Hornets wrap it up in 20 minutes

LUTON did both Watford and their fans a favour by banning visiting supporters from this game at Kenilworth Road on Boxing Day. The few Watford fans who made it to Luton, saw the Hornets win the game in the first 17 minutes and then watched a further 70 dull and unspectacular minutes before the result was comfirmed.

The majority of Watford followers, as it happened, took in this match in the best possible manner—hearing the result at the end, spared the numbing experience of witnessing it.

Victory at Luton is invariably an experience to savour but it came so quickly and unexpectedly and so drab were the proceeedings that followed, that it was almost a clinical, unemotional exerience.

Graham Taylor later contended that Luton probably helped Watford by banning the fans. Had the Watford contingent been there to chant in support of their team or lapsed into an 'easy, easy' taunt, it may have inspired the Luton supporters to retort, brought some atmosphere to the early afternoon and resultantly inspired the Hatters. Being two goals down in a local derby with only home fans in attendance, could have worked against them, for the Luton supporters became increasingly irritated with their own side, rather than get behind them.

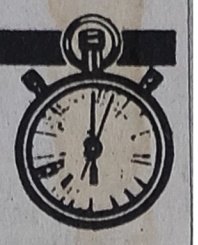
It was a pity there was a second half of such numbing banality. The first half was quite good by comparison but the whole experience was probably the tamest derby exchange in many a year.

Kenilworth Road looks a lot smarter, with the 'open end' covered and the hotch-potch of afterthoughts opposite the main stand, replaced by executive boxes. But the afternoon lacked real atmosphere. It was almost anti-septic and but for a few cheers from the 100 or so Watford followers who had beaten the system, the Hornets' goals were greeted in stunned silence.

But the periphery should not detract from the quality of Watford's success. They went to Luton to do a job, determined to negate what they saw as the home side's advantages of pitch and the supporters' ban. They did a job and while it was not attractive to watch in the second half, Taylor was able to acknowledge pointedly: "It was a non-event but then we had no one to please."

Luton had their chances. Two came their way in the first half and both were as good as Watford's. But they muffed these and then missed the clearest chance of all, from the spot after the break.

Luton manager John Moore did not however claim that the Hatters were unlucky. "We had an international who attempted to dribble out of defence and was punished and we had another who missed a penalty. We had a few injuries but it was the experienced



Luton.....0
Watford.....2
Porter 7, Richardson 17.

LUTON: Sealey; Breacker, Johnson, Nicholas, North, Donaghy, McDonough, B. Stein, Newell, M. Stein, Grimes. Substitute: McEvoy for McDonough after 48 mins (injury).

WATFORD: Coton; Bardsley, Sims, McClelland, Rostron; Callaghan, Richardson, Jackett, Porter; Falco, Barnes. Substitute: Gibbs not used.

ATTENDANCE: 11,140. REFEREE: C.Downey (Hounslow). Effective but blew for more than was needed.

ENTERTAINMENT VALUE: A passable first half, an abysmal second.

CLEAR-CUT CHANCES: Watford 2, Luton 3. SHARE OF PLAY: Watford 45 per cent. WATFORD'S MAN OF THE MATCH: Steve Sims.

CONDITIONS: Wet carpet. GOAL ASSISTS: Rostron-Barnes; Sterling-Barnes.

FREE KICKS-total (offsides): Watford 17(2), Luton 35(8). CORNERS: Watford 5, Luton 9

GOAL ATTEMPTS ON-TARGET (off-target): Watford 5 (6), Luton 4 (9). WATFORD GOAL ATTEMPTS: Barnes 4, Richardson 3, Porter 2, Bardsley 1, Jackett 1.

BOOKINGS: North for foul on Barnes (65).

and play man for man, dispensing with the concept of wingers, which Taylor feels never seems to work on artificial pitches. Worrell Sterling came in and played well as one of the three central front-runners, each of whom had instructions to go wide as and when they felt fit.

This ploy, backed by a three-man midfield, gave the Hornets the majority of early possession and after takinga 2-0 lead in the first 17 minutes, it would have taken a great rally by Luton to have pulled the game back.

"Had they converted the penalty, I'm not so sure we would have won," admitted Taylor.

Certainly the impetus was with Luton in the second half but they failed to make much headway in the final third of the field. Steve Sims, brought in as the best man to cover McClelland who man-marked Brian Stein, was outstanding.

