

Lawrence repairs Luton

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Steve Thomson sees why relegation fear has receded under new manager

MANAGER of the month trophies now come in the shape of a silver owl, the emblem of League sponsors Endsleigh, and Lennie Lawrence, the latest Division One recipient, is proving once again that he is a wise operator when it comes to reviving struggling clubs.

Luton have not lost in the League since the former Charlton, Middlesbrough and Bradford manager took charge six games ago. They are now fifth from bottom and steadily clawing their way towards safety after snatching an unlikely 3-2 victory over Grimsby from the jaws of defeat.

One key to Lawrence's success is an uncanny ability to re-charge the enthusiasm of players whose form has gone flat. Witness Bontcho Guentchev with four goals in his last five outings, including Saturday's crucial equaliser with an accurate drive after the visitors had gone 2-1 up.

The Bulgarian striker, who Lawrence describes as "a good technician on the training ground", is now displaying that ability on the main stage. So much so that the 31-year-old, whose free transfer switch from Ipswich last summer caused barely a ripple of interest, has been recalled to his country's squad for their friendly against England next month.

Another of Lawrence's strengths is his willingness to change tack if the game plan goes astray, as it threatened to do when Grimsby went ahead with the second of Jamie Forrester's goals. Within minutes he had sent on substitutes David

Oldfield, who added more composure in midfield, and Dwight Marshall, to inject extra pace up front. The effectiveness of these changes was underlined when Oldfield's defence-piercing pass sent Marshall clear to steer in the winner.

Perhaps the biggest managerial plus of all for Lawrence, however, is an ability to learn from adversity. In only his second game at the helm, the Hatters showed all the madness their nickname suggests when succumbing to a 7-1 FA Cup defeat by none other than Grimsby.

"The lessons I learned have been invaluable in our subsequent good run," he said. He did not need to go into specifics for it is clear that Luton are no longer a soft touch — unlike opposing goalkeeper Paul Crichton, who virtually handed them the lead early on when allowing Graham Alexander's long-range shot to bound over his despairing dive.

Forrester, snapped up for nothing from Leeds last October, neatly hooked the ball in to level matters 10 minutes later and turned smartly on to a pass from Peter Butler to put Grimsby in front shortly after the interval.

It was only Forrester's fifth goal of the season and four of them have been against Luton. So it was rather baffling to see the youngster, clearly hungry for his hat-trick, taken off with nine minutes still remaining. "We needed some fresh legs," was assistant manager Kenny Swain's puzzling post-match explanation.

Grimsby hoisted themselves into promotion contention before Christmas under the inspiration of Ivano Bonetti,



Lennie Lawrence... lifted Luton off the bottom

their Italian import. But Bonetti who played for Sampdoria against Barcelona in the 1992 European Cup final at Wembley, found Kenilworth Road's glue-pot pitch far too restricting for his nimble footwork.

Player-manager Brian Laws must be increasingly worried by a slump that leaves his side without a League win in 10 games. The margin between these two teams is now only six points.

Luton Town: Feuer; James, Davis, Patterson, Thomas; Alexander, Hughes, Waddock, Thorpe (Marshall 63); Taylor (Oldfield 61), Guentchev. **Sub:** Harvey. **Goals:** Alexander (7), Guentchev (66), Marshall (74). **Booked:** Thomas, Davis, Waddock, Hughes, Patterson.

Grimsby: Crichton; Laws, Warner, Lever, Croft; Childs (Southall 59), Groves, Butler, Bonetti; Woods, Forrester (Lester 81). **Sub:** Shakespeare. **Goals:** Forrester (17, 56). **Booked:** Warner.

Referee: B Knight (Orpington).