

■ Arms raise . . . Brian Stein leans back to beat Chris Woods for Luton's first goal



■ It's on its way . . . Ricky Hill finds enough power to head the equaliser

79/80

BRAVE LUTON BACK IN CRAZY RACE

Eric Harris with Luton

QPR: Woods, Shanks, Gillard, McCreery, Hazell, Wicks, Goddard, Roeder (Harkouk), Allen, Currie, Burke. LUTON: Findlay, Jones, Donaghy, Grealish, Aizlewood, Price, Hill, West, Stein, Hatton, White (Pearson). REFEREE: A. Hamill (Staffordshire). GOALS: Goddard (2 and 31), Stein (73), Hill (80). ATTENDANCE: 15,054. BOOKINGS Donaghy (foul on Currie), Harkouk (foul on Grealish).

ACCUSING fingers were hurriedly pointed at Luton following their inability to beat Cardiff City at home last weekend.But they did their own promotion hopes a power of good with a 2-2 draw at QPR on another topsy-turvy Saturday at the top of the Second Division where West Ham and Birmingham City emerged as the victims of a never ending chronicle of soccer surprises.

Defeats by Fulham and Cambridge United respectively again threw the race for First Division status wide open. And those fans who wrote off Luton's chanqes after that Cardiff shambles, were left to reflect on what little wisdom there was in their premature decision.

Luton's performance in West London merely emphasised that the promotion puzzle — already the tightest for many years — will probably remain unsolved until the last game of the season.

And if the Town do manage to confound their own critics by clinching promotion, the point won at Loftus Road on Saturday will be seen as one of their stepping stones.

It was achieved without three key players. Kirk Stephens and Mike Saxby were serving a one-match suspension and leading scorer David Moss was out with an ankle injury.

That all counted for nothing as the Town finally — and very patiently — pulled back a two-goal deficit to snatch what was undoubtedly one of their most precious points of the season.

While Luton boss David Pleat was well satisfied with the result, his Rangers counterpart Tommy Docherty directed an amazing verbal broadside at his own team.

"Promotion? Some of my players aren't good enough to play in the First Division," he said, after pulling off skipper Glenn Roeder in the second half.

Reputations aren't made overnight, but the Town proved that even with a weakened team they have strength in depth to counter any deficiency.

Graham Jones came in at right back for his senior game of the season, with Mark Aizlewood occupying the other full back's position while Mal Donaghy moved into the centre of defence.

Steve White had the unenviable task of deputising for Moss, but rarely made any impression and was pulled off in the second half to give 19-year-old Andy Pearsn a late run in what was also his senior debut.

It was a gamble which paid handsome dividends because Pearson gave the Town extra width on the left and provided additional problems for Rangers.

The display of the reserves left Pleat and assistant Ken Gutteridge thoroughly satisfied. "Didn't they do well?" Pleat asked two dozen Pressemen, who agreed with that assessment.

"I was particularly pleased because when Rangers struck their early goal we had to be bold and attack them. It was even harder when they went two up, although I felt it was only a matter of time before we scored."

Luton battled away when the odds seemed stacked against them and for the first time in several games, the ball ran kindly for them. It was their determined spirit and refusal to accept what, at one stage, seemed to be inevitable defeat which finally turned the game in their favour.

They received magnificent support from a pocket of their fans congregated behind one goal and it was noticeable that they often outshouted the Rangers supporters — even when the Town were two down.

Rangers had the boost of a goal after only two minutes when David McCreery and Steve Burke combined to present Paul Goddard with the opportunity of knocking in his 15th goal of the season. The Town's defence found themselves square and Goddard was left with far too much space.

The lesson to be learned from that early mistake was ignored when Rangers increased their lead after 31 minutes. Burke again did the damage with an accurate cross from the left and Goddard gobbled up the chance for his second goal.

However, Rangers had reckoned without the Town's fighting instinct and Paul Price gave them warning of what was to come when he rolled the ball along the bar.

The first of the goals Luton so richly deserved finally arrived in the 73rd minute. Hatton crossed from the left and Stein was placed perfectly to head the ball crisply past Woods.

Rangers were still struggling from that shock when the Town struck again ten minuted from the end. Again, the move was started on the left with Aizlewood's tantalising cross leaving Ricky Hill to complete an afternoon's energetic display with another headed goal.



■ It's there . . . Bob Hasell is beaten on the goalline as Woods watches in despair