

Late sickeners put U's back in trouble



RANDALL BUTT
reports on a
heartbreaker for
United at
Kenilworth Road

A COUPLE of killer injury-time goals, two minutes and 150 miles apart, dropped Cambridge United back into the relegation zone on a night when they showed they have the ability, strength, and certainly the grit and determination, to deserve second division status.

Arch-rivals Oxford, the opponents in a blockbuster clash at the Abbey in three days, grabbed a 92nd minute winner at Bury, then United had what would have been a valiant away victory snatched from them at Luton in the 94th.

If you looked at the match as a whole and analysed the statistics then it was probably, as both managers slightly reluctantly agreed, a fair result.

But the manner and the timing could hardly have been more cruel for a United team who, yet again, put a sloppy home display behind them and raised their level of performance in every area.

They quickly hit back after conceding a 19th minute goal to equalise, gain control and take the lead early in the second half.

Manager Roy McFarland, who admitted he felt uneasy from the first minute of Saturday's defeat by Wrexham, said: "We were comfortable for most of the first half and 20 minutes or so into the second."

But then they were literally knocked out of their stride.

Goalkeeper Shaun Marshall had limped out of the game with a pulled muscle as early as the 23rd minute, and was followed in the last half an hour by Neil Mackenzie and Tom Youngs.

Midfielders Ian Ashbee and Paul Wanless were giving as good as they got, as usual, and there was not a single United man who pulled out of a challenge.

But, in a hard though usually fair battle, Luton had more of the seasoned tough players you need in this sort of encounter, as well as a little more all-round stamina during the agonisingly long finale.

Losing a couple of attacking players meant United had fewer avenues out of defence, and with John Taylor, not surprisingly, tiring after a gruelling schedule of seven consecutive matches, they were unable to retain possession in the Luton half to ease the ever-mounting pressure.

Naturally, but fatally, they fell back on deeper and deeper defence, the ball bouncing back at them as though from a wall whenever they managed to clear.

Roared on by 1,200 nail-biting fans behind their goal, however, they still looked like holding on as injury time ticked so slowly away.

But, ironically, a Luton injury which kept top scorer Phil Gray out of the game proved a crucial factor.

It meant Hatters' boss Lennie Lawrence had to convert powerful centre-half Gary Doherty into a centre-forward, and he was just the man they needed in a packed penalty area.



CELEBRATION TIME . . . Trevor Benjamin is congratulated by Tom Youngs (left) and Ian Ashbee (right).

A big, brave player whose thundering runs into the box and aerial ability brought back memories of United hero Steve Fallon, he was, eventually, unstoppable.

It took a wonder save from substitute keeper Arjan Van Heusden to flick his 73rd minute header away for a corner; he literally rattled the crossbar with a mighty header in the 88th minute; then beat the United defence again in the air to set up the equaliser.

"Doherty had a tremendous game," admitted McFarland. "He's a difficult man to stop. Just imagine him alongside Trevor Benjamin."

It was Benjamin, with Taylor, who was the influential force in the first hour of the game, to such an extent that Lawrence commented: "I was massively disappointed by the way my defence was dominated by their front two. We owed a lot to our keeper."

Middlesbrough loanee Ben Roberts just about matched Van Heusden's save when he somehow blocked a close-range power header from Wanless after Mackenzie curled a 43rd minute free kick to the midfielder.

He pulled off another to keep his side in the game when Benjamin broke through in the 70th minute, and



JUST WIDE . . . Tom Youngs watches his shot miss the Luton goal.



BEAT THE KEEPER . . . Ian Ashbee rounds Ben Roberts to score United's second goal.

then was able to watch most of the action from a distance as Luton suddenly began producing the pace and power which made them play-off contenders before their slump of six defeats in seven games.

United fought for every ball that dropped like a mortar bomb into their box, but they were unable to get out to cut off the supply.

And, in the bitter end, the quantity produced the one moment of quality which stripped two precious points away from them.