

SUNDERLAND KEEP UP AWAY IMPROVEMENT



TERRY Butcher rises above John Dreyer and Paul Telfer to nod on this corner

SUNDERLAND are on the right track, and if Malcolm Crosby's festive wish is granted, better times are ahead for supporters.

Asked what he would like for Christmas, after Saturday's goalless draw at Kenilworth Road, the Roker manager quipped: "a train set".

A few short weeks ago, as inconsistent Sunderland floundered too close for comfort in the relegation zone, Crosby faced little joy over the holiday period.

But a vast improvement in away form has swept away constant speculation surrounding the manager's tenure.

And the point gained against Luton was more of a case of two that got away.

Crosby and his opposite number, David Pleat, were very much in the minority in their post-match verdicts, when claiming they were happy with a point apiece.

"I was hoping neither side was going to score in the last five minutes," said Pleat.

"We had a good spell, but Sunderland took over and delivered better higher balls."

Pleat indicated that the game would have been called off if scheduled 24 hours earlier, because of torrential rain, which left the pitch under water.

Several tons of sand was spread on certain areas, resulting in the ball sticking, while other sections of lush green turf led to passes being hit far too hard.

"It was hard to create chances," claimed Pleat. "There was no space behind Sunderland's back four."

"I saw them at Southend, when they played the same way and won and they beat Derby the previous week."

"Nobody should underestimate Sunderland. I think they are as strong a side as there is in this division physically — and they had two or three players missing who might give them a bit more power."

Luton Town 0
Sunderland 0



By
Geoff Storey
Chief Sports Writer

Few managers have praised Sunderland for their battling qualities on their travels.

But the days of being a soft touch have been banished on recent performances.

"I think people are seeing we are looking like a team," said Crosby.

"We are playing decent football at times, and are not going away defending for 90 minutes looking to nick a draw."

"We are trying to win the game and that is pleasing. When we have to defend, all credit throughout the side."

"We have got great supporters. They never stopped all afternoon, and we would love to go and get some great results for them."

"Obviously, if we win it gives everybody confidence, but the main aim is to do it for the fans."

"What we want is to be able to give them something where they can say we are going places."

A respectable mid-table position at the half-way stage, reached next Monday with Grimsby's visit, is the first priority.

Injuries have not helped the cause in recent weeks. But the replacements have been determined to prove their worth.



MICKY Gray races down the left, pursued by Luton's Jason Rees

Brian Mooney looked far more comfortable operating on the right flank, and the hard running of David Rush led the Luton defence a merry dance.

Peter Davenport and Shaun Cunningham came nearest to breaking the deadlock, but clear-cut chances were few and far between.

Goalkeeper Alec Chamberlain, one of Denis Smith's first transfer targets five years ago, produced a stunning save from Davenport's 62nd minute header from Michael Gray's left wing centre.

Davenport shot narrowly wide after creating an opening on the left, and the experienced striker was clearly unhappy when making way for Warren Hawke after 68 minutes.

The fresh pair of legs, however, failed to change the course of the game, and Luton will look back to the two stunning first half saves from Tony Norman that denied them victory.

Norman has a habit of bouncing back in style after dropping a clanger. Saturday was no exception.

He kept out a dangerous free kick from Jason Rees and then denied David Preece with another acrobatic save.

But Sunderland were rarely put under intense pressure thanks to another rock-like man-of-the-match performance from Terry Butcher, who received commendable support from his defensive colleagues.



BRIAN Mooney goes for goal, despite the attentions of Luton's Ceri Hughes