

SUNDERLAND BY HEART OF

SUNK OAKES

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**GEOFF
STOREY**
REPORTS

SUNDERLAND were unchanged for the visit to in-form Luton.

Martin Smith and Richard Ord had to be content with a place each on the bench. Smith had recovered from the stomach upset which kept him out of the goalless midweek draw at Charlton. Ord was back after suspension.

Luton, beaten only once in their last 13 games, were also unchanged.

Overnight rain had left its mark on a heavily-sanded pitch, which looked in very poor condition and cut up easily in the pre-match kick about.

Luton were quickly into their stride with a neat flowing move. Oakes and Preece confidently broke through the middle until Bennett came to the rescue with a timely clearance into touch.

Sunderland responded with Ferguson playing the ball out wide on the left to Russell. His centre was headed out, but only as far as Ball. He brought in the overlapping Owers, who was flagged offside.

Bennett made amends for giving away a free kick inside his own half by heading out from Hughes.

LUTON TOWN: Sommer, Linton, James, Peake, Dreyer, Telfer, Harper, Preece, Hughes, Dixon, Oakes

Subs: Hartson, Thorpe, Peterson

SUNDERLAND: Chamberlain, Owers, Mickey Gray, Bennett, Melville, Russell, Ferguson, Ball, Atkinson, Howey, Phil Gray

Subs: Ord, Smith, Norman

Referee: Kelvin Morton (Bury-St-Edmunds)

Luton went ahead after four minutes with a bizarre goal.

Melville headed behind for a corner, the ball going out of the ground. Disaster then struck Sunderland with the replacement ball.

Oakes centred from the right, Bennett's clearance struck Chamberlain and went over the line, with

HUGHES claiming to have got the final touch.

Luton's crisp bustling movements were keeping Sunderland at full stretch. Another lightning move down the right looked threatening until Dixon ran the ball out of play.

A free kick from Ferguson was headed out only as far as Ball, who wasted no time in rifling a low drive

that finished well off target.

Melville headed out a long punt from Sommer and James overhit his attempt to send Dixon clear.

Sunderland created an opening in the 13th minute when Ferguson brought in Phil Gray. He threaded the ball through to Howey, who was under pressure from Dreyer and could only hit his low shot straight at Sommer.

Luton were soon back at the other end, with Dixon heading the ball on for Telfer to gain possession at the far side. His deep centre was flicked on by James, only for Hughes to snatch wildly at the half chance. His effort finished near the corner flag.

Ferguson was figuring

prominently in Sunderland's midfield. He soon had his side on the move again, finding Phil Gray, only for Howey to be caught offside.

Sunderland were again halted by an offside decision after Atkinson had linked up with Phil Gray.

Ball was penalised midway inside his own half for a challenge on Harper. Melville headed out Preece's free kick and Owers completed the clearance by heading into touch.

Chamberlain had no difficulty in saving a snap shot from Preece.

Russell latched onto another fine pass from Ferguson and made for the by-line. He whipped over a low centre, which was just beyond the reach of Phil Gray.

Sunderland were down to ten men in the 22nd minute when Owers went off for treatment to a leg injury. It was obvious he was in a lot of discomfort.

Sunderland, however, almost drew level when Phil Gray found Ferguson, whose toe-poke shaved the outside of the post with Sommer struggling.

Before the goal kick could be taken Owers made his way to the dressing room. Ord came on and immediately slotted into the right-back position.

Hughes took on Ord and forced a corner off the substitute. Oakes curled the ball in, but Sunderland quickly broke through Ferguson, who released Russell.

The youngster, who had switched flanks, again raced to the by-line. His low cross was out of the reach of Sommer — and the lurking Phil Gray at the far post.

Phil Gray then cleverly slipped his marker, but before he could make tracks for goal, Dreyer closed him down and whipped the ball away.

Hughes again took on Ord and won a free kick, which was headed out by Melville.

A tight offside decision denied Luton the chance of going further ahead on the half hour. Telfer flicked the ball through to Oakes, who was in the clear. But after cleverly side-stepping the onrushing Chamberlain the flag was up before he could put the ball into the empty net.

Russell was obstructed wide on the right. From Ord's inswinging free kick, Sunderland won their first corner when Dreyer headed behind.

Russell's inswinger caused confusion in the crowded penalty area, several players missing the ball as it flashed across the goal.

Sunderland fell further behind in the 34th minute — again through dreadful defending.

Bennett failed to cut out a harmless through-ball, leaving Oakes in the clear. When Ball brought him down a couple of yards inside the penalty area, the referee awarded a free kick on the edge of the box.

Justice was done when OAKES somehow pierced Sunderland's defensive wall and beat Chamberlain's despairing dive to his left.

Luton were soon back, with a low drive from Hughes taking a deflection on its way through to Chamberlain.

Dixon then took on a retreating defence. Spotting Chamberlain off his line, he tried to chip the keeper, who had no trouble in saving.

It was nearly 3-0 in the 39th minute. James swung the ball into the middle, where Dixon cleverly won possession and fired in a low drive which brought an excellent save from Chamberlain.

