

# Worries ease at United as they demolish Luton

89/90

THE PERILS of relegation have now cleared slightly from the millionaires of Manchester United, but they are more menacing than ever for little Luton Town.

Luton have never won here, and by coming as depleted through injuries as United, but having only youngsters to fill the breach, were simply overwhelmed before a crowd of 35,327 — 12,000 down on the opening attendance at Old Trafford. Such is the gloom of a frustrated season.

The warning was dire. "No doubt about it, we have to get this one won," Alex Ferguson had pronounced in the match programme. Their status thus threatened, United managed to play some sweet attacking football, interspersed with one dreadful error which almost gave the game away before Luton, very much a novice side, collapsed.

The error came in the 22nd minute from Pallister as he needlessly attempted to keep the ball from running out for a goal kick, turned and lost it to Black, virtually presenting an open goal to the visitors. Black nudged it across the face of an unguarded net but Dowie, from five yards, mis-hit it and the ball squirmed off the outside of his right boot wide of the far post.

Instantly United punished poor Dowie. They swept the length of the field and McClair, from 14 yards, was deadly accurate with his right-foot finish, as he has so often failed to be this season.

The difference, this, between a Scottish thoroughbred brought down from the Highlands for £850,000, and a man like Dowie who at 25 has been plucked out of non-League football. And that cool difference was even more apparent as the first half went on.

Indeed, even before the goal McClair, who had not scored in the League since October, showed stunning acceleration as he burst past James. The crowd was suddenly awoken to an astonishing roar, as if this were the Old Trafford of bygone days; and then McClair hesitated and his chance was lost in a tackle.

Hughes then demonstrated why he, too, is having such a fitful season. Martin carved out acres of space up the left, Wallace outpaced Breacker, but Hughes attempted to do too much on the ball, his first

## MANCHESTER UTD 4

(4-4-2): Leighton; Anderson, Pallister, Bruce, Martin; McClair, Phelan, Ince, Wallace (sub: Beardsmore 46min); Robins, Hughes.

## LUTON TOWN 1

(4-3-3): Chamberlain; Breacker, James, Dreyer, Harvey (sub: M Johnson 74min); Rees, Willson, Preece (sub: Cooke 77min); Nogan, Dowie, Black.

Goals: McClair (22min) 1-0; Hughes (32min) 2-0; Wallace (44min) 3-0; Robins (65min) 4-0; Black (79min) 4-1.  
Weather: blustery. Ground: soft.  
Referee: K Redfern (Whitley Bay).

by Rob Hughes

touch was wayward and he fluffed the chance.

Yet, with five players of 21 years old or under, with Jason Rees from Aberdare making his debut, Luton were clearly lacking in competitive guile. And so the deficit was doubled in the 32nd minute. A splendid goal, almost a classic. Martin, having a quite outstanding match, struck the ball left-footed high into the swirling wind. It travelled 35 yards from left to right, and there was McClair.

His chemistry is now right on song. He controlled it with a touch, he crossed it low and accurate into the feet of Hughes. And this time his partner was also spectacularly in fine fettle. Hughes controlled the ball with his left foot, allowed it to drop and volleyed it with the right way out of the reach of Chamberlain.

This was the first time since the opening day of the season that Hughes and McClair had both got on to United's scoresheet. But this is the exasperation that comes with Hughes: one moment he is trying to do too much, the next his finishing is positively world-class.

And now his fire was lit. He tried one of those Hughes



Black: consolation goal

spectaculars, a bicycle kick from the edge of the area which Chamberlain, the goalkeeper, athletically turned around a post. Now Anderson, the full-back, wanted a piece of the action: his header from a Wallace corner struck the outside of a post.

And in the last minute of the first half McClair once more instigated a United goal. He lobbed the ball into open space for Phelan on the right, and Phelan was able to exorcise an unhappy afternoon for him by delivering a perfect hard and low centre which Wallace tapped in at the far post.

Luton at least had moral courage. They dared to attack from the start with a 4-3-3 formation and, though it is 31 years since their last goal at Old Trafford, they sought one now from the debris of this defeat.

Nogan, another 19-year-old, deserved to have been the man to break that void when in the 60th minute he headed the ball cleanly over Leighton. Somehow, with elasticity that very few goalkeepers possess, Leighton was able to jack-knife and to palm the ball into his post.

Soon afterwards Leighton was dealt a concussive blow, colliding with both Dowie and Nogan. The stretcher was called for, but not needed, and straight from the free-kick United broke the length of the field to score their fourth. Ince gave the final pass, Robins came through and picked his spot with a left-foot shot. A youngster Robins may be, but one could almost hear the words of that old United prophet Matt Busby: "Do the simple thing, do it well, do it now."

Poor Luton. Not even their home advantages of a plastic pitch and a ban on away supporters may save them now. Their wretched luck was compounded in the 70th minute when Preece was taken off after a tackle by Ince, one more experienced Luton man out of the game. At last, the consolation: Rees outwitted Ince on the half-way line, but when the United player dived to handle the ball, the referee alertly waved play on, Dowie threaded the ball through the centre and Black superbly scored Luton's first goal here since 1959. A long wait, but too little too late.