■ DAVE FLETT REPORTS: LAWRENCE LEFT WITH PLENTY TO PONDER AS HATTERS SLUMP TO SECOND FROM BOTTOM

Hatters hit new lows Connolly wrecks 'em

WITHOUT a win in eight games, missing nine senior players through injury and lying second from bottom in Division 2, Luton Town are unarguably at their lowest ebb for years.

The Hatters injury crisis is threatening to rip the heart out of a team low on both confidence and experience and the club are now in a rut they seem incapable of getting out of with the limited resources at their disposal.

Many players in the current team do not know what its like, or indeed what it takes, to be a winner and, with so many of the club's injury problems long term, it could be a very long autumn for Lennie Lawrence's beleaguered team.

In a prophetic interview last week, Lawrence had predicted that whatever the outcome Saturday's game would not be boring, but even he couldn't have foreseen the extraordinary events that unravelled before the disbelieving eyes of a crowd of 5,241 at Kenilworth Road.

As is often the case, the Hatters forced the early pace and were unlucky not to go ahead in the second minute when the ever-lurking Stuart Douglas burst through a static visitors' defence to fire a firm shot into the side netting.

Causing all sort of problems with his pace and strength, Douglas then got round the back of the Wrexham defence after exchanging passes with David Oldfield, but the teenage striker's shot across the goal just evaded the onrushing Dwight Marshall.

A minute later, in an image very much symptomatic of the home team's luck this season, Marshall was brought stretchered off having damaged ankle ligaments in his attempt to convert the chance.

This blow shook the Hatters' fragile confidence and, in the tense atmosphere, it was bad when Karl Connolly's cross went taken in his stride by the unmarked Dave Brammer whose shot somehow eluded a bemused Andy Dibble.

Dibble was beaten again in the 26th minute, when a harmless cross from Craig Skinner saw home skipper Gary Waddock present Connolly with a chance after an embarrassing mis-kick.

Comedly capitalised with a clinical edge of the area finish that soared into the roof of the net and the home team encouraging start was suddenly a very distant memory.

On loan full back Bryan Small's central defence partnership with Steve Davis was inevitably experiencing another teething problems but, after 41 minutes, the latter had Dibble his flagging team an unexpected lifeline.

Meeting a well delivered Richard Harvey corner, Davis produced a towering near post header that poor keeper Wolfstones' keeper Andy Marriott no chance.

Wrexham had never won a game at Kenilworth Road before Saturday and on 50 occasions in the past the Hatters might maintain that proud record with debut boy Pat Ward-Prowse's first goal, which saw the hesitant Marriott no defender Mark McGregor to roll the ball into an unguarded net.

It was the perfect return for the 20-year-old, enjoying his first appearance in Hatters colours for over four years, and with Tony Thorpe having replaced Waddock at half-time Hatters give the team "more legs," home supporters hoped the attacking luxuries would paper over the obvious defensive frailties.

The Wolfstones' riposte was swift however and, once Comedly and captain Brian Carey both going close shortly afterwards, Lennie Lawrence decided it was time for another tactical change; forty-year-old Reserve Team coach Trevor Peake replacing Harvey in the defence, but the wisdom of the decision was to prove no doubt with Peake immediately stepping to stop the flight and furious pace of the game.

In the 63rd minute, Wrexham were back in front and Small pulled back Skinner, who duly converted the penalty spot kick, and a minute later, a McGregor through ball from Comedly in acres of space and with time to make it left the looping header floating over the hopelessly stranded Dibble.

As Wrexham found gaps in the Hatters defence almost at will, Comedly completed his hat trick in the 73rd minute with a cool finish after Skinner had dispossessed Gary Waddock the half-way line.

The game over as a contest, the tempo finally dropped and Lennie Lawrence was left to reflect on his heavily battered side's 6-2 defeat.

"When we pulled this side I knew we would need two three goals to win," he admitted, "with the total unfamiliarity of the back four, but a miracle, we never not going to keep clean sheet, especially with Spink and Connolly who are good a striking partnership as you'll get in this League.

