

Matchaction

Elvin King reports on Ipswich Town



ON THE BALL: Ipswich Town's Jay McEveley uses his head during this afternoon's clash with Luton at Kenilworth Road. Pictures: WARREN PAGE.

DEFEAT IS NO JOKE FOR

IT was no joke for Ipswich Town on April Fool's Day when they lost to a late Steve Howard header at Kenilworth Road.

It was a drab Championship encounter with chances few and far between – and Town paying for an unforced error by Castro Sito when he gave the ball away in the 81st minute.

Substitute Ahmet Brkovic crossed and Howard nodded home at the near post.

Marlon Beresford made a good save from Darren Currie in the first half, but Ipswich carried little weight in attack.

Their travelling fans deserved better and in the closing stages Luton could have added to their tally.

When Jimmy Juan was tackled from behind in the first half a penalty looked a certainty when the referee went to point to the spot. But he hesitated and then gave a corner.

Richard Naylor was back in the starting line-up after serving a two-match suspension and he was selected to play up front with Alan Lee.

Jay McEveley was another back in the side. It was his first return after suffering a serious knee injury at Cardiff in November.

The 21-year-old is being looked at by manager Joe Royle with a view to being taken on full time next season after being at Portman Road this campaign on a season-long loan from Blackburn.

Ipswich fielded arguably their strongest midfield, while there was no place on the bench for Scott Barron. Dean Bowditch,

Sito's error leaves the door open for Luton

Luton Town1
Ipswich Town0

back from a loan at Wycombe Wanderers was named one of the substitutes on a sunny day in Luton and at a ground Ipswich have not visited in the league for a decade.

Town made three changes with skipper Jim Magilton, Ian Westlake and Barron dropping out, with Naylor, McEveley and Jimmy Juan coming in.

Luton had dangerous frontrunners in Steve Howard and Dean Morgan. They began the season well after promotion last year, but have slipped recently and began the match behind Ipswich in the table.

Currie crossed from the right in a low key opening but it came to nothing, although he drew applause when later letting the ball run through his legs to reach Sito.

Two Luton players – Howard was the second – made heavy challenges on Sito in the space of seconds by the Town defensive right corner flag. The referee was in lenient mood and let both go.

Morgan had a free shot on goal after the ball had been pulled back to the 18-yard box, but he skewed his left-foot shot well wide.

Richards and Coyne needed treatment after a clash in the middle of the pitch and the Town man limped to the touchline and the dug-out area where Royle was sitting – an unusual occurrence as the Town boss regularly sits in the directors' box in the first period.

It looked as though Richards was going to have to go off when he went down for a second time. He was persuaded to go back on with Bowditch stripped down having taken off his tracksuit top.

McEveley was taking time to get adjusted to the pace in a game that he considered a bonus as he had prepared himself for reserve team football for the remainder of the season.

Richards appeared much happier now and in the 18th minute he played in Naylor to cross from the left by-line. The ball was cut out and Currie's corner was eventually cleared after a handball by Wilnis.

Royle is keen on bringing Fuller to Ipswich full-time next season after the Jamaican international impressed during his loan spell from Southampton last month.

But for today's game, it was Lee and Naylor battling away up front.

Lee made a lengthy run across the 18-yard box, but Naylor was not to be found when a low cross came into the middle.

In the 21st minute, De Vos found Naylor whose square pass was hammered

goalwards by Currie from 25-yards. Beresford needed to be alert to tip the shot over the bar.

Currie's four corners had come to nothing, with Ipswich having the majority of possession with the Town midfielder catching the eye with some good work.

This dilapidated ground does its best to survive in the rarefied atmosphere of the Championship for a Luton club whose ground is more suited to the Conference.

Supple was out quickly to dive at the feet of the raiding Foley, with Naylor now adding his weight to the visiting midfield and Lee ploughing a lone furrow up front.

Robinson was played through in the 28th minute and he got to the ball ahead of Supple.

But the Town keeper kept his eye on the ball and got his body in the way, making an impressive block in the first real chance of the match.

Then Supple saved bravely from Vine at close range, although the flag was up for offside.

Wilnis and De Vos, both celebrating signing new contracts, were competing well at the heart of the Ipswich defence.

Magilton was injured with a bruised foot while fellow midfielder Westlake is out for the rest of the season after suffering an ankle injury against Hull last Saturday.

The link-up between midfield and attack was not working well for the

visitors, with Beresford only having back passes to deal with and the willing Lee running into blind alleys.

Luton were little better and the standard of play was matching the facilities.

Howard had space in the 37th minute and drove towards goal, with Supple diving full length to his left to save comfortably.

In the 39th minute Ipswich looked as though they had won a penalty when the referee blew and motioned to the spot after Foley challenged Juan from behind after Lee had headed on.

But the official then swung away at the last moment and gave a corner.

He was surrounded by Town players but the referee was in no mood to change his mind.

Ipswich did not win in March and their last victory was at home to Leicester City on February 25.

