

5-GOAL UNITED SURGE INTO THIRD PLACE

83/84

By **ROGER MALONE**

Luton Town ... 0 Manchester Utd ... 5

MANCHESTER UNITED swept into third place in the championship race in yesterday's live televised match, inflicting on eighth-placed Luton their heaviest home defeat since returning to the First Division.

"We have been threatening to get a score like this in several recent matches," said Ron Atkinson, the United manager. "The championship race is hotting up." Referring to the £10 million take-over moves surrounding his club, he joked: "That will put the price up by another £5 million."

To be fair to Luton, they would probably have settled for defeat by 2-0 — the score with 18 minutes remaining.

Then David Pleat, the Luton manager, gambled by taking off Thomas, the left-back, to bring on Antic as an extra raider. But United scored three more goals against a depleted defence—all three moves stemming from the left side of Luton's rearguard.

Poor attendance

No doubt the nation's TV audience enjoyed seeing so many goals. But the boggy pitch, on which the ball bobbled about, prevented the high degree of close-quarter skills and flowing moves that both the talented sides might have provided on a better surface.

The attendance of only 11,265 — compared with 17,009 for last season's corresponding fixture — brought almost as much concern to Mr Pleat as the result.

"It should sound warning-bells all over football," he com-

mented. "Where will the next generation of young footballers come from, if they stop going to matches and missing seeing the likes of Bryan Robson and Wilkins? Watching on television is not the same."

Robson, the England captain, watched by his international manager Bobby Robson, became Luton's particular destroyer. Given a freer role, Robson scored two crucial goals — the first after 37 minutes and the third 11 minutes from the end.

Rich haul

His first goal came when the hard-working Stapleton headed on Muhren's long pass. Robson was already accelerating and his speed caught Luton's defenders flat-footed. He surged into the left-hand side of the box before placing home his 14th goal of the season—a rich haul for a midfielder player by February.

And, perhaps only a player of Robson's commitment and courage could have scored the third goal. Again accelerating as Duxbury's long pass approached the edge of Luton's penalty area, Robson lunged at the ball to nudge it over Sealey, a split-second before the inevitable collision with the goalkeeper.

Robson required treatment and was soon substituted by Graham, but his leg injury was not serious—reassuring news for Robson, who has twice suffered broken legs.

Since their return to the First Division, Luton, who often gain handsome victories over lesser sides, have never succeeded against what Mr Pleat described as "the big four—Liverpool, Manchester United, Arsenal and Tottenham."

He added: "Today's result proves to us once again that the best sides are not only skilful but strong of leg and body—and fast. United hounded us, particularly in midfield."

After Robson's opening goal United scored again within three minutes. Muhren's long centre from the left found Whiteside beating Donaghy, his Northern Ireland international team-mate, in the air to head home.

After Robson made it 3-0, the last two goals were academic. Whiteside's short centre found Stapleton unmarked to score after 81 minutes, and five minutes later Stapleton returned the compliment for Whiteside to make it five.

Luton Town.—Sealey; Stephens, Thomas (Antic 72), Horton, Elliott, Donaghy, Hill, Stein, Walsh, Aylott, Bunn.

Manchester Utd.—Bailey; Duxbury, Albiston, Wilkins, Moran, Hoeg, Robson (Graham 82), Moses, Muhren, Stapleton, Whiteside.



Frank Stapleton (dark shirt) gets a header in—despite the attentions of Luton's Mitchell Thomas.