

IT'S HATS OFF

Irish strike pair team up to sink Luton

**Sunderland
Luton Town**

**2
1**

SUNDERLAND: Fulop, Whitehead, D Collins, Caldwell, Varga, S Elliott, Kavanagh, L Miller, Wallace, Connolly, Murphy. Subs: Carson, Nyatanga, Leadbitter, R Elliott, Yorke.

LUTON: Kiely, Foley, Emanuel, Heikkinen, Barnett, Edwards, Brkovic, Robinson, Bell, Morgan, Vine. Subs: Beresford, Perrett, Feeney, Boyd, Langley.

Referee: A Penn (West Midlands).

GRAEME ANDERSON reports from the Stadium of Light



NEW signing Marton Fulop was handed a debut today as Sunderland made three changes to the side which beat Norwich City at the Stadium of Light last weekend.

The Hungarian keeper was handed the first-team gloves after regular stopper Darren Ward succumbed to a bout of flu.

Returning to the team from suspension was Stan Varga, who took up his usual place in the heart of the defence, with Danny Collins moving over to left-back at the expense of Lewin Nyatanga.

And the other change was the reintroduction of David Connolly alongside Daryl Murphy up front as Sunderland switched back to a 4-4-2 formation. Grant Leadbitter made way, with Stephen Elliott maintaining his slot wide on the right.

Luton, predictably, were unchanged from the side which toppled leaders Preston last Saturday. Hatters boss Mike Newell included, on the the substitutes' bench, ex-Hartlepool striker Adam Boyd.

The floodlights were on from the start, although there wasn't a cloud in the sky on a chilly December afternoon.

Luton launched the first attack within 60 seconds of kick-off when right-back Kevin Foley put in a great cross which went all the way through the Sunderland penalty area.

Sunderland produced a carbon copy move in the next minute when Murphy put in a similarly dangerous cross from the left wing, but Luton headed clear.

The first shot came in the third minute when Elliott fired wastefully over the bar and, from the next attack, Luton took an early lead.

Luton striker Dean Morgan received the ball on the right of the Sunderland area and got in a shot which Fulop looked to have covered, but Varga slid in to clear the ball out.

Unfortunately for the hosts, it went straight back to the feet of MORGAN 15 yards out and he stroked a quickfire shot across Fulop and into the bottom right-hand corner of the keeper's net.

Sunderland strove to get quickly back into the game and, in the seventh minute, Graham Kavanagh crashed a first-time left-foot shot narrowly wide of Dean Kiely's left stanchion.

For a minute it looked as though Luton would regain the initiative, but Sunderland levelled in the tenth minute when Murphy scored a goal out of nothing.

The Irishman challenged for a long



ON TOP: Sunderland striker David Connolly (above) fires in a shot against Luton today, while Graham Kavanagh (left) receives treatment.

ball forward which centre-half Leon Barnett looked to have got to.

But Murphy got something on it and was able to go past the defender and zero in on goal from the left. Kiely came out towards the striker, but MURPHY lifted his shot over the experienced keeper and high into the net to bring Sunderland level.

The minutes that followed were played at hectic pace and, within 60 seconds of Sunderland taking the lead, Barnett almost put Luton ahead again when he headed just over Fulop's bar from a goal-mouth scramble.

There was further concern for Sunderland in the 14th minute when Luton earned a free-kick on the very edge of the Black Cats' area. Morgan, who had been fouled in the first place, stepped up to take the free-kick from left of goal and curled it narrowly over Fulop's bar.

But Luton really should have taken the lead again in the 16th minute when a long ball forward from the visitors' half found the Hatters' leading striker, Rowan Vine, getting ahead of Varga.

He sprinted forward in a straight one on one with keeper Fulop in two minds whether to stay or go, but eventually the Hungarian came out and did just enough to put the striker off and the eventual shot, which was lifted over the keeper, drifted just wide of the target.

Sunderland responded by winning a free-kick on the right-hand edge of Luton's area when Barnett leap-frogged on to the back of Murphy.

Winger Ross Wallace took the dead ball, firing it into the near post where Murphy cleverly lifted the ball goalwards,

but just over the bar.

It had been as fast and furious a start to the game at the Stadium of Light as fans had seen all season and midway through the first half it showed no sign of letting up.

Slick inter-play between Dean Whitehead and David Connolly saw Sunderland break on the visitors and the midfielder twice crossed into the danger area, only for Luton to hold firm.

