

Crewe on the

next stop road to Wembley

Luton Town 1
Stockport 1

THE BIGGEST crowd of the season made it a carnival day at Kenilworth Road as the fans of both sides looked forward to football at a higher level next season.

There was all the more reason for Luton Town supporters to raise their hats to a campaign that has ended the regular season full of bright promise after an appalling start when the first three matches were lost and relegation looked a more likely prospect.

Stockport looked worthy promotion winners, the better team for the first half hour or so, before the Town got into their stride with a compelling second-half perfor-

mance that deserved more than the one point it gathered. And if it is disappointing that promotion has to be via the play-offs, the fact that Crewe provide the first hurdle was greeted with delight by fans and the Town manager.

"They're a footballing side, and if I had a choice they are the team I would most like to meet," said Lennie Lawrence.

And he knows that if the Town resume at Gresty Road where they left off on Saturday a trip to Wembley, on May 25 is very much a possibility.

Unloved champions

Stockport wanted to win to have a chance of snatching the title off Bury, who must be one of the most unloved league champions for years outside their own patch.

In the event, Bury clinched it by beating Millwall at home, and Stockport boss David Jones had no complaints about the last-day draw after ensuring promotion with three wins in seven days.

Lawrence rested Steve Davis and Tony Thorpe to ensure they are fresh and recharged up for the play-offs.

Ceri Hughes was missing through injury, which is the week's major bad news as the Town prepare for

But Paul McLaren had another splendid game as a midfield powerhouse. He and David Oldfield shared my man of the match tag, on a day when the manager was able to experiment during the game as part of the play-off planning.

Oldfield might have been a little fitful as an attacker in the first half, but when he reverted to an attacking midfielder in the second he was part of a unit that threatened to sweep Stockport away in a tide of remorseless forward movement.

Stockport had a championship look about them in the early stages, and a long ball from defence sliced open the Town after only seven minutes.

Alun Armstrong scampered clear and Ian Feuer brought him down. Kevin Cooper converted the penalty and we breathed a sigh of relief that referee David Orr's only consistency was that he was inconsistent.

Feuer escaped without a card of any colour, and was thus able to stay to make two vital saves in one-to-one situations with Armstrong.

But slowly Stockport wilted, in their 67th game of the season, and once the equaliser went in the Town rarely looked like losing.

It was another goal for Andrew Fotiadis, full of youthful vigour and

tenacious running, but taken with a deft touch.

Marvin Johnson's headed clearance from the centre circle sent him storming goalwards, and as the keeper advanced the teenager lobbed him on the run, showing a maturity beyond his years.

The Town really turned on the style after that, despite substitutions. Kim Grant replaced Richard Harvey for the second half, and Dwight Marshall went on for Fotiadis for the final 30 minutes, and Stockport were lucky to go home with a point.

Excellent saves

Paul Jones typified their defiance, making excellent saves from drives by Graham Alexander, Garry Waddock and Grant.

Even Darren Patterson, who like the rest of the defence got better as the game progressed, went close to his first Town goal, with a header just over the bar from a cross by Alexander.

If the loss of two home points was a disappointment, the fans failed to show it.

They quite rightly gave both teams an ovation for a match which was like the season so far as the Town were concerned: iffy to start with, and top class by the end.

"We were woeful in the first 15 minutes," agreed Lawrence. "We were apprehensive and nervous, but the goal came at a good time and the second half was a good display. I made changes and used subs to get a few things clear in my own mind and there were lots of plusses from the game.

"Paul McLaren had another excellent game, and Andrew Fotiadis looks as though he can do it, and get goals.

"For sure we were the better team in the second half."

Stockport boss Jones accepted that, but believes he and Lawrence will meet again next season.

"I said when Luton came up to our place that they were one of the best sides in the league, and that's still the case," he said.

"If they get into the First Division next season they will have earned it.

The full match details

LUTON TOWN: Feuer; James, Johnson, Patterson, Thomas; Alexander, McLaren, Waddock, Harvey (Grant at half-time); Oldfield, Fotiadis (Marshall 60 mins); Unused sub Guentchev. STOCKPORT: Jones; Connelly, Flynn, Gannon, Todd; Durkan (Mutch 77 mins), Bennett, Marsden, Cooper; Angell (Charlery 68 mins), Armstrong. Unused sub Dinning.

THE GOALS: 0-1 7 minutes: Kevin Cooper penalty, after Ian Feuer had been left exposed by a square defence and upended Alun Armstrong; 1-1 38 minutes: Andrew Fotiadis, clever lob over an advancing keeper after being put clear by Marvin Johnson's headed clearance.

