

LUTON FEEL THE BACKLASH

By ERIC HARRIS

THE rigours of the First Division were too much for Luton to cope with at Villa Park last night where the European Champions moved off the bottom of the table with their first victory of the season.

The Town's 4-1 defeat still leaves them with only one victory after four games of the new season and there was little from last night's performance to inject enthusiasm into the small army of fans who made the trip to the Midlands.

A creaky defence has conceded 11 goals, and the settling-in period in Division One is providing manager David Pleat with his fair share of early problems.

The midfield department was sadly out of touch last night as skipper Nobby Horton, Ricky Hill and Raddy Antic rarely came to grips with Villa's thirst for goals after three successive opening defeats.

Luton felt the full backlash of those results and, after conceding a goal as early as the eighth minute, there was rarely any sign it was going to be the Hatters' night.

Their failings were made even more miserable by the fact that Villa never managed to reproduce the form which won them the European Cup last season.

They were made to look above mediocre by Luton's inefficient passing from midfield — a problem which will have to be solved before it is punished further at Liverpool on Saturday.

After winning the Second Division Championship by eight points, Luton are finding their new ball-game a much tougher proposition and there have been only glimpses so far this season



CAPTAIN'S GOAL . . . Aston Villa skipper Dennis Mortimer slots home his side's first goal against Luton at Villa Park last night

of their potential to reach a position of respectability in the table.

Pleat managed to put on a brave face after the match but deep down he is well aware of the early season problems facing the First Division newcomers.

But, despite conceding that early goal, Luton still looked the most dangerous team on the break in the first 18 minutes.

Penetration

Diminutive Paul Walsh and the scheming Brian Stein tried all the tricks in their book to produce a vital equaliser. But once Villa increased their lead

in the 21st minute, the damage on Luton had been totally inflicted.

The Town had no answer to Peter Withe's tantalising running, or the

drive of skipper Dennis Mortimer, who scored one goal and had a hand in one of Villa's two penalties.

Withe could have blasted in a hat-trick

while, in contrast, Villa keeper Jimmy Rimmer was never made to work by a Luton forward line which sadly lacked penetration despite the efforts of Walsh and Stein.

Pleat must have been concerned with the simplicity of Villa's first two goals when Town's defence gave them generous space.

The first, after eight minutes, was all too easy as Withe sent Mortimer racing through to beat Jake Findlay to expose another big flaw in the Hatters' inefficient defensive tactics.

But, within two minutes, Luton gave Villa an early scare when David Moss, often playing deep, supplied Horton with a beautiful pass. The Town's skipper shook off his markers in a strong run, but shot wide after Rimmer came off his line to narrow the angle.

Despite Luton's early probing, another Villa goal in the 21st minute killed any survival hopes stone dead. Again, the goal stemmed from poor marking.

Opportunity

Kirk Stephens lost possession to Andy Blair after the referee had played the advantage rule to the Town's benefit. Blair's cross was gobbled up by Withe, unmarked, who prodded the ball past the keeper.

Within the next five minutes, Withe missed two relatively easy

chances before Stein, from Stephens' pass, found the pace of the ball too much and missed the opportunity of pulling one back.

Tony Morley shot narrowly over from a set piece free kick before Villa sealed Luton's fate with a 39th-minute penalty.

Mortimer put Morley clear and Horton, running in from behind, was penalised when the referee decided he brought the England winger down. Gordon Cowans, another thorn in Luton's side throughout the match, belted the penalty past Findlay.

Three down at half time, the Town were as good as buried although they pulled one back in the 54th minute when Blair was harshly judged to have handled Wayne Turner's cross.

Moss converted the resulting penalty, but that was as far as any Luton hopes of a fightback went.

Pat Heard shot over before Blair thundered a tremendous shot against the bar and Morley screwed the ball wide from Withe's cross.

Luton's misery was completed four minutes from the end, with another penalty, this time when substitute Billy Kellock looked like an airborne acrobat when he climbed above Withe.

Cowans obliged a mediocre Villa Park crowd by taking advantage of the spot kick for the fourth goal.

MATCH DETAILS

ASTON VILLA: Rimmer, Jones, Heard, Bremner, McNaught, Mortimer, Blair, Shaw (Walters), Withe, Cowans, Morley.

LUTON TOWN: Findlay, Stephens, Turner, Horton, Goodyear, Donaghy, Hill, Stein, Walsh, Antic (Kellock), Moss.

REFEREE: D. Owen (Wirral).

ATTENDANCE: 18,823.

GOALS: Mortimer (8), Withe (21), Cowans (39, 86 — both pens), Moss (54).

BOOKINGS: Goodyear (foul on Shaw), Stephens (foul on Walters).

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