

Luton look unstoppable now

WATFORD may not have conceded the Division Two championship but Saturday afternoon at Vicarage Road proved that it will take a mammoth upset to stop Luton storming into Division One in first place. Those who saw this, the fiftieth League meeting between these two adversaries, must have been left in little doubt that the Hatters are the outstanding side in Division Two.

To an outsider, the pure statistics of the League table, make Luton the red-hot favourites, and the way they emerged from this, probably the most exhausting examination they are liable to face, underlined their superiority.

For 20 minutes or more, at the end of the first half, the Hatters demonstrated their footballing ability, their slick, ground passing, control and understanding. But it was the way they matched and sometimes topped the Hornets with biting tackles and controlled aggression which demonstrated their qualifications and championship pedigree.

Powerful

It was not a great game and one has to go back a few years to that Christians and the Lions confrontation at Kenilworth Road in 1969, since one could really label this derby fixture as powerful entertainment. In fact on Saturday there periods of downright boring football as the two conflicting styles negated each other.

Luton came through it however, refusing to let Watford inflict their style and pattern on the game while the Hornets turned and battled the possibility of a defeat into a draw.

I made the Hornets a shade lucky. Yes, it could be argued that Jan Lohman should have won it but then the woodwork saved the Hornets from Hill's header and when it came to clear-cut chances, Watford trailed some way behind the Hatters.

Happily Watford ended the sequence of defeats at the hands of Luton but without playing well. This was due to a spectacular goal by Wilf Rostron who gave the Hornets the early edge and one which they were unable to build upon.

The highspots of January seem some way behind as play with the air of a vehicle with a blown head gasket. The equipment is there but the surge in power and effectiveness has temporarily abated, and when the Hornets needed to step up their acceleration, there was no real response.

Trickiest

In the midfield they lost out time and again, chasing to make do and mend, while the defence coped reasonably with probably the trickiest and most skilful trio of front men they are liable to meet this season. But up front the Hornets, who have only scored that one, blinding goal in their last three outings, rarely looked penetrating. Armstrong and Jenkins were unable to muster a real goal attempt between them and the latter has managed only one in the last three outings.

Here again, the service was, not great. Callaghan, returning after a "rest" which was spiced with the odd effective run out, had a quiet game while Barnes on the opposite flank was right out of it. Neither received

by Oliver Phillips

good service nor made the best out of that which reached them. Luton cut the threat from the flanks to a minimum and left Watford with extra midfield problems as a result.

At times the Hornets looked sluggish and apart from the first 20 minutes, they never put their act together. Luton, were incisive and impressive for the last part of the first half and after that, the game verged on a bore of almost epic proportions.

David Pleat, who spoke much sense after the game, claimed that it reflected the best in Division Two. The first half tended to support his claim, the second half denied it.

The after-match Press conference was a complete opposite to the sort of comments which were flung between rival fans in the Rookery End. The two managers praised each other's achievements and their teams and Pleat possibly committed blasphemy in the eyes of his own supporters when he said, "I hope both teams go up."

Revealing

Perhaps more revealing were the respective manager's answer to the question of which opposing player would you like on your team? Taylor answered promptly with the name of Brian Stein, "because of his composure."

With the notable exception of Newcastle's Arthur Cox and Shrewsbury's Graham Turner, most opposing managers tend to deride Watford's midfield play but Pleat's praise of the absent Kenny Jackett, in answer to the question, said much about Watford and perhaps hinted at what they are missing.

For those who expected and hoped that this would be

WATFORD 1
Rostron 8,
LUTON 1
Stein 33

WATFORD: Sherwood; Rice, Terry, Bolton, Rostron, Taylor, Lohman, Callaghan, Jenkins, Blissett, Barnes. Substitute: Armstrong for Barnes after 51 minutes.

LUTON: Findlay; Stephens, Aizlewood, Horton, Goodyear, Donaghy, Hill, Stein, White, Fuccillo, Moss. Substitute: Antic did not play.

Referee: K. Hackett (Sheffield). Attendance: 22,580.

Free-kicks: Watford 21, Luton 29.

Corners: Watford 9, Luton 8.

Goal attempts on target (off target): Watford 7(4), Luton 10(8).

Watford goal attempts by: Lohman 3, Taylor 2, Callaghan 2, Rostron 2, Bolton 1, Terry 1.

