

Luton's spirit of resistance defies United

91/92

UNITED remain top, remain frightened by the shadow of the 25 years since their last championship and remain damnably lucky to have escaped without a defeat at Luton, a result which mocks the so-called divide between a team charging into the elite and one conducting their annual rage against the dying of the light.

The cynics who wrote off Luton a week ago had better still their tongues while a marvellous player like Pembroke can lead his team in outplaying and outfighting the championship favourites.

We knew this would be the critical game of Easter. What surprised us was the opening goal which made a travesty of the first 25 minutes, during which Luton had had the visitors running in so many directions they were not sure where their next breath, never mind championship cohesion, was coming from.

REMAINING FIXTURES

Manchester United. Nottingham Forest (h), West Ham (a), Liverpool (a), Tottenham (h).
Leeds. Coventry (h), Sheffield United (a), Norwich (h).

In the opening minute, James had powered down the right and driven in a cross which Varadi controlled at knee height, before turning and scooping a speculative lob over Schmeichel's bar.

An early portent, but one almost forgotten as for five minutes United counter-attacked from their five-man midfield with élan and urgency. Webb looked for a while as if he may indeed be "the linchpin for the run-in" that Alex Ferguson expects him to be now that Ince is out, another casualty of Southampton's wretched foul play.

But soon Webb began to look heavy-legged, and failed to make even token attempts at preventing Pembroke shaping the next 20 minutes.

We already have, in this dying century-old First Division, a divided class. United boast 16 players whose market value is in excess of £1m, while young Pembroke, the Vales midfielder, is Luton's only saleable performer carrying that valuation. In the seventh minute, he

Rob Hughes

LUTON 1

(4-4-2): Chamberlain; James, Peake, Dreyer, Harvey; Oakes (Stein 79min), Pembroke, Kamara, Preece; Harford, Varadi (Gray 66min).

MANCHESTER UTD 1

(4-5-1): Schmeichel; Parker (Blackmore 46min), Bruce, Pallister, Irwin; Giggs, McClair, Webb, Phelan, Sharpe; Hughes (Kanchelskis 81min).

Goals: Sharpe (25min) 0-1; Harford (51min) 1-1. Weather: cloudy. Ground: soft. Referee: M Bodenham (Looe).

teased Pallister into another of those palpitating moments when he looks anything but a £2.3m defender. Pembroke had driven the ball hard from the left flank and Pallister, facing his goal at the far post and with nobody to hurry him, still contrived a miskick which fortunately went the wrong side of the post.

Preece took the corner, Oakes dummied and Pembroke struck the ball from outside the area. Schmeichel looked as if he expected it to be far too high; his hands went up, but half-heartedly, and his heart was in his mouth as the ball hit the crossbar and bounced over.

Next Varadi, rescued from virtual retirement in Leeds reserves, tested Schmeichel's judgment with a drifting shot from 30 yards which again escaped the goalkeeper's touch, but also the target.

Pembroke, looking every bit like a young Bryan Robson, was now running the midfield. Three more times he burst through to create scoring chances, or half-chances, but each time he lacked conviction in his finishing. And then, in the 22nd minute, Harford twice had shots charged down, the second striking the body of Pallister, who was looking in the opposite direction.

Can luck win a championship? It seemed very likely when, three minutes later, a sudden break the length of the field punished poor Luton.

Schmeichel kicked the ball long, Hughes managed an almost involuntary touch in the act of falling and Sharpe glided past Dreyer before scoring with a low shot between Chamberlain's legs.

Luton could not, and would not, be denied. And in the 51st minute they achieved the

equaliser which was the least they deserved. Varadi began it in his typical scurrying fashion, chasing down a lost cause, turning away from Bruce and allowing Preece to centre the ball from the left. A remarkable thing then happened: Harford, still one of the most dangerous players in the air, found that only Phelan had the sense of responsibility and urgency to mark him.

That, of course, was no contest. Harford's header struck the crossbar, reminding us once more that Schmeichel is a goalkeeper wounded from the game with Southampton and unable to get off the ground. He was still there when the rebound was nodded in with the instincts of a piranha by Harford.

The game deteriorated, the players tired, particularly United. And in the exasperation that crept in, four players were booked in nine minutes: Gray for dissent, Kamara and Hughes for an ugly skirmish and Phelan for a late tackle on Gray.

But that was not the heart and soul of this encounter. What was the courage still being displayed by Pembroke. More and more he resembled the dynamic running force from midfield which United wish they could inject into the injured calf of their skipper, Robson. And in the 83rd minute Pembroke, inevitably, was responsible for the through ball which put the substitute Stein away.

Schmeichel came slithering out, Stein intelligently attempted a shallow lob and this remarkable Danish goalkeeper once more saved his side by reaching up instinctively to paw the ball away.



Human shield: Pallister of Manchester United (left) puts himself between Harford and the ball

Chris Smith