Sports News

PROMISING … UNDONE BY …

● GOING FOR IT: Philip Gray rises to the challenge, despite being outnumbered by Villa defenders.

UNLESS SOMETHING is done to eradicate the schoolboy howler defensive errors that wrecked yet another away performance at Villa Park, Luton Town will be the prettiest football side ever to be relegated in May.

One point in the first game, at West Ham, is all the Town have taken from seven away matches so far.

Fear of fear?

The tradition is being built up so completely that when they fall behind the defence seems to get a massive inferiority complex, so worried about the fear of mistakes that they become inevitable.

It probably needs a phsychologist rather than a football reporter to understand why it happens.

Brian Swain report

It almost defies belief to realise that for … the game Aston Villa were second best in … football ability and possession. But two stab… cruel reminders that pretty potential is … near enough: the Town have the worst … record in the First Division, and the worst … rate.

I willingly pay tribute to the style and … was seen during the Aston Villa match. But … any Luton Town supporter go home feeling … about that, when the team has been stuffed … was powderpuff in the Villa penalty area.

Philip Gray showed plenty of strength … determination, but with no-one else showing … devil in attack it came to little in terms of …

Penalty chance wasted

And Gray was the man who wasted the … first penalty of the season, when he had the … to pull it back to 3-1.

The choking disappointment for Town … all the greater because it was obvious that … the acquisition of players costing over £4 … following the summer sale of David Pleat … were not the best team we have ever seen.

Even their manager, Ron Atkinson thought … best win of the season had come on a day when … did not turn in their best performance.

I bet he wishes all visitors would be as generous … the Town in terms of offering gifts at one end … declining them at the other.

One fact tells some of the story … Chamberlain did not make a single save … the four he attempted when the goals went in.

Nigel Spink made two very good saves … beaten when a couple of other efforts were … off target, and was saved by the woodwork … faced a 65th-minute penalty.

Making use of opportunities

Villa deserved to win because they had a … edge, and a confident ability to make the … their chances.

Bonus points for the Town, which are … report even though we would rather have … talk about, were headed by the return to … ch for the first time in nine months of Ceri … He looked rusty, as you might expect, but … is on the way back. He played 74 minutes … stepping off to make way for Brian Stein.

The other Town successes were Gray, … the penalty miss, Paul Telfer, Mark Pembridge … Matthew Jackson.

● OVER THE TOP: Kurt Nogan heads for goal.

● PRESSING: Paul Telfer competing with Paul McGrath

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Ipswich are Zenith Cup opponents

AN IPSWICH victory in the first round of the Zenith Data Systems Cup has set up a trip to Portman Road for the Town in a fortnight.

Ipswich came from behind to win 3-1 at Twerton Park against Bristol Rovers, and will entertain the Town in the second round on Tuesday week.

David Lowe scored twice and might enjoy playing against the Town: eight years ago, when he was an unknown at Wigan, David Pleat thought long and hard about bringing him to Kenilworth Road.

Happy cup memories

Some of us quietly hoped for a Bristol Rovers win to give us another ground to visit — the Town have never played the Rovers since they moved out of Eastville to Bath City's ground.

But the Ipswich trip should hold no terrors: the last time the Town took on the Second Division side was in November 1987 when a Brian Stein goal kept the Town on course for their Littlewoods Cup Wembley date with Arsenal in the final.

Town match verdict ★★

SOCCER IS BLUNDERS

Pictures: Josh Levy

The trouble is they are players for the future, and believe the Town need to do more trading quickly to safeguard the present.

With Harford out with a hamstring injury and David Preece laid low by flu, the Town line-up was a reminder of the great potential at the club.

Telfer and Jackson are 19, Pembridge and Hughes 20 and Nogan and Gray 21. Much as I agree about their worth as investments for the future, it seems to me to be too many youngsters in one First Division team.

And their careers may be hindered rather than helped if they have to suffer too many confidence-sapping days in a team that goes into away games knowing recent history suggests the first goal against is a disaster.

Psychological strain

There was nothing defeatist about the Town's display against Villa, but when a team has scored only once in seven away games and kept only one clean sheet, the psychological strain shows. At two down you know you are not going to win. Worse, you find yourself so edgy in defence that you can almost hear the fans groaning: 'Oh no, here comes another four or five-goal beating."

