

HIGH SPOTS IN AN OPENING DAY TO FORGET AT MEADOW LANE



HEAD HIGH: Notts County's Peter Beadle (right) sends a header just wide of the Luton post

much, they were not translated into goalscoring opportunities. Notts managed just two shots on target all afternoon.

That was particularly disappointing because visiting goalkeeper Nathan Abbey looked like a man who would crack under the slightest hint of pressure. Even in the warm-up, he looked shaky.

His susceptibility to crosses was exposed early on, when he unforgivably dropped a looping centre from Shaun Murray, but it was never truly exploited. Much of that was to do with the fact that Murray and Richard Liburd, the two wide midfielders, never saw enough ball to make it count.

The introduction of Mark Robson as a second-half substitute promised extra width, and there were some positive signs in the closing stages, but Notts never stretched Luton's raw wing-backs, aged 19 and 17, enough.

Holmes ran Blackmore closest for man of the match — his superb last-ditch tackle on Stuart Douglas stopped the Luton striker claiming an undesired winner on the counter-attack — and there was also an encouraging display from new signing Craig Ramage.

Ramage, the former Derby County and Bradford City midfielder, has been snapped up on a one-month contract and, on this evidence, Notts would be well advised to start talks on a longer deal as soon as possible.

Vision and goals are what Allardyce expects Ramage to supply. On early evidence, he, like Blackmore, possesses the sort of creative mind that is rare at this level, as might be expected from someone who has played most of his career in higher divisions.

Mark Warren continued where he left off last season, competing well in the air and on the ground and helping Holmes with his defensive work.

But Notts never really got to grips with Douglas, who was a handful, although Allardyce was disappointed the referee failed to notice the striker's habit of pushing Warren and Redmile all afternoon.

But Douglas was a danger and, despite being fed on crumbs, he managed to make his presence felt. Peter Beadle and Mark Stallard each showed some nice touches, but neither managed to impose himself on the game in the same way the Luton forward did.

Only twice did things truly open up for Notts. The first occasion came on 11 minutes, when Beadle headed in to round off a fine move involving Blackmore, Stallard and Murray. Significantly, Murray's cross was again the source, but he was still only rarely given time and space to cross.

The linesman's flag ruled out that effort, just as the referee had disallowed a Luton "goal" moments earlier. A long free kick from Spring was fielded by Darren Ward, the new Notts captain, but the 'keeper was barged into the net under the watchful eye of Mr Leake.

Fortunately for Notts, the referee was some distance behind the play when Luton broke forward in the closing stages. Phil Gray tumbled in the box, seemingly pushed by Warren, but the visitors' appeals were waved away. I've seen them given for less, as they say.

Defeat would have been hard on Notts, but a draw certainly was not.

Allardyce suggested they did not get the breaks when the ball was bouncing around the Luton penalty area, but it was from such a fortuitous break that Stallard spurned the game's best chance.

On 48 minutes, Beadle's shot on the turn was charged down and fell to Stallard, who blazed the ball across the face of the goal, albeit from a tight angle.

The only other noteworthy chance for Notts came in injury time — after the introductions of Paul Bolland and, to a huge ovation, Duane Darby — when Ian Richardson found a yard in the penalty area. His header was blocked and fell to Darby, whose shot met the same fate, thus denying us the fairytale ending that never really seemed likely.



FLASHPOINT: Police intervene as scuffles break out among the Luton fans
POSTPHOTO: 997528/21a

Match FACTS

NOTTS 0, LUTON 0

**Saturday, August 7
Meadow Lane**

NOTTS: Ward; Holmes, Warren, Redmile (Bolland 87), Blackmore; Liburd (Robson 57), Richardson, Ramage, Murray; Beadle, Stallard (Darby 80). Subs not used:

Gibson, Hughes.

LUTON: Abbey; White, Watts, Johnson; Fraser, McLaren, Spring, McIndoe, Taylor (Boyce 69); Douglas, Gray. Subs not used: George, Tate, Scarlett, Zahanioni.

REFEREE: A Leake (Darwen, Lancs)
ATTENDANCE: 6,141
SHOTS ON TARGET: Notts 2, Luton 1

SHOTS OFF: Notts 5, Luton 8
CORNERS: Notts 7, Luton 7

BOOKINGS: Blackmore (22, foul), Liburd (39, dissent), Taylor (41, foul)

MAN OF THE MATCH: Clayton Blackmore.



BEAT YOU: Mark Stallard gets past Luton's Matthew Taylor

POSTPHOTO 997527/23