

Saints dash Pleat hopes

91/92

LUTON'S dispirited manager David Pleat admitted last night: "We only have seven matches left and it's going to be tough now for us to avoid relegation."

Six players were booked — not an unusual occurrence at a match involving Southampton — but five of them were from Luton as two struggling sides at the foot of the table slugged out a grim battle for survival.

Southampton manager Ian Branfoot sprang a major surprise before the kick-off by leaving out England squad player Matthew Le Tissier, sent off at Norwich in an FA Cup quarter-final replay last week.

"He was fit and available," said Branfoot. "I took a gamble by leaving him out and it paid off."

Luton, without an away victory for more than a year, made a dream start with a goal after 43 seconds when Mark Pembridge bent a free-kick past the bewildered Tim Flowers from 25 yards.

But when full-back Julian

Southampton 2 Luton 1

by Pat Symes

James broke his cheekbone, Luton moved Chris Kamara to replace him. And after the reshuffle Southampton steam-rollered Pleat's frail midfield into submission.

Saints did not even win a corner until the 68th minute but when substitute Lee Powell took it, England's Alan Shearer rose above Luton's on-loan goalkeeper Mervyn Day — who said he had been fouled — to head his 19th goal of the season.

Then, with Luton in disarray, the Hatters' former striker Iain Dowie stroked home an 81st-minute winner with Luton protesting this time that Shearer was off-side.

SOUTHAMPTON: Flowers, Kenna, Benali, Horne (w'drn 56, sub Powell), Moore, Ruddock, Gilkes, Cockerill, Shearer, Dowie, Hurlock.

LUTON: Day, James (inj 59, sub Hughes), Harvey, Kamara, Dreyer, Peake, Rees, Stein (w'drn 83, sub Williams), Harford, Pembridge, Preece.

REFEREE: C. Wilkes (Gloucester).