

Honours end even in derby

MATCH HIGHLIGHT

The goal apart, when King cut in off the left and attacked the area before going so close to winning the game at the death.

MATCH MOAN

When Mackay's celebrations were curtailed by a marginal offside decision, even though a winner would not have been deserved.

ENTERTAINMENT VALUE

Lacked the edge of previous derbies but plenty of action for any neutral, if there was such a person inside Vicarage Road, to enjoy.

BOOKINGS

36 Showunmi for a foul on Young
41 Howard for dissent
50 Heikkinen for a foul on Spring
90 King for dissent

MAN OF THE MATCH

Jay DeMerit. Producing an immense display of front foot defending and bravely putting his head where others might not.

MATCH MARKS

Peter Fincham rates the displays of the Watford players against Luton Town

6 **BEN FOSTER:** Produced an awesome save but had a few nervy moments as well.

7 **LLOYD DOYLEY:** Another terrific display. Showing his versatility at left back.

6 **MALKAY MCKAY:** Lacks pace but positionally he had a solid, unsubtle game.

8 **JAY DEMERIT:** Exceptional on the floor and in the air. Won some telling tackles.

6 **JORDAN STEWART:** Better than of late, but still makes me very nervous.

6 **CHRIS EAGLES:** Totally anonymous. Has the talent but not the application.

4 **MATTHEW SPRING:** Very disappointing. Looked lost against his old club.

5 **GAVIN MAHON:** Still not anywhere near his best but did improve.

5 **ASHLEY YOUNG:** Produced the odd flash but cut an isolated figure on the wing.

6 **DARIUS HENDERSON:** Received very little support from midfield and spent the majority of the game jumping to trap or flick on the hopeful punts from the back line.

8 **MARLON KING:** Where would we be without him? Another sublime finish.

6 **AL BANGURA:** Did a job and continues to show great promise.

5 **JAMES CHAMBERS:** Had a poor 25 minutes after coming off the bench.

MATCH REPORT

by ANTHONY MATTHEWS

Coca-Cola Championship
Sunday, April 9, 2006
at Vicarage Road



WATFORD

King 36

LUTON TOWN

Brkovic 73



(1) 1

(0) 1

THE nineteen-year wait for a local derby home league win continues but Watford fans will happily forego the opportunity of taking the Luton fans up on their sarcastic "we'll see you all next year" chant for a season of Premiership football.

Sunday's draw may have made the prospect of that being achieved through the automatic route remote, but the Hornets can now approach the four – probably six and potentially seven – remaining games of the season knowing a golden opportunity is there to be seized after guaranteeing their play-off place.

The end-of-season extravaganza means nothing unless you win it. Even so, it is still an achievement for a club that was supposed to be embroiled in a relegation battle to reach the play-offs, and to do so with matches to spare. Yet that accomplishment was not greeted with the acclaim one might have expected on Sunday.

Perhaps that was because a top-six finish has increasingly looked a foregone conclusion in recent weeks. Perhaps that was because the chances of automatic promotion diminished still further, or perhaps that was because Boothroyd narrowly failed to become the first manager since Graham Taylor to lead Watford to a long-awaited home victory over their rivals.

The truth probably lies somewhere between all three statements, but there is no doubt the post-match atmosphere would have been markedly different had it not been for a dubious offside decision when Malky Mackay thought he'd snatched the winner or a fine last-gasp save by Marlon Beresford to deny Marlon King. To that extent the Hornets were unfortunate not to beat Luton 2-1 for a second time this season but to suggest a victory was merited would be a tenuous argument at best.

The game may have lacked the edge, and certainly the hostility, of past

ADRIAN'S ANALYSIS

"WE never started for 30 minutes and we got punished for that "We allowed Luton to get the momentum and I think it was only a matter of time before they scored in that 30 minutes. Then in the last 15 we came back at it again and we scored – obviously it was disallowed – and Marlon Beresford had to make some terrific saves. But we cannot expect not to turn up for 30 minutes and win games so, again, it's down to us."

exchanges between the two clubs but there were enough signs in the first half to suggest what could happen if the Hatters were allowed to gain the upper hand.

