

Policeman arrests Town escape fight to put them one foot in the grave

Sheffield Utd 1 Luton 0

By PETE KENYON

SEETHING HATTERS planted one foot in the grave after crashing to a third consecutive defeat in yesterday's crucial relegation scrap.

But scarcely can Victor Meldrew's catchphrase "I don't believe it" had a more fitting description of the result.

There must have been 500 sick parrots who left Sheffield for the long trip home last night.

With just 13 minutes left to play keeper Ian Feuer picked up a loose ball which had pinged back to him off Mitchell Thomas' knee eight yards out.

But referee Trevor West, a policeman from Hull, adjudged it to be a deliberate back pass and £1,000,000 signing Don Hutchison hammered substitute Phil Starbuck's indirect free kick into the bottom corner.

Mugged

It's not often that officers of the law stand accused of mugging - but in football terms that's exactly what Hatters were - mugged.

That the decision - from a referee who until then hadn't put a foot wrong - should swing such a crucial relegation tussle, was unfortunate to say the least.

In the pre-match build up Hatters' boss Lennie Lawrence was emphatic with his words.

"Quite simply we cannot afford to lose," he told journalists.

But with just 90 seconds on the clock Luton came within an ace of taking an early lead and giving Lawrence the fillip he needed.

Skipper Steve Davis thundered Scott Oakes'

Sadly, we do believe it!

95/96 floated corner towards the net, but Mitch Ward risked serious head injury to clear the rocket like effort off the line.

This was a feat he would repeat early in the second half - this time with an outstretched boot - from Oakes' dipping long range volley.

If Ward needed a dose of half-time aspirin to recover from his early saving header then the United fan in the main stand who bravely nodded Gary Waddock's up-and-under clearance back into play probably needed the whole packet.

For long periods it was United who were having all the headaches coping with the aerial threat of Taylor and lively running from Oakes and Oldfield.

On 20 minutes it was Oakes who nearly caught Simon Tracey out with a chip from 40 yards but the ball sailed just too high.

At the other end Gary Ablett played a peach of a through ball down the centre for Andy Walker, who outpaced Patterson but found Feuer right in his face to snuff out the one-on-one chance.

On the half-hour Taylor had two chances - both with headers - but found the keeper's arms on each occasion.

Desperate

Just before the hour Oakes' volley from the left angle of the box beat Tracey's desperate dive but Ward again cleared off the line.

With both sides clearly showing signs of nerves United manager Howard Kendall threw Phil Starbuck and David White into the action.

The game changed, with Starbuck forcing Feuer into three fine saves in as many minutes.

But the closest that United came was on 69 minutes when a cross from Dave Whitehouse found White fifteen yards out.

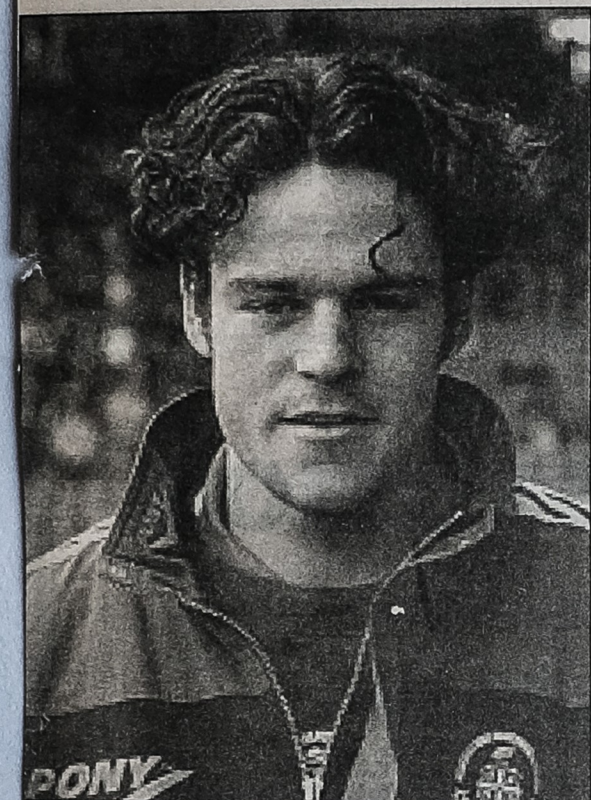
But the substitute's instinctive left-foot volley cannoned off the bar and Hatters cleared their lines.

Eight minutes later Mr West made the decisive decision of the match, and try as they might Hatters simply couldn't force a draw.

Tony Thorpe and on-loan Graeme Tomlinson, a 20-year-old striker from Manchester United, came on with nine minutes left but failed to make a difference.



● HEADS, YOU LOSE - The long arm of Simon Tracey foils John Taylor early on



● ON LOAN BOW - Graeme Tomlinson