

Walcott gives Bassett's prospects a lift

By Martin Smith

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AS A job application, that of Dave Bassett for the vacant Southampton managerial post has been solid, if unspectacular. Southampton have been unbeaten in the two matches since Harry Redknapp walked out, yesterday's win ending a month's worth of draws.

It moved Southampton to within three points of the Championship play-off places – Luton cling on to sixth position – and, just maybe, Bassett closer to taking over permanently. “The chairman [Rupert Lowe] said last week he would have a word with me after the Luton game,” Bassett said. “Yes, I would like a decision. Dennis [Wise, the player-coach] and me are not on trial. We are not kids. I’ve been a manager for over 1,000 games and Dennis has taken a team to the FA Cup final. We don’t want to be just jogging along, and that’s not wanting to put a gun to the chairman’s head.”

Southampton have drawn 13 of their 22 league matches this season, but Bassett said: “If we had drawn or lost I don’t think that would have made me any worse as a manager. And it doesn’t mean because we won I am a great manager, or that if we lost I would be useless.”

The fans are still reeling after Redknapp’s departure 10 days ago, and subsequent return to Portsmouth. What Southampton need now is a period of stability laced with consistently good results.

Their problem is scoring goals, though they might have found the answer in Theo Walcott, 16. The goal that increased Bassett’s immediate job credentials was a special one from one of the most precocious talents in the country. It looked fairly routine when Walcott received the ball on the left; Chris Coyne evidently thought so because he stood a yard



Unstoppable: Southampton teenager Theo Walcott, who scored a sublime goal, rides Markus Heikkinen's tackle

off the youngster with the intent of blocking any cross. Walcott, though, had looked up, spotted Dean Brill off his line, and lofted the ball perfectly over the goalkeeper’s head.

It was well-timed in more ways than one: hours later Walcott was at Television Centre as one of the nominations for Young Sports Personality of the Year. “He is a talent,” Bassett said. Comparing him with other youngsters he has managed in a 30-year career, he added: “He is certainly the quickest.”

The goal brought renewed cries of

“Who the **** is Harry Redknapp?”, yet it was the abused former manager who had nurtured Walcott. He is now joint top scorer with four.

Walcott is particularly sharp when on the shoulder of a defender: twice in the space of two minutes he was put beyond the Luton defence, the first time staying composed but shooting too close to Brill, the second sufficiently distracted by Markus Hakkinen’s presence to stumble at the point of shooting.

When he was replaced late on it was to a standing ovation from a

home crowd desperate for something positive to cheer.

Rory Delap was sent off in the 90th minute for two yellow cards, the second for clattering Rowan Vine. It left Southampton hanging on precariously. But they did it for Harry. ‘Harry’ Bassett, that is.

Southampton (4-4-2): Niemi; Delap, Kenton, Powell, Higginbotham; Kosowski (Baird 73), Prutton, Oakley, McCann; Walcott (Best 85), Jones (Cranie 90). **Subs:** Smith (g), Ormerod. **Goal:** Walcott (23). **Booked:** Delap, Niemi. **Sent off:** Delap. **Luton** (4-4-2): Brill; Foley, Coyne, Heikkinen, Underwood; Brkovic, Nicholls, Robinson, Edwards (Holmes 69); Howard, Showunmi (Vine 61). **Subs:** Beckwith (g), Barnett, Feeney. **Booked:** Heikkinen, Nicholls, Howard. **Referee:** L. Probert (Gloucestershire).