

Sports News

DESPAIR

Survival fight



● **SHATTERED:** The faces of Trevor Peake and Colin Murphy say it all as the Town troop away from the First Division at Meadow Lane.

'If you can't win away you deserve relegation'

—STRIKER'S VIEW

DEJECTED players shed tears as ten years in the First Division ended on a day they knew a place in the Premier League had been theirs for the taking.

Coventry, the team they had to overhaul, were beaten 2-0 at Aston Villa, with Cyrille Regis scoring in the first minute.

Extra misery

The shouts and chants from the crowded Town pens told the players what was happening.

But in the end Villa's performance only added to Town players' misery. Said David Pleat: "I hope it hurts them, but does not damage them."

He paid tribute to the efforts made by young and old alike in his mixed team of youth and experience.

"Trevor Peake has been a fine captain and he doesn't deserve to be relegated," said the boss.

He added that injuries during the game to Mick Harford and Chris Kamara had not helped the Town's cause at Nottingham.

But he knew that every player had given everything he could on a day the whole season was encapsulated into one match.

"I think the Premier League has lost a footballing team," he added.

Magnificent fans

"And I feel for the supporters: they were magnificent today, and have been all season."

"But it's a horrible feeling for all of us to be out of the competition for the best teams in the country. It hurts, but you have to live with it."

"We were in a position where we thought we could do it. We had chances and half-chances, and their

goalkeeper was splendid. But we couldn't put the ball in the net, and that has done us."

"In the first ten minutes we played excellent stuff. We should have had a goal in that spell — Pembroke hit two very good shots."

"I am really numbed. When their second goal went in it hit me that it wasn't going to be."

"I didn't think we had enough in our locker to get a second goal."

"And I have to say we shouldn't have conceded the first."

All gutted

Mark Pembroke, who probably played his last game for the Town at Meadow Lane, said: "We are all gutted. We worked hard and had the opportunities but didn't take them. It's a lousy feeling going down."

Trevor Peake said: "This is an awful feeling I have never had in my career. There are some who still can't believe it."

"We gave it all we had, but we let in the equaliser too early. If we could have got through to ten minutes into the second half without conceding a goal I think we could have battled through to victory."

Time to settle

"I didn't think we would struggle for so long this season. It took a long time to get a settled team, and we are all so disappointed to throw it away at the last hurdle."

"But you have just got to look at the table: we didn't win away, we

THERE were tears and cheers at Meadow Lane on Saturday as Luton Town's 16th away defeat of the season condemned them to relegation after ten defiant years in the First Division.

By Sports Editor Brian Swain

The knowledge that they deserved it for their inability on so many other trips this season was little consolation to the enormous blow we all felt on a day when everything seemed set fair for another dramatic escape act.

Aston Villa did the business by beating Coventry, the Town went into an early lead, and even at half-time, with the score 1-1, I thought determination to succeed would do the job against a Notts County side which had been relegated a week earlier.

But instead it was County who came out and played the better football for the last 45 minutes of the season.

The fifth occasion in ten years when it has gone down to the wire turned out to be one too many.

Ovation

The army of fans who went to Meadow Lane, to become nearly half the attendance showed their feelings with an emotional ovation to a team that had done its best and found it to be not good enough.

The talk in the bars and pubs afterwards was not so much of failings by players or manager, but of a tight-fisted board. They not only failed to give David Pleat the tools to do the job, but also robbed him of some of the best he had.

The policy of chasing financial stability above playing success has come home to roost.

If only one or two of us crying into our beer on Saturday night had the money to spend on putting our beliefs and ideas into practice!

Nerves

Luckless Alec Chamberlain looked to be suffering nerves more than most. He got away with missing a free kick clearance attempt on the edge of the box before one much closer to the goal-line led to the County equaliser.

Most football games are full of "if only" memories, and they crowd in about the Town's bright early promise.

Twice in the first ten minutes we were lifted at the sight of Mark Pembroke delivering rasping drives which were saved by Steve Cherry.

Practice

Both were products of training ground practice on corners.

One from the right, by Scott Oakes, was pulled back and dummied by David Preece to allow Pembroke to close in for a shot from the edge of the box.

The second was from the left, by Preece. As defenders and attackers alike crowded into the goal area he played the corner back and once more Pembroke raced in and hit a scorching

Desolate

The Town dressing room was a scene of desolation, with the knowledge that survival had been so near yet so far.

