

Luton give Ryan escape from hell

89/90

By John Lanchester
at Anfield Road

TO JIM Ryan - who, thanks to Luton's attack of musical boardrooms, is the club's third manager in 1990 - this fixture must have seemed like the managerial debut from hell.

As it was, though, two goals in two minutes nearly gave his team the game and, when Luton were subsequently pegged back, they held on to provide the unlikely score-draw on the coupon.

The brutal contrast of these two clubs' recent fortunes in the FA Cup, with Liverpool caning Swansea 8-0 and Luton losing 4-1 to Brighton, only confirmed longer-term trends: Liverpool have been showing signs of starting their mid-season title charge, and Luton, who haven't won an away game since December 1988, showing distinct symptoms of negative buoyancy.

Luton, not very popular anywhere, are particularly unpopu-

lar at Anfield. Liverpool regard their synthetic surface as conveying an unfair advantage and as offering "artificial football on artificial pitches", a dislike reflected in patchy results there - a 1-0 defeat last season, an excruciatingly dull 0-0 draw this. So, when Luton come to Anfield, their hosts like to put the footballing record straight.

The expected slaughter failed to take place, perhaps partly because the adverse circumstances made Luton feel they had nothing to lose.

Although Liverpool dominated the bulk of both halves, they seemed content, while on top, to let Luton sense their superiority by rubbing their noses in it. Chances were squandered with long-range shooting that had the air of bored target practice. Whelan and McMahon shot over the bar, Rush and Barnes had shots blocked, but the complete control with which Barnes scored from a free kick after 32 minutes made it seem as though

Liverpool could bypass Luton defence at will.

When they failed to do so, Luton made them pay for it. Great credit must go to Ryan for turning an introspective, negative team into the lively, optimistic, passing side on display here. Luton appeared suddenly to have discovered the ability to play to their attacking strengths: the passing of Preece, the positive work of Harford, the wing play of Black and the relentlessly eager running of debutant forward, Kieran Nogan. In the 70th minute Breacker's cross, headed across the box by Harford, came Black to volley spectacularly past Grobbelaar from the edge of the area.

Two minutes later, Liverpool got an even nastier surprise when Black escaped down the left and crossed for Nogan to put Luton ahead.

However, Liverpool equalised immediately with Nogan beating Breacker to Barnes' cross.