

White at the double bursts home bubble

WATFORD fell back in the Division Two mire on Tuesday night, failing for the umpteenth time when set to move into that, to date, elusive place in the top half of the table. That they slipped at the hands of the old enemy Luton only made the defeat harder to take. They not only completed the 1-0 double over the Hornets for the second successive season but also burst their home bubble.

For Watford's fans it was a night of frustration and irritation; frustration at Watford's failure to bury some good chances and irritation at Luton's uncompromisingly effective tactics at limiting those chances to a minimum.

But for all Luton's throttling offside tactics and defence in numbers, Watford sowed the seeds of their own downfall. Throughout the match, the quality of the final ball was so sadly lacking that Jake Findlay, who invariably pulls off something special in these derby fixtures, had a relatively easy time.

Frittered

Too often Watford wasted good approach work or frittered away their success at placing men in telling positions, by their tendency to play into Luton's hands. Watford's long ball work can be crushingly effective but when it is misused to the degree that was the case on Tuesday night, it can look naive and limited. Again, as with the first half against Bolton, it was not the tactics but their execution.

Of course it was not all Watford's fault. Luton restricted them well, if you like that sort of thing. The visitors rested with some confidence on a brilliantly-created and taken goal in the 10th minute. That they almost added to that in the dying minutes, was understandable against a Watford side forced by dwindling time to throw some caution to the winds.

But in the end, it was Watford who failed. They had chances and missed them and enough possession to have created more. As Graham Taylor later put it: "We are just not good enough yet to combat these sort of tactics."

Technically Luton looked a class above the Hornets. Their accurate passing to feet was in marked contrast to Watford's attacks and they had several heroes. None more so than Mike Saxby who nullified the threat of Jenkins.

Cynical

"I read a very cynical report of our last game which said Saxby had the mobility of a London Transport bus. I was very proud of the way he held Jenkins in the air," said Pleat.

Brian Stein and Ricky Hill also caught the eye in a competent Luton performance while Kenny Jactett, Eric Steele and to a degree new-boy Les Taylor emerged with credit from a sorry Watford night.

Taylor of course missed the chance of the match but long before he took off his substitute's track suit, Wat-

Watford 0 Luton 1

White 10

Watford: Steele; Henderson, Sims, Jactett, Harrison, Blissett, Train, Rostron, Callaghan, Jenkins, Poskett. Substitute: Taylor for Callaghan after 45 mins.

Luton: Findlay; Stevens, Donaghy, Grealish, Saxby, Price, Hill, Stein, White, Aizlewood, Moss. Substitute: West did not play.

Referee: Alex Hamil (Wolverhampton). Attendance: 16,939.

Free kicks: Watford 24, Luton 23 (seven offside). Corners: Watford 7, Luton 4.

Attempts at goal on target (off target) Watford 7(12), Luton 7(3).

Watford goal attempts by: Blissett 4, Jactett 4, Poskett 3, Train 2, Callaghan 2, Taylor 2, Jenkins 2.

Bookings: None. Watford's best: Steele and Jactett.

ford should have scored a goal or two.

Harrison, having shown the way to turn a defence by getting round the back in the second minute, put over a cross which fell to Luther Blissett who was in space. It was one of the few occasions that the midfield man was involved in this, his poorest display of the campaign. Blissett mishit his shot and the ball fell to Ross Jenkins and it seemed an eternity before he got the bouncing ball under some semblance of control with only Findlay to beat and then this chance fell to nought.

Two chances in a few seconds had been frittered away, and Luton defended well in the face of the next attacks — Grealish in the right position to clear off the line from Callaghan and Findlay similarly placed to save from Jactett's second attempt at a shot from a free kick.

Fortunate

Then there was Poskett, opting for a first-time shot following a good right-wing break by Watford and a pass from Sims. He had time to control the ball but instead he blasted it way off target.

All this then in the first nine minutes during which Luton managed only one shot, straight at Steele from 20 yards.

So Luton could count themselves somewhat fortunate to be on level terms, but then came the bonus which made their tactics viable. Stein brilliantly turned Sims, cut round the back on the right and drove over a cross which Steve White hit home with a first-time drive. A superb goal worthy of winning most games and a personal double for White who scored the winner at Luton in August.

