SUNDERLAND KEEP UP AWAY IMPROVEME



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. 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

pleat would have been called off if scheduled 24 game and that is pleasing. We are trying to win the game and that is pleasing. When we have to defend, all the shoughout the side. 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 under-estimate 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

Luton Town 0 Sunderland 0



Geoff Storey Chief Sports Writer

Few managers have praised Sunderland for their battling qualities on their But the days of being a

soft touch have been ban ished on recen on recent performances.

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

we are looking like a team, said Crosby. "We are playing decent football at times, and are not going away defending for 90

"We have to defend, all credit throughout the side. "We have got great supp-orters. 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,

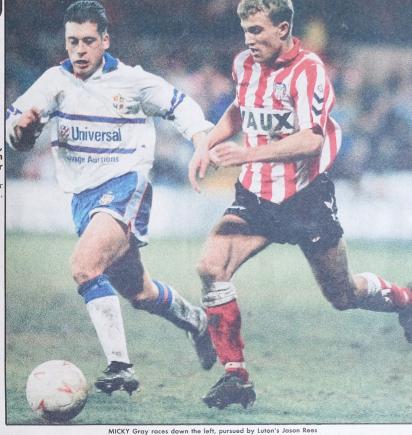
but the main aim is to do it for the fans.
"What we want is to be

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.



Brian Mooney looked fa 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 Cunnington 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 ft wing centre.

Davenport shot narrowly vide after creating an open-ng on the left, and the exp-rienced striker was clearly nhappy when making way or Warren Hawke after 68 ninutes.

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 acro-batic save.

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



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