

Town's Easter verdict ★★

A MIRACLE!

Chance to get out of the last three is blown

AFTER an Easter that began with much promise, Luton Town need a helping hand if their ten years in the First Division is to be continued.

Monday's defeat means that if Coventry take four points from their last two games, at home to West Ham and away to Aston Villa, the Town are down.

If the Town could have held on to their lead at Loftus Road, they would have been out of the bottom three

for the first time since they beat Oldham at Kenilworth Road in September.

The possibility of yet another miraculous escape opened up on Saturday as other results came in.

The point gained at Kenilworth Road began to look a lot more valuable when news came through that Coventry had lost again.

Fate?

They are beginning to worry at Highfield Road that the fates are conspiring against them.

A week earlier an 88th-minute own goal by Kenny Sansom had sent Coventry to a narrow defeat at Notts County.

And Saturday's home defeat against Everton was another one-goal disaster: the winner by Peter Beagrie was covered by goalkeeper Steve Ogrizovic until it caught a defender's deflection to leave the big goalkeeper helpless.

It was Coventry's fifth successive defeat and by the time they lost again at Leeds on Monday Don Howe was looking at a run of only two wins in 17 games since he replaced Terry Butcher.

But the Sky Blues goal difference, minus

eight compared to the Town's minus 34, is worth a point to them.

Norwich City are still in some danger of being dragged into the dogfight because of a hangover from their FA Cup semi-final defeat against Second Division Sunderland.

They went down to their fourth defeat in a row, at Sheffield Wednesday on Monday after Notts County won 1-0 at Carrow Road on Saturday.

West Ham are just about dead, and will be buried tonight if they fail to beat Manchester United at Upton Park.

But Notts County are battling bravely.

Lift

Two consecutive wins, at home to Coventry and away to Norwich, gave them a lift, and the Town have Sheffield United to thank for an important 3-1 win at Meadow Lane on Monday.

A home win would have shoved the Town down to 21st place.

Instead, if the dream results happen this weekend, we could yet go to Nottingham on Saturday week with the chance of another last-day escape.



POINT-SAVER: Mick Harford rises above Denis Irwin to head for goal against Manchester United. Seconds later he had headed the rebound off the bar into the net.

The next champs are well matched

LUTON TOWN 1 MANCHESTER UNITED 1

Mark Pembroke and David Preece worked the ball down the left wing, and Preece produced a gem of a teasing, curling cross to the far post. Gary Pallister and Steve Bruce were by-passed, and left back Denis Irwin, the weakest of the United back four in terms of height and weight, was unable to get near the ball as Harford rose majestically above him.

The header hit the bar, but Harford followed up to nod in his 12th First Division goal of the season.

The draw was the least the Town's heroes deserved from a flowing end to end game.

Second best

But United might easily have pulled off a smash and grab raid for all three points, even though they were rarely in command.

They were second best by a long way for

the first 20 minutes, and for that Mr. Pleat praised Chris Kamara in particular for his handling of playmaker Brian McClair.

The visitors were reduced to a succession of back passes at one stage to take the sting out of the game as the Town threatened to run riot.

Inches over

Imre Varadi flashed an early shot inches over the bar after a one-two with Scott Oakes, starting a league game for the first time in over a month.

Pallister stabbed a panicky far post clearance narrowly wide of his own net from a fizzing cross by Pembroke, who met the corner with a thundering drive which hit the top of the bar. It would have been ruled out, however, for offside against other Town men near the goal.

Richard Harvey and Harford then worked another opening for Varadi for a shot which was too high, and ever-willing Pembroke missed a couple of half-chances with drives off target.

Long ball

United's attacking ideas were reduced to the long ball, via goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel's massive punts.

And in Mark Hughes, Ryan Giggs and Lee Sharpe they had more pace than the Town to cash in.

Hughes nearly did so after Julian James and Trevor Peake failed to handle a long clearance, but shot weakly wide from a good position.

But United's first shot on target was cruel: Peake missed a Schmeichel clearance and Sharpe was through in a flash to nutmeg Alec Chamberlain.

Composure

It was against the run of play, but the Town fought back with great composure and concentration, and the 50th-minute equaliser was the very least they deserved.

United switched their formation to try to find ways of wresting control, without success, and were glad to see their keeper clutch a curling drive by Pembroke as the Town kept up the attack.