"I expected one or two to go in, but what happened after hour was suicide and totally unacceptable. It is really disturbing that, having got back to 2-2, we shot ourselves in the foot and you can't get away from the fact that we contributed our own downfall with the nature of those last three goals."

Lawrence's main concern, with angry fans criticising at the end, must be that there is little , within his power to arrest the Hatters' slide.

HATTERS: Andy Dibble, Gavin McCowan, Richard Harvey (Trevor Peake, 46), Gary Waddock (Tony Thorpe, 46), Steve Davis, Bryan Small, Phil Gray, Craig McLaren, David Oldfield, Stuart Douglas, Dwight Marshall (Sean Evers, 8).

WREXHAM: Andy Marriott, Mark McGregor, Gareth Howell, Wayne Phillips, Barry Jones, Brian Carey, Craig Skinner, Gareth Owen, Karl Connolly (Steve Watkin, 89), Dean Spink, Dave Brammer. Subs not used: Kevin Russell, Peter Ward.

HATTERS Davis 41, Gray 50 2
WREXHAM Programme 10, Connolly 26, 63, 73, Skinner (pen) 62 6
Attendance: Att: 5,241

LENNIE'S VERDICT

● SLIDE TACKLE: David Oldfield skips over the lunging challenge of Wrexham centre-forward Dean Spink

● GRAY DAY: New £400,000 signing Phil Gray demonstrates his close control and (inset) wheels away in delight after levelling the scores

● RISING TO THE OCCASION: Hatters centre-half Steve Davis hauls his team back into Saturday's game with a commanding header that left Wrexham keeper Andy Marriott grasping at thin air

● HERE WE GO AGAIN: Club Doctor Bill Berry attends to latest injury victim Dwight Marshall

Pictures: Gareth Owen

LUTON TOWN FC 1997-98 THE FULL STORY

August	Opponents	Score	Scorers	Att	Pos
Sat 9	Blackpool	0-1		6,647	
Tues 12	Colchester (CC1)	1-0	Thorpe 87	2,142	12
Sat 23	SOUTHEND	1-0	Douglas 75	6,746	7
Tues 26	Colchester	0-0		2,172	15
Sat 30	CHELWSTER (CC2)	1-1	Thorpe 54	2,872	
Sat 30	OLDHAM	1-1	Thorpe 60	5,404	12
September					
Tues 2	MILLWALL	0-3		5,791	18
Sat 6	BURNLEY	0-0		5,661	19
Tues 9	Chesterfield	1-1	Marshall 45	3,481	21
Tues 16	WEST BROM (CC2)	1-1	Douglas 24	3,497	
Sat 20	WREXHAM	2-6	Davis (20, 41), Gray 50	5,241	23
Tues 23	West Brom (CC2)	A	45		
Sat 27	Bristol City	H			
October					
Sat 4	WATFORD	H	3		
Sat 11	PLYMOUTH ARG	A	3		
Sat 18	Wigan Athletic	A	3		
Tues 21	Carlisle United	A	7		
Sat 25	BRENTFORD	H	3		
November					
Sat 1	WYCOMBE	A	3		
Sat 8	SHREWSBURY	A	45		
Sat 8	PRESTON	H	7		
Sat 15	FA Cup 1				
Tues 18	Grimsby	A	45		
Sat 22	WALSALL	H	3		
Sat 29	York City	A	3		
December					
Sat 6	GILLINGHAM	H	45		
Sat 13	Chesterfield	A	3		
Sat 20	BRISTOL ROVERS	H	3		
Fri 26	NORTHAMPTON	A	3		
Sun 28	Millwall	A	3		
January					
Sat 3	Southend (FAC 3)	A	3		
Sat 10	BURNLEY	H	3		
Sat 17	Watford	A	3		
Sat 24	FULHAM	H	3		
Sat 31	BOURNEMOUTH	H	3		
February					
Tues 3	Preston	A	7.45		
Sat 7	Wrexham	A	3		
Sat 14	Watford	H	3		
Sat 21	BRISTOL CITY	H	3		
Tues 24	Walsall	H	7.45		
Sat 28	Plymouth Arg	A	3		
March					
Sat 7	WYCOMBE	H	3		
Sat 14	Burnley	A	3		
Sat 21	Sheffield Wed	A	3		
Sat 28	Walsall	A	3		
April					
Sat 4	Fulham	A	3		
Sat 11	CHESTERFIELD	H	3		
Tues 14	Bristol Rovers	A	7.45		
Sat 18	Bristol Rovers	A	3		
Sat 25	Bristol City	A	3		
May					
Sat 2	CARLISLE	H	3		

