

Claridge farewell present to Blues

93/94

STEVE Claridge scored what could have been his last goal for the club to give Blues a deserved draw at Luton.

The striker, who manager Barry Fry said is likely to be leaving the club before Thursday's transfer deadline, neatly levelled Luton's opener by Paul Telfer.

It was the sort of finish which prompted Fry to pay Cambridge £350,000 for Claridge in January and he might do well to think again about letting him go to interested clubs Norwich and Stoke.

Claridge's unselfish hard work and a promising partnership with Andy Saville gave Blues hope for most of the match.

But if Saville had managed to finish like his colleague, Blues might have ended a dismal sequence of 15 games without a win.

Saville squandered several chances against a Luton side, who were strangely lethargic and appeared to have Wednesday's FA Cup quarter-final replay on their minds.

By Barry Churchill, Luton 1 Birmingham City 1

Saville headed an easy chance over the bar at the start of the game, and then completely mis-kicked after bringing down John Frain's cross to get completely free towards the end of the half.

That was the story of the opening 45 minutes, with Blues playing with greater determination than they did in the dismal defeat by Leicester on Tuesday.

But, once more, they fell behind shortly before the interval as Luton hit them after soaking up long spells of pressure.

Paul Telfer took a fine Alan Harper pass in his stride and raced down on Ian Bennett in the Blues goal.

Telfer teased his way past a Liam Daish challenge and then twisted the other way to poke the ball in just before Chris Whyte could make a lunge.

Usually a goal like that would have spelt disaster for Blues.

But Claridge's 49th minute goal gave them a great confidence boost.

Roger Willis, preferred to Carl Shutt on the right wing, played a ball in behind the Luton defence.

Claridge made a diagonal run to lob the ball wide of advancing goalkeeper Andy Petterson.

Blues pushed forward, with Gary Cooper clipping the top of the bar with a free-kick soon afterwards, and half-chances also fell with headers to Saville and Jose Dominguez.

A draw was a fair result, though, as Luton had what appeared a strong case for a penalty turned down when Frain bundled over David Preece three minutes before Telfer's strike.

And only a fine save by Bennett denied Luton substitute Martin Williams, who was clean through with just three minutes to go. Bennett, standing his ground, managed to deflect the ball wide as Williams scuffed his shot with a goal beckoning.

LUTON: Petterson; James, Dreyer, Telfer, Oakes, Burke, Preece, Hartson, Greene, Linton, Harper. Subs. Williams, Thorpe, Davis (GK).

BLUES: Bennett; Scott, Frain, Cooper, Daish, Whyte, Willis, Harding, Claridge, Saville, Dominguez. Subs. Shutt, Moulden, Miller (GK).

Referee: P Durkin (Dorset).



● **TOP TARGET . . .** Blues goalscorer Steve Claridge is congratulated by Roger Willis after his goal at Luton