

IT'S TOP

96/97

Ice cold Alex sinks Notts with late strike

STRUGGLING Notts County suffered another disastrous defeat as Luton came from behind to take the points here this afternoon.

County seemed to be on the way to a richly deserved victory when the recalled Ian Richardson put them ahead from inside the box on 61 minutes.

But a shock equaliser from 30 yards by Welsh international Ceri Hughes dragged The Hatters level four minutes later and midfielder Graham Alexander volleyed the winner home at the far post with only three minutes left to leave County deep in trouble at the wrong end of Division Two.

As they did last week at Walsall, County made all the running this afternoon but again paid for the inability to take chances and to consolidate a lead.

Sam Allardyce placed his faith in a new formation as he went in search of the first win of his short tenure at Meadow Lane.

Allardyce chose to field three centre halves — Redmile, Strodder and the recalled Hogg — as he did at Scunthorpe on Tuesday and for the later stages of last Saturday's defeat at Walsall.

This meant there was no place for Agana or Finnan — with Wilder and Baraclough given the wide duties — but there was a recall in midfield for Richardson who played so well in his last appearance before a flu bug at Watford on Boxing Day.

Luton had 20-goal Thorpe up front and one-time County loan player Davis at centre half.

Allardyce made the point after last week's defeat at Walsall that County seemed to be having difficulty defending set pieces.

If this is the case then one way to counter the problem would be to concede as few as possible.

It was a cause of some concern, therefore, that Luton managed to force four corners and two free kicks in the opening five minutes.

Now with the added height and aggression of Hogg in their own area, County had little difficulty

dealing with any of them, but it was only the leniency of referee West that saved the home team from disaster within the opening two minutes.

Oldfield's overhead kick from the six yard line looked destined for the back of Ward's net before both Strodder's hands appeared to halt its progress. The referee either didn't see the offence or deemed it accidental as he chose to wave play on.

County went on to improve somewhat from another slow start at home with their new formation giving them an encouraging amount of freedom down both flanks.

Wilder was the first to profit as Robinson freed him down the right but his shot was weak and Feuer gathered comfortably.

Baraclough then escaped on the other side twice in successive minutes. First he chose to shoot when a pass inside to the on-rushing Richardson may have been wise and in the second instance a useful looking cross was cleared.

Both sides looked well capable of breaking the deadlock were they able to muster some composed finishing and Luton midfielder Alexander was next to cause trouble as his deep cross from the right



IAN LADYMAN
at Meadow Lane

Notts 1, Luton 2

**Ward
Wilder
Baraclough
Redmile
Strodder
Hogg
Derry
Robinson
Jones
Battersby
Richardson
Subs: Martindale,
Finnan, Ridgway**

**Feuer
James
Thomas
Minton
Davis
Johnson
Hughes
Alexander
Oldfield
Thorpe
Guentchev
Subs: Patterson,
Grant, Marshall**

Referee: T West (Hull)
Linesmen: P Prosser (r & y); D Hine (y)

was cleared behind by Wilder for Luton's fifth corner of the game.

Derry's weak headed clearance gave Hughes a chance on the edge of the box but the Welshman, recalled to his national squad this week, shot over the bar.

He had another opportunity soon after but again his left foot effort failed to find that target.

As usual, Derry's long throws were proving to be a useful weapon for County but it was a cross from Baraclough that gave the home team their first real chance on 19 minutes.

The left wing back slung in a super ball deep to the far post only to see Strodder head narrowly over as he powered in almost unchallenged.

The club captain then gave away a needless free kick as he appeared to trample a prone Luton player on the edge of the box and was as relieved as anybody to see Hughes curl the free kick straight into Ward's arms.

At this time, Strodder just couldn't keep away from the action and his next contribution after 24 minutes was to release Baraclough with a splendid 30-yard ball and James' crude challenge on the County man near his own byline quite rightly earned him the first booking of the game and presented County with a free kick in a dangerous position.

Wilder it was who took it and again it was Strodder on the end of it, heading over once more when he would have expected to find the target.

It was certainly an encouraging spell for County but the watching manager will have been aware that a familiar pattern was beginning to develop, that being plenty of posses-

sion, a smattering of chances, but no goals.

With both sides committed to earning all three points, the game developed into an absorbing affair with some reasonably intelligent attacking from both teams.

It was County, however, who continued to look the more dangerous and Jones wasted the best opening of the half.

The centre forward had already curled one effort over the Luton bar when the outstanding Robinson presented him with a clear run on goal on 35 minutes.

Robinson won the ball midway inside the Luton half and slipped a pass through the back four only for Jones to plant his effort too near to Feuer. Luton were indeed looking increasingly vulnerable as a defensive unit with their back line of James, Thomas, Minton and Davis looking likely to ship goals at any time.

