

The tamest 'derby'

QUOTES:

● In the absence of their manager who was away on a scouting mission, Luton's coach Jim Ryan was in charge of the Hatters, who paraded the Littlewoods Cup to fans before the game.

"The penalty decision seemed a little harsh, to be truthful. I would not have been happy had we conceded a penalty like that.

"As for the game, I have played in much more competitive derby games. But in the circumstances after our peak and Watford's relegation, it was understandable."

Said Harrison: "I would liked to have maintained an unbeaten run right through to the end. I won't say anything about the penalty apart from the fact that I did not see anything to warrant the decision.

"I was pleased with Stuart Rimmer's run and shot but he has got to start doing that more often."

TO borrow from a past hit song, it was very much a case of "wake me up before you go-go" at Kenilworth Road on Monday as the tamest derby game in years ended Watford's First Division life on a mildly controversial note. Only the referee appeared to know exactly why he had awarded the 44th minute penalty that decided this game, and you gained the impression that few apart from the players, really cared.

Certainly the decision was greeted without protest from Watford's players and while this is not unusual, you can normally see the odd gesture of annoyance. As it was, referee Breen pointed to the spot and ran towards the corner-flag to avoid protests, only to discover he was alone.

It transpired that Mark Morris was supposed to be the guilty man, for pushing Foster as he attacked a free kick. None of the Watford players felt there was anything significant in the challenge between the two players and even Luton's coach, Jim Ryan admitted that he would have been miffed had such a penalty been awarded against the Hatters.

One Watford eye-witness from another part of the ground, felt there were a few pushes in the penalty area in preceeding incidents, yet claimed that Foster was "checked" by Morris as he ran to meet a free kick. The irony is that the referee gave the spot-kick for a push, not a check, on Foster.

So the incident remained somewhat baffling, but such was the tameness of the afternoon that it hardly seemed to matter as both teams served up typical end-of-season fare.

Watford started with Rod Thomas instead of Glyn Hodges on the right, and logically you would have expected Thomas's neat control to stand out on the Luton carpet.

Luton Town.....2

Oldfield 35, Wilson 44 (pen).

Watford1

Johnson M. (og) 31.

LUTON: Dibble; Breacker, Grimes, Johnson R., Foster, Johnson M., Wilson, Allinson, Oldfield, Hill, Black. Substitutes: Nwajiobi and Cobb not used.

WATFORD: Coton; Gibbs, Morris, McClelland, Rostron; Thomas, Jackett, Porter, Holden; Roberts, Rimmer. Substitutes: Hodges for Thomas after 73 mins; Sherwood for Rostron after 73 mins.

ATTENDANCE: 10,409. REFEREE: K.Breen (Liverpool) disrupted play with too many stoppages. ENTERTAINMENT VALUE: Tepid to poor. CLEAR-CUT CHANCES: Watford 2, Luton 3.

SHARE OF PLAY: Watford 40 per cent. WATFORD'S MAN OF THE MATCH: John McClelland. CONDITIONS: Bright and fine, no wind. ASSISTS: Rimmer - Thomas.

FREE KICKS - total (offsides): Watford 12 (2), Luton 27 (20). CORNERS: Watford 8, Luton 4.

GOAL ATTEMPTS: On-target (off-target): Watford 7 (3), Luton 6 (5). WATFORD GOAL ATTEMPTS BY: Roberts 3, Rimmer 2, Porter 2, Holden 1, Thomas 1, Hodges 1.

BOOKINGS: None.

Such was not the case for Thomas was very subdued, underlining the fact that he still has some way to go before he can realise his potential in first-team company.

Ironically John McClelland, who has admitted to being 'useless' on artificial surfaces, had an outstanding afternoon, while alongside him Morris struggled to control the threat of Luton's extremely promising, 19-year-old striker Oldfield.

Watford struggled in midfield but Holden occasionally caught the eye and Rimmer had a fine run and shot that deserved a goal, as he demonstrated both his speed and accuracy.

Watford would have chosen a different ground on which to round off their First Division career, but they

were in fact applauded onto the field. A chant of "Going down" in the second half was quickly suppressed by complaints from the remainder of the ground. You could not have imagined such cordiality 10 years ago, but Watford's reception from the Luton crowd owed something to the legacy of Taylor and Plead.

The first half was reasonably entertaining with three goals spicing the action. The second half was extremely tedious and seemed to take an hour and a half to be completed. Neither team had anything to fight for, as Luton's season has already peaked and Watford have passed their own low-point and after a season's practice, are learning to live with relegation.

As a result the final 20 minutes football were among the longest of the season before Tim Sherwood, perhaps significantly, became the last Watford player to kick a First Division ball in anger, and then the referee awakened us with the final whistle.

MATCH FACTS

GARY PORTER had a near-nightmare start to the game at Kenilworth Road. The first time he touched the ball, he attempted a back-pass to Coton that was intercepted by the outstretched foot of Oldfield who could only stab the ball wide.

Another attempted pass by Porter was intercepted by Allinson who sent Wilson clear. Luton looked certain to score but Coton excelled to save the shot.

When Johnson broke clear onto Black's cross, his first-time effort was saved by Coton, as Watford looked a little ragged.

Watford's first attempt came after 28 minutes when Roberts, Rimmer and Thomas combined in a fine move, which ended with Roberts scuffing his final shot on the carpet. The ball span as it bounced past the diving keeper and went just wide of the upright.

In the 31st minute, Watford took the lead. Rimmer's sheer pace took him clear as he chased a through ball towards the corner flag. He turned, dallied long enough in the home of a colleague arriving in support and then accelerated across the face of the box before beating the keeper with a clipped, dipping shot. The ball struck the crossbar and bounced down and out towards Thomas. His shot was blocked by the diving keeper but the ball bounced up towards goal. There Marvin Johnson attempted to head clear, knocking it against the underside of the bar. The ball bounced straight down, striking Johnson on the chest and going across the line before it was hacked clear. The linesman had no hesitation in awarding a goal and Luton did not complain.

The lead lasted just four minutes. The ball was lofted into the Watford penalty area and took a deflection before it bounced into the stride of Oldfield, who dispatched the ball into the net on the half-volley.

Nine minutes later Luton were awarded a free kick and Foster made a despairing lunge for the ball. The referee pointed to the spot and although Coton went the right way, Wilson's spok-kick eluded him.

Rimmer went close shortly after the interval with a header to Roberts' centre and Porter sent a deflected shot just wide after good work by Holden.

Watford made a double substitution after 73 minutes and could have snatched a point as the game dragged on. Johnson had a shot saved by Coton; Holden passed to Roberts who shot wide and then headed another cross wide from a very good position.

When the ball dropped into the centre circle, Tim Sherwood hooked it on as the referee signalled the final whistle and brought an end to Watford's First Division run.