Booking: Terry for a foul on Stein (51).

the afternoon of retribution, things started well as Watford began to take control in their customary fashion.

Rostron, joining in with the early attacks threaded a half-cleared Ian Bolton free-kick through to Les Taylor but the midfield man took too long with his shot and Findlay covered.

But in the eighth minute, Rostron threaded the ball through with considerably more power and success. There were shades of his Goal of the Season at West Ham in the way he struck the ball from a yard outside the corner of the penalty area, after Barnes' attempted cross had rebounded off a defender into space.

Controlled

Driving it with the outside of the left foot, Rostron curled the ball in towards the goal, beating the groping Findlay for it to enter the net high under the angle of post and bar. "He hit it superbly," said Pleat. "Jake Findlay admitted that he always felt it was going to beat him from the moment it left his foot."

Watford had their tails up and there was a controlled drive by Taylor which Findlay fielded and Lohman also forced the goalkeeper into action. "We could have been overwhelmed but we fought our way out of it which we may not have done two years ago," said Pleat.

It was a period of undoubted superiority for the Hornets but Luton resisted well. It began to go wrong however following three

successful offside traps, sprung by Luton and Watford's midfield seemed to hesitate about plying the forward balls.

Suddenly Sherwood had to arch and touch over a shot by Stein and Terry had to throw himself forward to block the forward's shot when Stein had worked himself into a promising position.

Goodyear had a header deflected wide by Jenkins before Callaghan turned the Luton defence to chip over a cross which was half-cleared to Taylor who extracted a fine save from Findlay.

But in the 33rd minute, Watford were pegged back. A disputed free-kick saw the ball played forward by Horton. Sherwood came out as if believing he had a chance of contesting the issue but stopped as Stein collected the ball. He worked himself enough space for an angled shot and Sherwood, who had ventured further forward, was in no position to save as Stein guided it beyond him into the empty net.

Dummied

Next Rice let in Moss and his Cross was met by Hill who beat Sherwood but headed against the upright. Showing some magical control, Stein then dummied Bolton to work an opening on the turn but Sherwood parried this.

Watford had been forced to play second fiddle for the final 20 minutes of the first half and were a might fortunate to be on terms even if

they had all but gifted Luton the equaliser.

Blissett, who had collided with Findlay in the first half, soon limped off after the break, enabling Armstrong, who had reported that morning with a heavy head cold, to come on. Terry was soon booked for a foul on Stein as both teams began to labour with the problem of their opponents' styles. A back pass from Donaghy brought Findlay to a full-length save while the goalkeeper had an easier task collecting half-hit shots from Barnes and Lohman.

Luton counter-attacked well, invariably finding a man free on the right and Sherwood made three fine saves, twice denying White and Moss once with three stops at his near post. "He's really come on a bomb," Pleat said of the Watford goalkeeper. "Both goalkeepers played well."

In all three breakaways, Luton looked dangerous, while Watford provided only one real telling break, getting effectively wide for a cross when Jenkins headed down and Lohman ran in to ram a shot against the diving Findlay who collected the rebound off the Dutchman's head.

Misguided

But the second half was a disappointing, turgid affair overall and the next illuminating moment of an afternoon interrupted by the all too frequent and occasionally misguided whistle from Mr Hackett, came when the other Division Two results reached our ears.

They confirmed what has long been suspected, that a team which can consistently string together a run of reasonable results, will always be in with a shout of promotion. Luton have already proved that they can string together excellent results and, provided Watford can overcome the recent run of hiccups in their performances, if not in their results, they should be able to start the next half century of derby matches, older and wiser.

● Jimmy Gilligan and Paul Franklin are recovering from slight knocks and missed Tuesday's reserve game.

AFTER THE GAME AGAINST "YOU KNOW WHO" THE TWO MANAGERS TEAMED UP FOR THE PRESS.....



TO THE DIE-HARDS, IT WAS HARDLY CREDIBLE



that's the trouble today, no sense of tradition!



WITH OUR AERIAL METHODS THWARTED BY "ON THE DECK" STUFF FOR THE SECOND WEEK ON THE TROT



I haven't look down, Doctor



ONE MAN, THOUGH, WHO ISN'T BOTHERED BY ANY OPPOSITION TACTICS AT THE MOMENT



NEVER MIND, WITH OUR CURRENT LEAGUE POSITION, ANY CRITICISM IS....

