

Liverpool like lost souls as Luton twist the knife

Luton 3 Liverpool 1

by Richard Bott

BEWILDERED Liverpoolians put their heads under the pillow again last night and wished that the nightmare would go away.

In the wake of manager Kenny Dalglish's sudden exit, the champions tumbled to their first defeat of the year.

And when I tell you it was a romp for Luton it might explain the level of Liverpool's embarrassment.

Luton had not won since December 29 so it was party time when the final whistle sounded.

Advantage

The idea might have been forming in Ronnie Moran's mind at half-time that he would be beginning his tenure as Liverpool's caretaker-manager with a victory speech.

Liverpool had ridden a considerable amount of luck in the first half but stole away to their dressing room with a one-goal advantage, seized from the penalty spot.

But Moran had to rip up the speech and read the riot act instead after Liverpool had spun dizzily to defeat as Luton tore them apart in the second half.

They cannot claim they were not given ample warning.

Luton played with such zeal and skill in the opening half-hour that it was only a matter of time before their efforts would be rewarded.

Liverpool, in contrast, looked for all the world as if the events of the past week



LUTON'S two-goal Iain Dowie challenges Liverpool goalkeeper Mike Hooper

had dulled their senses and ambition.

It is not enough to raise the old issue of their dislike of the plastic surface.

Jan Molby stroked them ahead from the penalty spot early on but even that called for a hollow celebration.

Luton were outraged that a linesman's flag rather than the referee's whistle penalised Julian James for handling a cross from Steve Nicol near the edge of the box.

Both linesmen came in for some animated abuse from the crowd because the other man with the flag ruled out what would have been a splendid equaliser by Luton's Lars Elstrup on the half-hour.

But Luton began the second half in venomous mood, scoring twice in the first eight minutes.

Kingsley Black, a dancing phantom who gave Liverpool some of their most embarrassing moments, was free at the far post to head in Iain Dowie's cross.

Lingering

Dowie then helped himself to two sweet goals, each provided by the strong running and intelligent passing of Elstrup.

Dowie's second strike, with less than ten minutes remaining, removed all the lingering doubts. If there were any.

It was all a little hard on Mike Hooper. Liverpool's

reserve goalkeeper, who had to make a mad dash down the motorway yesterday morning to stand in for Bruce Grobbelaar.

Ronnie Moran's first task yesterday was to assess Grobbelaar's health when his goalkeeper reported a stomach upset at the team's hotel.

Hooper was summoned to make his first appearance for two seasons and at least had the satisfaction of making one outstanding save in the first half.

LUTON: Chamberlain, Johnson, James (w'drn 76, sub Rees), Beaumont, Rodger, Dreyer, Elstrup, Preece, Dowie, Pembridge, Black.

LIVERPOOL: Hooper, Hysen, Venison, Nicol, Molby, Ablett, Beardsley, Houghton, Rush, Barnes, Staunton, (w'drn 68, sub Speedie).

REFEREE: J. Ashworth (Leicestershire).