

Relieved Luton reveal their fighting spirit

By Colin Malam

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FATE smiled on Luton through the rain at Kenilworth Road last night. Offered the chance to beat a tired, patched-up Nottingham Forest, the First Division's great escapologists took full advantage with a spirited performance.

Goals by Mick Harford and Julian James enabled Luton to come from behind and claim a win that leaves them only three points behind Coventry, the club fourth from bottom, with four games each to play.

Coventry's goal difference is so much better than Luton's that the margin is more like four points. But that will not deter a team who have cheated the drop for four seasons, twice on the very last day.

The team Forest were obliged to field last night, because of injuries, were tailor-made for a game Luton simply had to win. Deprived of six senior defenders, they had to ask Nigel Clough to play in central defence and winger Gary Crosby at right-back.

Two others, Des Walker and Brett Williams, were thought to be playing in spite of injuries, and the England defender was unable to continue beyond half-time.

Roy Keane then took over from Walker alongside Clough.

So, though Forest began their seventh game in 17 days with eight of the side beaten in the Rumbelows Cup final by Manchester United two days earlier, their defence was almost unrecognisable by the end of this watery affair.

A heavy downpour before the start left the pitch covered with puddles, which made the behaviour of the ball very unpredictable. Brian Clough's teams are never short of resilience or adaptability, though, and they made a fight of it throughout. Forest began

by taking the lead after just two minutes. Keane put Orlygsson away on the right and the Icelandic international sent over a low centre. It held up in the water, throwing the Luton defence off balance and enabling Black to drive home a left-footed volley.

The cruellest cut of all, of course, was that Luton sold Black to Forest for £1.5 million at the start of the season to ease their perpetual money worries.

But that and Saturday's 5-1 defeat at Oldham were soon forgotten.

"I don't often associate the word passion with us," said Luton's manager, David Pleat, afterwards, "but I thought we played with a lot of passion in the first half." And he was right.

Varadi and Pembridge both went close before Harford equalised after 12 minutes. Again the pitch played a part, Clough struggling to change direction as Harford ran in unmarked to steer Kamara's low centre into the bottom corner.

Further pressure yielded the winning goal 12 minutes later. A right-wing corner by the left-footed Preece was met so powerfully by James that the young full-back could be proud of the header which brought him his first goal of the season.

A rising shot by Sheringham, tipped over by Chamberlain after 36 minutes, was just about the last moment of anxiety for Luton. From then on, it was Crossley and the makeshift cover in front of him who had all the worries.

Luton: Chamberlain; James, Harvey, Kamara, Dreyer, Peake, Varadi (Hughes 79), Stein (Gray 72), Harford, Pembridge, Preece.

Nottingham Forest: Crossley; Orlygsson, Williams, Walker (Kaminsky 45), Glover, Keane, Crosby, Gemmill, Clough, Sheringham, Black.

Referee: T Fitzharris (Bolton).