

# Colchester have to settle for a point

Boxing Day stalemate felt more like a defeat for high-flying U's

By Carl Marston

COLCHESTER UNITED 1, LUTON TOWN 1

HALF-WAY through the season and Colchester United, despite yesterday's failure to beat Luton Town, can still take heart from their lofty position and current points tally.

The U's are usually facing up to a relegation battle, going into the second half of the season. Not so this term. In the play-off zone, and with 36 points from 23 games, represents a tale of festive cheer.

Phil Parkinson's men have set such high standards, over the last few months, that it was impossible to leave Layer Road without a feeling of disappointment last night.

United preserved their unbeaten record in December,

but they had the chances to see off visiting Luton Town. A draw was scant reward for their endeavours.

Scott McGleish broke the deadlock with a powerful header in the 12th minute. It was his 11th goal of the season, two more than he managed throughout the whole of last season.

The U's lead lasted 16 minutes. Lee Mansell's smart finish salvaged a battling point for the Hatters, although their hosts had numerous opportunities to regain their advantage, especially late on.

The Division Two play-off race is certainly hotting up, with at least 13 teams in the current shake-up, and that's not including the two pace-setters Plymouth and QPR.

United look well-equipped to

stay in contention, and they should not be too daunted by tomorrow's clash with QPR at Loftus Road.

Yesterday, although the sides were level at the break, Colchester had good reason to be disappointed. They had taken the lead, conceded a fortuitous equaliser and then spurned a terrific chance to regain the lead.

Wayne Andrews, the mastermind behind the opening goal, threatened first on eight minutes. He was crudely scythed down by Hatters skipper Chris Coyne, on the right edge of the penalty area.

It was not unlike Alan White's challenge on Eifion Williams at Hartlepool last weekend.

On that occasion, White was shown the red card, forcing the U's to hold out for 87 minutes with just 10 men, which they achieved.

Coyne, though, escaped with a booking – that was the correct punishment, but it must have been frustrating for White!

Rowan Vine swung over the ensuing free kick and Kem Izzet's delicate header flashed only inches wide of the far post.

The U's were in front just a minute later. Andrews charged down the right flank and delivered a pinpoint cross for McGleish to stretch forward and head home into the bottom corner of the net.

Luton, despite some prolonged possession, made little headway during the early stages, albeit for Steve Howard's downward header from Sol Davis' cross which bounced off the turf for Simon Brown to gather under his bar.

Yet, the visitors took full advantage of a slice of luck to poach the equaliser in the 28th minute, thanks to Mansell's clinical finish.

Matthew Spring's rather wayward shot was hurtling well wide until it took a wicked deflection off Andy Myers. The



**WELL DONE:** Scott McGleish receives the plaudits from his team mates after putting Colchester in the lead

ball spun kindly into the path of right-midfielder Mansell, who kept his composure to beat Brown with a ferocious low drive into the far corner of the net. It was Mansell's third goal of the campaign.

United could have restored their lead before half-time.

Vine had a goalbound shot blocked by left-back Davis in the 36th minute, and shortly afterwards keeper Marlon Beresford had to improvise in palming away Andrews' stinging shot from an acute angle.

Goalscorer McGleish, the recipient of Andrews' excellent delivery, repaid the favour with an exquisite through ball in the 42nd minute. Andrews was away and clear, only to fire his shot straight at the onrushing Beresford, who blocked with his legs.

The first 20 minutes of the second period produced no goalmouth action, just a spate of fouls and offside – the U's

front-line were caught offside five times in a short space of time.

Craig Fagan did spring the offside trap in the 67th minute. Birmingham City loanee Fagan, in the starting line-up because of an injury to Karl Duguid in training on Christmas Day, chipped the ball over Beresford, who had advanced to the right edge of the penalty area.

But the ball rolled harmlessly across the face of goal, with Andrews unable to apply a finishing touch.

Manager Phil Parkinson replaced goalscorer McGleish with new recruit Jamie Cade in the 74th minute – it was only Cade's second appearance since his move from Middlesbrough in late November.

Seconds later and a comedy of errors almost led to a Colchester winner. Fagan's lob from a tight angle caused mayhem as back-tracking keeper Beresford collided with

his skipper Coyne at the near post.

The U's were queuing up to take advantage of the half-hearted clearance, but Thomas Pinault missed his kick and Izzet's effort was blocked.

Andrews, without a goal in seven matches, must have fancied his chances when Vine's shot ricocheted into his path in the 79th minute. Beresford was rapidly off his line to narrow the angle, and Andrews could not squeeze his toe-poked shot on target.

The luckless Andrews was thwarted again in the 83rd minute as he met Fagan's cross with an effort that Beresford pushed wide.

In fact, Beresford was a busy man late on. He fingertipped a rising header from Vine over the bar, and then showed good handling to catch a long range free kick by Liam Chilvers.

Substitute Cade was involved in a neat U's move, in the final minute of normal time, which

ended with Vine hooking a shot only a foot wide following Sam Stockley's cross.

Whereas a draw at Hartlepool, when down to 10 men, felt like a win, yesterday's stalemate felt more like a defeat.

But a point from each fixture keeps the U's in the promotion hunt, and ensures more excitement in 2004.

**Colchester:** Brown, Stockley, Myers, Chilvers, White, Pinault, Izzett, Fagan, Vine, Andrews, McGleish (Cade 74)

**Luton:** Beresford, Foley, Davis, Boyce, Coyne, Mansell (Holmes 88), Robinson, Spring, Brkovic, Howard, Forbes

**Referee:** J Ross (London)



**WELL HELD:** U's keeper Simon Brown gets the ball from the head of Steve Howard



**RUNNER:** Craig Fagan attacks the Luton defence



**LOAN STAR:** Liam Chilvers, on loan from Arsenal against Luton's Steve Howard