That however was almost the last goalmouth incident of the first half. Watford's hunger seemed to dissipate in direct relation to Luton's increased confidence and apart from a White shot which Steele, without discomfort, saved

there was nothing further of note.

Taylor replaced Callaghan at the interval and with his first touch of the ball in the second half, he set up Poskett only for Price to whisk it off the striker's feet.

And it was Taylor again who broke clear, on to a Jactett through ball, beating the offside trap, and reaching the ball fractionally before Findlay who did enough stop the Watford man heading strongly. Moss had the chance to run round the back and clear as the ball bounced towards goal.

Golden

The Luton leading scorer then went up the other end to send a skidding free kick just past the post. Steele appeared to have this covered but again Watford soon had the chance to equalise. It was Taylor who set up Jenkins but Findlay saved the shot, pushing it out to Poskett who then played it back for Taylor to score what seemed the simplest of goals. Incredibly Taylor missed this golden chance spoiling the impression, that he had given up until then, of being remarkably cool in the box.

Next came Blissett, getting behind the Luton defence and sending over a fierce cross from which Poskett could neither get out of the way or control sufficiently to deflect into the net.

Instead the ball shot off him, wide of the mark. Watford who were by then approaching the 360th minute against Luton without scoring, had two more attempts left. One was from Blissett whose header from Rostron's cross gave Findlay a little difficulty and the other from Jactett who sent Watford's latest free kick variation, just over the bar.

Between those two attempts Moss sent a shot wide from a deflection and Steele made fine saves, tipping over a fierce shot from Saxby and reaching to flick away a lovely, chipped effort from Moss.

● After-match Press conference, page 31.

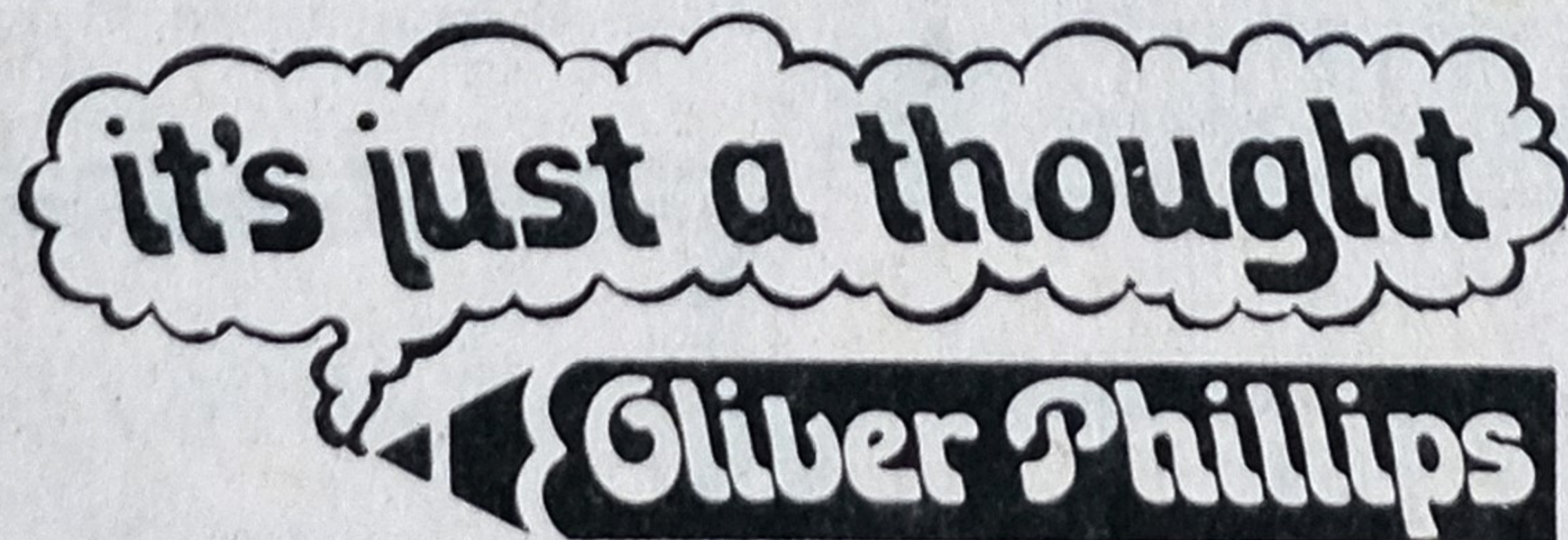
Taylor — so disappointed

TAYLOR was "very disappointed" after Tuesday's defeat. "How can my players justify the first 45 minutes. It was totally and completely opposite to what we have tried to do. Luton got a quality goal and looked a class above in possession.

