

Miracle man Johnson just won't give up

Queen's Park Rangers.....1 Luton.....1: By BRIAN SCOVELL

ACCORDING to manager David Pleat, Luton right-back Rob Johnson is a 'walking miracle.' On the evidence of Saturday's performance at Loftus Road, few could disagree.

The plucky defender has spent more time in hospital and on the treatment table in recent years than he has playing ... and has still come back for more.

Brave and determined, Johnson has undergone three operations on his left knee and one on the right. Each operation has been necessary to rebuild the vital cruciate ligament. Once that goes it's not easy to walk, let alone play football. But those operations, together with the insertion of two metal plates in each knee, have hopefully done the trick. Johnson was celebrating his 24th birthday on Saturday and although Wayne Fereday, the First Division's fastest winger, left him trailing on a few occasions he had a reasonable game. Just taking part is sufficient reward for all those lost years: 'It's a lonely business,' he said.

'After the first time I wondered whether it was worth going through it all again. I could have claimed my insurance money and taken up something else, but I always wanted to play football.'

The operation involves cutting and stretching a tendon from the back of the leg to the front and cutting out pieces of bone.

'We rate him very highly,' said Pleat. 'He's a good character. He hasn't really got any knees.'

Hard road

It has been a long, hard road towards First Division football. Signed straight from school, Johnson has played just seven first team games in as many years. Playing on Luton's artificial pitch wouldn't, you might think, be good for his knees, but he said: 'It suits me fine. I don't get any trouble afterwards, although I wasn't so keen on the Rangers pitch. It was difficult to turn and chase.'

If Rangers had given Fereday more of the ball they might have won, but it was a strangely muted and unimaginative performance by Jim Smith's men.

Luton missed striker Brian Stein, who had a ligament operation on Friday, but were encouraged by good work from Ricky Hill and Mick Harford.

Harford won several important duels in the air, laying on Mike Newell's equaliser and having another volley headed off the line by Steve Wicks.

But there were long, dreary periods which suggested that artificial pitches will never match up to good grass ones.

QPR : Byrne (36mins.). LUTON : Newell (63).