



● DAVIS DENIED: Steve Davis sees his goalbound effort blocked by the Rovers defence.



● IAN Fear can't believe it.



● STEVE DAVIS trudges off



● CHRIS OF LIFE: Chris Allen (grounded, far left) puts the Hatters ahead on Saturday.

# Prize turkeys stuffed again!



● CHAIR WIE GO: Stuart Douglas is wheeled off after injuring his ankle on Saturday.



● OLD GOAL: David Oldfield fires the Hatters' second goal against Bristol Rovers.

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| <b>HATTERS</b><br>Allen & Curlew 25                                                | 2 |
| <b>BRISTOL ROVERS</b><br>Curlew 12, Hayles 21, 27, Beadle 30.<br>Attendance: 5,266 | 4 |

IT WAS Merry Christmas from Mr Lawrence to Bristol Rovers on Saturday as the overjoyed visitors gleefully accepted three gift-wrapped points. **WRITES DAVE FLETT.**

Lennie Lawrence's turkeys received a thorough staffing from Ian Holloway's men and deserve to face the Christmas coup after another unacceptable home performance. Unlike many of our southern friends though, this group of turkeys are busy in the Boxing Day and the New Year because those players missing on Saturday won't make a blind bit of difference.

The squad of players assembled at Kestelworth Road are so mentally weak and lightweight, Prince Naseem Hamed would blow them over and it could be argued that several should have been shown the door long before now. An awkward one, but ultimately very useful, stocking-filler for Hatters fans this Christmas could be a Supporters Guide to Division 3 football grounds because, on the evidence of the first half of this season, the Hatters are not good enough to top a Division 2.

If anybody tells you Luton Town are too good to go down, don't you believe it because infinitely better teams than this lot have failed to beat the drop into football's basement division.

Saturday's performance was a carbon-copy of the previous home game against Gillingham, but this time the visitors took their chances during 25 minutes of kamikaze footballing suicide. The Hatters have conceded more than two goals a League game at Kestelworth this season and what separates Lennie Lawrence's men from other teams in the Division is that they don't possess strikers who, one from home, are capable of pointing teams on the counter attack.

On Saturday it was the turn of Peter Beadle and Barry Hayles lost through the hapless home defeat like the proverbial hot knife through butter. Hayles, only last season a Luton transfer target, made the usually reliable Alan White and Steve Davis look ill and there let the essence of Lawrence's problems - he doesn't know what to expect from his players from one week to the next and there is no consistency of performance.

He, having made an unconvincing start, the Hatters surprisingly took my lead. Stuart Douglas, accommodated in the starting line by Gary Waddock's request to the bench, beat three using defenders to the ball and, with a deft dog-back, fed David Beadle.

The Aussie midfielder's shot was only partly by Rovers' keeper Andy Collett and Chris Allen fired what he rebounded off a post. Law's inability to seize the initiative saw his angry head almost immediately when, four minutes out, a mis-directed Douglas headed from the half-way line saw Beadle miss Jamie Curlew for a clinical, simple equaliser.

## Santa Claus

On 21 minutes it was Davis' turn to play Santa Claus when his header, a goal with a long pass and hesitation from Ian Fear allowed the pocketier Hayles to nip in and grab his season second.

Another short-lived lead was pardoned when the Rovers defence, missing three players through suspension and with an average age of 30, could only look on as Alan Alexander's ball into the box was cushioned and laid off into the path of Oldfield by Tony Thorpe. He, later taking the ball on his left before volleying into the bottom corner.

Unavoidable is probably the best word to sum up what followed. On the half-hour a mix-up between Paul McLennan, Mitchell Thomas and Alexander presented Hayles with the simple task of releasing an unmarked Beadle to fire past Fear. Douglas went off in a wheelchair soon after with damaged ankle ligaments and on 27 minutes Hayles pulled his second of the game

when White, more than five yards behind his nearest teammate, mis-cued a dreadful header into the ex-Sievanange striker's path.

With more than a touch of deja vu, the players trudged off the pitch shell-shocked and the second half predictably became a formality as both sets of players went through the motions.

Andrew Fotiadis, on for Douglas, tested Collett early in the second half but the game rapidly deteriorated into as big a non-event as you'll ever see.

Only Doncaster Rovers have conceded more home League goals than the Hatters this season and Lawrence admitted afterwards that it's a problem he's struggling to find a solution for.

"In 1997 we must have one of the worst home records in all four Leagues," he said.

"The crowd weren't particularly hostile today but it's becoming more and more difficult and won't change

until we get a win.

"If we were playing Northampton away on Boxing Day then there wouldn't be a problem but we're not and all I can do is try and get the players through 90 minutes without making sense of the crazy decisions they are making here."

**HATTERS:** Ian Fear, Darren Patterson, Mitchell Thomas, Stuart Douglas (Andrew Fotiadis, 36), Steve Davis, Alan White, Chris Allen, Paul McLaren (Simon Davies, 72), David Oldfield, Tony Thorpe, Graham Alexander. Sub not used: Gary Waddock. Booked: McLaren.

**BRISTOL ROVERS:** Andy Collett, Matt Hayfield, Matt Lockwood, Gary Penrice, Tom White, Steve Foster, Ian Holloway, Tom Hanson (Luke Bradford, 56), Peter Beadle, Jamie Curlew, Barry Hayles, Sub not used: Julian Aloop, Mark Smith. **MAN OF THE MATCH:** Chris Allen - a class above anybody else in a Hatters shirt, although that was not very difficult.



● TIME FOR FIVE: Referee Orr plays guess the score.

## Lennie lives on - for now!

LENNIE Lawrence emerged unscathed from the emergency board meeting after Saturday's dreadful defeat.

The beleaguered Hatters' boss was called before the club's directors' loss, despite the growing pressure, will lead Law into their Christmas programme.

Former Hatters favourite Mick Harford has been linked with the managerial post at Kestelworth Road, although Lawrence remains defiant.

"I was talking to the directors because they're concerned. If they were looking to get me out they

would have done it a long time ago," he said.

"There's no way I'm going to leave. The directors have been very supportive. I've got so much with them at all. They want some explanations, they're worried and quite rightly so but I have to use all my experience as a manager to do something."

One thing is certain after the meeting - Lawrence will not be given any more cash for transfers.

"There's no chance of any money in fact in quite the opposite, I need to sell players. This place haemorrhages money," he said.