

Bristol Rovers 1, Luton 0

By ROGER DUCKWORTH

IT MUST have been difficult for the Luton players to shake hands with their victors at the end of Saturday's match. Luton's defeat was daylight robbery.

Although the match was played in rain and gloom, a modern invention called floodlights made it bright enough for everyone in the ground — except the referee — to spot a handling offence in his own penalty area by Bristol's Alan Warboys.

Mr Lloyd did not see it, did not consult either of his henchmen on the line, and Rovers broke away to score the winner.

A minute earlier Mr Lloyd spotted a heavy tackle from behind by Phil Bater which sent Jimmy Ryan sprawling in the penalty box. He thought it was obstruction and gave an indirect free kick.

He had already booked Bater for a first half foul on Lilly Fuccillo, and had decreed that this was a foul tackle he would have had to book him a second time, send him off and give Luton the penalty they should have had.

The first half had belonged to Luton. As early as the fifth minute, Ron Futchler had headed into the side netting. The same player later missed the chance to shoot from a good position, and a shot from Chambers was saved by big Jim Eadie.

Paul Price had a header cleared off the line by Bater, and a clever half volley by the energetic Jimmy Husband was saved.

Blocked

It was never a great match. After their splendid performance against Chelsea last week, Luton were looking for something extra.

But they played thoughtful football, with Chambers and Husband looking their best players in attack and midfield.

Chambers covered an amazing amount of ground. On one occasion he got in a shot, and as Rovers cleared and attacked, he was back in his own penalty box to mop it up.

The heavy rain, and the mud it produced, took some of the gilt off the game. But, for my money, Luton still looked good enough to win.

After Milija Aleksic had saved a Stephens shot early in the second half, Luton again almost went ahead. Chambers curled over a corner, which Ron Futchler headed across the goal. John Faulkner headed against the crossbar, and then had the rebound shot blocked on the line.

It just looked a matter of time. Then we had the double penalty refusal, and some of the fizz drained out of Luton.

Peter Aitken scored his first goal of the season when Warboys broke clear after the handball incident, despite two brave attempts in a crowded goalmouth by Aleksic.

Then Aleksic tipped over a Staniforth effort, and Eadie

This was sheer daylight robbery

MATCH DETAILS

Luton: Aleksic, Price, Buckley, Chambers, Faulkner, Paul Futchler, Husband, West, Ron Futchler, Fuccillo, Ryan. Sub: Hill.

Bristol Rovers: Eadie, Bater, Parsons, Aitken, Taylor, Williams, Stephens, Fearnley, Warboys, Staniforth, Hamilton. Sub: Evans.

Referee: D. Lloyd (Fernhill Heath).

Attendance: 7,185.

Goal: Aitken (Bristol) 53 mins.

Bookings: West (Luton) dissent. Bater (Bristol) foul on Fuccillo.

did the same to a splendid effort by Ron Futchler. The Rovers goalkeeper looked a bit shaky under pressure, and he knocked a Ryan corner against his own crossbar.

Afterwards he admitted: "I'm having a bad time. It can't go on like this. If I don't get over this bad patch quickly I'm going to have to ask the boss to leave me out."

Miracles

But Luton could not maintain their hold on the game as it wore on. The indefatigable Chambers had two more shots saved, but they were too straight to be dangerous.

Paul Futchler was Luton's most eye-catching defender, though Faulkner did a lot of good work, and the two full backs, Price and Buckley, used their pace to attack whenever they could.

I felt West had an indifferent match. There was no faulting his effort or his intentions, but his timing seemed out.

Fuccillo had a good first half and then faded. But so did a few of his colleagues.

Luton now find themselves in the wrong half of the table at the halfway stage of the



■ Jim Eadie fists clear as Ron Futchler challenges

season. They are playing well enough to count themselves safe — for the moment, but they will need a string of miracles to win promotion.

While they have several cultured men in their side, they don't find goalscoring easy enough. Just 32 in 21 matches is not good enough.

Several Luton players received knocks at Eastville, and Jim Ryan, Husband and Aleksic all needed treatment

before they could be considered for today's home game against Blackburn.

After promising such good things to come in the New Year with that win over Chelsea, Luton must now look back on a Christmas which gave them more defeats than victories.

But don't blame them too much for this defeat. With a more considerate referee they might easily have won.



■ Ron Futchler in the thick of it again, this time heading into the side netting