But they had lost only twice in the league since December 28.

Currie was now operating on the left but there was little coming from Ipswich, although Richards did strike a 20-yard effort well following a corner – but it was blocked.

For the umpteenth time the ball was sent spiralling over one of the small stands.

Wilnis gave the ball away, but Heikkinen proceeded to give it straight back again.

After beating Luton 1-0 on New Year's

DANGER-MAN:

The Blues' Darren Currie clashes with Luton's Steve Howard, who went on to score the winning goal for the Hatters.



BATTLING BLUES

Eve through a Westlake goal, the Blues were seeking a double and a victory that would see them challenge East Anglian rivals Norwich, who began the afternoon on the same number of points.

But it had been a disappointing opening and both sides would want to improve after the break. Half-time:

Luton Town 0 Ipswich Town 0

Manager Royle had a lengthy word with the referee as he crossed the pitch to take up position in the dug-out – no doubt discussing Mr Mason's decision not to give Town a first half spot kick.

It is the same referee who incorrectly sent Sito off against Norwich at Portman Road this season.

Blues fans were in good voice and doing their best to get the most out of a drab afternoon.

Robinson was keeping a close eye on Garvan after Heikkinen had stifled the young midfielder in the opening period.

After 50 minutes Morgan cut inside Sito, but from a promising position he blasted well over the bar.

Within seconds a poor back-header by McEveley set Vine on a run for goal. He got to within six-yards before blasting the ball high into the side netting.

Royle hopes to keep Juan next season, but his parent club Monaco are showing a big interest in taking him back to France.

The Frenchman has been one of the successes of this season and he was back in the side after missing two

games because of a groin problem. His influence was minimal so far, although there was no denying his work rate.

Supple had to be awake in the 54th minute when Edwards found himself unmarked in front of goal and the ball at his feet.

Town's keeper dived to his left to save.

Almost immediately Richards went off to be replaced by Bowditch, the number 17's first Town appearance since the Hatters at home on New Year's Eve.

Bowditch took his place on the right of midfield and Town stepped up one gear with Juan having a shot that went wide after good work down the left by Currie.

Naylor and Currie then set up Lee for a shot that was easily saved – with Bowditch screaming for the ball as he ran into space.

Howard was the first player to be booked while Currie was waiting patiently to take a free kick from the right touch line.

In the 68th minute Davis was shown a yellow card after Bowditch was bowled over off the ball and the Town man was left on the ground.

Then it was Heikkinen who went into the book for a late tackle on Lee, which led to the referee getting stick from the home supporters in a game that still refused to flow.

England cricketer Monty Panesar was introduced to the crowd before kick-off and as a Luton lad he pledged his allegiance to the home side.

However, the young spinner would not have enjoyed much of what he was seeing as there was little sign of any Premiership pedigree by either side.

Beresford rose to collect yet another chip forward and when the ball was quickly transported downfield Sito had to come across and make an important tackle on Edwards.

Coyne summed up the day when he somehow miscued an attempted clearance high into the air and into touch. Lee livened up the visiting fans in the 74th minute when he created space and volleyed into the stand behind the goal.

Official figures showed there were 1,800 Town fans in the ground – an impressive number.

Naylor set up Garvan for a shot that was blocked before Luton brought on Feeney, Brkovic and Showunmi for Vine, Morgan and Heikkinen.

As the season draws to a close, Royle said that despite a disappointing league placing there had been a degree of success taking into account the loss of players during the summer and the injury situation that has hit the club all campaign.

"There have been so many plusses," said Royle.

But this game looked unlikely to be one of them when HOWARD headed home for Luton in the 81st minute.

Sito must take the blame for giving the ball away when he had time to clear by the right touchline.

The home side gained easy

possession and when Brkovic crossed unheeded, Howard was unmarked at the near post to nod beyond Supple.

Ipswich had not done enough to win, but neither had Luton to be honest and the home team would be grateful for Sito's mistake.

Brkovic was booked after Wilnis ended up on the floor with the referee's attention drawn by one of his assistants.

It looked like a punch may have been thrown and the substitute was perhaps lucky to stay on the field.

When Edwards crossed in the 86th minute, Howard headed over when it looked easier to score.

Haynes replaced Sito to add to the men up front seeking an equaliser with just three left at the back.

Supple made a great save from Howard as Luton ended on top.

Result:

Luton Town 1 Ipswich Town 0

Today's teams

Luton Town: Beresford; Foley, Coyne, Heikkinen, Davis; Edwards, Robinson, Perrett, Vine; Morgan, Howard. **Subs:** Brill, Feeney, Showunmi, Brkovic, Bell.

Ipswich Town: Supple, Sito, Wilnis, De Vos, McEveley; Currie, Juan, Garvan, Richards; Lee, Naylor. **Subs:** Price, Casement, Brekke-Skard, Bowditch, Haynes.

Referee: Mr L Mason (Lancashire).

Attendance: 9,820

Luton man of the match: Robinson. **Ipswich man of the match:** Supple.