

PENALTY 'NO' MAY SEND LUTON DOWN

74/75

WHILE Luton manager Harry Haslam stubbornly refuses to accept that his side is doomed to relegation, other onlookers surely see Luton back in the Second Division next season. If Mr Haslam can get the Town out of this we'll dub him Harry Houdini.

Luton chucked away their prospects of survival in 45 inept, slithery, sodden minutes in the first half. During that time Coventry looked about two divisions better in speed, application and ideas.

They fully deserved their two-goal lead at half-time that surely condemned Luton to the gallows of relegation. They have been standing on the trap door all season, but this three-quarters of an hour put the rope round their neck.

Leicester, third from bottom, won their re-arranged fixture against Manchester City on Saturday, and are now three points clear of Luton with a game in hand.

If only two clubs were to be relegated Luton might just escape, but the foot-of-the-table odds now looked stacked against them.

Embarrassment

If they lose at Carlisle next week they could suffer the embarrassment of going down as bottom club. If they win they could do themselves a lot of good, as Leicester have to travel to Coventry and Spurs, also in deep trouble, go to Middlesbrough.

Luton have not been the same since the hiatus caused by the rearranged Everton fixture. That blank Saturday seemed to knock them out of their stride. Their rhythm has gone. I fear it may now be too late to get back into step.

After the match Mr Haslam managed to keep smiling. "What's the good of crying?" he said. "We were bad, but I still don't accept that our cause is beyond redemption. I can't."

"What would the lads think if I wrote them off? They are keeping their heads up and I must do the same."

The game was played on a disgrace of a pitch that was a mixture between quicksand and a paddy field. "It's as bad as Derby's," growled Mr Haslam. "If we played Derby every week we might both be top of the League."

The pitch, in fact, was one of the causes of Luton's downfall. Coventry's nippy little forwards seemed to skate over the mud and make better use

By **ROGER DUCKWORTH**

Luton Town 1,
Coventry City 3

of the grassy wings. In the first half Luton seemed trapped in the ooze.

In the second half they made better use of Aston out on the left, and they almost salvaged a point — and their pride.

Jimmy Ryan laid on a good cross and Aston scored a gutsy goal. Alston had just shot wide after Anderson looked certain to score.

To my mind the turning point of the game came after Luton had been refused an obvious penalty. Ron Futchler steamed into the area with little Willie Carr hanging on to his shirt like a drag anchor.

But for this encumbrance Futchler could hardly have failed to score. Referee Harold Davey, a Nottinghamshire joiner, could well have knocked the final nail in Luton's coffin by his extraordinary decision. As far as Luton were concerned, it was the refereeing boob of the season. Mr Davey cannot criticise the angry abuse hurled his way from the terraces.

Even Coventry manager Joe Mercer thought it should have been a penalty. "Harry Haslam thought it was a penalty, I thought it was a penalty, the crowd thought it was a penalty and both lots of players thought it was a penalty," he said. "It was only the referee who didn't think so."

Trailing by two fine Anderson goals to Aston's effort, Luton hurled themselves forward in a last do or die attempt to make something of their future. Their zest proved their undoing.

A long ball out of defence by

Carr sent man of the match Alan Green chasing into Luton's sparsely populated half. He rounded Faulkner, dribbled round a stop-start Horn and beat Buckley before scoring a brilliant solo goal.

It might never have happened had Horn not stuttered in his decision to race out of the box to clear. His moment's indecision gave Green the edge he needed.

Horn, it must be said, did well on other occasions, and had no chance with the first two goals, both struck firmly from well inside the penalty box.

LUTON TOWN: Horn, John Ryan, Buckley, Anderson, Faulkner, Paul Futchler, Jim Ryan, Alston, Ron Futchler, West, Aston. Sub: Husband.

COVENTRY: Ramsbottom, Oakey, Cattlin, Cartwright, Craven, Dugdale, Carr, Alderson, Ferguson, Green, Hutchison. Sub: Holmes.