● IN THE NET: Dave Beasant dives in vain as the Town go one up with Jason Cundy watching his header beat his keeper.

● HEADS UP: Darron McDonough joins the Town attack and rises well but giant goalkeeper Dave Beasant outreaches him.

SIGNS THAT BE A HAPPY

LUTON TOWN 2 CHELSEA 0
(Half-time: 0-0)

Brian Swain reports

AFTER THE unwanted and unappetising Christmas box his team gave him on Boxing Day Jim Ryan was much happier on Saturday evening.

The old year went out with overdue signs that the Town had stopped the rot and were capable of going through 1991 as surprise First Division survivors again.

The fact that he has to work on a very narrow shoestring budget still worries some of us, but at least for the first time since he took over as manager nearly a year ago we saw that happy-go-lucky Ryan has a ruthless streak in him as well.

DEBUT FOR STRIKER

"Time for a shake-up," he said after the home defeat against Sheffield United. He had been furious about the poor performance served up for the Boxing Day crowd.

So out went Iain Dowie, with Sean Farrell making his first full league appearance. Dowie's effort, commitment and determination were never in doubt, but a goals tally of four in 19 league games cost him his place on a day when the manager thought Farrell deserved his chance.

Jason Rees returned in place of injured Ceri Hughes and, more importantly, the Luton Town style of football returned as well.

Chelsea deserve some credit for that. Sheffield United had been pleased to indulge in a biff-bang approach — and on the day the Town had not got the wit to avoid being drawn into something similar.

That made Ryan angry, and top of his demands at a long dressing room inquest was that passing the ball had to be the policy, the only way the Town could impose their team game on the opposition.

Chelsea believed in the same philosophy, and a some ways the Town could count themselves a little lucky to beat a side that had chalked up seven consecutive victories before being smashed at Leeds on Boxing Day.

The Londoners' boss Bobby Campbell, his side weakened by injuries to Andy Townsend, Tony Dorigo and Gordon Durie, was rightly able to claim that Chelsea could have been ahead at half-time.

"If you don't tuck them away you don't win," said Campbell.

He was referring in particular to three good chances created on the break by a Chelsea team which had to spend most of the first half defending in depth.

They tackled and covered well with the result that for all their midfield possession the Town were looking less than 100 per cent confident as the first 45 minutes ticked away without reward.

A drive by Rees which Dave Beasant saved well in the fifth minute and one by Marvin Johnson which endangered spectators in the back row more than the goalkeeper were the most memorble striking moments. Farrell's neat volley on the turn had the misfortune to be too straight, and Beasant caught that one easily.

Chelsea's breaks were threatening, and Graham Stuart should have scored in the 27th minute after a sweet move which started when he beat Richard Harvey in midfield. Stuart played a quick one-two with Kevin Wilson, got clear, rounded Alec Chamberlain and then saw his shot cleared off the line by Darron McDonough.

The other close calls in the first half were down to poor finishing, with Kerry Dixon and Wilson both weak and inaccurate when they found alarming holes in the centre of the Town defence.

CLICKED INTO GEAR

The second half was a vastly different story, with the Town clicking into gear.

Once more David Preece made things happen all round him and as Rees got the pace of the game in difficult wet conditions the Town looked a quicker and more confident side.

The variety of passing helped and at last Kingsley Black was getting round the back of a defence which was vulnerable to quick passing football.

Farrell might have been trying a bit too hard, but there was no faulting his approach to his full debut.

Lars Elstrup was a bit of a disappointment, yet you could tell that Chelsea were always nervous when he was brought into the play.

Steve Williams said farewell to his mixed old year and hello to suspension by signing off with a flourish of probing passes.

● SAVED: Beasant stretches to deny Jason Rees his first league goal.

Town's Xmas Verdict: ★ ★ ★

● DEBUT: Sean Farrell during his first full league game.

IT MIGHT NEW YEAR

Pictures by Josh Levy

Dixon's pace and liking for goals on the plastic pitch was not much of a problem after the break as John Dreyer and McDonough got a grip.

And with Chelsea forced to back-pedal Harvey and Johnson drove forward with greater effect and the Town ran the show in the second half.

It took 11 slightly anxious minutes to get the goal the early burst of smart attacking deserved.

OFF THE LINE

Johnson was unlucky with a deliberate header past Beasant after the goalkeeper had punched weakly at a cross by Black. Farrell's challenge had put the keeper under pressure but Johnson's first league goal was denied him by Graeme Le Saux's clearance off the line.

Elstrup's best run of the game, set up by a quick exchange of passes with Farrell, ended with a curled shot which deserved to be his 11th goal of the season. But it swung inches the wrong side of the post.

The Dane was unlucky again shortly afterwards, when a downward header from a cross by Harvey was a little too perfect — he got so much power into it that the ball bounced over the bar.

