

Plastic minus a detonator

By JOHN MOYNIHAN: QPR 1, Luton 1

QUEEN'S PARK RANGERS could not complain about taking only one point from this chilly ice box of a match they had dearly wanted to win. A more persistent, better balanced Luton side had been unlucky to be a goal behind at half-time and thoroughly deserved an equaliser conjured up by Mick Harford's energy in winning the ball on the far post.

Unfortunately, England manager, Bobby Robson was not present after all to see Harford, though the Rangers defence, including captain Fenwick, a member of the England squad to play this week in Israel, and Wicks hardly made it possible for the Luton striker to have an exceptional afternoon.

These teams, the senior playboys on plastic, have provided some fairish entertainment for their fans while many other clubs with natural surfaces have begun to weary at the constant postponements due to the Siberian blasts.

Rangers, without the striking power of the injured Robinson, and James, under suspension, were obviously keen to win a contest between the major owners of artificial pitches. Luton had won all three of their previous games on this Omniturf and such was their energy and drive in the first-half that they looked like making it four.

The pitch, which resembled a coral green carpet hoovered back to vague normality after a thriving all-night party, soon had the players tumbling all over. The ball's bounce made some look as if they were wearing stiletto heels.

A chance quickly came to Byrne who had room to exploit a large gap on the left of the Luton defence, but he completely muffed the chance.

Rangers nearly paid the price for not watching Harford on the far post. When the big striker, who once nearly joined the Loftus Road club from Birmingham, lodged his shot past Barron, but Wicks emerged on the goal line to clear.

Foster, a great inspiration was always in the action and might have done better if he had caught the ball properly with a scissors kick just outside the Rangers six-yard line. However, his shot lacked strength and went wide.

Play whizzed from end to end like a ping-pong game, and Luton were the more authoritative when their turn came to attack. Chances continued to be missed, however, with Harford failing to reach a centre from Hill.

As Luton continued to control the game, Foster, his white headband predominant, emerged again to rattle an overhead shot just wide of Barron's goal. They could have done with the power of the injured Stein, who has scored 16 this season, particularly as Harford failed to make an impact in the first-half.

Hill manouvred the ball about searching for openings but still a goal would not come Luton's way and fate was certainly unjust to the visitors when they fell behind in the 36th minute.

From a long free-kick by Neill, Wicks headed square to Byrne who moved in from the right to beat Sealey with an angled cross-shot. Such was the ferocity of that surprise howitzer that Luton almost succumbed again, Sealey knocking away a considered header from Rangers' scoring hero.

Luton had a chance to strike back, but Newell blasted his shot wide of the near post with his right foot after making space for himself, while Harford was not nearly fast enough in trying to collect a centre.

But Harford made up for this in the 63rd minute with a header from a free-kick, rising to beat Barron, with Newell emerging on the far post virtually on the line to apply the finishing touch for a deserved equaliser.

The standard of play declined sharply during the second half. If any player looked likely to break the deadlock, it was Fereday playing wide on the Rangers left. One centre curving in towards the near post almost deceived Sealey.

And near the end Fereday was pulled down harshly by Foster, which earned one of Luton's heroes a booking.

If flair had only flickered spasmodically in a match of far too many stoppages, the form at left back of Luton's Thomas offered more than a brief hint of what this young man might do one day in an England shirt.

QPR: Barron; McDonald, Dawes, Neill, Wicks, Fenwick, Fillery, Allen, Bannister, Byrne, Fereday.
Luton: Sealey; Johnson, Thomas, Nicholas, Foster, Donaghy, Hill, Newell, Harford, North, Preece.
Referee: J. Ashworth (Leicester).



LOW SLUNG: Luton goalkeeper Les Sealey can only watch as John Byrne snatches QPR's goal yesterday