

Thomas off as Luton are robbed



Mitchell Thomas — sent off.

85/86

Oxford United 1, Luton Town 1

A LAST minute goal denied Luton their second away win of the season at the Manor Ground yesterday.

But the match will be remembered for a bizarre sending off of Luton's Mitchell Thomas and Oxford's John Aldridge in the first half.

Mick Harford came back to lead the Luton attack after a two-match suspension and teenager Mark North, who had replaced him, took the No.12 shirt.

Oxford, with five first-team members already out, lost Kevin Brock with injury in midweek and Peter Rhoades-Brown came in for his first full game of the season.

Just 30 seconds into the game Steve Foster was lectured by referee Ray Lewis after a collision that left Rhoades-Brown holding his nose.

It was Luton who looked the most dangerous side in the early stages and Harford went close three times in the opening five minutes. First he mis-hit a volley and enabled Hardwick to save, and then connected with a low hard cross from Thomas, but this time the Oxford 'keeper blocked the shot with his legs. The third chance came when Foster headed on a free kick by Preece — and Harford's final flick crept just wide.

But back came Oxford via a left wing run and cross by Rhoades-Brown. Aldridge threw himself at the ball, his header was blocked and Thomas followed up to crash the ball against the post.



Scorer Stein.

Luton recovered from this lucky escape and nearly scored when Stein flicked on a long ball and Nwajiobi and Briggs challenged for the ball. Keeper Hardwick was injured in protecting his goal.

Oxford almost opened up the Luton defence when Houghton sent a long ball over Foster's head and the Luton skipper was forced to foul Aldridge to stop the striker closing in on Sealey's goal.

The incident cost Foster a booking.

Luton's second lucky

escape came after 32 minutes when Thomas again exposed a square Luton back four as he chased a long pass from Shotton. With the Luton defence in disarray Thomas squandered his chance by hitting the woodwork.

Just a minute later Luton caused Oxford to rue their missed chances when Hatters took the lead. Harford headed down a long free kick and Stein was on hand to send a low drive past 'keeper Hardwick.

Then in the 31st minute the Manor Road crowd were stunned by an incident in which two players were sent off.

Luton's Thomas and Oxford's Aldridge were involved in a clash off the ball and as play carried on a linesman drew the referee's attention to the incident. After lengthy consultations with his linesman, referee Lewis sent both players off.

Both sides produced ragged formations following the sendings off which hindered the flow of play.

And although the football suffered, both sides still had chances. Andy Thomas had a glorious chance to put his side level after 61 minutes when he contrived to put the ball over the bar from five yards out after a right wing

run by Houghton had exposed the Luton defence.

Luton came back and Nwajiobi was twice unlucky with good efforts, first when he hit the side netting and then when his shot was parried after a jinking run had taken him through the Oxford defence.

Sealey was called upon to save in spectacular fashion from a flying header by Phillips as this time full back Langan threatened Luton's defence with a pin-point cross.

Then it was Oxford's turn to breathe a sigh of relief when Hill robbed Phillips in midfield and the final shot by Stein cannoned off Hardwick's chest with the Oxford 'keeper knowing little about it.

With just a minute remaining, Oxford's intense pressure paid off when Hebbard rose to head home a cross by Rhoades-Brown before the crowd of 10,626.

Oxford: Hardwick, Langan, Slatter, Phillips, Briggs, Shotton, Houghton, Aldridge, Thomas, Hebbard, Rhoades-Brown. Sub: Charles.

Luton: Sealey, Breacker, Thomas, Nicholas, Foster, Donaghy, Hill, Stein, Harford, Nwajiobi, Preece. Sub: North (Mark).

By Graham Punter