So it was a nice bonus when the Town had a bit of luck at last, with the important breakthrough.

Williams was obstructed ten yards inside the Chelsea half by Stuart. Preece knocked in a free kick to cause confusion near the goal-line and in a scrum of bodies the ball skimmed off the head of Jason Cundy and into the net for the first own goal the Town have benefited from since Mick McCarthy gave us a helping head against Millwall last March.

Farrell and Elstrup were putting on the pressure and Jim Ryan says Preece deserves the credit for the goal for the expert delivery of the free kick.

Chelsea tried to fight back and raised their game for a spell, and Dixon and Wilson both had half-chances. But it was a day when the determination, effort and willingness to give every ounce, counted decisively, even though we had to wait until the 83rd minute for the killer goal.

Mr. Ryan would like to claim that it was another product of training ground rehearsal, but admitted that it was more a matter of players adding a little embellishment to a corner kick ploy.

Preece took a corner short on the Town's left, playing it to Black's feet. As Chelsea were drawn to Black he dummied to let the ball run on to Williams. It was immediately returned to Preece and his cross was headed down by Farrell and met by Black's careful drive low into the corner.

The cheer that greeted Black's fifth goal of the season was as much relief that the points were safe as in appreciation of a goal with the old Luton touch.

If we get that, and the whole-hearted commitment shown on Saturday, the 'experts' who marked Luton as relegation candidates will have to eat their words yet again. And this time without a last-day miracle!

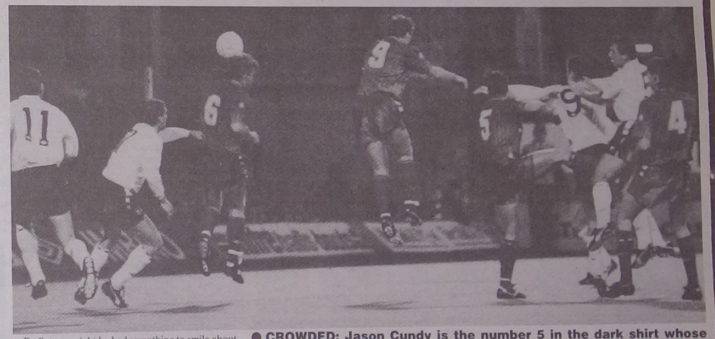
For Mr. Ryan the result, and more importantly the performance, was the tonic that revived him after a miserable Christmas.

By Saturay night he had something to smile about again, although he was still smarting a little about the Boxing Day flops. "I wish I could get all those people who came to that game and explain to them why the two performances were so different. But that's just one of those things about football.

"Today we played more like the way I expect a Luton Town team to play. Sometimes it takes a really poor performance to shake you out of some things that have been happening. Today we got back to doing the things we are good at."

THE MATCH DETAILS

TOWN: Chamberlain; Johnson (James 81 mins), McDonough, Dreyer, Harvey; Rees, Williams, Preece; Elstrup, Farrell, Black. Other sub: Nogan.
CHELSEA: Beasant; Hall, Cundy, Johnsen, Le Saux; Stuart, Bumstead (Dickens 76 mins), Lee (McAllister 56 mins), Wise; Dixon, Wilson.
THE GOALS: Jason Cundy header into his own net from a free kick by David Preece, 56th minute; Kingsley Black low drive edge of the box, 83rd minute.
OTHER STRIKES: Town seven saved and eight wide; Chelsea eight saved and four wide Corners: 9-7 to the Town.
REFEREE: Mike Reed, Birmingham — a little tolerant at times but handled the game well.
BOOKED: Graeme Le Saux for a foul on Marvin Johnson.
ATTENDANCE: 11,050 — pretty good on a wet cold day after a wash-out performance on Boxing Day. And Chelsea fans boosted the gate — it was nearly 1,000 up on the same Saturday last season when Chelsea won 3-0.
ENTERTAINMENT: A real tonic, with the whole team responding to the manager's demands to get back to the Luton style after the fiasco against Sheffield United.



● CROWDED: Jason Cundy is the number 5 in the dark shirt whose header is on its way into the net for the Town's first goal.

'Offside' decider no more than the strugglers deserve

LUTON TOWN 0
SHEFFIELD U 1

THE NEWS that Ceri Hughes faced surgery for a knee injury was the last straw for Jim Ryan on Boxing Day.

He was mortified by a performance which was the worst he had seen since he became manager. It was hard to believe how bad it was — and certainly a sad contrast to what we saw three days later against Chelsea. Hopefully, despite the absence of suspended Steve Williams on Saturday the Town will not make the same mistakes in the FA Cup at Bramall Lane.

APPEALING

At Kenilworth Road the bottom club in the First Division deserved their first away victory of the season.