An early goal is no help, and Villa could hardly believe their luck when they were gifted the opener after only four minutes. Dalian Atkinson, bought for £1.6million, got round the back of John Dreyer and crossed low. Kevin Richardson got a touch and Chamberlain was beaten as the ball seemed to go through his hands.

For a few minutes after that Villa looked capable of doing well, but with Steve Thompson helping the defence the home side looked all bark and no bite, and the Town began to mount some promising counter-attacks.

Pembridge and Telfer were operating as wingers at times, and with Nogan and Gray seeking space against a sweeper system, half-chances were created.

Gray and Hughes were wide with long-range efforts, and Telfer was unlucky with an overhead kick which drifted wide of the post.

At half-time the Town knew they were in with a good chance. Villa's major threat had been Dwight Yorke's forays down their right, and the instruction was to ensure he did not get round the back.

Craftsman's strike

But he did just that two minutes into the second half, and by the time Dreyer was trying to get back after a second tackle the cross had been played in and Ormile Regis was clear to hit a superb goal, struck first time from the edge of the box with venomous power.

Still the Town looked good when they were in possession, and Hughes went close with a far post header from a diagonal cross by Pembridge as Villa were forced to back-pedal.

The Town's big failing was lack of decisive action when they lost possession, and Villa capitalised with their third goal in the 59th minute. Atkinson ran at a Town defence which was apparently afraid to tackle for fear of giving away a penalty. He went clear down the inside right channel, and laid on the chance for Yorke to go in unmarked to net a diving near-post header.

Thunderbolt tipped over

It was a matter of going through the motions after that, especially when the penalty was missed. Shaun Teale used his hands to stop a right-wing cross by Telfer but Gray blasted the penalty hard against the bar. It rebounded with such force that it reached Thompson a yard outside the box, and his powerful drive was shoved over the bar by Spink.

The midfielder had another thunderbolt tipped over later, and Dreyer also hit a good shot just wide.

A 3-0 defeat might have been tough on the Town, but it got worse because Thompson, who had played well, became the latest to catch the defensive colly-wobbles. He hit a cross-field pass straight to Paul Mortimer, and the former Charlton striker gratefully accepted the gift for his first Villa goal.

The First Division

	HOME					AWAY					
	P	W	D	L	F	A	W	D	L	F	A	Pt
Man Utd	11	4	2	0	12	1	4	1	0	6	2	27
Leeds	12	4	2	0	12	6	2	3	1	8	4	23
Arsenal	11	4	1	1	14	8	2	1	2	12	9	20
Sheff Wed	12	5	0	1	16	7	1	2	3	5	7	20
Coventry	12	4	1	2	10	3	2	1	2	5	7	20
Chelsea	12	2	3	1	12	8	2	2	2	9	10	17
Wimbledon	12	4	0	2	14	9	1	2	3	7	10	17
C. Palace	10	3	1	2	11	12	2	1	1	8	7	17
Nottm For	11	3	1	1	12	9	2	0	4	9	8	16
Everton	12	3	3	0	12	5	1	1	4	7	11	16
Tottenham	9	1	0	2	4	5	4	1	1	13	9	16
Liverpool	10	3	2	0	8	4	1	2	2	3	4	16
Man City	11	3	0	3	8	8	2	1	2	4	6	16
A. Villa	12	3	1	2	10	4	1	2	3	6	10	15
Norwich	12	2	3	1	7	6	1	3	2	8	11	15
Notts Co	11	2	1	2	6	9	2	2	2	8	7	15
Oldham	11	3	2	1	12	8	1	0	4	5	9	14
West Ham	12	1	2	3	5	7	1	3	2	7	9	11
So'ton	12	1	1	4	4	13	1	2	3	6	8	9
QPR	13	0	4	2	5	9	1	2	4	6	14	9
Luton Town	12	2	2	2	1	5	4	0	1	6	1	23	9
Sheff Utd	12	1	2	3	4	8	0	1	5	10	18	6

● DEFENDER ATTACKS: Graham Rodger in support of the Town's front men.

Goals could have been prevented

ASTON Villa manager Ron Atkinson thought the timing of the first two goals was one of the most important factors in the result.