Indicates Department of Football League Line-Up

NATIONWIDE LEAGUE DIVISION TWO

Includes September 20 1997

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts	GS
Watford	8	6	1	1	13	7	19	13
Northampton Town	8	6	1	1	13	7	19	13
Southend	8	5	2	1	15	8	17	15
Wigan Athletic	8	5	2	1	12	6	17	12
Bristol Rovers	8	5	1	2	13	8	16	13
Millwall	8	4	3	1	12	6	15	12
Bournemouth	8	4	3	1	12	6	15	12
Preston North End	8	3	3	2	9	6	12	9
Gillingham	8	3	3	2	9	6	12	9
Wycombe Wdrs	8	3	3	2	9	6	12	9
Burnley	8	3	3	2	8	6	11	8
Fulham	8	3	2	3	11	9	11	11
Wigan Athletic	8	3	2	3	7	11	11	7
Blackpool	8	3	1	4	9	11	10	9
York City	8	3	1	4	9	11	10	9
Southend United	8	3	1	4	7	10	10	7
Brentford	8	3	1	4	7	10	10	7
Oldham Orlled	8	3	1	4	10	13	8	10
Bristol City	8	2	2	4	8	11	8	8
Walsall	8	2	2	4	8	11	8	8
Grimsby Town	8	2	1	5	10	6	7	10
Plymouth	8	1	3	4	5	10	6	5
Luton Town	8	0	4	4	6	12	4	6
Burnley	8	0	4	4	5	12	4	5

APPEARANCES & GOALS

	Appearances	Goals
	Lge. Cup Lge Cup	
Stuart Douglas	8/0	2/0 0
Graham Alexander	8/0	3/0 0
Simon Davies	8/0	0/0 0
Kelvin Davis	8/0	0/0 0
Steve Davis	8/0	2/0 0
Andy Dibble	8/0	0/0 0
Gary Doherty	3/0	0/0 0
Stuart Douglas	8/0	2/0 0
Sean Evers	1/0	0/0 0
Phil Gray	3/0	1/0 0
Andrew Fitzhardinge	1/0	0/0 0
Liam George	0/0	0/0 0
Phil Gray	3/0	1/0 0
Richard Harvey	4/0	0/0 0
Kevin Hitchcock	4/0	0/0 0
Marvin Johnson	1/0	0/0 0
Dwight Marshall	7/0	3/0 0
Gavin McCowan	8/0	0/0 0
Mitchell Thomas	8/0	0/0 0
David Oldfield	7/0	3/0 0
Trevor Peake	3/0	0/0 0
Bryan Small	3/0	0/0 0
Dean Spink	3/0	0/0 0
Wayne Thomas	1/0	0/0 0
Tony Thorpe	4/1	0/0 0
Gary Waddock	8/1	0/0 0

BAD BOYS

Player	Yellow Cards Red Cards
Gavin McCowan	3
Paul McLaren	2
Steve Davis	2
Gary Waddock	2
Stuart Douglas	1
Sean Evers	1
Dwight Marshall	1
Mitchell Thomas	1
Totals	10

● Stuart Douglas received his first yellow card of the season for failing to retreat at a free kick.

STAR TURNS

PAUL McLAREN was the star man against Wrexham with an outstanding performance from a fast maturing player learning his trade in the most difficult of environments

MAN OF THE MATCH

Player	MoM
Steve Davis	2
Gavin McCowan	1
Kelvin Davis	1
Stuart Douglas	1
Julian James	1
Kevin Hitchcock	1
Mitchell Thomas	1
Tony Thorpe	1
Gary Waddock	1
Totals	11