

Luton end the five-hour saga



AFTER five hours, 99 goal attempts, 39 corners, 199 free kicks and perhaps 18 clear-cut goal opportunities overall, Luton finally overcame Watford to squeeze through to the FA Cup quarter finals with this victory at Kenilworth Road on Saturday.

In the locality when the draw was first made, it was regarded as something of a glamour clash — to the respective sets of supporters perhaps Paul Newman v Clint Eastwood. By Saturday afternoon it had turned into a less than appetising X-certificate struggle — a sort of King Kong v Godzilla.

To the objective watcher, the three-game saga had only moments of entertainment and little in the way of flowing football. Neither side was shown to advantage and while there was obvious disappointment for Watford supporters, there must have been an element of relief too that these punch-drunk teams did not have to negate each other for a further match.

The 22 players on Saturday could well have been signing the recent hit "I Know Him So Well" as they tackled their opposite numbers and limited the moments of opportunism and invention to a minimum.

For an hour, this banal exchange lacked shape and colour before Luton's goal brought an increase in passion and interest to a match in which even the players seemed bored with the repeated yet unproductive commitment.

"I could not begin to argue who deserved to go through after three matches," said Graham Taylor. "The fact of the matter is that Luton are in the quarter finals."

Well, on my scoreboard, Luton shaded it on clear-cut chances and territorial superiority over three games. Watford were ahead on goal attempts and corners and could also contend that the officials were less than kind. In the end, Luton shaded it in the most important department . . . luck.

Their equaliser at Vicarage Road was deflected as was their winner on Saturday — Steve Terry being the unwitting contributor to both goals.

And Luton had the luck of unsighted or error-prone officials making telling contributions. There was the Lohman "non penalty" last Monday perhaps balanced by McClelland's challenge on Nwajiobi. Then there was Foster's handling offence on Wednesday and the linesman's terribly bloomer when he allowed Luton's goal to stand when scored from an offside position — a decision confirmed by video as being a bad one. Then again from the main stand viewpoint, in another incident in the same game, Foster appeared to fling himself to the ground unchallenged in the Watford box. But some contend, watching from the Vicarage Road end, that Gilligan fouled the Luton centre half and was fortunate not to have conceded a penalty. But others felt Foster was looking for a penalty.

On Saturday however, Watford certainly lost out — this time when full-back Mitchell Thomas handled in the box — a fact highlighted by television coverage.

"I don't always agree with Jimmy Hill," smiled Taylor, "but I think he got it right on the television coverage. It was a penalty. It was an amazing decision."

The cameras supported the viewpoint that Barnes' earlier offence was not intentional but it was a close call.

Television made a mockery of David Pleat's after-match claim: "I don't think there was anything controversial that would have changed the course of the game."

The penalty decision was a bad one, as was the lack of the offside decision in the previous game. The officials

Luton 1 Turner 57

Luton: Sealey; Breacker, Thomas, Turner, Foster, Donaghy, Hill, Stein, Harford, Nwajiobi, Parker. Substitute: Moss not used.

Watford: Coton; Sinnott, Terry, McClelland, Rostron; Taylor, Lohman, Jackett; Callaghan, Blissett, Barnes. Substitute: Bardsley not used.

Attendance: 15,586. Referee: J. Bray (Leicester).

Share of play: Watford 45 per cent.

Free kicks: Watford 25, Luton 26.

Corners: Watford 9, Luton 3.

Goal attempts on target (off target): Watford 10 (8), Luton 6 (5).

Watford goal attempts by: Barnes 5, Rostron 3, Taylor 3, Lohman 2, Blissett 2, Callaghan 1, Terry 1, McClelland 1. Bookings: None.

Watford 0

had no excuse for failing to spot either.

And when it comes to separating the two teams, Luton fans, who may rightly feel their side just about had the edge over five hours, must concede they had considerable fortune in the instances of these non-decisions.

For Watford supporters, the recovery from defeat is not made any easier however by the quality of the Hornets' play over the past three games. They matched relegation strugglers Luton for commitment but where was the invention or artistry in the last third of the field? As the Hornets move into the final third of the campaign, there was little to emerge from this trio of matches, to encourage hopes of a climb into the top half of the table.

The clashes with Luton over the years have invariably been close but even during those, Watford have been able to display their quality and not just enthusiasm.

Steve Terry, John McClelland and Wilf Rostron again proved to be outstanding; Tony Coton never put a foot wrong; Les Taylor toiled as did Jan Lohman although not to such good effect as on previous occasions. The remainder to varying degrees and for a variety of reasons were well below their own standards.

Les Sinnott, perhaps unnerved by Graham Taylor's uncharacteristic criticism of his individual contribution on Wednesday, was given no early respite by Luton who played on his flank early on and made inroads until Sinnott regained his composure.

John Barnes had some opening moments but was thwarted by Sealey and a handball offence and then faded. Luther Blissett was seldom in the picture and it was not until the 84th minute that he produced a really noteworthy contribution — a quality cross which went unchallenged.

Callaghan and Jackett, who once promised so much, continue to disappoint and so, not surprisingly, Watford's forward play was of a disappointing quality.

Watford attacked as if in the belief that they still had a Reilly or Jenkins to win the ball in the air. As a result they played into the hands of Steve Foster who had an outstanding game, or rather, was allowed to look dominant as the ball invariably picked out his forehead in the Luton box.

The Hornets' failure in this department would appear to lend weight to those who contend that Reilly would have made a telling contribution. Such must be conjecture as indeed is the view that Reilly's absence would not have been so noticeable had Barnes been fully fit in the first place. But although Watford were not over-impressive in any of the games in a footballing sense, they could reasonably argue that they did not gain a fair balance of luck and deci-

sions. For Steve Terry, who could have been booked in all three matches, there was the disappointment of making two unintentional deflections to enable Luton to go through.

The first incident of the game involved a handball offence by Barnes who tried to chest down a clearance in his own area — the ball striking his arm.

Barnes exploded with a good run, jinking past Foster's lunge and sending in a shot which Sealey managed to deflect with his feet. At the other end, Nwajiobi shot tamely at Coton from a Stein-inspired move.

In the 25th minute Barnes collected the ball from Blissett and burst through to produce a left-foot shot which Sealey parried but Luton came back with Foster rising high to head a free kick across the face of goal with no one following up.

Sealey moved smartly across goal to field a Rostron cross-cum-shot and for Watford, Coton saved an



John Barnes and Watford find their path blocked at Luton.

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angled drive from Nwajiobi.

It was not an exciting first half but the second half was played with more passion — after Luton had taken the lead. The half opened with Taylor seeing his shot from Barnes' lay-back, deflected over the bar, Barnes had a header deflected over from Callaghan's free kick but after 57 minutes Luton took the lead. Stein and Parker combined in midfield and the latter sent the ball through to Turner whose shot was deflected by Terry, over the diving Coton and into the net.

Blissett had a shot blocked but Stein went closer for Luton with a diving header

just wide of the near post.

Rostron saw his shot cleared off the Luton line but the home side had their moments as Watford pushed forward with Terry and Rostron abandoning their defensive duties. Coton saved from Nwajiobi and the Luton man also put another effort just wide.

Callaghan had a right-foot volley blocked and Sealey saved from a drive by Taylor but perhaps the most disappointing moment came when Terry rose to head across the face of goal but untypically, there was no one coming in at the far post to add the final touch.