

Moment of mercy

92/93

Hammers crash but the referee gives defender a lucky break

By NEIL HARMAN

Luton Town..... 2 West Ham United..... 0

JULIAN DICKS was grateful that this interruption to West Ham's promotion ambitions did not involve the fourth sending off of his tempestuous season.

On the day Vinnie Jones made his tri-annual visit to Lancaster Gate, the defender pressing him for the role of Malevolent Man stayed just clear of the cut-off point of 41 disciplinary points. One more caution and he will miss two matches of Hammers' likely involvement in the play-offs.

He can count himself fortunate. When he stuck out his right arm to deflect Kerry Dixon's shot away from goal in the 84th minute, a penalty was obvious and a red card seemed almost as certain. The laws of the game all but insist on it.

Last night, referee Gurnam Singh took pity on the crestfallen figure in front of him and showed the yellow. If this is the unwritten law of common sense being applied, the referee should be applauded for his leniency. 'I thought I was going off,' Dicks admitted later. 'And that really would have put me in hot water. The referee said he wasn't going to send me off because there were two players behind me on the line.'

If Luton deserved the success which eased their concerns at the opposite end of the table, it was right that they achieved it against a full quota of Hammers.

Not only that, for the previous 80 minutes Dicks had been superb in the face of a Luton onslaught which was so invigorating that it

Top of Division I

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Newcastle	41	24	9	8	78	35	81
Portsmouth	42	23	10	9	74	41	79
West Ham	42	22	10	10	70	39	76
Swindon	42	21	11	10	71	53	74
Tranmere	41	20	8	13	65	53	68
Leicester	40	20	8	12	62	52	68
Millwall	41	17	16	8	62	42	67

might have brought them more than the two goals they managed in the final six minutes.

The penalty was put away with venom by Philip Gray. A minute from time Gray backheeled substitute Martin Williams into inviting space on Dicks' weaker side and the teenager who had never scored for his club before swept the ball sweetly home.

So, the win that Luton manager David Pleat had known was imperative in the struggle to avoid a second successive relegation was theirs by right. 'I didn't want to mention it to the players,' he said, 'but deep down, I felt we needed this one desperately. Going to Sunderland on Saturday without this result behind us would have put us



PAYING THE PENALTY: more gloom for Hammers as goalkeeper Ludek Miklosko is beaten by Philip Gray's 84th-minute spot kick and struggling Luton are on the way to netting three valuable First Division points

Picture: DAVE SHOPLAND

From Back Page

right on the spot. Even so, that's more than a six-pointer, it's a 25-pointer for this club. We've got 48 points from 42 games but everyone's nervous down there.'

If they were racked by those nerves, the Luton players did their best to disguise it. Indeed, but for the saves of Czech goalkeeper Ludek Miklosko — though he didn't always know how he managed it — this could have been an even deeper wound to Hammers' confidence.

David Speedie twice cleared off his own line, once when Miklosko, retreating beyond his far post in an attempt to punch clear, sent the ball towards the top corner. Somehow, Speedie reached it. In front of the

opposition's goal, he was less certain — and he was not a lone sufferer. Ian Bishop blasted over from a couple of feet while Tony Gale, Martin Allen and Dicks were all wantonly wasteful when the ball fell to them on the edge of the area.

A minute before Luton took the lead, Allen crossed from the right, Trevor Morley made contact and the ball fell to Dicks's right foot, eight yards out. Alec Chamberlain's save may just have been the most important of the season.

Hammers play three more strugglers at home but, with Portsmouth timing their finishing sprint so well, even that may not be enough to lift them into one of the automatic promotion places.