The Sunderland goal lived dangerously in the 26th minute when Carlos Edwards' trickery down the right flank saw the former Wrexham midfielder put in a great cross but was unable to find a team mate who could apply a firm enough touch to put the ball home.

Just before the half hour, Sunderland midfielder Kavanagh went down under a challenge and it was immediately clear that he was in some distress.

Luton earned the boos of the crowd for playing on, but, when the move petered out, the Irish midfielder received lengthy treatment before being able to continue.

On the resumption, Sunderland looked the more promising side, even though Kavanagh was moving gingerly.

In the 33rd minute, Connolly got into the area on the left and tried to set up Elliott for a shot, but the Irishman was squeezed out as Sunderland continued to enjoy the upper hand.

A minute later, Sunderland came close to taking the lead for the first time when Kiely could only parry a Murphy snap-shot. Connolly, following it up, brought out another save from the keeper, although the flag had gone up for offside.

Good control by Murphy in the 37th

minute set up a chance for Elliott, who swivelled onto a left-foot shot but it lacked power and Kiely was able to collect.

Referee Andy Penn had words with Luton skipper Steve Robinson for a rough challenge on Kavanagh a minute later, but, from the resulting free-kick, Sunderland could make no progress.

Sunderland peppered the Luton goal with some great crosses from the right in the minutes that followed, but Luton survived through luck and judgement.

Luton found a breakaway move in the 42nd minute, but the shot, when it came, from Vine was rushed, and ballooned well over.

The half ended at the same break-neck pace as it had begun and, in the 45th minute, Luton earned a free-kick 25 yards out on the right of goal.

Midfielder David Bell struck a powerful, low shot goalwards, but Fulop was equal to the challenge at his near post.

Sunderland immediately countered and Connolly went ever so close to scoring when he dragged the ball wide of goal and attempted to slot his shot under Kiely from the right – the keeper doing just enough to block the ball out for a corner.

Luton defended the ball in from the right comfortably enough, but they were soon under pressure again and, in the three minutes' time added on, Connolly earned a corner from the left which put the visitors under more pressure.

It was the last attack of a thoroughly entertaining first half in which both teams had been positive in going for goal.

HT: Sunderland 1 Luton Town 1

TO CONNOLLY



THE EQUALISER: Sunderland striker Daryl Murphy pounces to score the Black Cats' leveller against Luton today. Pictures by Kevin Brady.

Both sides resumed unchanged for the second half, Luton showing first in front of goal and earning a corner from the left in the 46th minute.

David Bell delivered the ball into the middle from the left, but Sunderland's 6ft 5in keeper plucked it comfortably from the air.

Gradually, the Wearsiders got themselves into the game and when Murphy lifted a cross high into the North Stand after some initially very good work in the 51st minute, Sunderland were threatening to dominate.

They made their possession count in the 53rd minute, taking the lead for the first time with a goal from nothing.

A goalmouth scramble saw the ball bouncing in the Luton box and **CONNOLLY** was coolness personified on the ball, swivelling and driving home a low shot from 15 yards out on the right of goal.

Keeper Dean Kiely might have been unsighted but he stood little chance as the shot flashed across him.

Sunderland came close to extending their lead a couple of minutes later when Wallace released Elliott down the right with a wonderfully weighted pass and the Irishman's eventual pull back to Connolly saw the striker curl a first-time shot towards the keeper's top left-hand corner, only for Kiely to clip it clear with a left-hand block.

It was a fine piece of goalkeeping and, in direct contrast to Fulop a minute later, when the Hungarian dangerously fumbled a left wing cross with not a Luton player near him.

The ball dropped at the feet of a Luton player, but defender Steve Caldwell was in like a flash to make a clearance.

Just before the hour mark, Sunderland

GOAL LINES	
Morgan (Luton Town)	5
MURPHY (Sunderland)	10
CONNOLLY (Sunderland)	53

should have doubled their advantage when Connolly made ground down the right and put in a great cross for the head of Wallace eight yards out.

The winger was right in the centre of goal and virtually unmarked, but he did not get his angles right and, in stretching up and backwards for the ball, succeeded only in heading it over the bar.

Just the other side of the hour, it was Kavanagh's turn to squander an opportunity, the ball reaching him on the edge of the area unmarked but he fired well wide of the target.

