

Parker to miss United's run-in

Luton 1, Manchester Utd 1 **Christopher Davies**

MANCHESTER UNITED need eight points from their remaining four games to clinch the League title that has eluded them for 25 years but they looked anything but champions at Kenilworth Road.

Perhaps they were tired after two games in three days but Luton outplayed the First Division leaders in just about every aspect and had the visitors lost they could have had no complaints.

One player who will take no further part in the championship race is Parker, whose troublesome hamstring has flared up again. There must be serious questions marks over the defender's availability for the European Championship — can Graham Taylor risk a player who, though undoubtedly talented, seems fragile?

Although United will miss Parker's pace and poise, manager Alex Ferguson has the option of bringing in Blackmore, yesterday's substitute, or the more experienced Northern Ireland international Donaghy.

If Schmeichel had not made an acrobatic one-handed save from veteran forward Stein in the 81st minute — the player had been on the field only 60 seconds — Luton would probably have won.

Fatigue could turn out to be as powerful an opponent as Leeds in the run-in and Mr Ferguson will no doubt use his first team squad to the full to rest some tired legs.

"We didn't play at all. We got into the lead when we didn't deserve it and lost a terrible goal ourselves. Luton did very well. With our experience we should have been able to defend the lead," said Mr Ferguson afterwards.

Luton may not survive relegation as they have over the last three years but their crisp football will be a loss to the Premier League whatever the limitations of their stadium.

Luton had controlled matters from the first minute when Varadi shot over the bar from 25 yards. Preece and Pembroke were prodigious in midfield where Webb was a sad figure, ineffective and struggling to get into the game.

Harford had two goal-bound shots blocked before United took the lead against the run of play in the 25th minute. Schmeichel's long clearance was touched on by Hughes, even though the Welsh international was falling to the ground.

The ball ran to Sharpe who beat Dreyer before scoring with a shot that went through Chamberlain's legs. The goal was straight out of the Wimbledon coaching book proving that the direct ball is still one of the most effective weapons in soccer's armoury.

That Luton were behind at half-time was a travesty but they deservedly equalised five minutes after the interval with a goal that left Mr Ferguson far from happy.

Varadi won the ball and created the opening for Preece to centre from the left. The testing centre to the far post was met by Harford who, to his surprise and delight, was marked not by Pallister or Bruce but Irwin. Harford rose about the midfielder and, though his first header hit the woodwork, he made no mistake with the follow-up.

Mr Ferguson was upset that his central defenders were hopelessly out of position — Bruce was still running back while Pallister had been drawn wide and the goal gave Luton confidence and they continued to have United back-peddalling as they pressed forward.

This was United's ninth draw in 15 games and they seem to be less than convincing as the end of the season comes into focus. Schmeichel, who seemed to be carrying his left leg, was commanding but Harford proved he is still very dangerous in the air even if time has caught up with his legs.

For United, Giggs looked dangerous on the flanks but McClair was less effective than usual while Hughes, even though he had the better of his marker Peake, could not capitalise on it.

As tension mounted yesterday, four players were booked in a nine-minute period during the second half. Gray was cautioned for delaying a free kick, Hughes and Kamara were shown the yellow card after a midfield dust-up and Phelan became the fourth name to go into the book for a late challenge on Gray.

But referee Martin Bodenham had another excellent game, allowing play to flow whenever possible, and not frustrating players and spectators with an endless stream of free-kicks.

Bodenham was also in control of the two FA Cup semi-final matches between Portsmouth and Liverpool where his officiating proved exemplary.



Double booking time for Mark Hughes and Chris Kamara after their unsightly scrap at Luton/Brian Smith