

Hungry Luton take the biscuit

HEART OF FOOTBALL



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AT KENILWORTH ROAD

WHOEVER told you the Age of Romance is dead should go to Kenilworth Road, Luton. If he can find it. Let me give urban orienteers a few tips. It's not signposted off the M1, the A5 or the A505, nor does it lead to a leafy Warwickshire town with a famous castle – so don't be fooled. To add to the intrigue, there is no indication once you've arrived that this is, in fact, a football stadium. You'll need your wits about you. Since 9,000 of us and a bus from Hull somehow managed to congregate in the same spot it seemed sensible to organise a kickabout. Hatters versus Tigers – or, as it turned out, Pussycats.

What followed belonged to a grander stage. A 1-0 scoreline didn't do it justice. Luton Town tore into Hull City as though they hadn't been fed for a week. Come to think of it, meal allowances are so tight at Kenilworth Road that my observation could be closer to the truth than you imagine. If media catering is anything to go by, anorexia may be just around the corner.

Still, it concentrates the mind. At times, Luton played more entertaining stuff than I've seen from Chelsea this season. If Mike Newell wins automatic promotion on a football ticket, it will not only be a lesson to all those Neanderthals who insist that kicking lumps out of people is the only way to progress, but also a vindication of everything Luton Town stand for. Hull City, on the other hand, have to go into serious detox if their challenge is to be maintained.

They haven't won in seven games now. If this is the way they've been playing I'm not

surprised. Their dreary, sterile football should have been severely punished. Nick Barmby occasionally moved like a man who has commanded the best part of £20 million in transfer fees but got nowhere. Andy Hessenthaler reminded me of Norman Wisdom, scurrying about with a permanently startled look on his 39-year-old face. The truth is that Peter Taylor may have spent too long in Sven-Goran Eriksson's company. Only poor finishing by Luton saved Hull from embarrassment.

Don't let anyone kid you, however, that the romance has gone out of football. Armed with a Bovril and a biscuit, I sensed it all around me. There were little Luton, so nearly ravaged by a greedy predator, only recently out of administration and without two groats to rub together, teaching the rest of the division how to play. What's more, they're doing it in a stadium that should have been condemned 30 years ago, for corporate boxes read beach huts. Above them, 40 feet of mesh is strung between metal poles to stop footballs demolishing chimney pots.

Not the least romantic element was the presence of Newell's father, Terry. Ignoring his specialist's advice, Newell senior made it to the game only weeks after major abdominal surgery. Said Mike: "He's never far from my side. It's been like this since I was a kid. Never intrusive but always there." Mind you, Terry had to wait. Steve Robinson left it until the 89th minute before skipping down the right touchline with menace. His cross was met beautifully by Ahmet Brkovic, who leapt higher than taller men to put Luton four points clear of Hull with 15 matches to go.

Apart from a change of biscuits, journalists have requested one thing of the board. When they finally build a new stadium, would they please install a steel pillar smack in front of the press box? It'll be like home from home.