

Leeds march on to days of reckoning

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By Colin Malam

Luton Town 0 Leeds Utd 2

WHEN two teams are drawn against each other twice on the same day in different cup competitions, as Leeds and Manchester United were on Saturday, it is just possible to regard the 1,763-1 phenomenon as a coincidence.

But when those two teams are also first and second in the First Division and racing neck and neck for the title, you begin to wonder whether there might be somebody up there with a keen interest in football and a mischievous sense of humour.

In all events, it is as if the gods have tired of seeing Leeds and Manchester United forge well ahead of everybody else on an uncomplicated path and want to discover, here and now, who are the stronger team.

What better way than to pit them against each other three times in 10 or 11 days over the turn of the year? For, in addition to the FA Cup third-round tie at Elland Road on Jan 4 and the Rumbelows Cup quarter-final on Jan 7 or 8, Manchester United go there for a televised First Division match on Dec 29.

The response of Howard Wilkinson, Leeds's manager, was typically practical, though he did not know at the time his team would have to meet United in the FA Cup as well in such a short space of time.

"If you're going to win a cup," he said, "you've got to play the best sooner or later. We've got to play them in the League as well, and I think

it's terrific. Three years ago we were playing Shrewsbury and Swindon. So I'm not complaining."

The unexpected struggle Leeds had to beat Luton, adrift at the bottom of the table, led some to conclude that they are not as good as Manchester United, who have been wiping the floor with all and sundry in recent weeks.

But Luton manager David Peat predicted that Leeds would make it a tight championship race and that, while they had not got as many internationals in reserve as United, they did have some talented reserves.

"They're a good side, a strong side and they deserved to win," said Mr Pleat, after Rod Wallace and Gary Speed had settled this game with a quick, two-goal burst in the second half that had seen Leeds play with more of their usual urgency.

Mr Pleat was quite pleased with his own team's first-half performance. He felt, though, they had helped their opponents' strength and ability to tell by sitting back too much after the interval.

"History tells us everything is still wide open before Christmas," he said, "but it's going to be tough for us. If we were to go down, it would be because we just weren't good enough right at the start, even though we've changed it round.

"If we are not to go down, it will be a tremendous achievement by the young players in the team."