

LUTON OPEN UP AS FANS SING THEIR PRAISES

79/80

LUTON successfully threw the Second Division promotion race wide open again yesterday with an emphatic 4-1 victory at Charlton.

Luton moved into third place aided and abetted by the mobile army of Oak Road supporters who were encamped on the terraces behind one goal.

"Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way; Oh, what fun it is to see Luton win away. Oh!" they sang — after the Town had recorded only their third victory this year.

The fans' vocal support out-powered anything the frustrated Charlton followers could produce in an attempt to lift their team.

But, for all the good things Luton showed on the pitch, Pleat still wasn't satisfied.

"We were rubbish in the first half," he said. "When we were two up we sat back and lost our pattern."

"On paper we were expected to take the points. But games are not played on paper and perhaps my players had their thoughts on the Watford game."

"There is no doubt we can do better than this and, with all respect to Charlton, we always seem to play better against teams at the top."

That comment may point to a dour struggle this afternoon

Eric Harris with Luton

CHARLTON: Johns; Shaw, Madden, Tydeman, Berry, Hazell, Powell, Hales, Robinson, Gritt, Walker. Sub: Smith.
LUTON: Findlay; Stephens, Donaghy, Grealish, Saxby, Price, Hill, West, Stein, Hatton, Moss. Sub: Aizlewood.
REFEREE: C. Downey (Middlesex).
ATTENDANCE: 8,971.
GOALS: Moss, penalty (3), Grealish (12), West (48), Hatton (84), Hales (86).
BOOKINGS: Donaghy (dissent), Hales (foul on Price).

before Luton travel to London again on Monday to meet Chelsea at Stamford Bridge.

Pleat's pre-Easter demand for five points from a hectic three-game programme received a good start against a Charlton team who for the most part lacked spirit and determination.

A third-minute penalty set the pattern for Luton's almost superiority, although goal difference — which could be vital at the end of the season — took a knock when the Town allowed Charlton to hit a consolation goal four minutes from the end.

Charlton offered so little resistance that Luton were able to complete their Good Friday stroll at half pace.

The early penalty highlighted Brian Stein's ability when he has the scent of the penalty area in his nostrils.

His lolloping legs embarked on a jinking run which forced Lawrie Madden to stick out a

boot, which sent the Town striker tumbling.

It was a clear penalty — and leading scorer David Moss — back in the team after missing three games through injury — duly smashed the ball past Nicky Johns for his 23rd goal of the season.

In only the 12th minute the contest came to a premature end as far as Charlton were concerned when Tony Grealish knocked in Luton's second goal.

Paul Price started a neat build-up when a rebound found Bob Hatton, who did well to evade Les Berry's challenge and cross to Stein.

The resulting header produced a good save from Johns but he succeeded only in palming the ball out to Grealish, who promptly stuck it into the net.

Charlton had to wait 20 minutes for their first serious attack when Phil Walker's cross was missed completely by a queue of his colleagues.

But it gave them a rare air of confidence and two minutes later Derek Hales forced Jake Findlay to concede Charlton's first corner.

Gem

Within a minute Walker stabbed the ball into the net from Hales's cross, an effort which was disallowed for offside.

But three minutes after half time Luton struck again with a gem of a goal from Alan West, whose contribution could have won him a Goal of the Month prize if TV cameras had been present.

It started with Stein winning a free kick after being pulled down by Berry. The ball was flicked away from the far post to West, whose volley from 30 yards hit the back of the net before Johns moved.

There could have been another Luton goal almost immediately when Mal Donaghy ran almost unchallenged half the length of the pitch. The move ended in frustration when he lobbed the ball just over the top as Johns moved out to narrow the angle.

Johns then instinctively threw his hands in front of his face to parry Grealish's fierce shot before Hatton just failed to score from Ricky Hill's accurate cross.

But another Luton goal was always on the cards — and it arrived six minutes from the end when West's shot cannoned off a Charlton defender to Hatton, who ran on to beat Johns.

Charlton's solitary reply came four minutes from time when Hales, at the far post, stabbed Peter Shaw's cross past Findlay for a goal which upset Pleat.

"We want shooting for that," he said. "Goal difference is going to be important at the end of the season."