"But having scored, we were fortunate that they didn't apparently want to take us apart. They had all that possession but without getting in and hurting us.



Mr Pleat hit by subjective or objective?



THE galling feeling prompted by the experience of losing to Luton yet again, spread to the Press room after Tuesday's match. There was a mixture of subjective and objective criticism when David Pleat entered the Pressroom.

Having been reared on the Watford-Luton rivalry it took a good hour to sort out my own objective thoughts on the matter, but the partisan in me did enjoy the over-the-top comment from one who said, when Pleat entered the Pressroom, "Close the door quick before he runs out and catches us all offside."

We have been told throughout soccer's negative age that the game is about winning and losing. Immediate success was the goal without thought to the long-term effects.

Fortunately that trend has been partially abated in time to stop the game rapidly disappearing up its own shorts, but while the depression has undoubtedly hit the numbers who can afford to go to foot-

ball nowadays, a good proportion can afford it but now have to be more discerning on how they spend their spare cash. Football is then judged on entertainment and had the depression come five or six years ago, the possibility of watching a vaguely similar game to the previous week with only a change of faces and shirt, would not have proved too appealing.

That Luton did not completely suffocate Tuesday's game was due to Watford's non-stop if much-misguided work-rate. Watford had enough chances to have rendered a change in Luton's attitude and it was hardly Luton's fault that such a change was unnecessary.

As it was, Luton's tactics appeared to work; appeared to be justified in the end. Ultimately they won this game by default and could

walk away decrying all criticism as 'sour grapes' and pointing to that all important proof of a two-point pudding.

David Pleat admitted that having watched the game against Forest who stood back to soak up the pressure, he decided to be 'mean' and 'restrict' Watford's space; "stop Ray Train from having scope" and use the offside trap to this end.

"Look at Liverpool, Manchester United and Arsenal. They do just the same," he said but I have not noted any of those teams repeatedly running 30 yards in an attempt to catch teams offside.

Asked how he reconciled this practice with being a self-styled purist he replied: "I buy players who can play; not crunchers, kickers and people who purely stop. We planned it this way to com-

bat the amount of aerial pressure we expected to get."

Asked a subjective one: "Who plans the tactics to get people into the turnstiles?"

Well, it is all academic. Nevertheless football's chairmen spend a couple of days, debating the crisis within the game. The need for more open, thrilling and entertaining football is paramount. Luton did that cause no service on Tuesday. One can also ask whether Luton would have played in a different manner had it been three points for a win?

In a sense Pleat's tactics against Watford was a private matter. He planned and appeared to be successful in nullifying the Hornets' approach. The personable Pleat versus the personable Taylor with 27 assistants.

But managers often appear to have lost sight of the fact that football is not a private occasion. They throw their gates open and thousands come hoping to be entertained or thrilled; hoping to leave with something to savour even if they cannot

always have the basic essential of two points. I'm sure most Watford fans left Kenilworth Road, with heads held high despite the 1-0 deficit in August.

The obvious reply to all the foregoing is "Ask Luton's fans if they found it a worthwhile trip?"

Well apart from the fact that Luton's fans were in the definite minority anyway, there is the question of Luton's capabilities. For me, they were well ahead on technique. I agree with Taylor in that they had the skills and potential to have buried Watford. In Hill, Stein and, earlier Grealish, they had the best individual displays. Lovely players and a joy to watch. But on many occasions their assets were used negatively. As it is Luton managed to take the candy from a naive if exuberant baby who came close to snatching it back.

No, instead ask the Luton fans if they would have rather seen their team thrash Watford on Tuesday as opposed to pinching a victory with a few nerve ends showing. I think they would have opted for the thrashing.