

Boy wonder Theo

05/06

SOUTHAMPTON1
LUTON 0
 By NEIL ASHTON

HARRY Redknapp may be persona non grata in these parts, but Saints supporters might — just might — owe their departed manager a debt of gratitude.

Redknapp blooded Theo Walcott on the opening day of the season and the 16-year-old striker has since emerged as a beacon of hope amid the chaos and confusion on the South Coast.

With three goals before yesterday's visit of Luton, Walcott had an army of Premiership scouts scribbling in their notebooks with another superb strike yesterday.

He had no right to chase down Antti Niemi's wayward goal kick but, when he did, Walcott had only one thing on his mind when he spotted keeper Dean Brill off his line.

Walcott could easily have taken a touch but instead sent a looping 30-yard strike over Brill's head. It was just enough to give Southampton victory — their first since October — but Walcott barely had time for a pat on the back from caretaker manager Dave Bassett.

Still only 16, he was whisked to Television Centre last night for the BBC Sports Personality of the Year award. Incredibly, his stock is so high — even outside Southampton — that he was in the running for the junior award that was lifted by Wayne Rooney two years ago.

While talent is an increasingly rare commodity outside the Premiership, Bassett intends to mould his improving side around his young striker.

Bassett, unbeaten in two games since replacing Redknapp, said: 'His goal was of the highest quality, but I know what he's all about.'

'He's the quickest player I've ever worked with, but you have to remember he's still very young.'

'I don't give him any special treatment and sometimes we have to remember that he is a kid playing against senior professionals who know the game inside-out.'

His goal lifted the gloom at St Mary's and with the team three points off the play-offs after this narrow victory, there is a wave of optimism running through the club.

Saints chairman Rupert Lowe has some fairly hefty decisions to make this week and Bassett is causing him a bit of a headache.

Lowe favours the return of Glenn Hoddle as manager and, failing that, he would

Saints smiling again as Walcott steals the show

prefer the Sir Clive Woodward-Dennis Wise axis.

But Bassett intends to make life hard for him. He said: 'It's not a gun to the chairman's head, but Dennis Wise and me are not on trial. I've won promotion nine times in my career and Dennis has taken a team to a cup final, so I'd like to think we know what we're about.'

Suddenly, Saints are organised, disciplined and playing effective football. They bristled with confidence in the opening half, Walcott scored the winner, and then Saints

hustled their way towards the final whistle.

David Prutton was sent off late on for a second bookable offence — indicative of an approach that ruffled Luton manager Mike Newell.

'I'm not going to talk about that referee (Lee Probert) because he had me down at the FA once before with some concocted story,' he said.

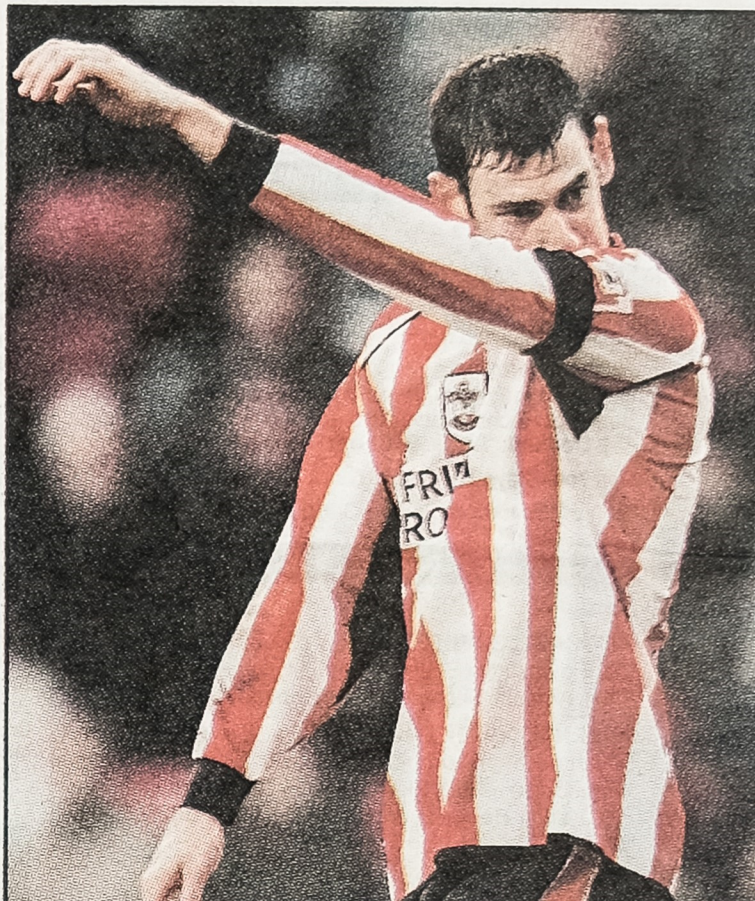
'Some referees know the game and some don't. It's no good stopping the game every 30 or 40 seconds.'

He did, and Luton then



Saint and sinners: cheers for Walcott (left) but Redknapp and Delap (below) had less to smile about

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CARLOS EDWARDS — Luton's left winger also plays for Trinidad and Tobago and should feature in Germany. But based on this performance, when he was substituted after 70 minutes, David Beckham and the lads do not have much to worry about.



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faced an equally interrupted journey home following the fire at the oil depot in Hertfordshire. At least Newell retained his sense of humour.

'As long as we're home before we play Stoke next weekend, I don't mind,' he quipped.

SOUTHAMPTON (4-4-2): Niemi; Delap, Kenton, Powell, Higginbotham; Kosowski (Baird 73), Oakley, Prutton, McCann; Walcott (Best 84), Jones (Cranie 70).

LUTON (4-4-2): Brill; Foley, Heikkinen, Coyne, Underwood; Brkovic, Nicholls, Robinson, Edwards (Holmes 68); Showumni (Vine 61), Howard.

Referee: Lee Probert.

Man of the match: Darren Powell.