

NOW IT'S A BATTLE AGAINST THE ODDS

88/89

By Brian Swain

WITH TWO MORE home points going down the drain against a Coventry side that hardly stirred itself until hit by a goal, Luton Town now know they are in a real dogfight to avoid the drop into the Second Division.

Yet you had to feel sorry for a team that managed to concentrate on football skill when the temptation to go for desperation tactics must have been nearly overwhelming.

And not for the first time this season manager Ray Harford found himself disappointed with the result, but encouraged by the ability and style his men had shown.

He is still convinced that his team is too good to go down. But nine league games without a win, and only five matches to go, suggests that the odds are lengthening against him.

Yet the defiance stands up to examination. Coventry, having won twice on their three previous trips to the synthetic pitch, were second best for a long time. But they were not nailed when the Town established superiority, and then got the breaks to snatch two unlikely equalisers.

While scoring at one end is still a problem for the Town, the defence was once again suspect, with luckless Alec Chamberlain having an impressive debut until his 80th-minute impetuosity contributed to the end of the Town's victory hopes.

A perpetual reserve to Neville Southall at

ON A DAY WHEN tragedy was hitting hundreds of football fans at Hillsborough the failure of Luton Town to beat Coventry at home, to take three desperately needed points, was put into its true perspective.

What do points or prize pots matter compared to young supporters being killed following their club on the FA Cup trail?

If Luton Town are to be relegated those of us who thought that would be a tragedy have been given a cruel reminder of what the word really means

Everton, he got his delayed First Division debut in preference to Les Sealey. His colleagues wanted him to succeed on a day when the manager made another brave selection decision.

John Dreyer justified his recall at left back with the best performance I have yet seen from him, with a cracking first goal for the club thrown in.

Chamberlain did more than enough to show why Everton rated him so highly when they snatched him from Colchester, after more than 200 league games for the Essex club.

The third selection problem, replacing suspended Mick Harford, was not so easily solved. Raphael Meade ran and worked willingly, but neither he nor Roy Wegerle could find space in the penalty area to capitalise on some excellent work by midfielders Kingsley Black, David Preece, Ricky Hill and Danny Wilson.

The Town looked mobile and inventive, and always potent as they moved forward, but there was more threat than solid achievement. And that despite good attacking work by both full-backs. Coventry seemed content to be pressed back, and defended well, with Greg Downs and Graham Rodger keen to impress their manager - as they did - in the absence of first choice central defenders Brian Kilcline and Trevor Peake.

The visitors were content with the scoreless first 45 minutes. Their only shot in that period had been one by David Phillips which threatened to creep in at the far corner after Cyrille Regis tried to sell Chamberlain a dummy. The goalkeeper dived splendidly to save.

Steve Ogrizovic had been busier at the other end, but made a couple of routine saves and watched efforts by Wilson and Steve Foster fly off target.

Coventry looked more positive after the break, and three times went close to the first goal. Chamberlain did well to save Steve Sedgley's drive, but was then exposed when sub

Match details

LUTON TOWN 2
COVENTRY CITY 2

Half-time: 0-0

TOWN: Chamberlain; Breacker, Foster, Beaumont, Dreyer; Wilson, Hill, Preece, Black; Meade (Cooke, 74 mins), Wegerle. Other sub: McDonough.

COVENTRY: Ogrizovic; Borrows, Rodger, Downs, Dobson; Phillips, Emerson (Bannister, 45 mins), Sedgley, Smith; Speedie, Regis. Other sub: Clark.

THE GOALS: John Dreyer header, 54th minute, his first goal for the Town, from a corner by David Preece; Cyrille Regis for Coventry, 70th minute, deflection off Steve Foster beating Alec Chamberlain; Danny Wilson, for the Town, 75th minute, following up after Steve Ogrizovic had parried his penalty; David Smith for Coventry, 80th minute, header as he, David Beaumont and Chamberlain all went for the same ball.

OTHER STRIKES: Town five saved, including the penalty, and five wide; Coventry six saved and three wide. Corners: 9-3 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 8,610, the reliable hard core, 22,000 fewer than went to Wembley, but 1,000 more than for Coventry's visit last season.

REFEREE: Dennis Hedges, Oxford - got in the way a few times but handled the game pretty well.

ENTERTAINMENT: It would have been very good if we weren't so worried about needing points so desperately.



NEW BOY: Richard Cooke, who made his appearance as sub for Raphael Meade.

Gary Bannister beat the Town defence for pace. The goalkeeper denied Bannister with a spreading save, and from the rebound Tim Breacker cleared off the line from Phillips.

It was a jolt for the Town, but within two minutes they had responded to the challenge. Meade and Rodger went up for a high ball together, and the Town were convinced that the defender used a hand to knock the ball to safety. Referee Dennis Hedges gave a corner instead of a penalty, and justice was done. Preece's kick was met by Dreyer's thumping header, and with 54 minutes gone the Town seemed to be on their way to the victory they desperately needed.

Wilson and Black, supporting attack admirably, both went close, but Coventry had stirred themselves after the goal and with 20 minutes to go grabbed a lucky equaliser. Regis tried a potshot from 25 yards, the ball hit Foster, and the deflection was enough to leave Chamberlain helpless. Some called it an own goal, but the professionals put it down to Regis, his first for two months.

At that stage I worried that the Town might have suffered a psychological blow. They have had the feeling for some time now that luck has tended to favour the opposition almost every time, and the equaliser seemed to prove the point.

But they had the character to stick at their game. Richard Cooke went on as sub for Meade just in time to see the lead regained. Wilson, always a menace on runs down the right, got almost to the by-line to get in a cross which Dobson stopped with his hands. Wilson's penalty brought an amazing save by Ogrizovic, but for once the luck went the Town's way. From the goalkeeper's block the ball bounced to the one spot that mattered, back to Wilson, who lunched himself for a scissors kick volley to convert the rebound.

We had 15 minutes left at that stage, and once more Town hopes were sky high, only to be shattered in the 80th minute. Foster failed to get the ball forward with a clearance header, with David Speedie snapping at his heels. The ball fired skywards, Chamberlain decided it was his, and collided with David Beaumont, who was trying to head clear. From the pressbox it looked like an own goal off the Scot, but little David Smith was credited with the last touch - "a headed goal for Smith... a real novelty," said Coventry manager John Sillett later.

Dreyer almost snatched a late winner, but was short of connecting with Cooke's cross and the final whistle came all too quickly for a Town side that deserved more than it got.

Pictures by Josh Levy