

Skilful soccer overcomes difficult conditions

PLEAT'S HAPPY AS LUTON STAND FIRM

78/79

Luton Town 0 Stoke City 0

Report by ERIC HARRIS

SOCCKER pundits who advocate a winter break in difficult conditions would have been interested by the evening's entertainment at Kenilworth Road last night.

Despite the lack of goals, both teams managed to produce some good football on a rock hard surface, and there was a slight suspicion at the end of 90 minutes that David Pleat's fighters were unlucky not to take both points.

But, perhaps, a draw was a fair result because neither side deserved to lose after an honest attempt to provide a paltry frozen crowd of 6,462 with a generous helping of entertainment.

Delicate ball control was almost impossible as the players experimented with a variety of footwear in an attempt to secure a firm foothold.

The pace of the ball as it bounced at all angles, was difficult to anticipate. But both managers were glowing in their praise for the players.

Stoke's point was enough to take them to the top of the Second Division with Brighton. But there was also plenty to enthuse over from Pleat's point of view, despite the fact his team have failed to score in their last two matches.

Full back Kirk Stephens, just back after a three-month lay-off, gave an immaculate performance and was Luton's Man of the Match.

His progress in a limited number of appearances for Luton since his arrival from Nuneaton for £5,000, has been remarkable and suggests Pleat's belief that his younger players are gradually reaching maturity is slowly being realised.

David Carr, deputising for Mark Aizlewood, also produced an adequate display. Carr may not have a lot of finesse, but he always gives

POSITIONS

Brighton	25	14	4	7	47	26	32
Stoke	25	11	10	4	33	22	32
C. Palace	24	10	11	3	34	18	31
West Ham	23	12	5	6	45	23	29
Sunderland	25	10	9	6	38	31	29
Fulham	24	10	7	7	34	28	27
Orient	25	11	5	9	32	26	27
Notts Cnty	25	8	10	7	31	41	26
Burnley	23	9	7	7	36	35	25
Newcastle	24	10	5	9	24	25	25
Charlton	24	8	8	8	39	37	24
Cambridge	25	6	12	7	31	32	24
LUTON	24	9	5	10	40	29	23
Bris Rov	24	9	5	10	33	41	23
Wrexham	20	7	7	6	25	21	21
Preston	23	7	7	9	37	40	21
Leicester	24	5	11	8	22	26	21
Oldham	22	6	7	9	28	39	19
Sheff Utd	22	6	6	10	29	34	18
Blackburn	23	3	9	11	24	42	15
Cardiff	23	5	5	13	25	52	15
Millwall	23	4	5	14	19	38	13



■ Chris Turner slices the ball over the line as he joins Luton's attack

Stephens bouncing back in true style

100 per cent and that was a decisive advantage last night when hard running and the ability to get into a tackle first was important.

"I didn't think we had a weak link in the team," said a delighted Pleat after the match. "We began to play in the second half and I thought we did enough to perhaps sneak the two points.

"But I'm not disappointed and am well satisfied with a draw considering the way we played under difficult conditions."

The game was a story of two halves. Stoke, showing their ambitions to regain their First Division status, were on top in the first period, with Luton retaliating strongly after the break.

Stoke could have taken the lead after only a minute when giant striker Brendan O'Callaghan headed over from a free kick. They were then penalised for offside after a succession of close range shots were blocked.

Luton, however, were never overawed by experienced opposition, and David Moss

forced Roger Jones to make a difficult, but clean, save under the bar.

Moss came into the picture again when he won a corner and from it Chris Turner showed his attacking qualities by knocking the ball just wide under pressure.

After Randall sliced the ball wide, Stephens, Alan West and Paul Price mounted an intelligent build-up to provide Carr with a chance to put Luton in front. But his long shot was two feet over the top.

The start of the second half saw Stoke under pressure as

the Town looked for the quick break. After 48 minutes Mal Donaghy swept the ball past Jones but Luton's jubilation was short lived as referee Ron Challis disallowed the effort after ruling Moss had handled.

Denied

Then, after 55 minutes, the Town's best move of the match produced wretched luck for Bob Hatton. Ricky Hill and West combined to feed Hatton who side-stepped a defender before hitting a shot that had the necessary power but lacked direction.

Moss continued to make the best of the conditions and, after a neat one-two with Hatton, shot fractionally wide. Then he was denied as Jones produced a brave save at his feet — winning the race by a mere six inches.

There was, however, one

last attempt by Stoke to take both points and it was left to West to rescue Luton eight minutes from the end when he headed O'Callaghan's shot off the line.

So Luton can be well satisfied with their point, and as Pleat quietly admits, his team usually reserve their best performances against better opposition.

Stoke must be one of the favourites to return to the First Division. They have all-round ability at their disposal

LUTON: Lawson; Stephens, Carr, Donaghy, Turner, Price, West, Hill, Taylor, Hatton, Moss. Sub: Stein.

STOKE CITY: Jones; Dodd, Scott (Bushy), Kendall, Smith, Doyle, Randall, Irvine, O'Callaghan, Crooks, Richardson.

REFEREE: Mr R. Challis (Tonbridge).

ATTENDANCE: 6,462.