



FALL GUYS: Luton's Julian James and Richard Harvey trip over each other to let Michael Gilkes slip through Picture: MURRAY SANDERS

By NEIL HARMAN

IF DAVID PLEAT is to go on another of his cavorting last-day dashes across a football pitch (don't hold your breath, Meadow Lane) he'll need to find someone, somewhere more benevolent than Mr Clive Wilkes was at The Dell.

A referee who lists conservation among his interests was clearly not in the mood to help preserve a place in the Premier League, *nee* First Division, which has been Luton's refuge for the past ten years.

Throughout the decade they have survived by the skin of their teeth, a trend set in 1983 with victory in the 85th minute of the last afternoon at Manchester City which sent City down, and Pleat on his famous arm-waving, jacket-flailing run across a silent Maine Road.

The manager's walk to the dressing room after the 2-1 defeat at Southampton on Saturday was more circumspect. During it, he trudged past the statuesque figure of his goalkeeper Mervyn Day, hands on hips, shaking his head as Mr Wilkes and his linesman scurried past.

Day is on loan from Leeds United and spends a lot of his time coaching at the FA's School of Excellence. One suspects that drop-kicking and coming out for corners may be high on the academic agenda this week.

For Day believes he was the victim of two dreadful decisions, the likes of which are dangerously prevalent in English football. The first, pre-empted by a linesman waving as Day drop-kicked on the edge of his area, was debatable. The fact that he was fouled at the ensuing corner merely added to his anger.

The second, when England's Alan Shearer came at him studs first, then lay on the goalline behind him (two yards offside) as

Survival hopes fade as vital decisions go against Luton

BOTTOM OF DIV I

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Coventry	34	10	10	14	31	33	40
Sheff Utd	33	11	7	15	50	54	40
Southampton	33	9	10	14	32	46	37
Tottenham	32	10	6	16	38	43	36
Luton	35	7	11	17	28	59	32
Notts Cty	34	7	10	17	33	47	31
West Ham	32	6	10	16	28	48	28

Iain Dowie side-footed his old pals on course for relegation, did not even merit debate.

Southampton manager Ian Branfoot, whose programme notes hammered the press for not condemning poor refereeing in Saints' games, will, one hopes, be reassured that Mr Wilkes comes straight into that category.

Luton were denied by means outside their control the victory

that would have caused one or two more hearts to flutter at White Hart Lane. Tottenham are likely to survive, more because of the failings of others than through their own dismal form.

Pleat spent a couple of minutes in the referee's changing room before drawing a deep breath in the Southampton press room. 'I musn't be too hasty,' he said. 'I have always believed that referees and linesmen are honest people and it's unusual for a linesman to prosecute a 'keeper for coming out of the box. I think the referee would have found it very difficult to disallow the second goal.

'We're determined not to feel sorry for ourselves. There are seven matches to go.'

Luton had gone ahead in the first minute, when Mark Pembridge's wind-assisted left-foot free-kick flew in. Branfoot was jeered off at half-time as the match ebbed and flowed from the

inert to the indescribable. Interspersed between the six bookings — five for Luton and only one (believe it or not) for the Saints — was a modicum of second-half improvement.

The game cried out for someone of exception to put his foot on the ball. Pembridge tried for Luton; for Southampton, Matthew Le Tissier was sitting in the stands, one suspects because of his mid-week sending off at Norwich.

The score is that Southampton are going to be in the Premier League next season barring a disastrous sequence of results.

For Mervyn Day, a bandaged hand was of secondary concern to perceived injustices at the hands of Mr Wilkes. Day said: 'When I questioned him about the goal from the corner when I was fouled, he kept going on about goalkeepers being in glass boxes.'

SOUTHAMPTON: Shearer (68 mins), Dowie (81). **LUTON:** Pembridge (1).