

ESCAPE ROUTE OPENS UP

THE FIRST NUDGE on the relegation escape hatch which set up last night's lifesaver with Charlton was a dramatic Luton Town victory over Derby County on Saturday.

Mark Wright's foolishness in getting sent off two minutes from time made no difference to an encouraging Town performance which well deserved the overdue first league win in 11 attempts.

It may not have been the end of the survival battle, but after weeks of depression, the fans were at last given a reminder of what Luton Town can achieve in the First Division.

Even the cantankerous Peter Shilton could do nothing to stop the Town on a ground where he has some unhappy memories, including seven conceded when he was a Southampton player. This time he brought to Luton the best away record of any First Division goalkeeper, with only 12 goals conceded in 15 games, four of them in one match, at Wimbledon.

Eleven other teams had tried and failed to inflict away defeats on Derby, but there was no doubt the Town deserved to succeed where Spurs, Nottingham Forest and Manchester United, for instance, stumbled.

The only mystery was how the Town could be so superior, yet be fighting for their First Division lives. There was a purpose and determination running right through the side, with the bonus of an early goal to dissipate nerves.

The very presence of Shilton tends to cow many attacks, and it was ironic that the England goalkeeper should save a late penalty when it hardly mattered, having been beaten from the spot earlier.

Derby players went home saying they had failed to hit anything like their normal form as the Town completed the double over them. Town boss Ray Harford said the reason was simple: the Town worked too hard to allow Derby to play.

He made Mick Harford man of the match, and I agreed with that view. David Preece and Danny Wilson were my closest contenders, and how nice it is to see Preece on song again. Wilson's return to form could hardly have been better timed, and the fact that others were not at peak performance was a real burden. Every man put plenty of effort into a game the Town had to win, and their reward was a surge of confidence that ran the length of the pitch.

RARE SCARES

There were only a couple of scares for the defence, but Alec Chamberlain made the best save of the match to prevent Derby mounting any sort of revival when they were two down. Derby occasionally threatened to compete well in midfield, but had little forward thrust beyond the efforts by Dean Saunders to inject a little pace into the attack. His leap to try to catch Chamberlain off his line was a tip to perfection. The tip-over save was even better.

Steve Foster and David Beaumont left few holes down the middle. When they did, Paul Goddard headed weakly over the bar from a cross by Ted McMinn when he should have been a lot closer to equalising.

John Dreyer seems to have solved the left back problem and is settling into a pleasing reliable groove. With Tim Breacker also dependable on the other flank, it helps midfielders go forward with more confidence, and that was the key to supremacy over Derby.

The other was the psychological and physical power Mick Harford exerted. Shilton was reduced to appealing in vain for a foul when he was beaten in the air at the far post when the striker headed the Town's second goal in the 63rd minute, from a deep cross by Preece.

The powerful header ended the last traces of nerves as we worried about the Town's need to at least hold on to the one-goal lead they had established in the first 100 seconds.

The Town's first attack had cut Derby apart. Wilson began it, with Roy Wegerle finding space on the right to take the pass and then deliver a good cross. Harford rose well above Wright to knock the ball into the middle of the penalty area and Preece looked set to score his first goal for three years. Shilton dived at his feet and made the ritual protest gestures as referee John Carter of Christchurch awarded the penalty.

Mr. Carter was some way short of being the best ref I have ever seen, but few had any real doubt about his judgement on that occasion.

Wilson converted his fifth penalty of the season, and his ninth goal, and Derby's normal away game plan of defend in depth and hope for a quick break was ruined before it had chance to get into gear.

Breacker almost notched his first goal of the season with a searing drive at the end of a move he



SAVED: Shilton dives to prevent Mick Harford making it 4-0.

began in his own half. Wegerle held the ball intelligently while the full-back charged into the inside-right position, but Shilton flicked the drive over the bar.

For 20 minutes or so the Town were firing on all cylinders, with Ricky Hill and Kingsley Black playing a major role in midfield control. Hill's free kick gave Harford the chance to frighten Derby again, but the soaring leap sent the header flashing wide, and the same fate befell another, from a cross by Breacker.

The Town footballed Derby aside for a spell, with Goddard's miss the only interruption to a long period of attacking Shilton's goal. But Harford failed by inches to connect with a low cross by Black, and Wilson had a shot charged down after Shilton had been unable to stop Harford's headed pass being despatched.

Shilton was protesting yet again when Harford headed his tenth goal of the season. The England goalkeeper takes it as a personal insult every time the ball hits the net behind him. He also looks for scapegoats, and finding none on this occasion he declined to accept that he had been beaten by Harford's leap. He claimed a foul by the striker.

The scapegoat was obvious enough when Shilton was beaten for the third time. Geraint Williams played a suicidal back pass from outside the area, Black took it in his stride, and produced a cheeky

little shuffle to leave Shilton flat-footed before shooting past him. For a lad of 20, and perhaps suffering physically towards the end of his first demanding season, Black's expertise would have done credit to a Harford.

But there was not a lot wrong with Harford's penalty in the 88th minute after Michael Forsyth had been adjudged to have tripped Wegerle. Derby were sure there had been no contact, while the Town were just as certain there had. Goodness knows what possessed Wright to continue the argument so long. The game was as good as over, Derby's league position is safe, and the greenest apprentice knows that refs don't change their minds because players argue.

Wright was sent off, for the second time this season, and Shilton, having settled for a less protracted protest, composed himself and dived to his right to save the penalty entrusted to Harford because Wilson had gone off with a hamstring strain.

It was an excellent save, although there was a little suspicion that he had moved early. Shortly afterwards there was another, to deny Foster a goal as the Town ended the day's entertainment the way they had begun it. And Charlton's scout went home looking for a secret formula Wright and Co would dearly love to discover - how to stop Harford when he is given the right service

29.4.89

The match details

LUTON TOWN 3 DERBY COUNTY 0

TOWN: Chamberlain; Breacker, Foster, Beaumont, Dreyer; Wilson (Cooke, 77 mins), Hill, Preece, Black; Harford, Wegerle. Other sub: McDonough.

DERBY: Shilton; Blades, Wright, Hindmarch, Forsyth; Williams, McMinn, Hebbard (Cross, 76 mins), Micklewhite; Goddard (Gee, 76 mins), Saunders.

THE GOALS: Danny Wilson penalty, second minute; Mick Harford header, getting above Peter Shilton's outstretched arms, 63rd minute; Kingsley Black, punishing a woeful back pass by Geraint Williams, 82nd minute.

GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town seven saved, including a penalty, and eight wide; Derby five saved and four wide. Corners: 7-4 to the Town.

ATTENDANCE: 8,507, 3,000 more than Wimbledon had against Newcastle on the same day, and 1,600 more than for Derby's visit last season.

REFEREE: John Carter, Christchurch. Made some astonishing decisions and Derby were furious with him. The first penalty award looked right, another might have been given shortly afterwards but wasn't, and the second penalty was just a bad joke so far as Derby were concerned.

MADNESS: Derby arguments over the 88th-minute penalty, which hardly mattered in the context of the game, or of their season, led to skipper Mark Wright being sent off. What a Charlie! Ted McMinn wasn't much better, getting a yellow card for dissent and then chancing his arm with more chuntering later.

ENTERTAINMENT: Highly satisfying for the home supporters - the perfect response to the challenge the team was set to pull clear of the relegation zone. And the result was right.

3869

Reports: Brian Swain Pictures by Josh Levy



HANDY MAN: The England goalkeeper makes a save to deny Steve Foster a goal seconds after the late penalty incident.