

Ryan defying odds with fresh image

Martin Thorpe

WE CAME to bury Luton, not to praise them — this selfish little club with their plastic pitch and away-fan ban; good riddance. But wait. Is change afoot?

The stewards have always been among the friendliest in the First Division, and the half-time nosh for the press is about the best. But to the outside world — and to the sponsors Vauxhall who are currently assessing their allegiance — the club has an image problem on a par with Nicholas Ridley's.

It was engendered by his fellow Tory MP David Evans, the club's hectoring chairman with the fault of most of his government: the inability to listen to another's point of view.

Now he has resigned, and his plastic pitch is due to be dug up at the end of next season. All that remains in the way of a Saatchi and Saatchi-style renovation of the club's image is the away-fan ban — a joke on Saturday, given Arsenal's support — and those sterile executive boxes like a row of holiday chalets on one side of the ground.

On the pitch, too, the image is improving. The new manager Jim Ryan is leading what some supporters are calling a people's revolution. Inspired by the goings on in Romania over Christmas, the fans started booing the then manager Ray Harford and his long-ball game. They may claim a measure of credit for the removal of both.

Enter Ryan, the reserve-team coach, a former player and Luton through and through, who bravely took on the relegation dog-fight with the nice-to-watch but fragile-under-pressure short-passing game.

With two of his old reserves, the forwards Black and Dowie, already in the first team, Ryan, on taking over, promoted two more, James and Rees. On Saturday the latter's energy, skill and willing spirit typified the team's performance.

At the start one seasoned supporter had not been so optimistic: "Dowie — always getting knocked off the ball; Wilson — he's not an inspirational captain." As is the way of the world, on 42 minutes, Winterburn half-fumbled a rare Luton cross in front of goal and Dowie poked home the ball.

Then in the 59th minute, with Luton dominating, Wilson sent a wonderful pass to Breacker on the right, whose fine cross was converted by Black.

There is an injury doubt over Wilson for Luton's last two games, at home to Crystal Palace and away at fifth-from-bottom Derby. But the team more realistically in the Hatters' sights is Sheffield Wednesday, who have to play Charlton and Nottingham Forest.

SCORERS: Luton: Dowie (41min), Black (58).

Luton: Chamberlain; Breacker, McDonough, Beaumont, James (Johnson, 71), Dreyer, Wilson, Rees, Dowie, Preece, Black (Elstrup, 66).

Arsenal: Lukic; Dixon, Winterburn, Thomas, Bould, Adams, Davis, O'Leary (Hayes, 66), Smith, Merson (Rocastle, 66), Campbell.

Referee: A Gunn (South Chailey).