

LUTON TOWN 3

WALSALL 1

BOTH MANAGERS knew that things could have been very different before Luton Town surged to a victory which pushed them back into the top half of the Second Division, and delighted their supporters.

Walsall were no mugs, and but for Ian Feuer would have scored a goal or two when they turned on top quality quick passing football in the first half an hour.

But they failed to cash in, and having rode their luck a Town side without a recognised experienced strike force came up trumps.

Tony Thorpe moved up from midfield to join 19-year-old Andrew Fotiadis in attack, and the fact that both scored good goals, and that sub Paul Showler also netted his first for the Town, gave added satisfaction all round.

It was tough luck on Walsall, who had enough of the play to take something from a game to which they contributed plenty of entertainment.

But the Town had one of those days when they clicked where it mattered most, with Feuer doing the business when it was needed.

Goalkeeper on top form

In an encouraging early burst Fotiadis, brought back because David Oldfield was injured and Kim Grant was in Ghana, almost netted his first league goal in the fourth minute.

Thorpe, who had a storming match, set the youngster free, but visiting goalkeeper Trevor Wood made a blocking save.

Then Walsall got into gear, and the Town could have been embarrassed but for Feuer's expertise.

The visitors used the flanks well, and their quick passing had the Town looking second best. But Feuer made an amazing save from John Keister before a free kick by John Hodge hit the angle of the woodwork.

The goalkeeper kept his side in the game again with a stop to deny Kevin Wilson, who looked real class, and home fans were getting restless as the Town were second best by a long way.

The mood was not helped when a free kick 25 yards from goal brought a buzz of anticipation, but a mixture of laughs and groans went up as Ceri Hughes shot over the top of the Oak Road stand.

Bontcho Guentchev was getting little change out of Martin Butler and Charlie Ntamark on the Town's left flank, and the lively Hodge looked capable of demon-



REPORTS by BRIAN SWAIN PICTURES by GARETH OWEN

strating how left wing play could upset defences. But he limped out with a hamstring problem after 33 minutes, and Walsall were not the same side after that. Ray Daniel, a former Town player, was his replacement, but had an unhappy return, and we saw the rare spectacle of a sub being subbed as Chris Nicholl sought in vain to find a match-saving formation.

Precise pass and goal

The Town's breakthrough came in injury time at the end of the first half, with Kyle Lightbourne helping out his defence at a set piece, and producing a real attacker's defensive clearance, straight to Hughes.

The Welshman sized up the situation perfectly, and his precise pass enabled Thorpe to skip through a defence coming the other way, and net his fifth goal of the season.

Showler went on as replacement for Guentchev, and the Town got hold of the game in the two penalty areas.

The defence was rock solid, and it needed a very special strike to beat them, with Lightbourne producing a top quality finish to score the goal Walsall deserved, in the 70th minute.

But the game was up for them before that. The Town's passing and control improved considerably from what we had seen in the first 30 minutes or so, and it was a pleasure to see confirmation that this group of players is well aware of the style

and tactics needed for Second Division success.

The ruthless touch

Better still, it was a real delight to see a ruthless touch about the finishing.

Hughes came out of his dodgy patch to add impetus to the attack, and Julian James and Mitchell Thomas enjoyed marauding down the flanks. Gary Waddock's leadership and tackling were as consistent as ever, and a vital part of the equation as the Town were made to fight for midfield supremacy.

Steve Davis and Marvin Johnson added their weight to attacks, and if the contest between the two penalty areas was fairly even, there was no doubting the day's winners in the boxes.

But fans were beginning to get restless again when it started to look as though the Town would once again be unable to find the second goal, and then kill off the game. Too often recently one goal leads have led to precarious and nervous late stages.

But the managers' luck with substitutions was in line with the rest of the afternoon's happenings.

Lennie Lawrence decided to send on Paul Showler for Guentchev, and within eight minutes the former Bradford man had netted his first goal for the Town, diving full length to complete a well-rehearsed free kick routine.

Graham Alexander, looking more comfortable and dependable with every game now, floated a long free kick to beyond the far post, and Davis made a late run to power in a header towards goal. Thomas added a touch, and Showler flung himself forward to complete the move.

One to remember

That nearly brought the house down, but young Fotiadis, always so hard working and enthusiastic, got an even bigger hand when he netted his first senior goal.

And it was one to remember. Fotiadis took a long pass by Davis, ran into the inviting space, and as Trevor Wood advanced carefully slammed a powerful lob over him and into the net, from about 25 yards.

Nicholl also rang the changes with subs, but his decisions backfired. Walsall were still reorganising into a 4-3-3 after sub Ray Daniels had been subbed when Fotiadis struck a minute after the double substitution.

Lightbourne's rapid response to the Town's third goal was spectacular and admirable, but by then there was little doubt about the destiny of the points, even if Feuer did have to make one more good

Wilson.