

LAST-GASP WINNER ENDS THE WORRIES

REPORT by BRIAN SWAIN
PICTURES: MARK RICHARDS

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IT WAS a case of "Thank you and I love you all" as Luton Town manager David Pleat welcomed the happy end to a sad run when Notts County were beaten by a last-minute goal at Kenilworth Road.

Their first win in eight attempts shot the Town to safety in the First Division, and ended the relegation worries for another year.

County, basic but willing, and another club destined to struggle with poor resources, went home cursing the fates that had kicked them when they were down.

They scored first, against the run of play, picked themselves up to equalise five minutes from time, then saw a point snatched away when Frank Bunn's 20-yard winner settled it.

The result tended to swamp all else for an anxious club and their supporters, and even if Luton Town still have a problem or two to solve in the summer this week is a time for being grateful for continued survival.

Mr Pleat scarcely knew who to thank first for the result that lifted the pressure off him for the time being.

Bunn for his goal, teenager Garry Parker for his contribution as Ricky Hill's deputy, the groundsman for producing a level surface, young players who have been thrown into the action in recent weeks, and even the dwindling band of supporters all earned the manager's gratitude.

The attendance slumped again, but those who did turn up helped to keep the Town going when they were struggling to find the extra touch that would see off County.

"After losing four on the trot it can be an intimidating experience unless the crowd gets behind you," said the manager. "Today they helped us as much as they could."

County's general manager Jimmy Sirrell, always dour and offended by defeat, thought his team was unlucky. "We deserved to get a point," he said.

It was the end of an unbeaten run of seven games for his team, and probably also the end of their hopes of staying in the First Division.

They had a basic but effective approach to their task: defend in depth, hold a line on the edge of the penalty area, and try to counter-attack at speed.

In John Chiedozie they had the best attacker on view to make that policy work. As early as the tenth minute a long clearance set him free and his pace put him clear. He ought to have scored, but Les Sealey produced the save that may turn out to be the season's most important. His dive tipped Chiedozie's drive round the

post to ensure that County were denied the early lead they might have sat on.

The Town had plenty of possession, even if they were prone to misplace passes when it mattered, but David Moss's availability on the flank helped make them look the better team.

Brian Stein was even more dangerous when he veered off down the right wing, and after an undistinguished first half the Town looked more like their old selves after the interval.

They had much the best of the second half, with Mick Leonard saving from Stein and Bunn to keep County alive, and Martin O'Neill driving narrowly wide at the other end when Sealey conceded a free kick for punching clear outside the area.

It was completely against the run of play when County scored, Trevor Christie getting free to meet Ian McParland's cross in the 68th minute.

Brian Horton took it as a personal insult, because he had lost out to McParland to make the goal possible, and the Town skipper made sure all his men redoubled their efforts to prevent a defeat which could have been disastrous.

Within a minute Stein had tricked his way down to the by-line on the right and crossed hard and low for Moss to score the equaliser, his first goal since his return after injury.

Leonard made a marvellous reflex save to keep out a flick from Paul Walsh, but the Town went ahead in the 79th minute when Ken Armstrong, towering above Stein, shoved the striker to concede a penalty from which Horton scored, four minutes after Moss had limped off with a groin strain.

It looked like the decider, but in the 85th minute Leonard punted a clearance downfield, Paul Elliott's header deflected the ball into Chiedozie's path, and Clive Goodyear, deputising for the suspended Mal Donaghy, had no hope of catching Chiedozie. He sprinted clear and hammered his shot past Sealey.

County seemed to have snatched a point they had not deserved, but Horton drove the Town forward again in the final minute, and from a poor clearance Bunn hit the decisive goal.

The home supporters who had stayed raised the loudest sigh of relief Kenilworth Road is likely to hear for a long time. They were as grateful for the three points as David Pleat was.



● YOU DARLING: Paul Walsh leads the celebrations after seeing Bunn earn the Town team an overdue win bonus.

● LEFT: The start of the revival—David Moss places the equaliser into the County net for his first goal since his five-month injury lay-off.

Match Details

LUTON TOWN 3 NOTTS COUNTY 2
Half-time: 0-0

TOWN: Sealey; Stephens, Elliott, Goodyear, Thomas; Parker, Horton, Bunn; Stein, Walsh, Moss (Antie, 75 mins).

COUNTY: Leonard; Hodson, Richards, Armstrong, Clarke; Hunt, O'Neill, Mair, McParland (Harkouk, 75 mins); Chiedozie, Christie.

THE GOALS: Trevor Chitie for County, 68 mins; David Moss for the Town, 69 mins; Brian Horton penalty for the Town, 79 mins; John Chiedozie for County, 85 mins; Frank Bunn for the Town, 89 mins.

OTHER STRIKES AT GOAL: Town five saved and four wide; County two saved four wide. Corners: 10-4 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 8,181. Believed to be the Town's lowest ever in the First Division. Certainly the lowest gate since October 1980.

REFEREE: John Martin, Alton — always on the ball and County had no complaints about bookings for Clarke (handball) and Hunt (dissent).

ENTERTAINMENT: Improved dramatically in the last 22 minutes when the goals started flowing.