

Horton smashes the United barrier

By ERIC HARRIS

81/82

LUTON skipper Nobby Horton has a habit of scoring important goals.

His 88th-minute effort against Swindon in early January gave the Town a place in the fourth round of the FA Cup.

Last night, his spectacular second-half goal helped Luton to open a seven-point gap at the top of the Second Division with a 1-0 victory over Cambridge United at Kenilworth Road.

For much of the match, Luton must have wondered exactly what they had to do to break down United's defensive barrier.

It wasn't pretty to watch and, although Cambridge manager John Docherty vigorously defended his tactics in the post-match Press conference, the ploy he used must be open to criticism.

Capable

Docherty insisted he was playing for the three points and the game's corner count, nine to Luton and seven to Cambridge, suggested that United were capable of nicking a goal.

But that was upset by the fact that big Jake Findlay had only one serious save to make while his counterpart, Richard Key, was continuously overworked especially in the second period when he made excellent saves to restrict the Town to only one goal.

Docherty used five players in the middle as he successfully attempted to prevent the Hatters scoring in the first half. But Luton's patience was finally rewarded when Horton smashed a superb shot past Key in the 75th minute.

Until then the battling Hatters had been firing on only three plugs. Off-key passing against Cambridge's massed defence frustrated the fans as they bayed for a goal.

It didn't arrive until Horton's effort although that was justice in its own right because there was never any doubt the Town deserved to win.

Docherty faced with the difficult task of trying to

LUTON TOWN: Findlay, Stephens, Aizlewood, Horton, Goodyear, Donaghy, Hill, Stein, White, Fuccillo (sub Antic), Moss.

CAMBRIDGE UNITED: Key, Donaldson, Murray, Smith, Fallon, Turner, O'Neill (sub Cartwright), Spriggs, Gibbins, Reilly, Mayo.

REFEREE: D. Letts (Basingstoke).

ATTENDANCE: 10,597.

GOAL: Horton (75).

BOOKINGS: Turner (foul on White), Gibbins (foul on Donaghy).

peg the Second Division's runaway leaders, didn't attempt to hide his defensive ideas and, to some degree, it looked as though the ploy would work in United's bid to sneak at least one point.

But once Luton had gone in front, Cambridge were forced to come out of their defensive shell which helped to lift the match in the second half.

Luton manager David Pleat had warned his players that Cambridge were capable of defending well under pressure. His concern proved correct on a night when entertainment from the visitors seemed to be the second priority.

It was a difficult game for Luton to win, but patience was their best ally and United later had to thank the woodwork and Key's unorthodox leg saves to keep them in the picture.

Offside

The Town opened on a bright note and United's early frustration was recorded when former Luton player Chris Turner was booked for a clumsy foul on Steve White as the striker cheekily attempted to nip through on his own.

There were only seven minutes gone when, from a consolidated build-up, Brian Stein put David Moss through but he ran into an offside position and the early opportunity of a goal disappeared.

Luton had to wait 11 minutes for the first corner which Key scooped off the turf before the keeper made an easy catch from the winger's lob four minutes later.

Then Stein attempted to wriggle his way towards

goal when his header took a deflection to give the Town their second flag kick.

But Cambridge, although defensively minded, also tried to sneak the vital early goal when Joe Mayo headed wide from Steve Spriggs's curling centre.

Poor passing didn't assist Luton's attempt to take the lead although Stein smashed a ferocious shot marginally wide towards the end of the first half.

Wave

But the start of the second period signalled the arrival of a wave of Luton attacks.

Within two minutes of the resumption Ricky Hill — England's latest Under-21 recruit — embarked on an energetic run which finished with a precision pass to Stein. But he mistook the pace of the ball and yet another opportunity had disappeared.

With 54 minutes gone Key made the first of his important saves when he managed to block Moss's shot, hit on the turn, with his legs. A minute later, Kirk Stephens had the agony of watching his 30-yard shot rebound from underneath the bar.

There was now some frenzied action from the Town and Mark Aizlewood was only a fraction off target with his shot before Stein should have scored when he allowed the keeper to make another save with his legs.

Hill hit the post with a fierce low shot before the long-awaited goal finally arrived in the 75th minute. It was a marvellous effort as Horton, in the inside-left position, nipped around Tommy O'Neill to give Key absolutely no chance with his angled drive.

That was followed by more excellent work from Hill who forced Key to make another fine save. But, five minutes from the end, Lindsay Smith could have snatched an undeserved equaliser when Findlay had to make a rare save.

Once in front, Luton were never slow to use the back pass when the situation warranted it. But it forced Pleat to jump out of the dug-out to urge his side forward.