

REF'S BOOB IS A KILLER

Brian Swain reports from Bramall Lane

SHEFFIELD UNITED 1 LUTON TOWN 0

AN INCREDIBLE blunder by referee Trevor West played a major part in dumping Luton Town further into relegation trouble at Bramall Lane.

But while the Hull policeman's mistake cost the Town the decisive goal, manager **Lennie Lawrence** pointed out that the team had caused its own problems, because the game should have been all over well before the 77th-minute controversy.

Fair point – but as goalkeeper **Ian Feuer** said, you wonder how Mr West will sleep easy if his decision turns out to be a 'major contribution to the drop into the Second Division.'

The ref had a good game except for the crucial misjudgement that undid all the Town's good work earlier.

With 13 minutes to go, a goalless draw was the most likely result of a vitally important match for both teams, with United kicking off just one place above the Town.

Defender **Roger Nilsen** hammered a hard low cross diagonally towards the far post, and the ball bounced off **Mitchell Thomas's** thigh and into the hands of Feuer.

Even United and their fans were stunned when Mr West ruled it was a back pass. The indirect free kick seven yards from goal was touched off by **Phil Starbuck** to **Don Hutchison**, whose low drive managed to elude all 11 Town men trying to protect the goal.

The Town still managed to pick themselves up after that devastating blow, and United were glad too to hear the final whistle as Lawrence's men stormed upfield without being able to find a chink in a hard-worked home defence.

Howard Kendall, the manager brought in to do a Lawrence at Bramall Lane, said he didn't see what part of his body Thomas used for the controversial "back pass" and was just pleased to see his side battle and scrap for a vital win on a poor pitch. You can't expect good passing football in the circumstances, he added.

Yet the Town had produced plenty in a very promising first half, without being able to turn it into goals. **John Taylor**, operating as a lone spearhead with **Scott Oakes** and **David Oldfield** leading the support from midfield, had two chances in a minute before the interval, both from crosses delivered by Oakes, but put headers straight at Simon Tracey.

Taylor, who looked more like his old self, also poked a hurried shot wide, under pressure, from a through-pass by Oakes.

Fans will now wait with interest to see the attacking formation to be used against Ipswich on Saturday – **Bontcho Guentchev** was dropped at Sheffield, and now signing **Graeme Tomlinson**, on loan from Manchester United, was left on the bench until the last eight minutes.

Barely 90 seconds had been played when the Town almost scored from their first attack. But **Steve Davis's** powerful header from a corner by Oakes was cleared off the line by **Mitch Ward**, who repeated the trick in the sec-



TAYLOR RAID: John Taylor fires off a first-half shot which drifted inches wide of the goal

ond half from a cracking volley by Oakes.

Against that Feuer made one important first-half save, at the feet of Andy Walker, and was relieved when a thundering drive by David White came back off the bar seven minutes before the game was decided by Mr West.

Thomas said: "No way was it a back pass. The ball came off my upper thigh and bounced into Ian's hands. I couldn't believe when the whistle blew."

He refused to disclose the conversation between him and the ref, beyond: "I won't repeat what the referee said to me. If I had said it to him I would have been sent off."

"We are all so disappointed because we played well, but lost to something like that."

Feuer said: "It was the most scandalous I have ever had given against me. If I had seen any doubt about it being a back pass I would have kicked the ball away, and even United players were agreeing with us that it was not a back pass. If we go down, I hope that referee can sleep."

Lawrence refuses to criticise refs, but said: "We were always vulnerable to a decision like that because we hadn't scored. If we had been two or three up, as we should have been, it would have been just a blip."

"I have never seen anything similar to that in the hundred or so games I have watched this season, but it must not deflect us from our main business. We were good in the first half, made three chances, and missed them. Afterwards we were second best. Our passing has never been worse. And Sheffield United got a little break, aided and abetted by the referee. But that is no excuse for losing."

LUTON TOWN: Feuer, James, Davis, Patterson, Thomas; Alexander (81 mins), Oldfield (Tomlinson 81 mins), Waddock, Oakes, Harvey (Thorpe 81 mins), Taylor.

SHEFFIELD UNITED: Tracey; Short (Starbuck 58 mins), Ablett, Hodgson, Nilsen, Ward, Patterson, Hutchison, Whitehead (Cowan 81 mins); Taylor (White 58 mins), Walker.



GOAL-KEEPER: Graeme Tomlinson, on loan from Manchester United, was left on the bench until the last eight minutes.