It is little wonder that the team did not play at its best.

But they were miraculous in getting over the tension on a day when there was no half-

Division player. You feel you have let everyone down.

"I am sure we can bounce back, but we need more strength in depth. And I am looking forward to playing for Luton Town again next season."

Chris Kamara looked like a man suffering a family bereavement.

"I am absolutely shattered," he said. "We had a one-goal lead and the fans right behind us. Then we lost a stupid goal at a set piece, and all of a sudden our world crumbled."

"That equaliser killed us. We had a few chances after that, but couldn't take them."

"This is the worst thing that has ever happened to me in 16 years in football."

"We were confident we could get out of it, but if you give goals away like County's first you deserve to go down."

"Our football doesn't deserve to go down, but our strike rate has not been good enough."

"Phil Gray got injured in my debut game, and since then we have lacked a goalscoring partner for Mick Harford."

Need a marksman

"He has had a magnificent season, and Brian Stein is a good set-up man, but we need another marksman."

"We have outplayed teams away from home but couldn't get two up when we should have done."

"It will take me a long time to get over this shock."

The midfielder is contracted to the Town for another two years, and he believes that no player will want to leave despite the failure to stay in the top flight.

Town match verdict ★ ★ ★

ALL ROUND

fails the last test

Action pictures by Josh Levy

shot, with Cherry again equal for it.

County employed Craig Short to shadow Mick Harford everywhere he went, but he was not up to the task in the move that saw the Town take the lead.

Pembroke hurled in a long throw from the right, and Harford rose above Short to get the knock-down.

County failed to clear Julian James found the ball bobbling his way, and he hit a right foot shot into the corner of the net.

But the Town could not extend the lead against a side keen to do well on their farewell to the First Division.

Tony Agana wasted a chance at one end, shooting over the bar when put clear by Mark Draper, and at the other Brian Stein headed over the bar when John Dreyer's long ball had been headed back by Harford.

James and Dean Thomas got into a bad-tempered tangle for which the County man was booked in the 33rd minute, and a few seconds later James unloaded Agana on County's left.

Thomas powered in the free kick and Chamberlain flapped it

to Short. His shot was blocked on the line by Dreyer, but debut boy Rob Matthews accepted a gift first goal from the rebound.

I made the Town marginally ahead on points at the interval, but in the first part of the second half County were the team who showed more determination for aspell.

They pressed forward to win a succession of corners.

Push up

The Town rode that period of difficulty and started to push up to look for a winner.

Chamberlain became a vital defender, acting as sweeper as the Town committed more men to attack.

They made chances, but were not sharp enough to convert them, with Pembroke, Preece and Stein all off target with efforts from the edge of the box.

Chris Kamara was magnificent in his efforts to drive forward, despite collecting an injury which made every step painful.

Dreyer, Peake and Darren Salton sorted out a smart mixture of

attack and defence, but two incidents in quick succession at opposite ends of the field finished the Town.

Cruel lesson

County half-cleared a free kick by Peake and Stein shot over the bar from about 20 yards, and County went upfield to give a cruel lesson in how it should be done.

Town men chased back as the ball was worked to Matthews in the inside left position, and despite defenders between him and the target he curled in a superb shot which left Chamberlain without a prayer as it bent into the far corner.

And bitter experience told us that was that, with 20 minutes of the decade of First Division soccer still to be played.

Both subs were put on as the Town went for broke, and Jason Rees forced Cherry to a good save seconds after the goalkeeper had done well to deflect a drive by Stein.

Wasted

The best chance fell to Phil Gray, who replaced Salton immediately

the stands willing the Town to pull off another miracle, but at a club that cannot afford to keep men of his quality, let alone buy them in, we can only remember the good days of the last decade and trust in the manager who brought them to us to do it again.

Given the backing, I believe David Pleat can do it again.

But first something will have to be done to redress the badly-loaded balance of financial priorities.



● **BRIEF ELATION:** David Preece is first to congratulate Julian James on his goal.

THE FULL MATCH DETAILS

NOTTS COUNTY 2 LUTON TOWN 1 (Half-time: 1-1)

TOWN: Chamberlain; James, Salton (Gray 70 mins), Peake, Dreyer; Oakes, Kamara (Rees 76 mins), Pembroke, Preece; Stein, Harford.