OTHER ATTEMPTS: Town five saved, 11 wide and an inswinging corner by Graham Alexander came back off a post; Stockport four saved and one wide.

CORNERS: 13-3 to the Town.

FOULS: Town 17, Stockport nine.

OFFSIDE: Town twice, Stockport ten times.

BOOKED: Stockport's Tom Bennett for a foul on Marvin Johnson; Gary Waddock for a foul on Chris Marsden; Graham Alexander for dissent.

REFEREE: David Orr, Iver: a model of inconsistency, for which Ian Feuer and Gary Waddock should be grateful, with Feuer unpunished over the penalty foul and Waddock escaping with a ticking-off for a high kick at Lee Todd.

ATTENDANCE: 9,347, the season's first sell-out at Kenilworth Road.

ENTERTAINMENT: A lovely way to end the regular season, with the Town stuttering dreadfully in the first half hour, but then ringing the changes and looking a class side in the second half, denied only by a very good goalkeeper. Both sides deserved their laps of honour after the final whistle.

THE FINAL SECOND DIVISION TABLE

	HOME					AWAY					Pts	
	P	W	D	L	F A	P	W	D	L	F A		
PROMOTED:												
Bury	46	18	5	0	39 7	6	7	10	23	31	84	
Stockport	46	15	5	3	31 14	8	8	7	28	27	82	
TO PLAY-OFFS:												
Luton Town	46	13	7	3	38 14	8	8	7	33	31	78	
Brentford	46	8	11	4	26 22	12	3	8	30	21	74	
Bristol City	46	14	4	5	43 18	7	6	10	26	33	73	
Crewe Alexandra	46	15	4	4	38 15	7	3	13	18	32	73	
Blackpool	46	13	7	3	41 21	5	8	10	19	26	69	
Wrexham	46	11	9	3	37 28	6	9	8	17	22	69	
Burnley	46	14	3	6	48 27	5	8	10	23	28	68	
Chesterfield	46	10	9	4	25 18	8	5	10	17	21	68	
Gillingham	46	13	3	7	37 25	6	7	10	23	34	67	
Walsall	46	12	8	3	35 21	7	2	14	19	32	67	
Watford	46	10	8	5	24 14	6	11	6	21	24	67	
Millwall	46	12	4	7	27 22	4	9	10	23	33	61	
Preston	46	14	5	4	33 19	4	2	17	16	36	61	
Bournemouth	46	8	9	6	24 20	7	6	10	19	25	60	
Bristol Rov	46	13	4	6	34 22	2	7	14	13	28	56	
Wycombe Wdrs	46	13	4	6	31 14	2	6	15	20	42	55	
Plymouth	46	7	11	5	19 18	5	7	11	28	40	54	
York City	46	8	6	9	27 31	5	7	11	20	37	52	
RELEGATED:												
Peterborough	46	7	7	9	38 34	4	7	12	17	39	47	
Shrewsbury	46	8	6	9	27 32	3	7	13	22	42	46	
Rotherham	46	4	7	12	17 29	3	7	13	22	41	35	
Hotts County	46	4	9	10	20 25	3	5	15	13	34	35	

Play-offs: Crewe Alexandra v Luton Town and Bristol City v Brentford on Sunday, reverse fixtures next Wednesday; winners to meet in the final for one promotion place at Wembley on Sunday May 25.

Reports by Brian Swain Pictures by Gareth Owen

The League factfile

APPEARANCES (As substitute in brackets): Feuer 46; Alexander 44(1); James and Johnson 44; Davis 43(1); Thomas 42; Thorpe 39(2); Waddock 38(1); Hughes 36; Oldfield 31(7); Showler 21(2); Guentchev 15(12); McLaren 13(11); Marshall 9(15); Fotiadis 9(8); Grant 8(17); Patterson 8(2); Kiwomya 5; Linton 3(4); Douglas 2(7); Skelton 2(1); Harvey and McGowan 2; Evers 1; Upson one as sub.

GOALS: Thorpe 28(7 pens); Davis 8; Oldfield and Showler 6; Hughes and Marshall 4; Thomas, Alexander and Fotiadis 3; Waddock and Grant 2; Guentchev, Kiwomya and James one each.

ASSISTS: Alexander 18; Hughes 9; Thorpe and Oldfield 6; Showler 4; Thomas and Grant 3; Davis, Waddock, Marshall, Fotiadis and James 2; one each by Johnson, Linton and Douglas.