

Hatters pass Oxford examination

IN A city renowned for its academic brilliance Lennie Lawrence's young pupils passed their latest test with first class honours on Saturday.

Liam George, one of the brightest graduates from this Kenilworth Road school of excellence, scored a third-minute goal at Oxford and the Hatters went on to doggedly defend that one-goal lead.

Gary Doherty produced another consistent performance alongside reliable, old campaigners Julian Watts and Marvin Johnson and teenage wing backs Stuart Fraser and Matthew Taylor were less cavalier than in recent games, both putting in mature and disciplined displays.

Admittedly, beleaguered Oxford, who slumped to their fifth successive defeat, have now failed to score in over seven hours of football and even their last goal was a penalty.

But equally Luton have not taken three points on their travels or kept a clean sheet since August so Saturday's result represented a significant step forward.

Unfortunately, with five out of the top

match facts

OXFORD UNITED 0 LUTON TOWN 1

● **OXFORD:** Andre Arendse, Les Robinson, Paul Powell (Neil McGowan, 46), Peter Fear, Mark Watson, Steve Davis, Matt Murphy (Steve Anthrobus, 60), Paul Tait, Derek Lilley (James Lambert, 60), Mickey Lewis, Joey Beauchamp.

● **HATTERS:** Nathan Abbey, Stuart Fraser, Matthew Taylor, Matthew Spring, Julian Watts, Marvin Johnson, Gary Doherty, Paul McLaren, Stuart Douglas (Adam

Locke, 78), Neil Midgley (Michael McIndoe, 71), Liam George. Subs not used: Efetobore Sodje, Tresor Kandol, Scott Ward.

● **Shots on target:** Oxford 1, Luton 4.

● **Off target:** Oxford 5, Luton 3.

● **Corners:** Oxford 8, Luton 2.

● **Referee:** George Cain (Seaforth).

● **Top Hatter:** Doherty - Mr Consistent.

six also winning on Saturday, the Hatters did not move up the Division Two table.

George's ninth goal of the season was an early vindication of Lawrence's decision to revert back to the three-forward formation he had disposed with for the Hatters' last two away games.

All three strikers were involved in a swift move with Stuart Douglas feeding an overlapping Neil Midgley whose cross left George with a simple tap-in.

Oxford, who boast players with Premiership experience such as Peter Fear, Joey Beauchamp and Derek Lilley,

struggled to muster a response in a low-key first half and were booed off at the break by a disgruntled home crowd.

Little changed in the second half until the introduction of another former top-flight star, bustling ex-Wimbledon striker Steve Anthrobus.

Anthrobus, dropped to the bench, was brought on for fans' favourite Matt Murphy to another chorus of catcalls but the home fans soon realised the 60th-minute substitute was their only real chance of salvaging a point.

Nathan Abbey certainly seemed aware

of the big man's presence, flapping at a couple of crosses and Fear could have done better than head Anthrobus' 72nd-minute cross wide.

But the goal-hungry sub blew his big chance to snatch a point when his powerful header from James Lambert's cross flew inches over.

To cut off the supply line to Anthrobus, Lawrence acted by bringing on midfielders Michael McIndoe and Adam Locke and withdrawing front two Midgley and Douglas.

It was a tactical gamble with George now the only attacking outlet but was one that paid off.

The Hatters rearguard were afforded a well-earned rest from the aerial bombardment aimed at Anthrobus and, at the other end, three chances were created in the last ten minutes to add to the lead.

A tireless George set up opportunities for Matthew Spring and McIndoe. Spring was thwarted by an Andre Arendse save and McIndoe by a last-gasp Mickey Lewis tackle.

George was then denied at the death by another Arendse stop after Spring had released him.



Lennie's verdict

It was a learning experience. At any level of football, 60 to 70 per cent of away wins are 1-0 and we've proved we can do that. We were very disciplined in defence.