

TO THE DISMAY of their largest crowd of the season, 19,619, Luton spurned a glorious chance yesterday of consolidating their leadership of the Second Division.

To be more accurate, they spurned any number of glorious chances to defeat Queen's Park Rangers handsomely and widen the gap between themselves and their closest rivals for promotion.

In a fiercely competitive match littered with bookings — the referee took the names of Wicks, Hazell, Shanks and Hatton — Rangers responded so positively to their many escapes that Allen, the Second Division's leading scorer, was able to increase his tally for the season to 14 goals.

Indeed, the London side ended the game looking capable of adding a winning goal to their valuable equaliser.

It was a curious, ultimately rousing 90 minutes plus that came to life only during the last five minutes of the first-half, and the seven minutes of injury time the referee added on to it. In that period, Luton subjected Rangers to a devastating blitz which yielded the home side's goal.

The play was divided into clearly definable segments. Playing the ball out of defence cleverly and neatly, Luton dominated the beginning of the first half as well as its closing minutes.

In between, Currie began to exert an influence in midfield, and Rangers took control with some accurate, imaginative possession football.

Luton were also dominant in the early part of the second half, but their failure to score again gave Rangers the encouragement to prove that they do not lack the character to play their way out of adversity.

Neither side looks quite ready for the First Division yet. On this evidence, Rangers' defence would appear to be as much in need of tightening as Luton's finishing is in need of sharpening.

Among the unusually large crowd drawn to Kenilworth Road by this promising confrontation was Ron Greenwood, the England manager. He was there presumably to check on the form of Tony Currie before naming his squad for the European championship match against Bulgaria.

Blitz survived



● Top of Division Two. Home gates up by 30 per cent but still 10,000 down on break-even level.

COLIN MALAM reports
from Kenilworth Road
Luton 1, QPR 1

Greenwood ended the day checking on Currie's fitness because the Rangers' midfield player limped off with an ankle injury during the second half.

The England manager must also have made a mental note of the form of Luton's Stephens, a right full-back of immense promise. Stephens, who is particularly effective going forward, was prominent as Luton threatened to score four times in as many hectic minutes before they eventually found the net.

One of those misses came at the end of the best move of the match, Moss skimming the bar with a swerving left-foot shot after West had played two neat one-twos with Grealish and Hatton.

The attack that followed was only marginally inferior. Hatton intercepted Stein's crossfield pass to Hill, struck a lovely reverse pass to Stephens, and the overlapping full-back thumped the foot of the post with a powerful shot on the run.

Then Woods was called upon to save twice in quick succession. After holding a shot from Moss, he had to fling himself to his

right to pull down Stein's header from one of the awkward right-wing corners Moss swung into the Rangers goalmouth.

Finally, Luton's extreme pressure won them a free-kick from the half-way line in the first minute of the injury time added on to the first half. Price floated the kick high, and Woods, whose positioning and handling had looked suspect from the start, was outjumped by Saxby, who headed firmly into the net.

That lead should have been increased in the early minutes of the second-half. How the ball stayed out of Rangers' net in the 48th minute, for instance, remains a mystery. When Wicks made a hash of a short back-pass to Woods, Moss intercepted, rounded the stranded goalkeeper and prepared to walk the ball over the line. But Wicks had enough pace to get back and redeem himself by hacking the ball off the line.

Undeterred by that escape, Wicks lived dangerously again in the 51st minute when he tried another back-pass, from the touch-line. Stein intercepted, but was unable to control the ball sufficiently to prevent it going out of play.

Three minutes later Hill found Hatton unmarked at the far post with a headed pass. But the Luton striker guided his header straight into the hands of Woods.

That was to be Luton's last chance. Rangers swarmed forward from then on, largely thanks to the efforts of Roeder, and Allen equalised after 64 minutes by bursting through to drive an angled shot past Findlay after a shot by Roeder had been deflected to him.

Allen might have got the winner, too, in injury time, but he hurried his shot over the bar after Saxby had failed to head clear. Nevertheless, like Stephens Rangers' England youth player cannot have done his future international prospects any harm.

Luton: Findlay; Stephens, Donaghy; Grealish, Saxby, Price; Hill, West, Sten, Hatton, Moss.

QPR: Woods; Shanks, Gillard; McCreery, Hazell, Wicks; Bowles, Roeder, Allen, Currie (Burk, 68m, Goddard).

Referee: B. Martin (Nottingham).