Display was a bigger worry than defeat

DEFEAT at the hands of Luton was almost acceptable. The disappointment at another setback against the old enemy was overshadowed by the concerns evinced by Watford's overall display on Saturday. The erosion of first team potential for a variety of reasons since the top six speculation of August, was comfirmed in dismal reality on Saturday.

That news of Nigel Callaghan's transfer request following hot after the final whistle, only seemed to underline the problems Watford are facing this winter.

Graham Taylor likes positive thoughts and positive people but after this display, it was hard not to think negatively, even when consoling with the throught that the problems are set in a First Division context. When we dreamed of First Division status, did we imagine it would be easy?

Lack of confidence can play havoc with a team but on Saturday, despite their shortcomings in this department, they put in the effort if not, it seemed, with conviction, cohesion or understanding.

One could even accept Taylor's view that they battled back deservedly to equalise, if only because Luton defaulted on their superiority. But even had Saturday's match not been cursed with the Terry-Sinnott ricochet of an own-goal three minutes from time, Watford's faithful would still have returned home worried about the future, despite the point salvaged.

I am sure to that Malcolm Allen has the potential to make the grade and become a force in First Division football. The way he went past Foster and another Luton defender in an inspired run, gave hints of his future. Worrell Sterling too has the ability to upset defences and, if Gary Porter can grow stronger, perhaps he too could make the First Division scene.

But is it not too much to ask them to lift a side seeminly short on morale, form and confidence? And also move arguably the star player to a position for which he has yet to show consistent aptitude? One suspected that might be the case from the outset but the display at West Ham — the most heartening away performance of the season — tended to shelve those concerns. On Saturday they came to the fore.

Certainly Saturday's game did not help the youngsters' cause, for none of them will make the grade if they continue to receive the abysmal service that was provided for them on Saturday.

Even when Watford did break on the flanks, their centres were few and the quality limited. Long before the end, I suspect a number of spectators were questioning whether the likes of Nigel Gibbs and Nigel Callaghan could not provide better service.

Watford were under pressure in the first half, simply because they seldom gained possession. luton played some pretty football yet Tony Coton was almost a spectator for all the Hatters' intricate dominance.

Graham Taylor's view that Luton do look attractive but in terms of end product there as little to separate the sides, is a valid point.

But when the Hornets were nut mesmerised by Luton's approach work, they cleared the ball hastily, straight to another opponent.

In the second half Watford pushed forward and had Luton on the defensive but, for the most part, the Hatters looked on top of the problem. The Hornets made a few breaks but the equaliser came as almost a surprise.

Over the years, Watford's games with Luton have seldom been the most uplifting of experiences. With a few, albeit notable exceptions, they have been tense, fraught affairs.

Defensively Watford coped well. Coton was only forced into real action twice in the whole game but such was the visitors cohesion and the Hornets' woeful distribution that Ludon enjoyed longer periods of possession than any visitors in many a long day.

Terry and Rostron were the pick of the defenders while Talbot was clearly more effective than Jackett who appears to be going through one of those subdued spells.

Even allowing for the bad service, Porter looked a trifle light-weight, Sterling failed to get in a sufficient number of crosses and any hope of understanding between the front two was sabotaged by the constant ploy of lofting the ball to Foster's head.

Porter plays a more withdrawn interpretation of the wing role which gives the formation a touch of 4-3-3 in appearance. The overall impression was that this performance by Watford was as artless and as confused as the recent Milk Cup display against QPR when a 4-3-3 was also the pattern.

There were times when it seemed hard to believe that Watford had actually prepared for the game. There was confusion over the throw-ins, long before the mistake with a throw which Taylor felt had to be the Luton equaliser.

"Footballers are human. If they did everything we told them, they'd be brilliant. In fact David Pleat and myself should just go out and play each other to decide the issue," said Taylor explaining Watford's late confusion.

"We had fought back and equalised. So we start rushing things in our half, instead of using our heads. Fair enough if you start picking up the pace in the opposition half but not in your own half with seven minutes to go after you appear to have turned a defeat into a draw.

"We had a throw-in in our half which Lee Sinnott should have taken. Instead Wilf Rostron took it and understandably, he does not throw the ball so far. We lost possession and never got out of our half as a result. The next thing we know is that Luton have equalised."

85/86

Watford 1
Talbot 83

Luton 2
Thomas 28
Sinnott og 87

WATFORD: Coton; Bardsley, Terry, Sinnott, Rostron; Talbot, Jackett; Sterling, Allen, Barnes, Porter. Substitute: Smillie for Porter after 72 minutes.

LUTON: Sealey; Breacker, Thomas, Nicholas, Foster, Donaghy, Hill, Harford, Stein, Nwajiobi, Preece. Substitute: Daniel not used.

Attendance: 16,107.

Referee: G. Napthine (Leicester). Not impressive, nor was Mr Butland with the red flag.

Share of play: Luton 60 per cent.

Entertainment value: Low.

Clear-cut chances: Luton 3, Watford 3.

Free-kicks: Watford 22, Luton 18 (incl. 7 offside against Watford).

Corners: Watford 4, Luton 6.

Goal attempts on-target (off-target): Watford 6 (9), Luton 4 (3).

Watford goal attempts by: Allen 4, Barnes 3, Sterling 2, Porter 1, Bardsley 1, Sinnott 1, Rostron 1, Smilley 1, Talbot 1.

Bookings: None.

Watford delight from the oldest and youngest player as the Hornets equalise against Luton.

Watford match facts

WATFORD contrived the first goal-attempt of the afternoon, when a flick-on by Barnes was met with a half-hit overhead kick from Allen and Sealey saved.

Sinnott let in Harford but Watford managed to cover the situation as the defence was placed under steady presure. Luton however threatened more than they actually achieved. Watford managed to string very few attacks together but from one half-cleared corner, Barnes flicked Sterling's centre across the face of the goal.

In the 28th minute Talbot let Stein get behind him and Preece's fine pass set the Luton striker up for shot. Coton came out to challenge well and block but the ball bounced clear to the overlapping Mitchell Thomas who met it with a fierce, angled drive which found the net despite Porter's attempt to block.

Allen, chipping the ball goalwards in a melee and a free-kick from Barnes were the only moments Watford enjoyed in a sterile period before the interval. Just before the break Watford showed signs of getting back into the game when Sterling collected Porter's cross, went round the front of the defence but found Sealey well positioned.

Allen made a great run in the second half, going past two players including Foster. Talbot challenged for Allen's pass but his attempted shot was blocked and the ball fell to Sterling who shot wide.

Allen then juggled the ball but failed to stretch Sealey with his hook-shot whereas Stein, breaking through on the right, brought a smart save from Coton.

Sinnott, reacting well, headed over when Luton looked poised to increase their lead but Watford began to assert themselves more and pressed forward. Even so they made little progress. Allen juggled another shot wide but it was largely hopeful staff with the passing letting them down as much as anything.

In the 72nd minute Smillie came on for Porter and ten minutes later, the winger produced the sort of cross that had been missing for most of the afternoon. Smillie broke down the left and crossed deep beyond the far post. There Sterling met it, heading back into the path of Barnes who should have scored. But the striker missed the ball completely and it fell in turn to Talbot who blasted it into the net.

Watford never seemed to get an attack going after that and three minutes from time Terry hacked clear from Stein's cross, the ball ricocheting off Sinnott into the net to bring an end to Watford's unbeaten First Division home record.