

Blissett-Callaghan come in from the cold

NIGEL CALLAGHAN and Luther Blissett came in from the cold on Tuesday night to spearhead Watford's victory and gain three valuable points at the expense of local rivals, and relegation strugglers, Luton at Vicarage Road.

The flattering 3-0 success was a welcome reassurance for those who had begun to doubt the Hornets' ability to avoid becoming embroiled in a relegation battle over the next two and a half months.

Blissett, celebrating his 300th Watford appearance, scored another two goals to take his tally to 22 — 15 in the League — and join the leading First Division scorers in joint fourth place.

While his touch and form have still to return if he is to recapture his pre-Christmas quality, a record of four goals in the last three appearances is a heartening return for an "out-of-form" striker.

"It's coming back. I fancy myself to score when I go out now," said a happy Blissett with his eye on Kerry Dixon's leading 17-goal First Division tally.

On Saturday, the only forward to show promise was Gary Porter but on Tuesday night this number doubled with the displays of both Callaghan and Blissett.

Callaghan emerged from months of indifferent and poor performances to give Luton's Mitchell Thomas a harrowing night. There was much of the old Callaghan as he grew in confidence throughout the game and climaxed his night with a magnificent goal which should join the leading list of contenders for Goal of the Season.

Callaghan's improving fortunes were helped by the fact that Thomas was plainly shaken by his error in conceding a 27th-minute penalty. Or, as Graham Taylor was to put it: "The crowd got off his back because Jimmy Gilligan was having a horrible time and they turned on him and that gave Nigel a chance."

Gilligan did indeed have a desperate game but John Barnes was not far behind him in the ineffective stakes as Watford showcased in a game both the reasons for hope and concern.

Luton enjoyed the greater possession for spells and looked the more fluid side but, for all their possession, they looked a team with too many footballers attempting to walk the ball into the net. Ricky Hill and Brian Stein turned their men well but overall there was too much embroidery and not enough penetration to their game.

By comparison Watford looked disjointed but more direct and while the teams shared the goal attempts on the night, the Hornets, once they hit a run of confidence and had the smell of victory, began to look the better bet. In the final 25 minutes Watford looked more like their old selves.

The scoreline was flattering but apart from the three points, the goals gave a valuable boost to the goal difference column as well as providing sweet revenge for the FA Cup defeat.

It was perhaps ironic that Watford gained the lead via the penalty spot. Callaghan clipped a fine pass over Thomas, the ball dropping to the feet of Blissett.

"I think if Thomas had gone for the ball instead of trying to get back in front of me, it might have served him better," said Blissett. "But he definitely tripped me. Some referees give it, some don't."

Said David Pleat: "Thomas was very foolish if he did trip Blissett but he said he didn't. But then if it had happened at the other end I would have been looking for a penalty. There were a couple of handball situations in the Watford box that had me looking to the referee."

Taylor pointed out that Thomas had escaped a penalty decision in the final Cup tie with Luton. "These things balance out," he said.

Watford's first-half display was edgy to say the least while Luton played with greater continuity and confidence. Yet at the interval,

Watford3

Blissett 27 (pen), 89

Callaghan 75

Luton0

WATFORD: Coton, Bardsley, Terry, McClelland, Rostron, Taylor, Jackett, Callaghan, Blissett, Gilligan, Barnes. Substitute: Porter not used.
LUTON: Sealey, Breacker, Thomas, Nicholas, Foster, Donaghy, Hill, Stein, Harford, Parker, Preece. Substitute: Nwajobi for Parker after 75 minutes.
Attendance: 14,411. Referee: T. Spencer (Salisbury).
Share of play: Watford 45 per cent.
Free kicks: Watford 17, Luton 23 (10 for offside).
Corners: Watford 6, Luton 5.
Goal attempts on target (off target): Watford 8 (5), Luton 7 (5).
Watford goal attempts by: Blissett 5, Callaghan 4, Rostron 2, Barnes 1, Gilligan 1.
Booking: Harford for dissent (38).

Blissett scores from the penalty (right), and hits Watford's third.



although Watford seemed somewhat flattered by their lead, the chances had been even. By the end of the game however Watford had the greater number of clear-cut opportunities while Luton had wasted the larger tally of threatening, dangerous attacks.