For a change, it was the opposition on tenterhooks as the final quarter was played, with the Town full of con-

fidence after proving to themselves that they were more than a match for the best team in the land.

Good save

Brian Stein, who was sub to make way for the return of Oakes, might have crowned the occasion with a fairy-tale ending.

He replaced Oakes and almost his first taste of the action was to get clear from a neat pass by James.

A dramatic winner was on the cards until Schmeichel pulled off the day's best save to prevent it.

Mr. Ferguson thought United should have held on to their lead, but added: "I was very impressed by Luton."

"They deserved the result. I saw them at Manchester City a few weeks ago. They lost, but they showed they could play brilliant football at times."

Mr. Pleat was delighted that the Town's preparation had been vindicated by events, including the recall of Oakes.

Practised

The equaliser came from a move the squad worked on in training, believing that the best way to beat one of the finest defences in the League was to use Preece's accurate crosses to the back post and Harford's power.

And in the second half Chamberlain did a vital job.

The Town had to push

up to seek all three points, leaving the goalkeeper with extra responsibility.

In the event he played almost as a sweeper, prowling around on the edge of his penalty area, and reading the game perfectly.

He did it so well that in the 90 minutes he did not have a serious save to make.

And that was a tribute to the way the whole team played for each other.

Imposed

Fleet Street men complained that United never got into their stride, and did not play with the look of real champions.

That was an insult: they were never able to because they were up against a team that was very determined to impose itself on quality opposition.

The First Division

	HOME					AWAY				
	P	W	D	L	F	P	W	D	L	F
Leeds	40	12	8	0	37	13	8	8	4	33
Man United	39	11	7	2	31	12	9	8	2	29
Sheff Wed	40	13	4	3	39	24	8	6	6	22
Arsenal	40	11	7	2	46	21	7	7	6	23
Man City	40	12	4	4	30	14	6	6	8	24
Liverpool	39	12	5	3	32	17	3	9	7	12
Sheff Utd	40	9	6	5	27	20	7	3	10	36
Nottm Forest	39	10	5	4	34	25	6	4	10	24
Aston Villa	40	12	3	5	29	16	4	6	10	17
C. Palace	40	7	7	6	23	24	7	7	6	29
Chelsea	40	7	7	6	30	29	6	6	8	18
Oldham	40	11	5	4	44	31	3	4	13	17
Tottenham	40	7	2	11	30	32	8	4	8	24
QPR	40	5	10	5	24	21	6	7	7	22
Everton	40	7	8	5	26	18	5	5	10	21
Wimbledon	40	9	5	6	29	20	3	8	9	20
Southampton	40	6	5	9	16	28	7	5	8	21
Norwich City	40	8	5	7	28	27	3	6	11	18
Coventry	40	5	7	8	17	15	5	4	11	17
Luton Town	40	9	7	4	23	17	0	5	15	12
Notts Co	40	6	5	9	22	28	3	5	12	16
West Ham	39	4	6	9	18	24	3	5	12	15



MATES: Welsh internationals Mark Pembroke and Mark Hughes in competition.

SATURDAY'S MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Chamberlain; James, Dreyer, Peake, Harvey; Oakes (Stein 78mins), Kamara, Pembroke, Preece; Varadi (Gray 66mins), Harford.

MAN UNITED: Schmeichel; Parker (Blackmore HT), Bruce, Pallister, Irwin; McClair, Phelan, Webb, Sharpe; Giggs, Hughes (Kanchelskis 80 mins).

THE GOALS: Lee Sharpe for United, 24 minutes, nutmegging Alec Chamberlain after getting on the end of a long punt by Peter Schmeichel and beating Trevor Peake for pace; Mick Harford for the Town, 50 minutes, from the rebound after his first header hit the bar when he beat Denis Irwin in the air to a superb curling cross by David Preece.

OTHER ATTEMPTS: Town eight saved, eight wide and one hit the bar and led to a goal; United three saved and six wide. Corners: 10-5 to United.

REFEREE: Martin Bodenham, East Loos. Had a very good game and kept it flowing well although Gray's caution looked a little harsh.

BOOKED: Philip Gray for delaying a United free kick; Chris Kamara and Mark Hughes, foul and niggly retaliation; Mike Phelan, foul on Gray.

ATTENDANCE: Jam-packed 13,410, the first full house Kenilworth Road's current configuration has seen.

ENTERTAINMENT: Excellent, with the Town close to beating the champions elect, and always a real match for them.