

Saddlers forced to settle for a point

Division Two round-up

WITH Fulham involved in FA Cup action, Walsall had the chance to go level on points at the top of the Second Division when they faced Burnley at Turf Moor on Saturday. But the Saddlers had to settle for a point in a goalless draw. It had looked as if they had gone 1-0 up after 68 minutes when Andy Watson volleyed home before it was ruled offside.

The flag was also raised five minutes later when Burnley top scorer Andy Payton's close-range header beat keeper James Walker.

Chesterfield moved up to eighth after their first away League win of the season, 2-1 at Reading. It was all the more remarkable as the Spireites had six first-choice players missing through flu or injury, but their replacements did them proud.

Tom Curtis struck in the 33rd minute when left unmarked at the far post and then 11 minutes later Ian Breckin headed their second from Marcus Ebdon's corner.

Reading substitute Mass Saar scored a late goal but it was too little too late and the home fans in the Madejski Stadium booed their side off at the end.

Gillingham's Nicky Southall proved to be the match-winner with an 87th minute strike to claim the points against battling Blackpool at Priestfield.

It was only Southall's second goal of the season as he drilled his effort past former Gills keeper Steve Banks following a quick free-kick involving Robert Taylor and Paul Smith.

Second half goals from York leading scorer Richard Cresswell and defender Barry Jones completed a League double over lowly Wycombe, as they won 2-1 at Adams Park.

Cresswell, whose run of goals had attracted a host of Premiership scouts, finally broke the deadlock after 69 minutes to grab his 16th goal of the season.

Wycombe could have moved out of the bottom four had they won and they equalised eight minutes later through Keith Ryan.

But just when Wycombe thought they had earned a point Jones struck, rising highest to head home.

QUICK QUIZ ANSWERS

ANSWERS to the Quick Quiz questions featured in the Colchester v Luton Town programme of Saturday were as follows.

Name Today's Visitor: Phil Gray
Strange But True: Eric Morecambe
Luton Town's Last Visit: Tony Thorpe
Name The Game: Watney Cup
He Came, He Saw, He Conquered: Ian Allinson
He Played For Both: Ray Whittaker
Division Two Challenge: Gavin McGowan

Colchester United 2

1	Fernandes	7	
2	Dunne	7	
3	Betts	6	
4	Williams	6	
5	Greene	7	
6	Buckle	7	
7	WILKINS	8	
8	D Gregory	7	
9	Sale	7	
10	Abrahams	7	
11	Duguid	6	

GOALS

D Gregory (pen, 20)
Abrahams (84)

SUBSTITUTES

12 N Gregory (for Sale, 80)
13 Lock (for Duguid, 73)
14 Haydon (for Williams, 80)

BOOKINGS

Betts (foul, 26)
D Gregory (foul, 30)
Sale (foul, 37)

Match stats

Corners 2
Offsides 2
Fouls conceded 19
Shots on target 6

Formation: 4-3-3
Weather: Dry

DATE: Saturday, January 2, 1999 VENUE: Layer Road
REFEREE: Barry Knight (Kent) 5 ATTENDANCE: 4,694

Luton Town 2

1	Davis	8	
2	Alexander	7	
3	Thomas	6	
4	Spring	6	
5	White	7	
6	Johnson	7	
7	McLAREN	8	
8	Harrison	6	
9	Douglas	6	
10	Gray	7	
11	Evers	7	

GOALS

Alexander (pen, 7)
White (72)

SUBSTITUTES

12 McIndoe (not used)
13 Doherty (for Douglas, 65)
14 Fraser (not used)

BOOKINGS

McLaren (foul, 2)
Johnson (foul, 35)
Alexander (off-the-ball incident, 58)

Match stats

Corners 7
Offsides 3
Fouls conceded 15
Shots on target 7

Formation: 4-4-2
Pitch: Heavy

Abrahams to the rescue

by CARL MARSTON

PAUL Abrahams stopped the rot with a late cracker to salvage tentative Colchester United a point at Layer Road on Saturday.

The U's, left reeling by an emphatic 3-0 home defeat last Monday, dished out by Bristol Rovers, were just relieved to scramble a draw against mid-table Luton Town.

It was entertaining fare, if a little scrappy, with four goals, two penalties and six bookings. There were times when referee Barry Knight struggled to exert his authority on a full-blooded affair.

Colchester have been in the lead on home soil for less than 20 minutes all season, and they never managed to get their noses in front against the Hatters.

