

Pleat refuses to throw in towel

LUTON have a gigantic mountain to climb in tomorrow's Football League Cup first round second leg tie against Gillingham at Kenilworth Road.

Their chances of success look as slim as a cigarette paper — but manager David Pleat refused to throw in the towel after Saturday's humiliating and embarrassing 3-0 defeat in Kent in the first leg.

Pleat's team, valued at over £3 million including Orient's valuation of £350,000 on Tony Grealish — were rarely in the game and were finally fortunate to be beaten by only three goals.

It was a demoralising and bitter exercise for the Town and they face tomorrow's match knowing that only a repetition of last season's decent home form will give them any hope of salvaging a place in the second round draw.

"It is fortunate we have another crack at them," said a disappointed Pleat after the game.

"We couldn't have wished for a bigger test at the start of the season and their late third goal really killed us.

Professional

"A two-goal defeat wouldn't have been so bad, but we are optimists and we realise we must reproduce last season's home form to force at least a replay on Tuesday.

"We knew Gillingham were a good team and certainly didn't come here to play for a draw in the first leg. We didn't under-estimate them but I admit we face problems in the second leg."

So Luton face elimination from a major cup competition before they have kicked a ball in their domestic Second Division programme, and it's going to take more than an average performance to get them through.

Two thoroughly professional goals and a penalty produced the Town's downfall as Gillingham, who missed promotion to the Second Division last season by only one point, showed all the nice touches.

In fact, a neutral supporter could easily have been forgiven for thinking Gillingham were the Second Division team and, although the Town did manage to carve a

LUTON ANALYSIS ■ ERIC HARRIS

couple of rare openings, there was a distinct and disturbing lack of powerful finishing — a deficiency Pleat accepted and recognised after the match.

There was little method in Luton's approach work and they were generally outplayed by opponents who preferred to mark tightly throughout the match to cut out the few threats the Town posed.

It's worth recording that Luton failed to win a corner compared with Gillingham's seven.

Only keeper Jake Findlay and right back Kirk Stephens came out of the game with any credit from the Town's point of view.

Findlay had no chance with any of the three goals, but showed his supreme command of the area with confident catching.

A sign of what was to follow came after only three minutes, when Gillingham's Ken Price had a fierce shot headed away following a free kick and, a minute later, Danny Westwood shot wide after a terrible back pass from Mal Donaghy.

With eight minutes gone, Luton were in trouble — and a goal down.

Damien Richardson's low corner eluded Luton's defence and Ken Price turned quickly and, with the minimum of effort, smartly cracked the ball past Findlay.

The Town's first serious threat came two minutes later, when Ricky Hill and Stephens combined to create a half chance which ended when Stephens's cross was wide.

Gillingham's third corner, in the 12th minute, almost produced a second goal when John Overton just failed to connect with a header when he was well placed to score.

During this period, it was obvious the Town faced a huge fight.

After Paul Price had headed David Moss's cross over the top, Gillingham struck again in the 24th minute to virtually kill any hopes the Town had of getting back into the game.

Mark Aizlewood and Richardson tussled for a high cross in another indication of Gillingham's penetration power.

The battle for the ball ended with Aizlewood quite rightly being penalised for a foul in the box and Mick Barker made a mere formality of sending Findlay the wrong way with his penalty.

Bob Hatton, Tony Grealish and Stephens gave Gillingham a temporary fright with long, speculative efforts — but it was nowhere near enough to suggest the Town could pull anything out of their empty bag.

Two minutes from the end, it was all over for the Town. A delightful penetrating cross from Richardson found Ken Price, who took the opportunity to knock in his second by easily beating the advancing Findlay.

It all hinges on attitudes tomorrow night.

Three goals for a replay — and four to go through at the first attempt — seems a mighty tall order for any team.

But, to coin a cliché, cup football is a funny old thing, and, while a betting man may not put his money on Luton's chances, memories of those high scoring home games during the early part of last season could still give the Town's fans something to shout about at 9.10 tomorrow evening.



■ Flying high ... Brian Stein (left) in take off action



■ Poised for the centre ... that's David Moss



■ Mal Donaghy takes on the Gillingham defence

MATCH DETAILS

Gillingham: Hillyard, Sharpe, Barker, Overton, Weatherly, Crabbe, Nicholl, Bruce, Price (K), Westwood (Funnell), Richardson.

Luton: Findlay, Stephens, Aizlewood, Grealish, Saxby, Price (P), Hill, Donaghy, Stein, Hatton, Moss. Sub: Birchinnall.

Referee: G. Napthine (Loughborough).

Goals: Price (K) 8 and 88. Barker (pen) 24.

Attendance: 6,222.

Bookings: Bruce (foul on Stephens), Moss (foul on Sharpe).



■ There's no way through as Bob Hatton (centre) is denied a shot at goal

■ Luton pictures by COLIN BOWERMAN