Battersby, clearly the strongest physically of all County's centre forwards was doing a good job holding the ball up and he moved inside shortly after Jones' miss to fire a right foot shot narrowly over.

A mistake by full back James as half-time approached let Baraclough into the box but the Luton man recovered to tackle well before Baraclough picked up the loose ball to deliver a cross that unfortunately proved elusive for the in-rushing County players.

As in so many recent games, it was the opposition who came closest to scoring when Alexander struck the top of Ward's crossbar from distance on 40 minutes.

Redmile cleared for a corner and Alexander again picked up the ball to fire another effort just wide.

Marshall so arresting

A PENALTY two minutes from time by Ben Marshall saw Notts County to victory at Bodymoor Heath today, writes Andy Easom.

This increased Notts' unbeaten run to ten games — the last defeat coming against Villa.

Villa's Alan Lee pace threatened to expose Notts on several occasions and a minute before half-time he caused the major scare of the half when he ran

VILLA 1, NOTTS 2

through to shoot against the outside of the post.

The goal Notts deserved came on the hour. Newton laid off for Holmes to centre for Craig DUDLEY to force the ball home under pressure. Dudley's pace threatened again a minute later as he just missed the target with a diagonal shot.

Beckford-Quailey could do nothing to prevent a stooping

header from SHERIDAN from flashing inside his post from an Appleby cross in the 83rd minute.

Dudley gained the opening for the Notts penalty with two minutes left as he surged in on goal he went down under pressure from Ruben Hazell MARSHALL made no mistake from the spot.

NOTTS: Beckford-Quailey, Holmes (Cockerill 83), Jones (Cooke 90), Henshaw, Randall, Best, Diuk, Marshall, Dudley, Newton, Mitchell. Sub not used: Matthews.

HATS



TIGHT LINES: County's Tony Battersby gets little change from Luton match winner Graham Alexander as the pair tussle for possession at Meadow Lane this afternoon

The second half followed a similar pattern to the first in its early stages as Notts probed the Luton backline in search of the decisive opening but it showed little sign of coming before the hour mark.

Indeed it was Luton who perhaps looked the more dangerous during this period as their breaks began to carry an increasing threat.

On more than one occasion they approached the County box with a spare man on the overlap without managing to find the pass that would unlock a route to goal.

Guentchev and James both shot wastefully wide from just outside the area when placed well while Oldfield fired an effort just wide of the near post as he collected a corner on the turn.

County were still looking to Wilder and Baraclough for their main source of attacking threat but when they took the lead on 61 minutes it was from a completely different source.

Robinson picked the ball up 30 yards from goal and chipped a tremendous pass diagonally into the area where RICHARDSON controlled the ball instantly and slid it under the advancing Feuer into the net.

Allardyce immediately chose to make a double substitution in a bid

to preserve the lead that County had struggled for so long to earn.

The manager removed Jones and Hogg and replaced them with Ridgway and Finnan.

This move saw County revert to a back four with the substitutes pushing up the flanks and Battersby left as a lone figure up front.

The move backfired almost instantly as Luton pushed forward to grab an equaliser out of nothing on 65 minutes.

HUGHES picked the ball up midway inside the County half and though his shot from fully 30 yards seemed to carry a minimal threat, it found its way past Ward and into the net.

It wasn't clear whether the ball swerved wickedly or took an uneven bounce in front of the keeper, but it was certainly an effort he would normally have been expected to gather.

Battersby almost restored County's lead within a minute as he powered onto Ridgway's cross only to see his header parried by Feuer at the near post.

Luton made their first substitution on the game on 68 minutes when Marshall replaced Minton.

It took some time for the home team to recover from the blow of conceding their lead so unexpected-

ly but once they did they then began to threaten.

County's search for the winner was always likely to leave them vulnerable at the back and they were lucky to escape on 73 minutes when a punt from defence sent hit-man Thorpe clear on County's goal.

Luton's leading marksman gathered the ball in his stride but, with all the time in the world, only managed to screw a poor effort across Ward and wide of the far post.

Recognising the desperate need for home points, the Meadow Lane crowd did their best to rouse their team as they entered the final ten minutes, but County's attacks looked more and more desperate as time ticked away.

Luton boss Lennie Lawrence threw Grant on for Thorpe while Martindale replaced Richardson and joined Battersby up front with eight minutes remaining.

Chances were now few and far between, however, and Battersby wasted a potential opening as he volleyed wildly into the family stand after latching onto another throughball.

With three minutes left, ALEXANDER won the game for Luton with a volleyed goal that left Notts no way back.