Mike Newell's men looked particularly effective when they broke from, and through midfield and they forced the home defence into a couple of uncertain moments.

But once King had deftly lobbed Beresford to become the first striker, since Luther Blissett 21 years ago, to score 20 league goals in a season, Watford were in a position to assert themselves further.

A second goal before half-time would have helped in that regard, and Chris Eagles so nearly got it, but what happened to the players after the break is difficult to fathom.

The expectation was they would emerge for the second half and seek to cement their advantage but that only occasionally looked like happening before the 73rd minute. While it would be unfair to suggest Watford switched off completely, the high-energy, pressurising approach that has been so key to their campaign was temporarily and strangely absent.

Luton gradually took charge and following two close calls it was no real surprise when the visitors equalised with the latest entry in the Hornets' season-long catalogue of defensively poor goals.

Thankfully, Ahmet Brkovic's unmarked close-range effort did have the desired effect and there was only one team who looked like taking maximum points after that. But quite why Watford got themselves into such a position in a game where the stakes were so high can only be explained by those on the pitch.

Individually, some tried to lift their side but if one player summed up the inconsistent nature of the performance it was Foster.

The keeper's reaction block to keep out Showunmi's powerful half-volley was top drawer. However, his kicking was erratic and he survived one near heart-stopping moment in the first-half.

Credit Luton for doing their home-



Ashley Young manages to find a way past the sizeable frame of Luton's Enoch Showunmi during Sunday's derby draw at Vicarage Road.

Picture 14A5921: JANE PARR

work but, by the same token, their tactic of closing the on-loan keeper down was a distinct nod of acknowledgement to what a potent attacking weapon his long clearances can be.

The warning message was not heeded after Steve Howard charged down one Foster clearance and shortly before the break the keeper rapidly had to retreat towards his own goal when the ball cannoned back off Edwards.

In fairness to the 23-year-old, he had received Jordan Stewart's back-pass on his weaker foot but there has always been a nagging doubt that one day Foster would be caught out. Sunday was nearly such an occasion.

● To read more about how the game unfolded, log onto Match Reports on the Watford FC section of www.watfordobserver.co.uk.

MATCH VERDICT

A day of celebration had looked on the cards after King scored but instead of going for the jugular Watford withdrew onto the back foot and their opponents, who had already shown they could pose problems, gained heart and it was no surprise when they equalised. This spurred the Hornets back into life and while they went close and were also unfortunate not to score a late winner, it would still have been an injustice.

MATCH STATS



Watford v
Luton
Town
Sunday, April 9
at Vicarage Road



WATFORD SUBSTITUTES: Bangura and Chambers for Eagles and Stewart after 66 mins; Carlisle, McNamee and Chamberlain not used.

LUTON SUBSTITUTES: Barnett for Davis after 17 mins; Vine for Feeney after 68 mins; Morgan for Foley after 90 mins; Holmes and Brill not used.

CLEAR-CUT CHANCES: Watford 4 (King 2, Henderson 1, Young 1); Luton 2 (Robinson 1, Showunmi 1).

ASSISTS: Mahon.

WATFORD GOAL-ATTEMPTS BY: Young 5, King 3, Eagles 2, DeMerit 2, Henderson 1, Bangura 1.

REFEREE: Mike Dean (Wirral, Merseyside). A top-class display by this season's FA Cup Final referee. No complaints with any of the bookings and he showed his quality in one first-half incident when Eagles was clattered into by Barnett. The official played advantage and then waited for a natural stoppage in play before calling the substitute over.

6	Offside	4
11	On target	9
3	Off target	5
5	Corners	5
11	Fouls	18
45%	Share of play	55%

CONDITIONS: Dry, overcast with sunny spells but cold.

ATTENDANCE: 15,922 (Luton contingent 2,273. Two Luton arrests, one for a public order offence and one for trying to enter the stadium whilst drunk).

DESERVED RESULT: A draw.

