

Nine-man Spurs saved by Stewart

IT WAS the festive season at White Hart Lane. It had to be with some Spurs fans daring to wear Christmas bonnets in Arsenal colours, red and white.

Maybe that was ominous.

The on-field trouble that has followed Arsenal this season moved into another part of North London and besmirched the reputation of Spurs.

Despite the fact that manager Terry Venables loyally insisted later that he was "proud" of a team which retaliated after an early Iain Dowie goal for Luton with two Paul Stewart strikes, victory seemed at times to become irrelevant.

Two Spurs men — the Moroccan Nayim and Pat Van Den Hauwe — were sent off inside six minutes late in the first half with two Spurs yellow cards thrown in for "bad" measure.

Luton's reputation suffered, too. Make no mistake.

Their legacy from a runaway farce was one red card for Ceri Hughes and three yellow.

With referee David Elleray, a schoolmaster from Harrow-on-the-Hill, needing to be surrounded by police as he left the pitch at the end, it almost smacked of one of those riotous affairs in Latin America.

It should not have. It should have been a near-classic between two sides recognised for their quality, not as charging tanks.

It wasn't dirty by old-

Spurs 2 Luton 1

by Steve Richards

fashioned standards. It was just recklessly stupid at times. And not a little devious, perhaps, at others.

Two of the most apt comments came from Spurs fans in the main stand when Nayim was heading for an early shower after allegedly using "foul and abusive" language to the referee at a free-kick.

At first, it looked as if he had been sent off just because he declined to step back 10 yards at a free-kick.

Exaggerate

One fan shouted "rubbish" at Nayim. The other called him an "idiot".

I wouldn't go that far. But Nayim the Naive certainly. He wasn't alone.

When Van Den Hauwe was sent packing only six minutes later it was for an elephantine, dangerous tackle on Dowie which was about as subtle as a gangland shooting in a Chicago street.

Mercifully, there was to be just one more card after the interval. And that was the red for Luton's Hughes after a tackle which Gary Lineker seemed to exaggerate with his heavy fall.

When Lineker got up it was noticeable that FIFA's choice for their Fair Play award rejected a handshake offer from Hughes.

Then the Luton man went and this time, I thought, the referee had possibly overreacted. So did Luton players.

But to blame the referee for such general confusion would be passing the buck from players, in particular, managers and coaches.

The indiscipline shown by some players is not excused by the pre-match anxiety of both teams, caused by Spurs having taken only one point from the previous nine and Luton just two.

Mr Elleray, in fact, gave the players enough warning of how he intended to interpret the law. To the letter.

But even after the trouble had subsided, Paul Gascoigne was lucky to escape with only a lecture for his mock applause at being given a throw-in.

Dowie's goal, a half-volley from 10 yards, came when Spurs defenders were nowhere to be seen, probably trying to play him off-side.

Stewart's equaliser followed Gascoigne's only brilliant run of the match, in which he beat two defenders on a new fivepenny piece before crossing to the goal-line. Stewart's second was from a Gascoigne corner.

What an eternal shame that there were few other examples of skill and no other goals to report on a day when everybody seemed to want to kick everybody else and then blame each other.

SPURS: Thorstvedt, Thomas, Van Den Hauwe, Sedgley, Howells, Mabbutt, Stewart, Gascoigne, Nayim, Lineker (w'drn 74, sub Samways), Walsh (w'drn 67, sub Allen).

LUTON: Chamberlain, Johnson, Harvey, Williams, McDonough (w'drn 82, sub Beaumont), Dreyer, Elstrup (w'drn 62, sub Farrell), Preece, Dowie, Hughes, Black.

REFEREE: D. Elleray (Harrow-on-the-Hill).