

Dicks avoids dismissal as West Ham fade away

By Clive Ellis

Luton.....2 West Ham.....0

THE ONLY good news for West Ham was that Julian Dicks stayed on the field after handling Kerry Dixon's goalbound shot seven minutes from the end.

Philip Gray's penalty and a well-worked second goal by Martin Williams, his first for the club, not only gave Luton an excellent chance of remaining in the First Division but also severely undermined West Ham's faltering promotion claims.

A play-off place is West Ham's for the taking but, having for so long looked like inevitable promotion partners for Newcastle, the momentum is now very much with Portsmouth who remained three points clear of the Londoners.

Billy Bonds, West Ham manager, said: "It's hard to see Portsmouth slip up the way they're going at the moment. It looks as though we might have to win our last four to go up."

A match which was full of good football and notable for excellent saves by both goalkeepers, Alec Chamberlain and Ludek Miklosko, turned on two critical moments near the end, both involving Dicks.

Nine minutes from time, he surged forward to strike a shot which was fortuitously blocked; he struck the rebound with equal conviction but Chamberlain saved brilliantly.

Almost immediately Dicks was forced to turn auxiliary goalkeeper to prevent Dixon giving Luton the lead. Gurnam Singh, the referee, decided that a booking was sufficient punishment for Dicks' crime, though no one could have been greatly surprised at a fourth sending off this season for the combative defender. Even so, he faces a fifth period of suspension, which will hardly help West Ham's claims.

West Ham would have been forewarned by their defeat at Southend a week ago that matches against relegation candidates can be more anxious affairs than those against teams in the midtable comfort zone of the First Division.

Luton were much the quicker to settle on a difficult surface and Chris Kamara almost put them in front in the second minute after the ball had skidded away from Miklosko's grasp.

West Ham's marking was all at sea in the 16th minute as Marvin Johnson slid in the far post, almost converting Paul Telfer's free-kick from the right.

Martin Allen—returning to the West Ham side after suspension—began to wrest control in midfield but their shooting was wayward. Allen should have given West Ham the lead early in the second half but he shot over wildly from no more than eight yards after Luton had failed to clear a West Ham corner.

Gray, Luton's leading scorer, missed two clear-cut chances to give his side the lead. His shot in the 55th minute was kept out by Miklosko and the striker failed to take advantage after the visiting goalkeeper had pawed away Julian James' curling left-foot shot.

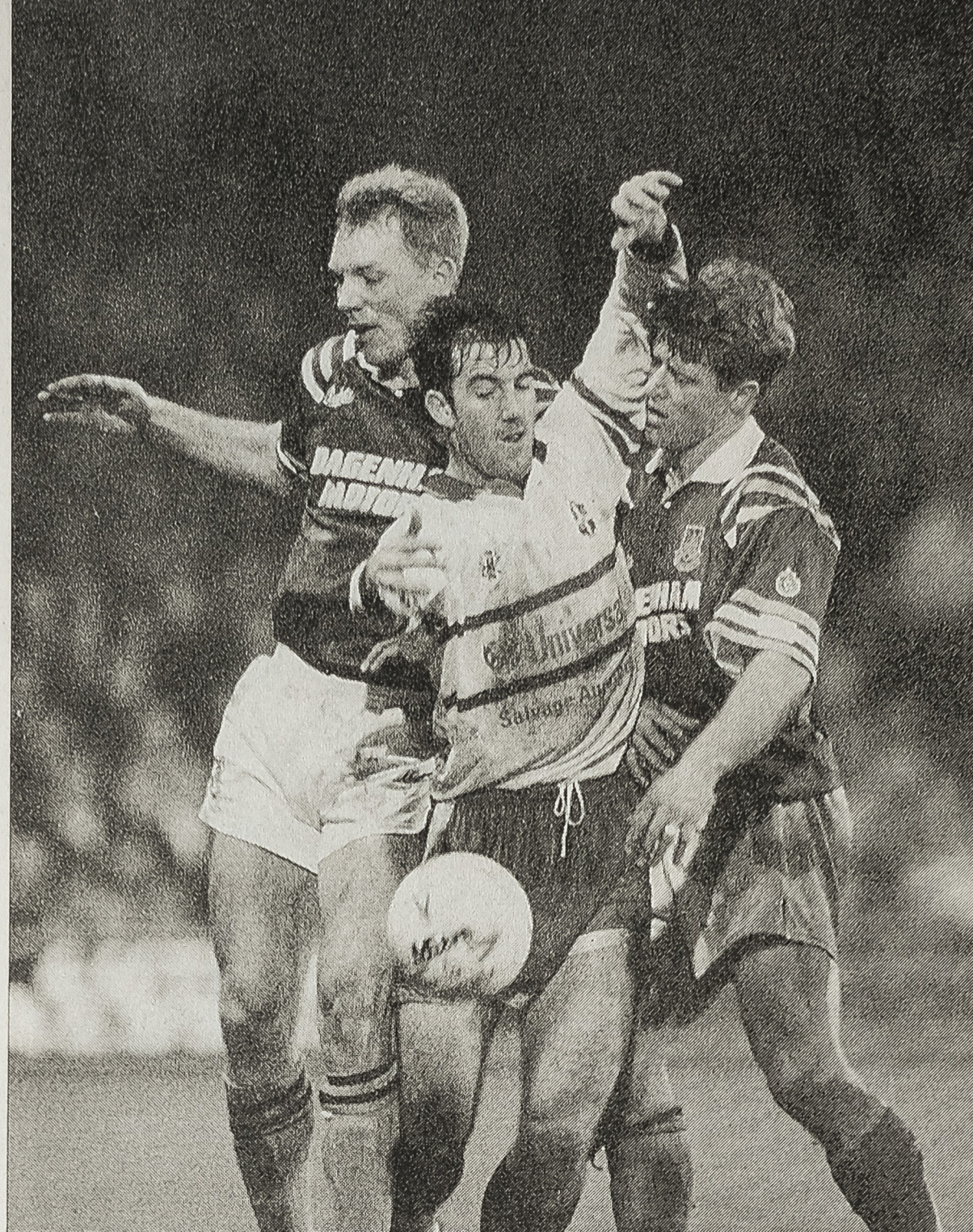
There was no sign of a let-up in the unrelenting pace of the game and Chamberlain had to be alert to tip over Speedie's cleverly-conceived chip in the 67th minute.

Seconds later a rapid Luton break ended with a well-struck volley from James, which brought a brilliant leaping save by Miklosko.

Luton Town: Chamberlain; Dreyer, Telfer (Oakes 73), Johnson, James, Peake, Hughes (Williams 73), Kamara, Dixon, Gray, Preece.

West Ham: Miklosko; Breacker, Dicks, Potts, Gale, Bishop, Allen (Holmes 81), Butler, Speedie, Morley, Keen.

Referee: G Singh (Wolverhampton).



Luton scorer Philip Gray is sandwiched by Breaker and Butler

Picture: FRANK COPPI