

United mete out rough justice

By William Johnson

91/92

Manchester United..... 5 Luton..... 0

ANY victory, no matter how scrappy or laboured, would have been welcome to Manchester United, who put more emphasis than necessary on the draining effects of what was little more than a day trip to Greece for the start of their defence of the European Cup-Winners' Cup.

Alex Ferguson, United's manager, had his excuses ready in case things went wrong against a Luton side who have been on borrowed time in the First Division ever since they arrived nine years ago and have never got a point in 16 visits to Old Trafford.

Four goals in the last half hour of what had been a mundane contest allowed Mr Ferguson to assume a different stance, pointing out that it was only the sixth Saturday of the new season and that people who got up at 5am to go down the mines received no sympathy if they complained of exhaustion.

It gave David Pleat, Luton's manager for the second time of asking, the perfect platform to tell the story that his players really were tired. They had been shaken from their Manchester hotel beds at 3.30 on the morning of the match, only to be told that there was no fire.

Lack of fire in the Luton ranks was to be expected. They face a long, hard winter as their manager battles to overcome financial difficul-

ties, but suggestions that fatigue is already creeping into what should be a buoyant United camp are incomprehensible.

The emphatic scoreline suggests that United resumed their title-chasing quest with gusto and swept aside their relegation-threatened rivals. That was anything but the case until referee and linesman chose to differ over a crucial 64th-minute sequence of events which swung the match United's way.

United were unconvincingly holding on to a half-time lead earned by Ince's close-range stab, when referee Allan Gunn pointed to the penalty spot for a handling offence by Pembridge in blocking a Hughes shot.

The linesman had been flagging to indicate that Webb's corner had drifted out of play on the way to Hughes, but the referee chose to stick by his original decision, possibly because he had shown the yellow card to Pembridge for the offence which allowed Bruce to shoot United into a two-goal lead.

After that miscarriage of justice Luton were finished. McClair, only a substitute, capitalised on a goalkeeping error to add the third, scored again shortly afterwards and then set up the fifth for Hughes to consolidate United's early lead with nine of 42 hurdles safely negotiated.