

Douglas edges Luton home

97/98

By Martin Smith

Luton Town 1
Southend Utd 0

LUTON Town, one of the favourites to win the Second Division, set their campaign rolling slightly earlier than they did a year ago, a season which ended with them just missing promotion at the first attempt.

Stuart Douglas's goal, 14 minutes from time, lifted Luton from the bottom of the table, albeit at an embryonic stage of the season, into a mid-table position. Last season they needed four games to get off the mark; last night's win against Southend was achieved in only their second league game.

Manager Lennie Lawrence was concerned before the season kicked off that the disappointment of missing an automatic promotion place, and then losing in the play-offs to Crewe, might have an adverse affect on their early matches. They duly lost their opening game at Blackpool, and for long periods of last night's game, his premonition appeared justified.

Indeed, it was not until deep into the second half that

they finally took control against one of the other fancied teams in the division. Yet Luton looked in trouble at half-time with goalkeeper Ian Feuer holding his right shoulder after tearing muscles after a routine throw-out, and with the reserve goalkeeper, Kelvin Davis, on loan at Hartlepool.

An injection during the interval deadened the pain, and it was to Southend's embarrassment that they did not cause him further discomfort.

Hartlepool, however, can expect a call this morning as Feuer is unlikely to play at Fulham on Saturday.

In fact Feuer was beaten only once during the game, when Paul Byrne's 30-yard shot dipped over his 6ft 6in frame and cannoned back off the crossbar.

Luton cured their early sloppiness, though they were

over-elaborate interminably in midfield, midway through the second half when centre-half Steve Davis provided the turning point. Taking matters into his own hands, he moved forward purposefully and shot narrowly wide.

Suddenly Luton, and in particular Tony Thorpe, top scorer in the division last season, burst into life. Thorpe shot just off target following a neat turn, Mitchell Thomas forced Simon Royce into a spectacular tip-over at the near post before Douglas, 19, entered the fray as a substitute.

Even so, Douglas appeared offside as he ambled back in the build-up to the goal. He was deemed to be not interfering with play, though he was on hand to pounce on the rebound after Royce parried Thorpe's shot.

Luton Town: Feuer, James, Davis, Johnson, Thomas; Alexander, Waddock, Davies; Marshall, Fotiadis (Douglas 64), Thorpe (McLaren 90). Sub: Harvey.

Southend Utd: Royce; Harris, Roget, Dublin, Jones; Byrne, Beeston, Marsh, Clarke; Thomson, Boere (Rammell 81). Subs: Parris, Stimson. Booked: Byrne, Dublin.

Referee: C Foy (St Helens).