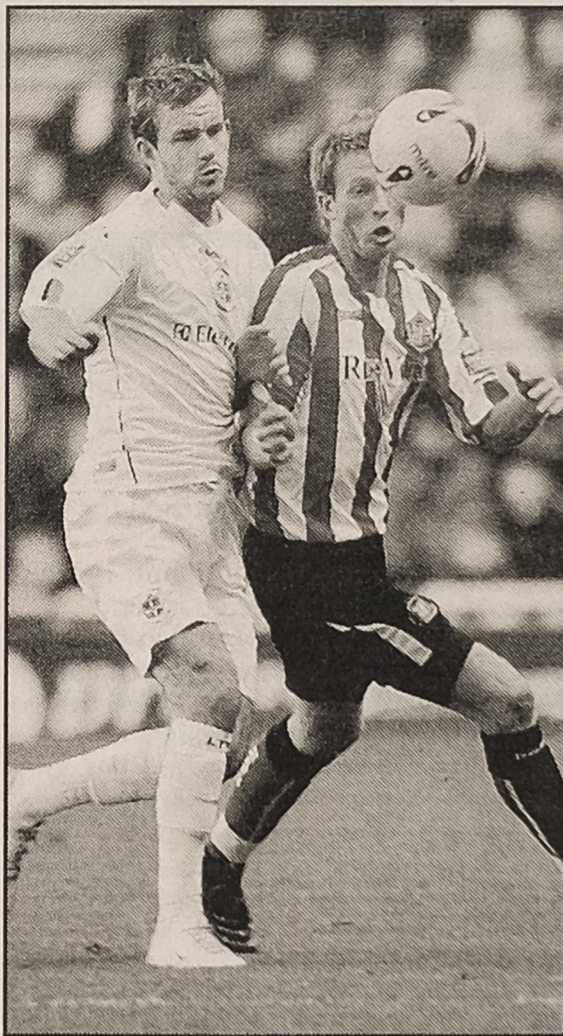
Luton went close on 62 minutes, but Vine headed a pacy right-wing cross just wide of Fulop's left-hand post.

Sunderland were guilty of conceding possession too easily in the minutes that followed and inviting pressure upon themselves, but they earned respite in the 67th minute, making use of the pace of Elliott to have Luton on the back foot briefly.

In the 71st minute, Elliott was sandwiched between two Luton players to give Sunderland a free-kick 30 yards from goal on the right. Kavanagh lifted the ball over the wall and found the target, but Kiely watched it coming all the way.

It was a rare break amid what was near-constant pressure from the visitors.

With less than quarter of an hour remaining, Luton won a free-kick on the right of goal, 25 yards out, with the Hatters taking advantage of the break in play to make two substitutions, Boyd and Warren Feeney coming on for goalscorer



NO DANGER: Sunderland defender Danny Collins holds off an attacker. Morgan and Vine as Luton boss Mike Newell looked to change things around up front.

Sunderland responded by making a change of their own in the 77th minute, Leadbitter coming on for Connolly.

The substitute came on during a break of play in which Varga was treated for a facial injury which had blood streaming down his face, possibly from a broken

nose, and required a change of shirt.

While the giant Slovakian was off the field of play, Luton earned two corners from the right, both taken by Bell. From the second one, the visitors were just a few inches away from bringing the scores level, Ahmet Brkovic timing his run into the box to perfection but heading the ball inches over Fulop's bar.

Varga returned in the 81st minute and watched Elliott earn a free-kick for Sunderland on the right 12 yards out from the corner flag. But the angled ball to the near post was to no effect.

In the 86th minute, Sunderland again came under sustained pressure, but this time Luton managed to get a shot in, substitute Feeney driving a shot high over the bar from a cross from the right.

The crowd must have been chewing their fingernails towards the end of the game as Sunderland held on before Leadbitter did some excellent work up the right and earned his team a free-kick from which the Wearsiders found themselves under attack after their efforts to waste time proved unsuccessful.

With full-time showing on the board, the referee flashed up three minutes' extra time and during that spell Luton won a corner which Varga glanced clear and Elliott hoofed upfield.

Sunderland, though, successfully wound the clock down and there was just enough time for Brkovic to earn himself the only booking of the game before the whistle blew on a thrilling home victory – the hosts' fourth in five games.

FT: Sunderland 2 Luton Town 1
Attendance: 30,445

★ John Collins suffered his first defeat as Hibs manager as Rangers romped to a 3-0 SPL win, thanks to goals from Dado Prso, Libor Sionko and Barry Ferguson.