Sunderland replied through Phil Gray, who burst through and hit a fierce drive. Sommer knew very little about it as he blocked with his outstretched legs.

Howey was at full stretch to cut out a poor clearance from Sommer, and Dreyer was able to come to the goalkeeper's rescue.

HALF TIME:

Luton 2 Sunderland 0

Russell confidently took on James before playing the ball back to Ord, whose attempt to find Phil Gray was easily beaten out by Dreyer.

Melville was booked in the 46th minute for a challenge on Oakes.

When play resumed with a free kick a few yards outside the area, Dixon was pulled up for tangling with Bennett as he brought the ball under control.

Howey headed on an up-and-under, and Sommer had to race off his line and dive bravely at the feet of Phil Gray to prevent a certain goal.

Melville was at full stretch to prevent Dixon from breaking clear and force the ball into touch.

Sunderland replied with Russell outpacing Harper to a ball down the left from Phil Gray. He was prevented from going past Harper, who clearly handled.

Ferguson's fierce inswinging free kick was well held by Sommer.

Oakes was obviously feeling the effects of Melville's challenge and in 53 minutes he limped off, to be replaced by Thorpe.

Atkinson became the second Sunderland player to be cautioned when he took revenge on Hughes. The referee had taken no action a few moments before when Hughes clearly impeded Atkinson on a promising run.

Sunderland forced only their second corner after 56 minutes through Russell. Again Sommer showed confident handling when he came out to the penalty spot and held onto Russell's outswinger.

Ferguson was easily brushed aside by Thorpe, but the substitute overhit his pass through the middle and Chamberlain was able to collect.

Preece was only a whisker away from adding



ALEC CHAMBERLAIN made some good saves against his old club, but could not prevent Luton from overpowering Sunderland

a third goal in the 59th minute. He confidently took on Bennett before rifling a low drive that beat Chamberlain's dive to his right on its way into the side netting.

Sunderland made a tactical switch in the 63rd minute, bringing on Smith for Mickey Gray. Ord switched to left back, Atkinson dropping back to fill the gap on the right and Smith taking up a wide midfield position.

Bennett was penalised for climbing all over Dreyer in his attempt to get on the end of a free kick from Ord. Phil Gray fared no better with the officials when he tried to win possession from Linton.

Sunderland were making no impression in their bid to decrease the deficit. Indeed, they were in danger of falling further behind, with Ball forced into conceding a left-wing corner. The pressure was only finally relieved with an offside decision.

Smith burst to light in the 67th minute when he raced to the by-line before whipping over a dangerous centre across the face of the goal.

Gray, seeking a goal on his return to his former club, chanced his arm from 25 yards when he had colleagues in support, and a possible chance of reducing the deficit went begging.

Preece was booked for a deliberate trip on Smith, who had neatly slipped the challenge of the Luton midfielder.

Luton had players

queuing up in the penalty area when Telfer had the freedom of the park, but Melville came to the rescue, getting in ahead of Hughes to head clear.

At the other end Howey chested the ball into the path of Phil Gray, whose wayward shot from just outside the area cleared the stand and out of the ground.

Chamberlain could be credited either with perfect judgment or sheer carelessness when he allowed a speculative angled chip from Dixon to bounce off the top of the bar and behind the goal.

The home side made a second substitution in 74 minutes, bringing on Hartson for Preece.

Russell was easily bundled off the ball in midfield, giving Luton the opportunity to go on the attack again.

Smith raised Sunderland hopes in the 77th minute with a surging run. He slipped the ball out to the overlapping Howey, whose powerful drive was spectacularly turned behind by Sommer.

From the corner, Melville flashed a header inches over the top with the keeper beaten.

A through-ball from Smith should have presented no problems to the Luton defence, but a complete misunderstanding between Linton and Sommer caused confusion. The full back recovered just before Russell could take advantage.

Hartson broke through

the middle. When his shot took a wicked deflection off Bennett, Chamberlain was unable to prevent the ball going behind.

From the corner Dixon got up well and his header flashed over the bar with Chamberlain beaten.

Sunderland were having more of the possession in the later stages, though Luton looked more dangerous on the break.

But in the 87th minute Sunderland were given a lifeline by Howey.

Russell latched onto a misunderstanding between Sommer and Dreyer and fired against the goalkeeper. Gray's follow-up was blocked on the line, but HOWEY made no mistake, drilling the ball home from close range.

With Sunderland committed to all-out attack in search of the equaliser, they left themselves vulnerable and Hartson hit a fierce drive into the side netting.

But Sunderland were soon back on the attack, with Ferguson forcing a corner. From the kick both Smith and Ball swung at the loose ball without being able to make contact, leaving Sunderland to ponder just what might have been.

FULL TIME:

Luton Town 2

Sunderland 1

Attendance: 9,367

GOAL LINES

Hughes 4

Oakes 34

HOWEY 87

PHIL GRAY — denied a goal on his first return to Luton. One shot went clean out of the ground