

Pleat set to replace Ryan as manager

By Colin Malam

Luton..... 2 Derby 0

LUTON appear ready to discard Jim Ryan, the man who has twice saved them from relegation, and replace him with David Pleat, the high-profile manager who was lured away from Kenilworth Road by Tottenham Hotspur five years ago.

Neither Peter Nelkin, Luton's chairman, nor Mr Pleat would confirm or deny yesterday's rumours, but the indications are that Luton hope to reappoint Mr Pleat, their respected manager from 1978 to 1986, after Mr Nelkin has met Mr Ryan this week.

All the chairman would say yesterday was: "In the last few weeks we have all been working hard to stay in the First Division. Now we have done it, we are going to enjoy ourselves this weekend and then get back to work to look ahead to next season on Monday."

Mr Pleat, who has been out of work since being sacked by Leicester City in January, insisted he had had no official contact with his old club. But he admitted to an "affinity" with them and made no secret of a desire to resume his managerial career.

Still resident in the Bedfordshire town, Mr Pleat said: "I am flattered, if it is true, that Luton are going to approach me, but at this stage it would be unwise and unfair to talk about anything like this while Jim Ryan is in possession of the job."

"Football is a strange game. Nothing surprises you in football, and I am well aware that this summer there will be several jobs available. That's the game."

Not surprisingly, Mr Ryan was not best pleased to hear about the speculation. "I

can't comment," he said, "because I know nothing about it. But if there have been meetings with David Pleat already, I think I ought to have known about them."

On a 46th birthday that had suddenly turned sour, Mr Ryan doubted whether he could stay on at Luton under Mr Pleat, who is also 46. "It would be an impossible situation for both of us," he said.

The sense of shock must have been considerable for Mr Ryan, a former Luton player, who joined the club's coaching staff when Mr Pleat left in 1986 and was promoted to manager 15 months ago on the departure of Ray Harford.

On Saturday, he had seen Luton's biggest crowd of the season flood on to the doomed plastic pitch to celebrate the club's latest escape from relegation.

"There's only one Jimmy Ryan," they chanted in recognition of his achievement in keeping the club up, despite the enforced sale of key players.

An own goal by Mick Harford, the former Luton striker now tipped to return as player-coach, and a header by Lars Elstrup had enabled the home side to stay in the First Division by beating Derby in the last match for the second season running.

"Now it's all over, it's a lovely feeling," Mr Ryan had said.

"It's always satisfying to know in yourself that you've done a very, very difficult job, and I feel as though I've done it well."

His final, poignant words were: "I'll see you all next season," but that must be open to considerable doubt now.



Derby defender Mark Wright clears under pressure from Luton's Sean Farrell