"I lost count how many times Taylor and Rostron hooked clear in the box," said Pleat.

Tony Coton also performed well and, in fact, twice set up goal-producing moves with timely saves and interventions. David Bardsley and Kenny Jackett also made effective returns to the line-up and there was more shape to Watford's general play even in their fretful moments.

"I moved John Barnes out to the wing because I felt that no matter how we were playing, we needed something the players understood," said Taylor.

Watford were able to find their way out of Saturday's self-inflicted hole by touching the base of a familiar playing pattern — two wingers and two central strikers — without the complications of other tactics adding to their own worries.

The commitment was there and there were signs of rehabilitation for two of the front runners. There was a semblance of a creative department, headed by Callaghan's fine distribution in the second half. But the season has seen such inconsistencies that it is impossible to fathom whether Watford are on their way back to something akin to their old form or if they just briefly touched a vein of cohesion during a difficult period.

Luton, suffering their first defeat in seven games, are deep in trouble. Yet they look the part of a team destined for better days, flattering only to deceive. In four games with Watford in 15 days, Harford has struck me as being technically excellent when shaping to fire goalwards. He even strikes the ball well but almost every time he has hit it wide. And behind him, there seem to be too many cooks preparing the attacking fare for too few front runners.

Watford's hopes must rest on continuing commitment on the level demonstrated

against Luton. Sunderland and Sheffield Wednesday without lapse into the limp surrender epitomised by displays against Newcastle and Chelsea.

It must also be hoped that

Callaghan has turned his personal corner and that Blissett's goal-run will similarly boost his confidence. Barnes too is overdue a return to form for if Callaghan had played as he did on Tuesday night the crowd would not have been so kind.

Luton had five good chances in the first half. Parker clipped a left-wing cross straight at Coton; Harford sent a clear ninth-

minute chance across the face of goal; Foster sent the ball in a similar direction after climbing for a free header at the far post to Parker's corner; Harford struck another effort elegantly wide and, finally, Parker came in with an angled shot well saved by Coton.

Watford had fewer opportunities. Jackett sent Blissett clear but Sealey raced out to make a fine interception; then Jackett crossed for Barnes to challenge but Gilligan hit the loose ball tamely at the goalkeeper; Rostron had a cross-shot which went just

wide of the far post and Callaghan, and just before the interval, Barnes' cross was nodded on by Gilligan and Callaghan sent a looping header over the goalkeeper but on to the roof of the net.

The clearest chance of the first half was provided by the penalty in the 27th minute. Callaghan sent Blissett away. Thomas challenged crudely and the referee pointed to the spot. There Blissett duly blasted the ball home with some confidence.

Watford began to assert themselves more forcefully after the break. First though, Harford had headed over from Parker's cross, then Callaghan made a fine run, cutting inside and opening up the centre of the Luton defence. He could have

opted for a shot but the confidence was not high enough and instead he clipped the ball through for the unmarked Gilligan and Barnes to confuse each other. Barnes restrained from a first-time effort and attempted to dribble the ball through without success.

Blissett went close when he met a Callaghan cross at the near post but hooked it wide before Luton came back with Stein looking dangerous but his final attempt was charged down. Back came Watford with Callaghan splitting the defence with a magnificent crossfield ball to Blissett, who cut in and sent a first-rate shot goalwards, which Sealey went full length to tip round the post.

Yet the cementing of Watford's lead was to come from a moment of real distress. McClelland was not alive to a threat as he loped towards the ball and it took a desperate challenge by Coton to hack the ball clear. Blissett collected it and sent it out to Callaghan who took a couple of paces before unleashing a stunning angled, dipping and swerving shot from 25 yards out which beat Sealey all the way.

● Watford are at Coventry tomorrow (3 pm); the Reserves entertain Chelsea (3 pm) at Vicarage Road, and the Juniors are at Cambridge (11 am).

The Juniors travel to Barnsley in the first leg of the FA Youth Cup semi-final (7.30 pm). On Wednesday (7.30 pm) the Reserves are at Oxford.

Watford's match with Aston Villa, scheduled for Wednesday, has been postponed until April 24 because of next week's international calls.

