

# HATTERS ARE STARING AT AN ABYSS

**BIRMINGHAM CITY 4**

**LUTON TOWN 0**

(Half-time: 1-0)

EVEN manager Lennie Lawrence, one of life's optimists, knows that Luton Town's 11th away defeat of the season spells the premature end of the battle to survive in the First Division.

"The strain is beginning to tell. We are staring into an abyss," he said after an uncharacteristic defensive

display allowed Birmingham to hit four goals at St. Andrew's for the first time this season. And on the 60th anniversary of a match - the sum total the Town have managed in 21 away games this season.

Barry Fry's men, still with an outside chance of a play-off place, were gifted the lead before a Town player had touched the ball and in the second half fate took a hand - the Town were down to ten men for the last 20 minutes, in which Birmingham scored three more.

As Kim Grant was stetched away from the Town's faint hopes of saving the game went with him. And it was precious little consolation to the big Luton following to hear that other results meant the Town would still be facing a mountain had they won.

Lawrence and Fry both suggested the seeds of the St. Andrew's humiliation were set in the midweek heartbreak when Stoke came back from a goal down to win at Kenilworth Road with two very late goals.

The Town seemed still to be suffering the psychological damage at St. Andrew's.

Lawrence was not as angry as he had been after the Stoke game, but the opening goal, always important,

left him perplexed.

"My last words in our talk before the game were to tell the players to remember that Peschisoldo and Barnes up front would try to turn them at the earliest opportunity."

He was proved horribly right: Darren Patterson, stand-in skipper while Steve Davis completed his suspension, made the mistake of winning the toss, giving City the kick-off.

They moved the ball back towards defence, and Martin Grainger hoofed a long clearance upfield. Patterson and Maria Johnson stood and watched, and Paul Devlin was allowed to run clear, go round Ian Feuer, and plant the ball into an empty net. The video nasty shows it took just 18.45 seconds.

Lawrence summed up the rest of the Town's afternoon: "We passed with reasonable effect to the edge of their penalty area, but there nothing much happened. Then going down to ten men was too much of a burden to bear, although 4-0 was a bit harsh. But I was asking myself are we ever going to score?"

"This is a team that looks as though it might do it... but never does. Chronic defensive errors have crept in lately, and if you concede a goal in the first minute you deserve nothing."

Fry, who has always had a bit of a soft spot for Luton, going back 20 years to his days as manager of Dunstable Town, said: "It was comfortable in the end after a dream start. It always looked as if Barnes and Devlin would score, but no way did we deserve to win 4-0."

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BY BRIAN SWAIN

# INJURIES STRIKE IN SECOND HALF

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He picked out as a turning point a 53rd-minute save by Bart Griemink, the best of the match. Still only one down, the Town were threatening to get back into a game they had to win. Scott Oakes was fouled just outside the box, and Richard Harvey, one of three subs used, curled a brilliant free kick around the wall and towards the top corner of the net. But the Dutch goalkeeper acrobatically tipped the ball round the post, and from then on the Town looked Second Division.

Lawrence shuffled his pack without being able to find any aces, although Oakes and sub John Taylor both struck powerful drives a little too high.

Chasing the game, the Town left themselves more and more vulnerable, particularly when Fry sent to Alan Legg to use his pace to get at Graham Alexander. That forced the right back to spend less time in attack, but Paul Barnes missed two good chances to extend Birmingham's lead.

The second turning point came when the Town suffered their second serious injury of the game. Gary Waddock had been forced out by a first-half kick on the ankle, and with 20 minutes to go Grainger clattered into Grant. The Blues man collected a yellow card, while the stretcher collected Grant, and although he was able to limp up and down the touchline after treatment to his ankle injury, there was no way he could go back on.



KIM GRANT

Graeme Tomlinson had already become the third sub, replacing David Oldfield after Taylor had taken over from Bontcho Guentchev.

Fry sent on 6ft 7in attacker Kevin Francis, and he finished off the Town with a 76th-minute header from a far post cross by Gary Poole.

A through ball by Paul Peschisoldo sent Paul Barnes through for the third minute later, and in injury time Barnes scored again, converting the rebound after Ian Feuer parried a drive by Peschisoldo.

Just before that Alexander might have pulled a goal back. A delightful crossfield ball by Oakes set him free on the overlap down the right, and Alexander danced clear of the defenders brilliantly, only to pull his shot wide of the post.

Shortly afterwards Oakes had a 25-yarder well saved, but the crucial difference between the sides was that Birmingham created chances deep inside the penalty area, while the Town's efforts were nearly all from outside it.

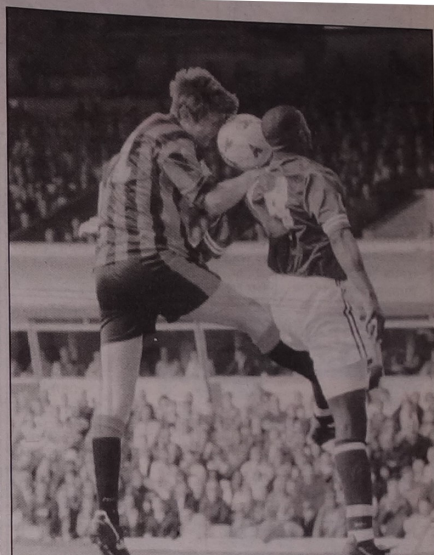
There was little conviction or confidence about the all-round team performance. We needed a miracle, perhaps some outrageous piece of luck, to give a hope of victory. Now we need the same to avoid relegation. Going down with Watford is a bitter pill to swallow.

**BIRMINGHAM:** Griemink; Poole, Breen, Edwards, Grainger; Tait (Legg 54 mins), Cornforth (Francis 70 mins), Devlin, Hunt (Johnson 59 mins); Barnes, Peschisoldo.

**LUTON TOWN:** Feuer; Alexander, Patterson, Johnson, Thomas; Oldfield (Tomlinson 64 mins), Waddock (Harvey 35 mins), Oakes, Thorpe; Guentchev (Taylor 54 mins), Grant.

**ATTENDANCE:** 15,426.

**REFERENCE:** Roger Gifford, Llanbradach.



HEADS UP: John Taylor in competition with Birmingham's Michael Johnson



BLASTED: Tony Thorpe tries his luck with a power drive that was deflected wide