

Shot-shy Watford make it a year to wait for first cup goal

92/93
(A1C)

WATFORD will have to wait a further year before registering their first Anglo-Italian Cup goal. Their exit from the competition, made probable by their earlier defeat at Bristol City, was confirmed at Vicarage Road on Tuesday night.

The Hornets, needing the minimum of a two-goal lead to entertain any hopes of travelling to the likes of Cremonese, Ascoli or Lucense, finished woefully short of their target, producing just four goal-attempts in 90 minutes of football. And that against one of Division One's struggling sides.

As it was, David Pleat's youngsters deserved to win this tie and only the fortitude, luck and dexterity of Perry Suckling prevented the Hatters from chalking up a victory.

Watford rang the forward changes, then fielded four forwards in a dying effort to retrieve the tie, but still did not manage to create one clear-cut chance all night and, when they did place the accent on forward play, they were unable to muster one goal attempt after the interval.

The Hornets showed more haste than speed, their play was hurried rather than urgent and the result was an unhappy manifestation of dwindling confidence and confused aims.

In short, there was little pattern in this performance apart from the will to survive.

The plus-points, as Perryman was able to point out after the game, were the displays by Suckling and Gerard Lavin. The clean sheet provided doubtful reassurance for, in the end, it was down in part to Luton's indifferent finishing as they squandered three situations when they should have scored.

Lavin, an 18-year-old with one substitute appearance behind him, is happier in midfield but gave a good and often forceful account of himself, showing some particularly impressive single-mindedness as a full back. It is no easy thing to come into a struggling team but the Corby-born youngster took it all in his stride, making sure that his clearances were constructively delivered even when under pressure.

Suckling made one remarkable first-half save and several more after the break and appeared to be adding a veneer of confidence

WATFORD.....0



LUTON TOWN.....0

- **CLEAR-CUT CHANCES:** Watford 0, Luton 3.
- **WATFORD'S MEN OF THE MATCH:** Perry Suckling and Gerard Lavin.
- **SHARE OF PLAY:** Watford 45 per cent.
- **ASSISTS:** None.
- **CONDITIONS:** Ideal.
- **FREE KICKS — total (for offside):** Watford 21 (8), Luton 24 (7).
- **CORNERS:** Watford 7, Luton 9.
- **GOAL ATTEMPTS — on-target (off-target):** Watford 2 (2), Luton 8 (6).
- **WATFORD GOAL ATTEMPTS BY:** Dublin 2, Furlong 1, Drysdale 1.
- **DESERVED RESULT:** A Luton win.
- **BOOKINGS:** None.

- **WATFORD:** Suckling; Putney; Lavin, Holdsworth, Dublin, Drysdale; Hessenthaler, Solomon; Bazeley, Furlong, Thomas. Substitutes: Nogan and Butler for Putney and Bazeley after 64 mins.
- **LUTON TOWN:** Petterson; Linton, James, Salton, Peake, Johnson, Claridge, Kamara, Gray, Preece, Rees. Substitutes: Oakes and Campbell for Gray and Claridge after 82 mins.
- **DATE:** 15-9-92.
- **ATTENDANCE:** 5,197.
- **REFEREE:** Roger Milford (Bristol). A fair display from a man who has had his Watford controversies in the past.
- **ENTERTAINMENT VALUE:** Limited.

with every outing.

Indeed the defence, without the steadiness of Nigel Gibbs and the familiarity of Barry Ashby, gave a fairly solid account of itself. The industrious Trevor Putney, whose enthusiasm for and insistence on repeated possession is not always justified by his distribution, was pushed forward into midfield after the break but even his greater qualifications for producing subtlety and guile proved unsuccessful.

Watford lack a blend at the moment, some clear and cogent playing pattern. Of course it would be foolish to believe that they do not spend every training day working to this end but, with few exceptions, there has been precious little evidence of them having one.

While the defence is more than adequate for the division, especially when at full strength, the balance and continuity of their forward play lacks a rhythm and cohesion so necessary to establish your ascendancy over the opposition.

Watford sported neither effective width, midfield control nor any discernible method of breaking down the Hatters. Yes, the display was more solid than in the second half against Notts County, but the shortage of inventive, creative credibility remains disturbing.

This was another game in which the Hornets were unable to carve real openings. Paul Furlong, for instance, has had to make-do and mend with the most inconsistent

of service. Small wonder that he has yet to score at home because he has had so little in the way of half-chances to work with. Almost all his attempts on goal have been

incidents which he has had to create.

One of the more promising sources of service could be Jason Drysdale who, truth to tell, has had a funny old week with a faulty back-pass, three abysmal throw-ins and a memorable goal. On Tuesday night, his crossing failed to trouble Luton.

Incredibly, even when they brought on the relegated Butler and Nogan to bring the forward tally up to four, they still did not manage a shot, far less trouble the Luton keeper.

The Hatters, stripped of so many assets and shell-shocked from relegation, still managed to put together a credible display, looking like a side that knew what it was about even if the achievement of the aims was not always likely.

The introduction of Rod Thomas is something of a commentary. Last season he was on loan to Gillingham and was unable to convince them of the need to make the move perma-

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nent, but while he has been ruled out of the Watford first team reckoning because he is disruptive and impetuous on the field, those very qualities have provided him with a route back.

The Hornets have become so predictable and so lacking in flair, that Thomas's cavalier sallies and rushes of dribbling blood to the head come as a welcome antidote to the mundane and pedestrian approach we have had to witness of late.

On Tuesday night, Thomas found it hard to assert himself and the moments we were left to savour were such as the moment Jason Solomon broke back to win the ball with a superb tackle. But, as he was first to admit afterwards, the player should never have got away in the first place.

While the season's conclusions are in the melting pots, Tuesday night ensured that we leave the passports in the drawers.

Watford end run of cup defeats then bow out

Match action replay

Back came Luton and Preece, with a curling shot, forced Suckling to a save. Then Furlong headed a centre too close to the keeper from a fair position.

After a lengthy period of inconclusive football, Watford were caught cold by a throw-in and Suckling was forced to pull off a remarkable save to thwart Gray and somehow tip the ball wide for a corner. From the resultant flag-kick, Furlong almost diverted the ball into his own net, his attempted header clipping the top of the bar in the 40th minute.

Soloman had a fair chance early in the second half when Putney found him in space. Soloman turned away from goal before circling and clipping the ball over the keeper but beyond the far post.

Watford squandered a free kick given on the edge of the Luton six-yard box, after the keeper had

handled a Salton interception. Drysdale floated the ball away from the crowded goalmouth, beyond the reach of any Watford players and Luton cleared with ease.

Preece produced a fine rising drive following a corner in the 64th minute and Suckling juggled another excellent save.

Rees had a half-chance as he headed down from a cross but Suckling, seeing it late, tipped the ball over the bar.

Next, Dublin took the sting out of a Gray shot which enabled Suckling to gather as the visitors again threatened. The Watford keeper brought off his best save of the night when, following a corner, substitute Campbell headed powerfully for goal. As the visitors prepared to acclaim what seemed a certain goal, Suckling stretched to tip the ball on to the bar.

Watford experienced another escape when Preece, with only Suckling to beat, sent a header well wide of the goal.