

Luton look for unlikely escape route

By Glenn Moore

Luton Town 2 Aston Villa 0

LUTON'S annual escape act has become as much a part of modern footballing tradition as executive boxes and semi-final Sunday, but this year they may have taken their brinkmanship too far.

To secure a place in next season's Premier League, Luton, the only team in the top two divisions without an away victory, must win at relegated Notts County on Saturday while hoping Coventry — the First Division's other great escapologists — lose at Aston Villa.

If Villa play as tamely as they did at Kenilworth Road on Saturday there would appear little chance of the latter part of the equation being realised. But, having successfully avoided the drop on the final day for the last three years, Luton know strange things happen in the First Division's twilight zone.

Should they finally go down, after 10 years in the top flight, there will be few mourners. David Pleat's side are about as welcome in the Premier League as a beggar at a St James club.

While the power-brokers look down snootily on their cramped, ramshackle ground, low support and chronic under-funding, other clubs' fans have been alienated by the plastic pitch and the ban on away supporters.

But Luton do not intend to leave quietly.

Mark Pembridge — the one Luton player who is bound to be playing in the Premier League next year, though probably not in a Hatters shirt — was the difference against Villa, making Luton's crucial early opening goal and scoring the second.

Brian Stein — a veteran both of Luton's glory days at Wembley and earlier relegation struggles — glanced in Pembridge's right-wing cross for the first, after 10 minutes; 38 minutes later Pembridge drilled a left-foot shot from 30 yards past the surprised Bosnich.

Luton's financial problems dictate that Pembridge, the fiery ginger-haired Welsh international, will be sold in the summer.

Bosnich, the Australian goalkeeper who briefly featured with Manchester United before the Home Office sent him home, enlivened a promising Villa debut by being booked. He made a Grobbelaar-like foray upfield that ended with him conceding a throw-in and refusing to hand over the ball.

Another newcomer, Salton, who was given a testing full League debut at right-back for Luton, coped well enough for the watching Craig Brown, manager of Scotland Under-21s, to draft him into the squad to go to Sweden for this week's European Championship semi-final.