

In praise of West Ham and their fighting spirit

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By Norman Fox
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Luton 1 West Ham 1

Without offering serious rivalry to the astounding events near the top of the first division, the leading teams of the second managed a few comparatively mild surprises on Saturday. Birmingham City had taken a temporary lead on Friday night but were removed by Chelsea, who were the only side in the top eight to gain two points.

If "character" means asserting authority over lesser teams, perhaps Leicester City and Newcastle United lack the quality, having lost at home to Oldham and Watford respectively. More probably it means the possession of fighting spirit. West Ham United have been accused of placing this essential quality low among their priorities but at Luton on Saturday, their ability to take some reward from a match that caused them many problems was worthy of praise.

Any discussion of Luton's capabilities must begin with a word of surprised laudation for their reappearance as a potential first division team so soon after tottering on the edges of complete financial disaster. That is character, a resilient determination to do more than survive.

Luton have several excellent players but are not yet in a position to see a long-term first division future. They work hard for their gains but, on Saturday, faded towards the end, allowing Brookings to become a crucial influence after a quiet first half that cast doubts on his fitness. They took

an early lead when Lampard gave away a free kick that Moss swung across for Hill to volley in. Hill is one of Luton's most valuable players, a genuine athlete with delightful ability.

In the second half, Luton conceded some of their midfield control and had to rely on the strength of defenders, notably Stephens and Saxby. West Ham persuaded Brookings to go further forward and with the talented Devonshire beginning to make progress into the penalty area, they deserved to equalize. However, the manner of the goal was not entirely satisfactory.

Brookings was making one of an increasing number of long runs into the penalty area when Grealish disturbed his delicate balance. There was no alternative for the referee who gave a penalty that was met with anguished complaints from local supporters, who felt deprived when Holland had done much the same to Moss.

Stewart's penalty, his seventh of the season, was well blocked by Findlay but the ball rebounded to the taker and was returned with greater accuracy. Luton's frustration was understandable but a combination of their own loss of momentum and West Ham's tactical alteration that brought Pearson into the attack and moved Brush into midfield seemed to determine the inevitability of a draw.

LUTON TOWN: J. Findlay; K. Stephens, M. Donaghy, A. Grealish, M. Saxby, P. Price, R. Hill, A. West, B. Stein, (sub S. White), R. Hatton, D. Moss.

WEST HAM UNITED: P. Parkes; F. Lampard, P. Brush, R. Stewart, R. Martin, A. Devonshire, P. Allen, P. Holland (sub S. Pearson), D. Cross, T. Brookings, G. Pike.

Referee: S. G. Bates (Bristol)