

Polished performance as West Brom fight hard to dispel gloomy prospect of one more season of behind-the-scenes strife

Luckless Albion throw away flying start

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Before we can safely declare that West Bromwich Albion have seen off the prophets of doom, it is worth recalling that they gained an opening-day point on their travels last season before the wheel-nuts inexorably came loose.

The 1-1 draw at Kenilworth Road was laudably earned by Keith Burkinshaw's team on Saturday, but not without picking up several late dents to the defence and after reprieving Luton with a misfire or two in attack, when the home side were in full first-half retreat.

A fourth-minute goal from Bob Taylor suggested another rich harvest is in store for last season's leading marksman and in their ensuing domination, Albion were a team transformed from the side that buckled on the same ground only three months earlier.

They might have extended their lead with a penalty kick and at least one more goal from open play, but referee Graham Pooley failed to spot a blatant foul on Bernard McNally inside the box and Carl Heggs lacked the sharpness of Taylor when he was later put through.

Albion needed the two or three-goal cushion, for the match turned following David Pleat's half-time lecture, and an equalising goal by Scott Oakes on 49 minutes was as good as any he has scored for the Hatters.

Either side could have won the match with a second strike, but the two goalkeepers each contributed crucial saves and all told, the points were honourably shared - in Albion's case, with key players like Andy Hunt out injured. But the worry of many West Brom fans that another season of struggle and strife lies ahead was not entirely allayed.

The 2,000 followers who journeyed down the M1 saw possession and creativity tail off disappointingly af-

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ter the break and while young Craig Herbert stood his ground confidently in the first half, the pace and pressure told on him in the second, and it needed Daryl Burgess and Stuart Naylor behind him to hold the defence together.

In midfield, Albion's new captain Mike Phelan performed competently, if not spectacularly, on his First Division debut and the commitment he displayed was mirrored by the whole team. What they lacked, though, was the consistency to finish a job they had begun so convincingly.

At least Albion proved that they were capable of rising above the off-field problems and politics back home at The Hawthorns, where chairman Trevor Summers would appear to be fighting a relegation battle of his own.

Keith Burkinshaw has been deter-

mined to distance himself from all such controversy, but I suspect he will very soon take steps to establish proper authority within the club.

It became apparent over the weekend that the manager of West Bromwich Albion has no control over the youth system currently run by Cyril Lea. He has neither a say in which youngsters are recruited, nor how they are coached and developed.

"This was something that was introduced four years ago," Burkinshaw said. "I've got no jurisdiction in this department whatsoever and that's hardly an ideal situation. But it needs sorting out. The manager's authority should percolate down to every section of the club".

Burkinshaw had another beef on Saturday, and he expressed it in a gentle roasting for the press. The Albion manager blamed all sections of

the media for spreading despondency around The Hawthorns.

"All I hear is talk of gloom and doom," he complained. "People were writing us off as relegation material before a ball was kicked this season, and I can't understand it.

"We're capable of getting at least a point on any ground this season. At home, we will soon have one of the finest stadiums in the First Division and we're going to put on performances to please the supporters who watch us. We've got players with talent and personally, I'm full of optimism about the new season."

Well, Bob Taylor spoke effectively enough with his left boot at Luton on Saturday when Paul Edwards lobbed a pass in front of him and the striker swept a low shot past Juergen Sommer to put Albion ahead after four minutes.

They should have increased their lead, but referee Pooley overlooked Trevor Peake's manhandling of McNally when he surged into the

box and Heggs lacked a split second of sharpness to convert his chance before Marvin Johnson put in the tackle.

At either end, Naylor saved blindingly from Scott Houghton's 20-yard drive and later, Sommer did equally well to smother a close-range shot from substitute Kevin Donovan after Taylor had put him through.

In the closing minutes of Luton's siege, Naylor twice saved superbly from Kerry Dixon and Burgess deprived the striker of another goal-scoring chance with one of several fine tackles. It was a hard-earned point in every sense.

Scorers: Taylor (4) 0-1, Oakes (49) 1-1.

LUTON (4-4-2): Sommer; James, Greene, Peake, Johnson; Telfer, Skelton (Linton, 73), Preece, Houghton (Marshall, 82); Dixon, Oakes. Sub (unused): Barber.

ALBION (4-4-2): Naylor; Parsley, Herbert, Burgess, Edwards; Ashcroft (Donovan, 53), Phelan, Hamilton, McNally; Taylor, Heggs. Subs (unused): Raven, Lange.

Referee: G Pooley (Bishop Stortford).

Bookings: Luton - James (time-wasting); Albion - Herbert (dissent), Burgess (dissent).

Attendance: 8,640.

Man of the Match: Daryl Burgess - protected Craig Herbert and defended mightily in the second half.