COUNTY: Cherry; Palmer, Williams, Craig Short, Thomas; Chris Short, Draper, Harding, Wilson (Devlin, 58 mins); Agana, Matthews. Other sub: Johnson.

THE GOALS: Julian James for the Town, 18th minute, low left foot shot after a long throw by Mark Pembroke; Rob Matthews for County, 34th minute, after Alec Chamberlain got into difficulty with a free kick by Dean Thomas and John Dreyer blocked a Craig Short drive on the line; Matthews again, 71st minute, brilliant curling shot into far corner after the Town were caught stretched as they pushed upfield in the do or die effort to score.

OTHER ATTEMPTS: Town nine saved and ten wide; County eight saved and seven wide. Corners: 6-5 to the Town.

REFEREE: Bob Nixon, Wirral; had a good game and dealt confidently with a few odd moments of nastiness which broke out as a result of tension.

ATTENDANCE: 11,380, boosted by just over 5,000 from Luton, who did their very best to cheer the team to survival.

BOOKED: Dean Thomas for a foul on Julian James; Mark Pembroke for one on Kevin Wilson.

ENTERTAINMENT: It was probably a good match, but impossible for Town fans to enjoy on a day when so much hung on the last 45 minutes of the season, and the Town team was not good enough to deliver another fairy-tale finale.

The 1991/92 season

● Results showing Town score first, Town scorers, attendances and league position:

Barclays League Div One

14 Everton (a) 1-1 (Stein).....16,707 19

21 Southampton (a) 1-2 (Pembroke).....15,315 20

APRIL

4 Wimbledon (h) 2-1 (Varadi, Preece).....7,754 20

11 Oldham (a) 1-5 (Harford).....13,210 20

24 Nottm Forest (h) 2-1 (Harford, James).....8,014 20

18 Man Utd (h) 1-1.....13,410 20

20 QPR (a) 1-2 (Pembroke pen).....10,749 20

25 A. Villa (h) 2-0 (Stein, Pembroke).....11,178 20

MAY

2 Notts Co (a) 1-2 (James).....11,380 20

APPEARANCES (as sub in brackets): Ever-presents

Dreyer and Pembroke 42; Peake 38, Preece 34(4), Stein 32(7), Harvey 31(1), Harford 29, James 28, Kamara 28, Chamberlain 24, Telfer 17(3), Oakes 15(6), Gray 9(5), Hughes 6(12), Nogan 6(8), Varadi 5(1), Campbell 4(7), Rees 3(2), Linton 2(1), Salton 2(1), Williams 1(1).

Before transfers: Sutton 14 (loan), Rodger 11(1), McDonough 9, Jackson 7(2), Beaumont 6(3), Thompson 5, Black 4, Day 4 (loan), Farrell 3(1), Holsgrave 1, Glover 1 (loan).

Number of players used: 32, eleven more than last season.

GOALS: Harford 12, Pembroke 5(2 pens), Stein 3, Preece 3, Gray 3, Dreyer 2(1 pen), Harvey 2, Oakes 2, Varadi 1, Nogan 1, Telfer 1, James 2, OG 1 (Tanner, Liverpool).

FA CUP, THIRD ROUND

Jan 4 Sheff Utd (a) 0-4.....12,201

APPEARANCES: One each by Chamberlain, James, Peake, Harvey, Telfer, Kamara, Pembroke, Preece, Oakes and Stein. One as sub by Campbell.

THE RUMBELOWS CUP

Rd 2(1) Sep 25 Birmingham (h) 2-2 (Gray, Nogan).....6,315

Rd 2(2) Oct 9 Birmingham (a) 2-3 (Gray 2).....13,252

APPEARANCES: Two each by Chamberlain, Jackson, Preece, Beaumont, Pembroke, Thompson, Telfer and Gray. Stein 1(1). One each by Peake, Harvey, Dreyer, Rodger and Harford. Nogan two as sub. Salton one as sub.

Zenith Data Systems Cup

Rd 2: Oct 22 Ipswich (a) 1-1 (Telfer). Lost on pens.....5,750

APPEARANCES: One each by Chamberlain, Telfer, Rodger, Salton, Allpress, Pembroke, Nogan, James, Hughes, Williams and Harford. One each as sub: Rees and Campbell.



● **GOING FOR IT:** Brian Stein hits a drive which rose inches over the bar as the Town battled for a second-half lifesaver.

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