

ON COURSE

Home draw is
enough to keep
boss happy...

LUTON TOWN 0, STOKE CITY 0

LOOKING for three points from the two holiday weekend games to ensure First Division survival for another season, Luton manager David Pleat was content in the end with two after Stoke City frustrated his depleted side at Kenilworth Road on Monday.

The second scoreless home game of the season might have gone either way, and if the result was disappointing it soon looked a lot better as other results became known.

The Town may be clear of the drop already, and the value of the performance against Stoke was that it left them poised to make certain in Saturday's final home game of the season.

By that time the players will have had a rest, and Paul Walsh may be able to return to inject the missing sparkle into attack.

Stoke boss Ritchie Barker cheerfully admitted that Walsh's absence following his injury at Southampton had made a big difference to the game.

He claimed that Stoke didn't really operate an offside trap. It just happened because their defence realised they could edge forward behind clearances. "Luton lacked a bit of pace up front... but we wouldn't think of doing that if Walsh had been playing."

I am one of the spectators who accept that with some misgivings, but agree with both managers that the result was about right.

The Town's problems are behind the scenes rather than on the pitch. The strength in reserve is so sparse that with Walsh joining Brian Stein on the

REPORT BY BRIAN SWAIN
PICTURES: MARK RICHARDS

injured list the Town put out a side with only two experienced attackers, Trevor Aylott and David Moss.

They both battled hard, but it was left to Tony Godden to save the point with two tremendous saves in the first half, when Stoke were too good for a disorganised Town side.

The Town played half the game with Moss on the right wing. Aylott in the centre and Raddy Antic floating behind them.

Brian Horton had passed a fitness test on the pitch before kick-off, and played after a pain-killing injection to prevent further enforced changes.

The presence of 18-year-old Ray Daniel as substitute, and 17-year-old Garry Parker the other player in contention for that role, underlined Mr Pleat's point when he said that his team choice had been governed by who was fit and able to play rather than by a considered selection from a full squad.

BETTER

Stoke had much the better of the first half. The 45-minute corner count was 8-0 to the visitors, and but for Godden's outstanding work Stoke would have been at least two up by the interval.

The strength of his game is in his ability to make quick reflex saves, and when the chances arose to prove the point he denied Sammy Mellroy in the 30th minute and pushed a header by Ian Painter onto a post 13 minutes later.

The Town had a let-off when Micky Thomas pro-

duced a cracking volley which whistled wide, while the only first-half danger to Paul Fox at the other end was when he blocked a shot by Moss, who had been put clear by Aylott, and then watched Wayne Turner blast the rebound well wide.

The Town looked a more confident outfit after the break when Moss reverted to the left wing and Turner was moved up into attack.

They were still unbalanced, but the amount of effort put into it almost overcame that problem.

WIDE

Aylott nearly snatched a goal with a solo burst and a shot which curled wide of the far post with Fox beaten and Turner, not too happy as an attacker, sent a fair chance wide after good work by Moss.

Horton had a 20-yarder pushed round the post, but tiredness and tension crept into the last 20 minutes or so.

Mellroy struck a sweet half-volley a fraction too high to remind the Town that any mistakes at the back could be fatal, but on the whole the defence had a good day.

Paul Elliott, patchy in his first few weeks, played with cool authority, particularly in the first half, and Richard Money has come back to form at an important time.

Even so the final whistle came as a relief because Stoke looked the stronger in the latter stages and news that all the other endangered teams had failed to win made the Town's point look a real holiday treat.

Match Details

TOWN: Godden; Stephens, Elliott, Donaghy, Money; Hill, Horton, Turner, Antic; Aylott, Moss. Sub: Daniel, not used.

STOKE: Fox; Bould, Hampton, O'Callaghan, McAughtrie; Bracewell, Thomas, Mellroy; Chamberlain, Painter, Maguire. Sub: Griffiths, not used.

GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town seven saved and seven wide; Stoke five saved, eight wide, one deflected on to a post. Corners: 12-2 to Stoke.

REFEREE: Alan Gunn, Sussex — suffered with one linesman who had difficulty with the offside law, then got it wrong when he gave one offside decision himself.

ATTENDANCE: 11,877 — second highest at Kenilworth Road since Liverpool's visit in February.

ENTERTAINMENT: Not as bleak as the average 0-0 draw, and a fascinating contest in the later stages when fears about possible defeat kept Town supporters' hearts fluttering.



● ENGLAND GOALKEEPER, Peter Shilton, watches Paul Elliott's header roll into the net for the Town's opener at The Dell and afterwards blamed team-mate Ruben Agboola for putting it there.



● PAUL ELLIOTT gets up among a ruck of defenders to head the Town in front against Southampton in the fifth minute with his first goal in the First Division.