The Watford midfield battled well and Mark Falco, although limited by his shoulder injury, lead the line effectively. The biggest disappointment was John Barnes. He was as subdued on Boxing Day as he was enthralling on the following afternoon. On such a surface, you would expect Barnes to stand out but he still has an unimpressive away record in that he does not loook even half the player he appears at Vicarage Road.

Much of the second half gave the impression of 22 players frantically trying to keep the ball in play. On further study, Luton's pitch is better than that at Loftus Road but the difference is marginal. The Hatters looked just as ill at ease on it. The earlier rainfall had made it play particularly fast

points to prove, just survive.

Even so they should have produced more attacking moments in the second half but perhaps I am being greedy.

Such has been Watford's away form this season, their record at Luton and their past performances on carpets, that victory seemed an unlikely occurrence as the teams kicked off at noon. Within 20 minutes we were confidently expecting victory and the remaining 70 minutes were of little more than nuisance value.

Those first 20 minutes were among the best Watford have put together this season. Richardson and Porter, moving to the flanks in attack, provided good service. That spell was so good and the domination so total that it laid the foundation for a welcome and overall a deserved three points.

But on leaving that unreal atmosphere and surface, I suspect that some Watford fans could reflect that they have gained a more emotional trip in previous seasons, fuming over an unjustified defeat than they did from the three points on Boxing Day, seemingly gift-wrapped in cellophane and handed over with a pair of tongs.

Professional Christmas

WATFORD'S players trained on Christmas morning, returned to their families for lunch and then reported to a local hotel at 7.00 that evening.

"We cannot guarantee the results but our preparation has been as professional as it could be. Playing at Luton on Boxing Day at 12.00, presents a change in approach. Normally we have a meal three hours before the kick off. When the players went to their rooms on Christmas Day night, we pointed out that if they were thinking of watching a late movie, which they may do at the own homes on a normal Friday night, that they had best remember they have to be up, ready and sharp in time to start playing at noon.

Taylor feels that if you get your tackles in, mark well, compete and want to play, then tactics are secondary. He admits however that he did decide to switch the tactics at Luton because, in his experience of artificial pitches, Watford have seldom managed to get their flank-men going.

"I think it takes longer on such pitches to get the ball down. Time and space in football are one and the same. If you take time to play a ball, the space will disappear. On artificial pitches the ball bounces and does not roll. By the time you get the ball under control, the space has gone," he said.

So Watford dropped Callaghan, played Luton man-for-man with McClelland moving up to mark Brian Stein. Steve Sims was brought in because Taylor felt he was the best player to cover McClelland in this situation.

"We gave Worrell, John and Mark complete freedom up front. We took a gamble with Mark because plainly the shoulder injury hindered his jumping. Worrell Sterling has been out of the side for so long but he is a great team player and is far more respected for that in the dressing room than in other quarters. He was asked to play a different role and did well. Yet there were no supporters there to see it.

Match action replay

WATFORD'S decision to man-mark Luton, threw the Hatters into early disarray and the visitors took up 99 per cent of the early running.

There was plenty of early pressure from Watford and Richardson went close with a half-volley.

But in the seventh minute Watford took the lead. Wilf Rostron flighted in the free kick, Barnes challenged and perhaps got the slightest of touches and Gary Porter forced the ball in as the players challenged for it by the post.

Watford continued to stay on top for a few more minutes before Luton finally launched their first attack—Peter Nicholas volleying well wide.

Gradually Luton began to string their passing together and a great run by Mark Stein finished with a shot against the challenging Coton. That encouraged the home side who then mounted a short

Bardsley on the left, took the ball into the area and slipped it low across the area to set up Newell who somehow failed to connect properly and the ball went wide.

In the second half, Bardsley broke through on the right but shot over the target but play in general was far more disjointed after the break added to which the referee tended to blow for every infringement.

If Luton were to reflect on turning points then their two first-half misses were costly, but the penalty failure in the 59th minute, in reality, clinched the points for Watford.

A long, diagonal cross seemed to be Coton's but Richardson headed the ball out straight towards Stein. Bardsley attempted to chest the ball down but was always losing out in the challenge and his push and tug on Stein gave the referee no alternative but to point to the spot.

Peter Nicholas stepped up to take the

happily it will be some years before his considerable pace