Twice, Steve Wignall's men had to claw themselves back into the game. But the fact that they achieved this, together with a competent display from debutant keeper Tamer Fernandes, gives them hope of turning the tide and remaining above the relegation zone.

Manager Wignall has become accustomed to chopping and changing his front-line, from one match to another, in a desperate bid to discover his best attacking formation.

Saturday was no different. Out went Jason Dozzell, Tony Lock and Neil

Gregory from the Rovers defeat, to be replaced by a new attacking trio of Mark Sale, Karl Duguid and Abrahams.

It wasn't a wholesale success, but Sale won the penalty that enabled David Gregory to slot home the first equaliser, and Abrahams finally came good with his 84th minute leveller.

Throughout their barren spell—the U's are without a win in seven games—there has never been a shortage of goalscoring chances. United have missed most of them, but the opportunities have kept flowing.

Before Abrahams' late strike from the edge of the box, buried with his right foot low into the far corner of the net, no Colchester striker had scored a League goal since last October.

In fact, the U's have relied entirely on goals from David Gregory and defender David Greene over the last couple of months.

Just as United have slipped from mid-table safety to the fringe of the relegation zone in recent weeks, so Luton have slumped from promotion candidates to a middle-of-the-road team.

A lack of confidence, that comes with

such depressing runs, was evident in both sides. Hence, both camps were relatively satisfied with the final outcome.

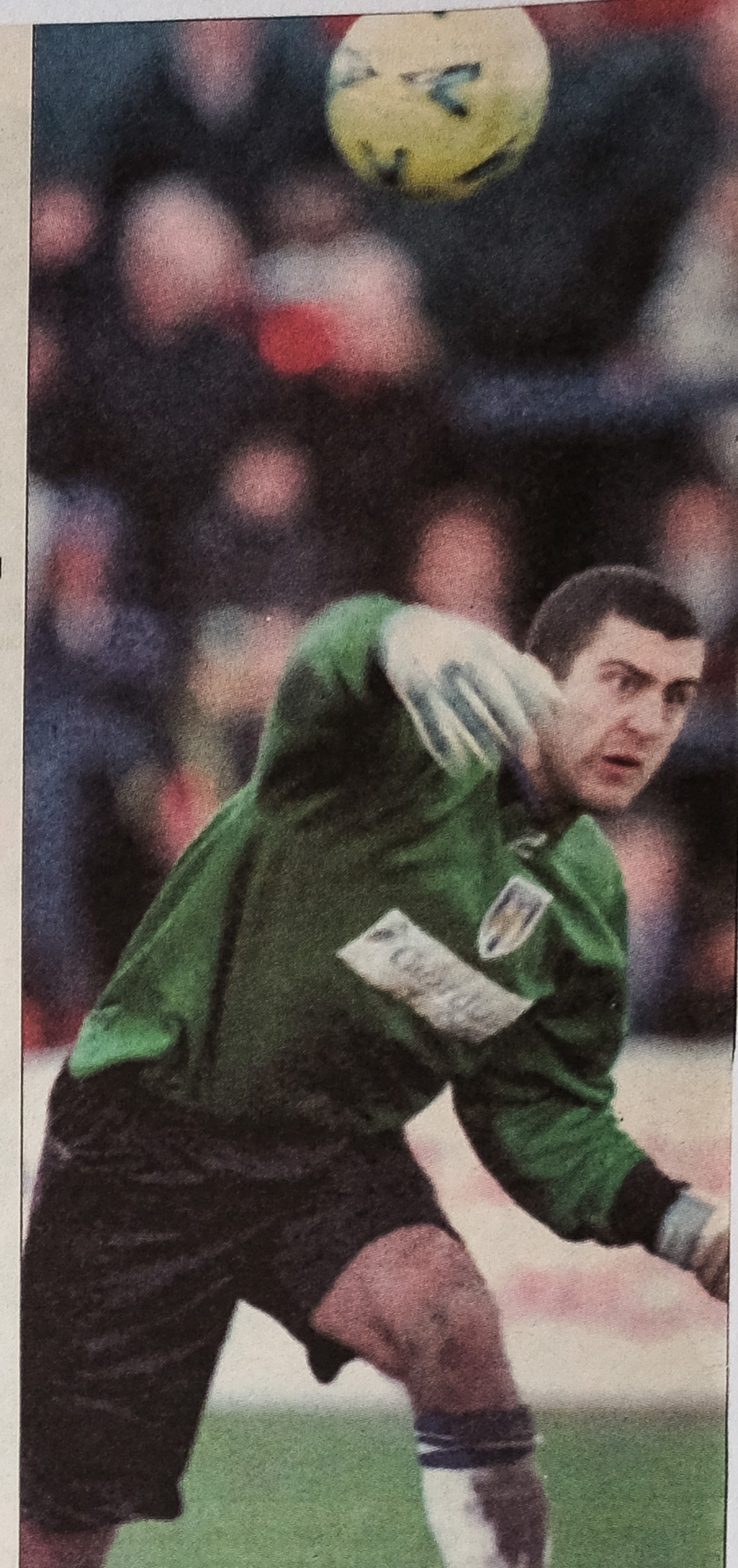
Luton, facing up to life without their club captain Steve Davis (he moved to Burnley for £750,000 in midweek), enjoyed the better of the opening exchanges.

