

No Mersey!

WALSALL 2 LUTON TOWN 0

**ANDY MacKENZIE reports
from the Bescot Stadium**

AFTER more than two months without a league defeat, Hatters crashed to their second loss in four days at Walsall last night.

Player-boss Paul Merson set the Saddlers on their way early on and was later named man-of-the-match. Substitute Matt Fryatt wrapped things up with a second 16 minutes from time in a fast-paced game in the Midlands.

Hatters made one change to the side that lost to Huddersfield on Saturday. Steve Robinson returned to the midfield after suspension in place of Michael Leary.

But on the bench, Gary McSheffrey was conspicuous by his absence having returned to Coventry to review his options following the end of his month loan spell at Luton.

Hatters had hoped to put the memories of their first league defeat behind them, but suffered the worst possible start, falling behind in the seventh minute.

Zigor Aranalde got behind Kevin Foley on the left and from his deep cross, Darren Wrack pulled the ball back for player-boss Merson to slide home from 14 yards.

Town rallied and Steve Howard controlled Foley's cross on his chest before hitting a rasp-

match facts

WALSALL: Joe Murphy, Zigor Aranalde, Simon Osborn, Nell Emblem, Michael Standing, Gary Birch, Jorge Leitao, Paul Merson, Darren Wrack, Mark Wright, Julian Bennett. **Subs:** Mark Paston, Ian Roper, Matt Fryatt, Daryl Taylor, Joe Broad. **LUTON:** Dino Seremet, Kevin Foley, Chris Coyne, Curtis Davies, Sol Davis, Ahmet Brkovic, Kevin Nicholls, Steve Robinson, Paul Underwood, Steve Howard, Rowan Vine. **Subs:** Rob Beckwith, Enoch Showunmi, Matthew Blinkhorn, Russ Perrett, Stephen O'Leary. **Referee:** Chris Foy (Merseyside). **Attendance:** 5,963.

ing drive from the edge of the area that had to be tipped over by Joe Murphy in the ninth minute. From Steve Robinson's resulting corner, Town's leading scorer then crashed his far-post header against the upright.

Rowan Vine and Robinson both tested Murphy again before the Saddlers almost stretched their lead in the 17th minute.

Michael Standing beat Robinson and Kevin Nicholls before setting up Gary Birch to curl just past the post from 18-yards.

Both sides produced some slick passing football in a flowing first 45 minutes, but it was Walsall who twice went close again within a minute just after the half-hour mark.

Firstly Merson played in Jorge Leitao, who crossed for

Birch to thump a header just over the bar from 10 yards. Then Mark Wright got free down the right and from his dangerous cross, Leitao just failed to convert at the near post.

Town's Ahmet Brkovic then robbed Standing eight minutes before half-time and played a one-two with Vine to run clean through, but ran out of pitch as he tried to round the keeper.

Vine was booked five minutes later for upending Julian Bennett after losing out on a chase for a long ball.

Brkovic picked up his sixth booking of the season nine minutes after the break for a foul on Simon Osborn and Bennett was then cautioned for a wild hack on Robinson three minutes later as the game lost its fluidity.

But Merson lifted the home crowd with a taste of his Arsenal days as he somehow danced between three Luton challenges and got to the by-line, only for Dino Seremet to cut out his centre just after the hour.

Howard then headed just over the bar a minute later from Foley's deep cross on the right as Town responded.

However, more Merson magic helped Walsall to their second goal in the 72nd minute when the former Gunner set up Wrack to cross for substitute Matt Fryatt to net with the help of a deflection off Foley.

Fryatt almost got his second and Walsall's third when he headed Standing's cross just wide two minutes later.



ON THE BALL! Steve Howard in the thick of the action at Bescot Stadium last night. His first-half header rapped the Walsall woodwork. Picture: GARETH OWEN