

Hendrie homes in on title

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By LOUISE TAYLOR

CLUTCHING red and white balloons, Middlesbrough supporters filed out of Ayresome Park yesterday confident that they will be cheering a Premier League team next season.

Should Bolton Wanderers fail to win away to Stoke City on Wednesday, Manchester United and company will be requiring directions to Middlesbrough's new Riverside Stadium in August. The only way that Bryan Robson's side can be deprived of automatic promotion from the Endsleigh Insurance League first division is if Bolton win their remaining two fixtures and Middlesbrough lose to Tranmere Rovers at Prenton Park next Sunday. Bolton could then overtake them on goals scored.

Robson's horizon did not initially look quite so sunny.

More than once in a nervy opening half, Dwight Marshall, the Luton striker, outwitted Middlesbrough's off-side trap before outstripping their defence. Even when Middlesbrough won a penalty after half an hour — mysteriously awarded for an alleged handling offence — Cox's nervous kick was saved, but the mood lightened seconds before half-time, Hendrie's shot being deflected into the net off Marshall's body.

Marshall won the free kick that led to Luton's 63rd-minute equaliser. When Telfer hoisted the ball over a disorganised wall, nobody picked up Taylor's run and, unimpeded, he headed across the line. But Luton's hopes ended in the 71st minute, when Whyte centred cleverly from the byline and Hendrie fired a decisive second from just outside the six-yard area. Few players have done more than Hendrie to propel Middlesbrough towards promotion.

His winner provoked a mi-

nor pitch invasion at the final whistle. Every one of the hundred or so trespassers seemed to want to give Robson a congratulatory pat and, good naturedly, he waited 15 minutes, patiently permitting his hair to be ruffled and shirt tugged. "I got the same tingle as when I played in big games for Manchester United," he said.

Matches do not come much bigger than the one against Tranmere next Sunday, and Robson's players were permitted no part in the Ayresome celebrations yesterday. "It will be nice if that was the last game here, but you never know," he said. Nobody, least of all the player-manager, wants to face a play-off semi-final at the club's outdated home.

MIDDLESBROUGH (4-4-2): A Miller — N Cox, N Pearson, S Vickers, D Whyte — C Blackmore, J Pollock, B Robson, A Moore — J A Fjortoft, J Hendrie.

LUTON TOWN (4-4-2): K Davis — D Linton, T Peake, M Johnson, R Harvey — P Telfer, S Oakes (sub: A Thorpe, 80min), G Waddock, D Preece — J Taylor, D Marshall.

Referee: P Vanes.