat depleted, Kenilworth Road fans to shout about.

But Luton and Villa fought furiously until the final whistle ended the deadlock. They share the points — but for both sides, comfortably in the top part of the division, the result is academic.

Luton will want a better result on Monday, though, when they play their last home match of the season — against Middlesbrough.

In the Villa team were former Luton players Chris Nicholl and Neil Rioch. Missing, of course, was Bruce Rioch, who went into hospital earlier in the week for his third cartilage operation.

There was a disappointing crowd at Kenilworth Road. But the weather and Luton's two recent results did not help.

Driving sleet eased off for the kick-off but left the pitch very slippery.

First shot of the match came from the right foot of Jim Ryan who tried one from outside the box. It was caught first bounce by Cumbe.

Faulkner marked Lochhead very tight and the first clash of personalities came in the fourth minute when Faulkner was penalised for hitting the Villa striker in the back.

After six minutes a neat back heeler by Hamilton gave full-back Robson a chance at goal. But his first-time shot soared over the Oak Road



Jim Ryan challenges for the ball

stand into somebody's back garden.

A gritty run by French and a long-range shot from Aston showed the Hatters' determination. But neither move came to anything.

Then Villa won a corner on the left and Barber did well to catch the greasy ball while under pressure in the goal-mouth.

Luton could have been in trouble when Faulkner tried to dribble clear but Barber went full length to turn a hard shot from Hamilton round a post.

After a foul by John Ryan on Nicholl, Rioch banged a free kick out of play from a good position on the right. And Lochhead was quick to show him what the thought of the effort.

Then Chris Nicholl was cautioned after a heavy tackle on Anderson ten yards outside the box. Hindson took the free kick and Shanks headed over.

A fine through ball by Anderson gave Busby a chance. Villa full-back Robson got there first but his hard back pass to goalkeeper Cumbe resulted in a diving save. It could so easily have been an own goal.

In midfield John Ryan made two particularly good clearances as Villa began to look dangerous.

And when Luton broke, Nicholl was reprimanded for a body check on French ten yards outside the box. But Thomson's free kick, slipped inside to Shanks, was wasted.

A good move between Busby, Jim Ryan and French saw a shot from French go just over the top.

More good work on the left by Aston left Rioch standing and Aston's cross was headed at goal by Busby but caught by Cumbe.

If Aston had looked up a couple of seconds earlier he would have seen French unmarked on the right.

A good centre by John Ryan gave Busby another chase. Ross was too alert however and the Villa full-back found his keeper. At the other end Villa tried a quick break but McMahon's shot was well adrift.

Full-backs Thomson and John Ryan combined well on the left for Ryan to get in a cross but there was nobody on hand and Villa defender Robson did a good job in heading the ball down for his goalkeeper.

French's trickery brought Luton another corner off

Rioch. Again French took it himself from the left and Vowden's half clearance was headed back to French by John Ryan. But Villa massed their defence to clear.

Midfield work by Vowden and Brown gave Hamilton the chance of a low cross. It was stuck out for a corner by Shanks but Barber did some courageous work under pressure and cleared with a free kick.

Hindson ended a period of monotony by intercepting a Villa clearance and setting off on his own. He made good ground but at the last minute the finish was missing when his shot was blocked.

On the hour Barber made

VERDICT

Fifteen minutes of pressure by Luton late in the second half did little to upgrade this match into the type of game it should have been.

For the most part it was a midfield squabble from two mediocre sides. But Luton were lucky in that they had man-of-the-match Graham French.

French, and French alone, gave the game the attacking glitter it deserved.

He was full of tricks both on the grass and in the air and when he broke through in a thrilling run in the 71st minute, he might have broken the deadlock.

But his shot hit a post, bounced out and that was the end of that.

John Ryan also had a grand game for the Town in the defence in the first half and in midfield in the second, after Aston was left in the dressing room.

Apart from one mistake, which came to nothing, Faulkner did a good job on the dangerous Lochhead. But to balance this out former Luton centre-half Chris Nicholl was always too strong up top for Busby, who didn't get much of a look in.

Barber gave Luton confidence with his safe handling but there was not all that much fire in the Villa attack. Early on a colleague said: "this is a goalless draw." It was that obvious from early on.

Neil Rioch, another Luton product, worked like a Trojan but he didn't have the speed to stop the wiles of French.

By ROGER DUCKWORTH



Luton players in the thick of things against Villa.

A fine bit of footwork by Aston gave him the space to centre from the left but French and Busby could do nothing with the offering. Rioch conceded a corner and French went close with hard right-footer.

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A neat pass inside from Busby gave French a chance but as he was poised to shoot the ball was whipped away from behind by Vowden.

Villa were doing plenty of probing but the Town defence stood up well.

In the 36th minute Robson was booked for a late tackle on French, who got up and walked away unconcerned as the referee cautioned the former full-back.

And another Luton build-up from the left produced a chance for Busby to get in a shot but he had to hurry it and the ball flew over the crossbar.

In the 38th minute a glaring error by Faulkner who failed to read the bounce on the wet turf let Villa through but McMahon's shot went wide.

The match became a midfield battle with few clear-cut chances for the strikers. And there were too many long balls back to the keeper from both outfits.

It was four minutes before half-time when the vice-presidents began to file out for their tea and buns. And they missed a good run through the middle by Hind-

son which almost produced an own goal off Ross.

HT: Luton 0, Aston Villa 0

Luton came out without John Aston. He was replaced by Ken Goodeve who took up his usual spot in the defence. John Ryan moved into midfield.

Clever dribbling by French won him a corner off Rioch. Luton almost snatched a goal but Anderson did not quite connect.

A short free kick by Nicholl sent Rioch racing into a shooting position from the right, but his effort soared over the crossbar — like everything else this afternoon.

Vowden caused a scare when he beat both Faulkner and an appeal for offside and closed in on goal. But instead of shooting, he put the ball inside to McMahon who was sharply tackled by Shanks and

MATCH DETAILS

LUTON: Barber, Shanks, Thomson, Anderson, Faulkner, John Ryan, Jim Ryan, French, Busby, Hindson, Aston. Sub: Goodeve.

ASTON VILLA: Cumbe, Ross, Robson, Brown, Nicholl, Rioch (N), McMahon, Little, Lochhead, Vowden, Hamilton. Sub: Graydon.

Referee: Mr M. V. Sinclair (Guildford).

Attendance: 10,971

Luton were grateful for the goal kick.

In the 68th minute Hindson almost gave Luton the lead when a hard sell outside the penalty area very nearly beat Cumbe, who needed to go to stop Hindson's crisp drive.

There was tremendous excitement in the 71st minute when French, Luton's man of the match, beat off ferocious tackles from Rioch and Robson, and raced towards goal.

His cross found its way back to him and he beat Cumbe with a terrific left-footer which bounced back past him into touch.