

Hill keeps it on the level

By COLIN MALAM: Luton 2, Arsenal 2

RICKY HILL could not quite carry Luton into the quarter-finals of the FA Cup at Kenilworth Road yesterday. Arsenal just managed to resist the brilliance of the occasional England midfield player and earn themselves a fifth round replay at Highbury on Tuesday.

Hill, who came on as substitute after being recalled to a depleted England squad for last month's match in Egypt, was quite the most imaginative and effective player in a lively tie bursting with first-half goals.

He opened the scoring and continually threatened to provide the winner with the quality of his passing after Luton had recovered from a two-goal burst by Arsenal in the middle of the first-half.

But it was not to be. Hill's colleagues could not turn his through passes into goals, and even he himself failed in front of goal after combining devastatingly with Thomas.

At the end of a bitterly cold afternoon, Arsenal were entitled to feel pleased at forcing a draw without the services of the injured Robson and Davis in midfield. Williams, back in the side after a two-month absence, did a reasonable marking job on Stein, while Rocastle took his side's second goal very well.

Other than Hill, the outstanding contributor to the occasion had to be Luton's excellent synthetic pitch. Although one or two players occasionally lost their footing, it played so well that it was hard to believe that snow lay on the ground outside.

Arsenal took so long to adjust to the extra pace of the game on this surface that, in the early stages, they might have conceded more than just the one goal Hill struck into their net superbly after eight minutes.

It was an example of real virtuosity. Hill, back to goal, had Keown climbing all over him as North played the ball into the penalty area. Nevertheless, the muscular black midfield player broke free, wheeled away to his right and beat Lukic with a beautifully angled left-foot shot.

Arsenal's equaliser, seven minutes later, stemmed from a fierce free-kick by Rix that skidded right through the Luton defence. Sealey could only block the ball, and Harford lost possession as he tried to bring it out of the danger area.

This gave Allinson the chance to strike another angled, left-foot shot from the same corner of the penalty area that Rix had delivered the free-kick. Sealey went full length, but the ball hit the inside of the far post and rebounded into the net.

The Luton defence had already shown an inability to deal with Anderson's height at set pieces.

In the 15th minute, for instance, Thomas had had to head off the line when Anderson's aerial challenge hurried Sealey into a miscued punch.

That weakness was to cost Luton a second goal after 27 minutes. When Arsenal were a little fortunate to be awarded a free-kick for a tackle by Donaghy on Charlie Nicholas, Rix floated the ball towards the tall full-back.

Anderson was up first again, and his header went out to Woodcock on the left. The England striker returned it immediately to the goalmouth where Rocastle steered a header wide of Sealey with a twist of his neck muscles.

Harford's annoyance at seeing Arsenal go ahead led to his booking for two successive fouls on Lukic. But it also led to Luton's equaliser, a simple left-foot shot by the tall striker five minutes before half-time, when a Thomas centre and Harford's aggression led to a misunderstanding in the Arsenal defence.

The second-half was less eventful, although Hill almost scored a memorable winner when he drifted into the Arsenal penalty area, took a clever pass from Thomas and clipped the ball narrowly wide of the far post as Lukic came out.

Stein and North were no more successful from Hill's passes. North shot wide and Stein was so badly injured by O'Leary's desperate saving tackle that he had to be helped off the field and must be doubtful for the replay.

□ Arsenal manager Don Howe was unhappy with the performance of Highbury favourite Charlie Nicholas, who was substituted. "I did not think Charlie was involved enough for me. Tony Woodcock battled well, but Charlie just could not get into it at all."

Howe also criticised Luton's approach: "There was a lot of bludgeoning going on around our box," he said. "That surprised me because it is not really Luton's style."

David Pleat Luton's manager, retorted: "I am very surprised at what Don has said. I should have thought he would be grateful for small mercies and happy to go to Highbury with a draw."

"He is the England coach, and, perhaps, I am in a different world. I thought we tried to play football to get through, and I don't know what he is suggesting. I have only one player who can battle physically for me, Mick Harford."

Luton: Sealey, Johnson, Thomas, P. Nicholas, Foster, Donaghy, Hill, Stein, Harford, North, Preece.
Sub: Parker/Stein, 75.

Arsenal: Lukic, Anderson, Sansom, Williams, O'Leary, Keown, Allinson, Rocastle, C. Nicholas, Woodcock, Rix.
Sub: Mariner/Nicholas, 75.
Referee: A. Gunn (Burgess Hill).