

Durability bodes well for Graham

By Christopher Davies

Arsenal 3 Luton Town 2

AS the season approaches the halfway mark there is the growing feeling that once again it will be Liverpool and Arsenal who will be slugging it out for the title in May. 89/90

Neither of the two heavy-weights of English football have shown the form or consistency of last season but they are first and second in the table, which many people believe will be the situation when all 38 games have been played.

The chasing pack all have admirable qualities and it would be good for the game if a sustained challenge could be maintained.

But Chelsea are fading rapidly and one wonders whether Norwich, Aston Villa, Southampton or even big-spending Tottenham have the all-round strength and experience to give the big two a real run for their money.

A remarkable statistic is that Arsenal's longest winning sequence in the First Division is three and Liverpool's is two. Despite this, they are out in front although Ray Harford, Luton's manager, has no doubt who will win the championship.

"Liverpool are in a different class to Arsenal," he said. "I was not too impressed by them at all. We paid them too much respect."

Luton played an unfamiliar sweeper system at Highbury and Mr Harford said: "I would never use this against Liverpool. We did it because we expected a barrage of long balls."

Mal Donaghy, on loan from Manchester United, thought Arsenal were "wishy washy" and did not get the impression that George Graham and Theo Foley were happy with the home team's display.

Mr Graham wasn't, not for the first time this season, but there is still a quality about Arsenal that enables them to win even when they are playing poorly by their standards.

They have a number of players who score goals regularly and even though the defence were, to use Mr Graham's word, "abysmal" at times, Arsenal have conceded fewer goals than at this stage last season.

It augurs well for them. While Villa and Derby have put together long winning runs, Arsenal are out in front and although their football may not always be pretty, it is durable and wins matches.

When Luton attacked Arsenal with purpose in the last half-hour the home team looked uneasy but, despite all the criticism of their long ball style and of how they fail to excite, Arsenal will very likely finish as champions or runners-up.

Scorers.—Arsenal: Smith (20), Merson (33), Marwood (50). Luton: Elstrup (30, 51 pen).

Arsenal: Lukic; Dixon, Winterburn, Thomas, O'Leary, Adams, Rocastle, Richardson, Smith (Merson 29), Groves (Jonsson 88), Marwood.

Luton Town: Chamberlain; Breacker, Harvey, Kennedy, Donaghy, Dreyer, Williams (Gray 77), James, Dowie, Elstrup, Black (Cooke 45).

Referee: L Dilkes (Mossley).