

No let up for physio

97/98

Luton 1 WBA 1

HATTERS physio Clive Goodyear is fast becoming the busiest man at Kenilworth Road.

Marvin Johnson is the latest addition to his already over-subscribed treatment room, after being stretchered off during Tuesday night's 1-1 Coca Cola Cup draw with Division One high-flyers West Brom.

He now faces at least three weeks on the sidelines after being forced out of the action with knee ligament damage.

To underline the extent of the crisis, when manager Lennie Lawrence threw promising youngster Liam George into the action for his Luton Town debut on 77 minutes, the 18-year-old became the 24th player to be used in a campaign which is just 10 games old.

Only Steve Davis and Gary Waddock are ever-presents.

Lawrence said: "The likes of Sean Evers, Liam George and Gary Doherty will all be players and they can all play their parts, but not week in week out."

But stand-in striker Stuart Douglas, still only 19, was singled out by his manager for special praise after firing Hatters into a 24th minute lead and picking up the man-of-the-match award.

"Stuart is looking like a man, not like the little boy he did last year," said Lawrence.

Even so, Douglas faces life back on the fringes of the first team with the £400,000 signing of Phil Gray, and the return to fitness of Tony Thorpe after a three match absence.

Gray, who left Kenilworth Road for Sunderland for £800,000 in 1994, re-signed for his old club on Monday, but needed to return to Amsterdam on Tuesday to sort out his pre-move personal affairs.

In 59 appearances for Luton between 1992 and 1994, the 28-year-old netted 22 times, and Lawrence will be looking to the experienced target man to form an instant partnership with Tony Thorpe.

Another former Hatter back at Kenilworth Road, keeper Andy Dibble, suffered a nightmare start to his second spell at the club.

He failed to come for a swirling cross into the six yard box, and as he and Marvin Johnson waited for each other to clear, Bob Taylor stole in to level a tie which until then Luton had threatened to run away with.

But the penalty-save hero of Hatters 1988 Littlewoods Cup Final triumph was more decisive eight minutes from time - racing off his line to smother as Kevin Kilbane charged through on goal. Gary Waddock and Bob Taylor both hit the woodwork, but after a bright start Hatters faded badly, and were lucky to cling on for a draw.

Luton: Dibble, Alexander, Harvey, Waddock, Davis, Johnson (Davies, 67), McLaren, Evers, (George, 77), Oldfield, Douglas, Marshall. Sub not used: Doherty. Attendance: 3,437.



WELCOME BACK:
Phil Gray scores on his return to Luton, while (inset) a midfield tussle ensues.

Gray day for Luton

97/98

Luton Town 2 Wrexham 5

By PETE KENYON

NEW BOY Phil Gray paid back the first instalment on his £400,000 transfer fee - then watched his makeshift team fall apart.

A tactical blunder of monstrous proportions from Luton boss Lennie Lawrence wrecked the Gray-inspired comeback - and after clawing back a two-goal deficit Hatters surrendered to a three-goal 11-minute blitz.

Within four minutes of needlessly bringing off Richard Harvey and making 40-year-old reserve coach Trevor Peake Hatters' oldest-ever league player, Wrexham were back in front and ten minutes later it was all over at 5-2.

Dwight Marshall became the latest casualty of Hatters' already injury-ravaged season - after being stretchered off as early as the eighth minute - as Lawrence's nightmare run of bad luck cantered on at breakneck speed.

Initial fears that the Jamaican had

broken his ankle after catching his foot on the turf proved groundless - but Marshall now faces several weeks on the sidelines with ligament damage.

As for the decision to play Andy Dibble instead of the improving Kelvin Davis - only Lawrence knows the answer.

Welshman Dibble may have left Kenilworth Road as a 1988 Littlewoods Cup Final hero, but, quite simply, he has returned as a shadow of his former self - afraid to catch any ball under pressure in his own six yard box, and already a target of abuse from the boo-boys.

Unless ragged Hatters improve soon the unthinkable prospect of basement football next season is a real possibility.

Coach Wayne Turner appealed to the press afterwards: "Blunt your knives do not sharpen them." But the glaring fact is this side, albeit an injury-ravaged one, would struggle to grind out a result in the Vauxhall Conference.

Lawrence himself conceded after yesterday's sorry debacle: "What happened after we pulled back to 2-2 was a total nonsense."

And he gave disgruntled supporters - who were baying for blood at the end of

90 minutes - little hope of a rapid turnaround in events.

"We cannot buy any more players because I have spent all the money on Phil Gray, and we cannot loan any more because we already have our full quota of two loan players."

"These are difficult times and there is no getting away from it. I have been in similar situations before but never with so little ammunition to deal with it."

"We have got to patch up and mend and make do until we get our side back."

Defending his tactics and the substitution of Richard Harvey at such a crucial point in the game, Lawrence shrugged: "It might have been different who knows the decisions were made and that was it."

But he blasted his side for buckling to three late goals.

Bryan Small pulled down Dean Spink after letting the ball bounce over his head just after the hour and Craig Skinner made no mistake with the resultant penalty to make it 3-2.

Straight from the kick-off Trevor Peake allowed a ball to bounce over his head, Dibble never moved off his line and Karl Connolly popped in

unchallenged to rifle into the corner. Ten minutes later Connolly completed his hat-trick after Skinner's inch-perfect through ball sliced Hatters' defence apart and the young striker made no mistake.

Earlier Hatters had outplayed Wrexham only to fall two goals behind - Dave Brammer getting behind the defence to put a volley past Dibble on 10 minutes.

Fifteen minutes later Connolly got on the scoresheet for the first time after benefitting from Gary Waddock's failure to clear from the edge of his own box.

Steve Davis threw Luton a lifeline three minutes before the break - heading home a Richard Harvey corner in emphatic style - and three minutes after the break Phil Gray's persistence in chasing a lost cause reaped its reward when he somehow bundled past Andy Marriott and slotted home from the acutest of angles.

Hatters: Dibble, McGowan, Harvey (Peake 67), Waddock (Thorpe 45), Davis, Small, Gray, McLaren, Oldfield, Douglas, Marshall (Evers 8). Attendance: 5,241.