The Town defence — but not the manager — thought Brian Deane was offside when he raced through for the winner in the 71st minute. Mr. Ryan was more worried about the idiocy of pushing out and then standing still to appeal in vain as Deane helped himself to his tenth goal of the season.

There was little to enjoy about the Town's inept performance, with the big boot and hope too often employed instead of passing with a bit of brain.

United, nothing more than a hard-working team unit, were the better side.

One late shot by Lars Elstrup, which produced a good save by Simon Tracey, was all the Town could muster on a cold, wet and windy day.

United could have won more handsomely — Carl Bradshaw missed three acceptable chances, including one cleared off the line by John Dreyer.

In public Mr. Ryan was subdued and careful in his choice of words to describe a performance which he agreed did not deserve three points.

Privately, in nearly an hour behind locked dressing room doors, he was much more scathing, with players told in blunt terms that they had to do better to keep their places.

MATCH DETAILS

TOWN: Chamberlain, Johnson, Dreyer, McDonough, Harvey (Beasmont, 45 mins); Hughes (Farrell 54 mins), Williams, Preece; Black, Dowie, Elstrup.
UNITED: Tracey; Wilder, Hill, Beesley, Lucas; Bryson, Jones, Gannon, Hoyland; Bradshaw (Wood 81 mins), Deane. Other sub: Todd.
THE GOAL: Brian Deane, 71 minutes, low drive from Chris Wilder's pass, with the Town defence standing and appealing in vain for offside.
OTHER STRIKES: Town four saved and six wide; Sheffield five saved and five wide. Corners: 7-3 to the Town.
ATTENDANCE: 10,004.
REFEREE: Ian Borrett, Harleston, Norfolk.
ENTERTAINENT: Not the sort of stuff to replace football.

The season so far

THE TOWN's results, scorers, attendances and league table position:

August
25 C. Palace (h) 1-1 (Dowie) ..... 9,583 —
28 Arsenal (a) 1-2 (Elstrup) ..... 32,723 —
September
1 Southampton (a) 2-1 (Elstrup 2) 14,878 8
4 Man United (h) 0-1 ..... 12,576 8
8 Leeds Utd (h) 1-0 (Black) 10,185 8
15 QPR (a) 1-6 (Hughes) 10,196 11
22 Coventry (h) 1-0 (Dowie) 8,336 7
29 Norwich (a) 3-1 (Elstrup 3) 12,794 6
October
20 Sunderland (a) 0-2 ..... 20,025 8
27 Everton (h) 1-1 (Elstrup) 10,047 7
November
3 Derby (a) 1-2 (Black) 15,008 8
10 Liverpool (a) 0-4 ..... 35,2017 13
17 Man City (h) 2-2 (Dowie, Dreyer pen) 9,564 12
24 A. Villa (h) 2-0 (Black, Elstrup) 10,071 9
December
1 N. Forest (a) 2-2 (Elstrup 2) 16,498 10
8 Arsenal (h) 1-1 (Dreyer pen) 12,506 11
16 C. Palace (a) 0-1 ..... 15,195 12
22 Spurs (a) 1-2 (Dowie) 27,007 12
26 Sheff Utd (h) 0-1 ..... 10,004.12
29 Chelsea (h) 2-0 (OG, Black) 11,050.12

LEAGUE APPEARANCES, including as sub in brackets: Ever-presents, 20 each: Chamberlain, Dreyer, Preece, Elstrup; Dowie and Black 19; Hughes 17; Harvey 15(2), Beaumont 14(3). Williams 13, Johnson 12 (2), McDonough 10 (4), Rees 7(6), James 6(2), Farrell 1 (6), Nogan (4), Breacker 8. Number of players used, 20 games: 17. Last season's total: 27.

LEAGUE GOALS: Elstrup 10, Dowie and Black 4, Dreyer 2 pens, Hughes 1, OG 1 (Cundy, Chelsea).

THE RUMBELOWS CUP

September
25 Bradford (h) 1-1 (Harvey) 5,120
October
10 Bradford (a) 1-1 (Black) — lost on pens 6,180

APPEARANCES: Chamberlain 2, Dreyer 2, Beaumont 2, Hughes 2, Preece 2, Black 2, Dowie 2, Harvey 2, Rees 1 (1), James 1 (1), Nogan 1 (1), Breacker 1, Elstrup 1, Williams 1, Johnson (1).

GOALS: Harvey and Black one each.

THE ZENITH DATA SYSTEMS CUP

December
25 W. Ham (h) 5-1 (Farrell 2, Rees, Elstrup, Black) 5,759

APPEARANCES: One each by Chamberlain, James, Harvey, Williams, McDonough, Dreyer, Elstrup, Rees, Farrell, Pembridge, Black. One each as sub: Beaumont and Nogan.