He admitted that Villa had not played well, but added: "In the second half we drove the game."

Three bad ones

David Pleat was left to rue the Town's failure to build on having as much of the game territorially as Villa had enjoyed.

One good goal and three bad ones was his summing up, with the additional thought that all four could have been prevented by better defending.

He did not name names, and when he was invited to blame Alec Chamberlain for the first goal, when the ball seemed to go through the keeper's hands, the boss replied: "You can criticise the keeper, but you also have to say that the Villa man should not have been allowed to get in the cross in the first place."

The manager added: "At half-time we still had a chance. Gray and Nogan were getting into good spaces behind the Villa defenders, and we were playing some good football.

"During half-time I spoke of the need to stop Yorke getting round the outside. Two minutes later he did it again, and they scored…

"Our job is to see through this result. We had to put out a very young side, probably the youngest we have ever fielded in the First Division, and we have the nucleus of a good team.

Must learn

"They're doing their best, but they have certainly got to learn quickly."

● THE ages of the Town side at Villa Park ranged from Matthew Jackson and Paul Telfer, who will both be 20 in a couple of weeks, to 31-year-old Trevor Peake. The average age of the team that started the game was 23 years, 9 months.

Managers' viewpoints

The season so far

THE TOWN'S First Division campaign to date, showing results, scorers, attendances and league table placing:

August			
17	West Ham (a) 0-0	25,079	—
21	Coventry (a) 0-5	10,084	—
24	Liverpool (h) 0-0	11,132	—
27	Arsenal (a) 0-2	25,898	21
31	Chelsea (a) 1-4 (Gray)	17,457	22
September			
4	Southampton (h) 2-1(Gray, Harvey)	8,055	19
7	Wimbledon (a) 0-3	3,231	20
14	Oldham (h) 2-1 (Harford 2)	9,005	17
17	QPR (h) 0-1	9,185	19
21	Man Utd (a) 0-5	46,491	21
28	Notts Co (h) 1-1 (Gray)	7,629	20
October			
5	A. Villa (a) 0-4	18,722	21

APPEARANCES, including as sub in brackets: Twelve each each by Chamberlain, Dreyer and Pembridge; Preece 11; Rodger 10(1), Stein 9(1); McDonough 9; Peake 8, Jackson 7(2), Gray 7(2), Beaumont 6(3), Thompson 5, Harvey 5, Harford 4, Telfer 3(3), Farrell 3(1), Nogan 2(6), Hughes 1(1), Holsgrove 1, Black 4, Dreyer 1.

Number of players used: 21, same as last season's total.

LEAGUE GOALS: Gray 3, Harford 2, Harvey 1.

● ON THE BALL: Matthew Jackson, who has established himself in the First Division before his 21st birthday, breaks out of defence at Villa Park.

MATCH DETAILS

Aston Villa 4 Luton Town 0
Half-time: 1-0

TOWN: Chamberlain; Jackson, Peake, Rodger (Beaumont, 77 mins), Dreyer; Telfer, Hughes (Stein, 64 mins), Thompson, Pembridge; Gray, Nogan.

VILLA: Spink; Kubicki, Teale, McGrath, Nielsen (Mortimer HT), Staunton; Richardson, Cowans; Yorke, Regis, Atkinson. Other sub: Penrice.

THE GOALS: Kevin Richardson, touch-in from Dalian Atkinson right wing cross, 4 mins; Cyrille Regis, excellent strike from Dwight Yorke's right wing cross, 47 mins; Yorke diving header after Atkinson solo run through the defence, 59 minutes; Paul Mortimer, solo run after Steve Thompson gave the ball to him in midfield, 80 minutes

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town three saved, seven wide and a penalty hit the bar; Villa three saved and three wide. Corners: 5-3 to the Town.

BOOKED: Atkinson and Yorke of Villa, for foul and not retreating at a free kick.

REFEREE: Philip Don, Middlesex. Had a nice easy game.

ATTENDANCE: 18,722, Villa's lowest league gate of the season.

ENTERTAINMENT: Exasperating for the 200 from Luton: the Town turned on some bursts of nice football, but wrecked it all by incredibly bad defending. It was never 4-0 on the run of play, only on the measure of individual mistakes.