And they duly broke the deadlock in the seventh minute, when Simon Betts was adjudged to have fouled striker Phil Gray in the penalty area.

Graham Alexander tucked home the spot kick, giving Fernandes no chance. Fernandes had been preferred to regular number one Carl Emberson, who is set to miss out next week as well because of a suspension.

And the former Brentford custodian made a superb save in the 18th minute, palming away a toe-poked effort from Paul McLaren, which looked destined for the top corner of the net.

Two minutes later and the U's were level with the game's second penalty. Luton centre-half Marvin Johnson felled Sale in the box, and David Gregory's spot kick squirted over the goal-line via the hand of keeper Kelvin Davis, and the post.



U's DEBUTANT: Tamer Fernandes produced a competent display in goal but could do little to stop Luton's two goals, the first from the penalty spot and the second from a close-range volley

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NATIONWIDE LEAGUE REVIEW

It was David Gregory's sixth successful penalty of the season, and his eighth goal in all competitions. No other Colchester player has been more effective in Division Two this campaign.

Yellow cards were flashed in all directions for the remainder of the half, with four bookings in a frantic 11-minute spell as mis-timed tackles were all punished by referee Knight.

Davis, who at 22 is one of the promising keepers in the division, then made an outstanding save from Sale in the 51st minute. The U's target man met a cross by Abrahams with a thunderous header which Davis managed to push onto the underside of the bar.

United's woe in front of goal looked to have cost them dear again when defender Alan White, groomed as Steve Davis' long-term replacement, volleyed home Matthew Spring's 72nd minute corner. White had lost his marker David Greene at the far post.

Three minutes later and Abrahams should have scored, when pouncing onto a poor back pass. He aimed a weak shot straight at keeper Davis.

But it all came right for Colchester, and Abrahams, when he drilled home his first goal since last August, with time running out.

United must take heart from this positive finish. Perhaps the corner has been turned.

'Big improvement on Bristol game'

COLCHESTER United front-runner Paul Abrahams was the toast of Layer Road when his 84th minute equaliser prevented the U's from suffering a third straight defeat.

And the 25-year-old home-grown star believes that United may have turned the corner with the gritty 2-2 draw against Luton.

"We were a lot better than of late. We said that we had to stay together, and we ground out a result today," said Abrahams after the match.

"We knew that we had to be more physical in both boxes, and in this we showed a big improvement from the Bristol Rovers game.

"We managed to come back twice, and now we have to make sure that we continue to show this conviction.

"However, I'd also like us to go ahead for a change and get a comfortable lead so that a few of us can come out of our shells," added Abrahams.

Former trainee Abrahams, now in his third stint at Layer Road, missed several chances before finally burying the late equaliser.

He admitted: "I tried to really whack my first chance in the first half, and then with my second I tried to place it.

"I didn't have time to think about the third chance and maybe that helped. It was just such a relief to get the equalis-

er," added Abrahams.

Manager Steve Wignall confirmed that the U's must "mix-it" and become more physical as they strive for the haven of mid-table over the next few weeks.

"It was a whole-hearted game. Luton were excellent for the first 20 minutes, and we were really chasing shadows," said Wignall.

"It was not a dirty game. In fact, I reckon the fans got their money's worth. "We mixed it a little more, which we have to do with the pitches getting so much heavier. We must not be so nice.

"We must become a more difficult team to beat," confirmed Wignall.



IN FULL FLIGHT: Paul Abrahams becomes airborne as he cracks in a shot during Saturday's clash with Luton Town