

Ryan's anxiety after great escape

90/91

LUTON have given us The Great Escape so often that, come the last day of the season, you half expect Steve McQueen to vault the wire at Stalag Kenilworth on his Harley.

For three years in succession the most unpopular club in football, as their own chairman calls them, have won their final match to stave off relegation.

On the last two occasions they have been lucky enough to meet poor old Derby on the day of reckoning. They do not come any easier. Starved of funds by Robert Maxwell, that most reluctant of benefactors, the Rams became lambs, trundling meekly to the relegation slaughterhouse.

Here, they showed about as much interest as their absentee

chairman, playing with one eye on the beach.

Luton won easily, but they were uncomfortably aware that few beyond Bedfordshire would be sharing in their celebrations. They have become more sensitive souls with the departure of David "flog-'em" Evans, and "no one likes us, we do care" is the theme of the new chairman, Peter Nelkin.

Anxious to regain some of the goodwill lost under Evans's isolationist regime, Nelkin is to welcome back away supporters next season, when a return to the days of reciprocal hospitality and grass — they are selling the old plastic abomination at £11.50 per square — should earn them a few Brownie points off the pitch.

Points on it will again be hard to

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come by, despite Nelkin's bold proclamation of a new era of progress and growth.

A London-based property developer, he has the smooth tongue which goes with the territory. He was an Arsenal season-ticket holder until he took over as chairman 10 months ago, but amid Saturday's orgy of backslapping — champagne glass in hand, shirt hanging out, words gushing like Ben Elton on speed — you would have thought him Hatter-mad all his life.

After much talk of credit, bal-

ance sheets and hands-on management, it was nitty-gritty time. Would there be money for better players to put an end to the days of brinkmanship? A tricky one, that. The gist? Probably not.

Instead, Nelkin is said to be considering the route beloved by chairmen seeking to appease the fans at minimal cost: a change of management.

Jim Ryan has done a decent job in difficult circumstances. Forced to sell his best players, he did well to keep a threadbare team in the First Division.

It may not be enough. Supporters still go misty-eyed over the David Pleat era, when Foster and Donaghy, Hill, Harford and Stein could outplay the very best. The smart money is on Pleat returning

as manager, with Ryan staying on as coach.

Any money, smart or not, would be a godsend at the Baseball Ground. A fortune is about to be raised from the sale of Mark Wright and Dean Saunders, but Arthur Cox will see precious little of it. Maxwell's silver hammer is poised to knock down the club to the highest bidder. No Nelkin, this. No one likes him? He don't care.

Goals: Harford og (41) 1-0; Elstrup (47) 2-0.

Luton Town: Chamberlain; Beaumont, Harvey, Rees (James, 79), McDonough, Dreyer, Elstrup, Preece, Farrell (Nogan, 79), Pembridge, Black.

Derby County: Shilton; Sage, Forsyth, G Williams, Wright, Patterson, Micklewhite, Saunders, Harford, P Williams (Hebbard, 66), McMinn (Cross, 45).

Referee: G Courtney (Spennymoor).