

Whelan's wads win points for Wigan!

LENNIE LAWRENCE called this game Division Two's ultimate test for 76 minutes, his young pupils appeared to have passed it.

Stuart Barlow's clinical second-half finish was all that separated the sides who are poles apart in terms of financial clout and footballing experience.

The Hatters battled valiantly on their first trip to Wigan's £28 million JJB Stadium and, on another day, could have come away with a point against a side hotly-tipped for promotion.

It was Luton's inability to score away from home one again that ultimately cost them.

Two hundred and seventy four minutes have now passed since the Hatters last league goal on their travels and, after Barlow's goal, the industrious Stuart Douglas, now without a goal in 17 games, Liam George, less effective in an out-and-out striking role, and on-loan sub Neil Midgley, still finding his first team feet, could not conjure up an equaliser.

But it could so easily have been the home team chasing the game if Luton had not been denied a half-time lead by a baffling offside decision.

The game was basically a tale of two Gary Doherty headers, one that ended up in the Wigan net but was mysteriously disallowed and the other a poor clearance that led to Barlow's winner.

On 39 minutes, the 19-year-old defender thought he had nodded the Hatters in front when he connected with Matthew Taylor's inswinging free-kick and the ball squirmed under home keeper Roy Carroll.

Doherty was certainly not in an offside position and was mobbed by his teammates for lengthy celebrations before referee Mike Pike ruled out the effort on the advice of his assistant to the relief and amusement of the home fans.

In an even first-half, Wigan's best chances saw Nathan Abbey tip over a Kevin Sharp volley and push a Stuart Balmer shot wide.

After the break, Barlow fired an early warning when he shot past Abbey only for the athletic Taylor to race back and clear off the line.

The marauding 17-year-old wing-back also had two half-chances of his own but Carroll saved both and the Hatters struggled otherwise to create clear-cut opportunities.

But defensively Luton, marshalled by the excellent Julian Watts, were resolute and looked capable of keeping a clean sheet until Doherty's weak headed clearance saw the ball break loose

match facts

WIGAN 1 LUTON 0

● **WIGAN:** Roy Carroll, Carl Bradshaw, Kevin Sharp (Roberto Martinez, 46), Stuart Balmer, Arjan De Zeeuw, Ian Kilford, Michael O'Neill, Darren Sheridan, Simon Haworth, Andy Liddell, Stuart Barlow.

● **HATTERS:** Nathan Abbey, Stuart Fraser, Matthew Taylor, Matthew Spring, Gary Doherty, Julian Watts, Marvin Johnson, Adam Locke (Neil Midgley, 78), Paul McLaren (Michael McDowd, 75), Stuart Douglas, Liam George. Subs not used: Efetobore Sodje, Alan White, Scott Ward.

● **Shots on target:** Wigan 4 Luton 4.

● **Off target:** Wigan 9 Luton 3.

● **Corners:** Wigan 9 Luton 8.

● **Top Hatter:** Watts - solid.

to Barlow in the penalty box. The ex-Everton striker expertly took the ball in his stride and fired coolly into the bottom corner for his 10th goal of the season.

Abbey prevented the home side from doubling the margin of victory with a late, unintentional save from Simon Haworth's deflected shot.

"Disappointed with the result but not the performance" was Lawrence's verdict afterwards.

But the quote of the day belonged to a Wigan fan who, in gloom descended on the impressive new stadium, directed this verbal volley at multi-millionaire chairman Dave Whelan: "Turn the lights off, Whelan, you tight xxx!"

What the Hatters would give for such a miserly owner!

Lennie's verdict

We were beaten by a classic goalscorer's goal. It needed something like that to unhinge us. We gave a good account but needed more attacking options. Some teams will be buried alive here so we leave with pride intact but no points. If our goal had been allowed, I'm sure we'd have drawn but, to be fair, the linesman put his flag up straight away.

