

Luton hang on to make their point

Oldham Athletic 1 Luton Town 1
By Bill Cole

HAVING taken the lead with a crisp Phil Gray goal and being denied a certain penalty soon after the interval, relegation-hit Oldham hit back with some spirit to have the Town hanging on at the end of an exciting encounter.

A draw was probably the right result with the drama continuing right up to the final whistle, Gray hitting the bar with seconds to go.

There was still time for Gavin McGowan to get his marching orders for retaliation after being fouled in injury time and Marvin Johnson to save the Hatters from defeat with an instinctive, athletic defensive header that denied Oldham a tap-in winner.

With bottom clubs beating top in the other Division Two games on Friday, Luton still have some work to do to feel safe, but they won't be worrying too much as they stretched their recent unbeaten run to three games with this performance and continued to play with some style.

Town manager, Lennie Lawrence was able to announce a rare unchanged side with three strikers suspecting that Oldham, on a

dreadful run, would not appreciate being attacked and so it proved.

We had hardly settled in our seats when Matthew Spring's pin-point cross found Mitchell Thomas's head beyond the far post. He headed back across the six-yard box, Paul Mardon missed a straightforward clearance kick and Gray clipped it home with keeper Kelly nowhere.

The Latics, woefully short of confidence, went on to have a terrible first half with John Sheridan and the on-loan Andy Gray, their only bright spots.

All the others saw the ball as a hot potato to be rid of as soon as possible. Luton should have put the game well beyond Oldham before they equalised around the hour mark, but, not for the first time this season, they over-elaborated when they should have gone for the jugular.

Paul Danson did not help. The Premiership referee took a day off from the top flight and can return there as soon as he likes. He could do the strutting about and the waving cards part of the job all right, but chickened out badly when the chips were down.

Luton had begun the second half as if they meant business. Within seconds of the restart Tony Thorpe and Gray combined to feed Stuart Douglas who turned his man and fired in a shot that Kelly did well to turn round a post.

Thomas played a beautiful pass into acres of space for Thorpe to run on to, he gathered and turned past defender Andrew Holt who tripped him – a certain penalty. The only men

in the ground who thought otherwise were Mr Danson and his assistant. The decision turned the game because if Luton had got a second it would have been all over for Oldham.

With nothing to lose the home side pushed ineffective central defender Shaun Garnett up as a full-time striker, but he was having no more luck there until Steve Whitehall was introduced and the two combined immediately to equalise on 62 minutes.

A long throw into the Town penalty area was glanced on by Barnett, but Whitehall with his first action failed to make contact as it went past him. But his presence seemed to distract the defence and the ball bounced on into the far corner of Davis' net.

With their confidence supercharged, a revived Oldham dominated and rained high balls into the Luton box for the rest of the game. But heroics from Sean Dyche, Johnson and Chris Wilmott and great covering on the line by Spring saw them home with a point.

Even then they could have travelled home with all three because Thomas put a header onto the top of the crossbar, only hampered in accepting an easy chance by two other Town attackers going for the same ball. And Gray produced an exquisite 89th minute chip that comprehensively beat Kelly but hit the bar with substitute Alan White, following up, the victim of a second doubtful home challenge in the box.

There is bad news about Paul McLaren. Already having missed most of this season with medial ligament damage to a knee, he was stretched off after only ten minutes on Friday and will probably not play again this season having injured his other knee in similar fashion.

After the match Lawrence said: "It was a fair result from a hard game, they put a lot into it, but so did we.

"The trip on Thorpe looked like a penalty to me and Mitchell missed a good chance, but they put a million balls into our area and we coped at the back. If we can beat York on Tuesday not many can overtake us and I'd like us to target last year's points total of 57.

Luton Town team: Davis, Wilmott, Thomas, Spring (booked 23), Dyche, Johnson, Gray, McLaren (McIndoe 10), Douglas (White 76), Thorpe (booked 18, Fotiadis 72), McGowan (booked 71, sent off 89).

Attendance 4948



■ Alan White and Andrew Fotiadis are out-jumped, above
■ Scorer Phil Gray, below



■ Gavin McGowan gets his marching orders in the last minute from ref Paul Danson



■ Paul McLaren is carried off and will miss the rest of the season with a knee injury