

POWER POINT FOR THE HATTERS

POST-ECHO
VERDICT
ON THE
BIG TWO

Stoke City 0 Luton Town 0 By ERIC HARRIS

78/79

MAGNIFICENT Luton returned from the Victoria Ground yesterday with a point which could go a long way to keeping them in the Second Division.

There's still some hard work in front of David Pleat's young team but, if they can produce yesterday's fighting qualities and determination, they won't have much to worry about.

Pleat was bubbling with enthusiasm after the match, but the only worrying fact facing the Luton boss is his team's inability to maintain their form.

They played well against Sunderland and West Ham but came out of both games with nothing. On Saturday, against Millwall, there was no consistency but they proved against Stoke that the will to knuckle down to hard work can pay dividends.

Admittedly, Stoke were reduced to ten men in the second half with centre half

Denis Smith a passenger on the right wing. But, by then, Stoke's ambitions for First Division soccer could have been dealt a shattering blow after the Town wasted three good chances in the first ten minutes.

Helping

Pleat omitted David Moss who felt the after-effects of his pelvic strain in the 2-2 draw against Millwall on Saturday.

Paul Price came into the back four as a sweeper, with Kirk Stephens moving into midfield and occasionally helping out front-runners, Bob Hatton and Steve Taylor.

Surprisingly, Stoke manager Alan Durban adopted the same 4-4-2 tactics and seemed to abandon any hopes of two points.

The result was deadlock and, while the game failed to provide artistry, I fancy Luton's chances of avoiding the drop more than Stoke's of winning promotion.

Pleat obviously planned to play for a point, but the ease

with which Luton achieved it must have surprised the Luton boss as much as it disappointed Durban.

Angle

Luton took a point mainly because they were prepared to work for each other. Alan Birchenall emphasised his value as a general when Stoke attempted to get on top in the second half.

But perhaps the most refreshing angle from Luton's view was the success of playing Stephens in midfield. After only six minutes, he galloped down the right flank and pushed the ball inside to Hatton.

He turned quickly and thumped the ball at Roger Jones who, deceived by its flight, watched helplessly as the ball rattled the underside of the bar and bounced down on the right side of his goal line.

That break rattled Stoke who almost went behind in the next minute when Stephens again outpaced their defence and forced Jones to race off his line and scoop the ball up at the edge of the box.

Three minutes later, Luton broke for the third time with Stoke's defence again helpless. Hatton fed Ricky Hill with a precision pass and this time Jones had to race out of his area to boot the ball away.

That early Luton pressure injected confidence into the Town, although they had an early escape when Paul Randall screwed the ball over the bar from six yards.

But Jake Findlay didn't have one direct shot to save throughout the match, although he earned his draw bonus with fine anticipation and clean handling to snuff out Stoke's crosses.

Taylor, too, showed his speed on the break when his 13th minute shot carried so much power that Jones dropped it and rescued Stoke with a belated second clearance.

Howard Kendall, who injured his thigh, had already been substituted by Terry Conroy when Smith burst a blood vessel in his calf and was sent on in the second half merely to make up the numbers.

But, as the game progressed, it became evident that the only way Luton could lose was by making defensive mistakes. They never allowed Stoke that bonus with the back four in command.

Power

Durban tried to conceal his disappointment, but managed to give Luton their due credit.

"It is not a disaster for us," said the Stoke manager. "But it would have been if we had lost. I thought we would overpower them in the air, but it didn't work and, to be fair to Luton, they did well."

The game proved that there is probably more tension at the top of the division than at the bottom, and Garth Crooks was booked when he pulled down Taylor in the second half as the Luton striker was in the middle of a wide, mazy run which could have produced a goal.

MATCH DETAILS

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

LUTON TOWN: Findlay, Stephens, Aizlewood, Donaghy, Phillipson-Masters, Price, Hill, West, Taylor, Hatton, Birchenall. Sub: Stein.

REFEREE: A. Challinor (Maltby).

ATTENDANCE: 19,214.

BOOKING: Crooks (foul on Taylor).