■ DAVE FLETT REPORTS: TRUSTY SKIPPER THE MAN TO SPARK AS PLAIN-SAILING GRIMSBY PULSATING CLASH HANGING ON FOR A POINT

Aye-aye cap'n! Steve strikes to maroon the Mariners

MAKESHIFT striker Steve Davis grabbed a last-gasp equaliser within five minutes of being thrown upfield against Grimsby but will resume defensive duties this Saturday against Walsall.

The Hatters' inspirational skipper was pushed forward in a "do or die" tactical switch by manager Lennie Lawrence and delivered the goods just five minutes from the end of this pulsating encounter.

Afterwards though, Lawrence admitted the decision was an act of desperation and that his talismanic centre half would return to the back four at the Bescot Stadium.

"I don't think I'll be looking at doing that again at least not from the start," the Hatters' boss said, "we need him at the back. I took a gamble throwing him up there and keeping him up there to get the winner. Unfortunately, we couldn't quite get the ball up to him in the last five minutes."

Davis headed home Graham Alexander's 85th-minute cross to reward the Hatters for a spirited grandstand finish but incensed Grimsby manager Alan Buckley argued afterwards that the influential Geordie shouldn't even have been on the pitch to score his sixth goal of the season.

The irate Mariners boss claimed Davis should have received his marching orders for an incident that eventually led to the visitors' opening goal in the 54th minute, Jack Lester had his shirt pulled by Davis for ten yards before referee Andrew Hall whistled for a foul after the Grimsby striker had mauled into the Hatters penalty box.

The Birmingham official played the perfect advantage, waiting to see if Lester scored before awarding the free-kick as the original infringement had occurred outside the area, but then upset the Humbersiders by showing Davis a yellow rather than red card.

Full-back Tony Gallimore appeared his angry teammates, stepping up to strike the resulting free-kick past Kelvin Davis with the aid of a deflection, but the significance of Mr Hall's decision would later come back to possibly sink the Mariners automatic promotion aspirations.

Gallimore's goal was not an injustice in more ways than one with only more inspired goalkeeping from Davis preventing the visitors from taking an earlier lead.

In the sixth minute, the England Under-21 international evoked memories of Gordon Banks in 1970, when he flung himself low to the right and tipped a close range Lee Nogan header around the post.

The young keeper then held on to a rocket-powered Wayne Burnett drive in the 27th minute, acrobatically tipped over an edge-of-the-area effort from Grimsby skipper Paul Groves and raced off his line to smother a second-half Lester shot.

In between, the visitors had a penalty appeal rejected when the dangerous Lester was wrestled to the ground by Darren Patterson, Mr Hall adjudging the offence to have been committed outside the area.

From the subsequent free-kick, the ball was rolled into John McDermott's path who let fly with a low drive that was deflected behind by an outstretched Lester leg.

At the other end, Patterson peeled off his marker to head a corner subtly into Aidan Davison's hands and Dwight Marshall drilled one over at the far post after Alexander whipped in a vicious cross from the right.

Lennie Lawrence's side did not seriously threaten the visitors goal until the 48th minute. Marshall repeying the earlier compliment only for Alexander's header to come back off the bar.

Six minutes later, the Hatters fell behind and a lucky deflection for the Mariners in the 64th minute when Kevin Donovan doubled their advantage.

David Smith fed the ball to Gallimore, overlapping unopposed down the left flank, and his miscued shot was turned in at the far post by an unmarked Donovan.

With Andrew Fotiadis and David Oldfield flattening to deceive in another shot-shy performance, the omens didn't look good and, when an ambitious 40-yard Oldfield effort that almost uprooted the corner flag was not wide enough of ??That is why you're going down," it was some supporters seemed prepared to argue with.

Only four minutes introduction provided some much needed excitement for

Stepping from bottom after three months without a win Fotiadis was released into the action and immediately made of the unsuspecting Grimsby defence.

Offering pace, he listened, pressurised and chased down a cross-shot of one of his colleagues to shame.

Dodgy ankle obvious as the Hatters picked themselves up from two-last fighting.

Sean Ellis, 18th point, came out of his shell with good

from the top of the pyramid, a corner will be the goal week by Oldfield.

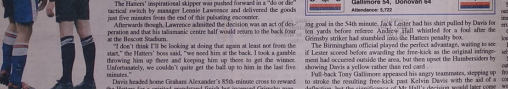
Alexander's cross to his left shot in the middle of the before Steve Davis completed a final six minutes.

HATTERS 2
Evans 66, Davis (S) 85

GRIMSBY TOWN . . 2
Gallimore 54, Donovan 64

Attendance: 5,722

● WATCH IT: Steve Davis is lucky to escape with a yellow card after a lecture from ref Andrew Hall.



● RISING TO THE OCCASION: Davis is switched up front and immediately responds by meeting Graham Alexander's right wing cross and heading home the Hatters 85th-minute equaliser.

● HEADS UP: Hatters midfielder Paul McLaren outjumps Grimsby's Wayne Burnett and wins this particular round of their aerial battle.

Oldfield fired straight at Davison when put clear by a deft Evans pass and last week's goal hero Mitchell Thomas saw his firm near-post header well saved by the over-employed Grimsby keeper.

A minute later, Davis headed in the equaliser and a frantic finale saw the visitors scrambling to defend their penalty box as Lennie Lawrence's men laid siege on Davison's goal.

For the most part, congestion denied the Hatters a winning goal but Oldfield wasted the clearest chance, again shooting straight at Davison.

Afterwards Lawrence was adept in emphasising the positive but equally didn't disguise his side's shortcomings, as another draw meant they slipped to second bottom in the Nationwide Conference Table.

"You've got to take into account the quality of the opposition," he pointed out, "they are the best team in the league and the first to threaten us defensively in a long time. To come back from that situation with that spirit and the quality of goals was great. I think when they're two down, there's nothing to lose, the fear goes and the players start to relect which is what happened today."

HATTERS: Kelvin Davis, Julian James, Mitchell Thomas, Sean Evans, Steve Davis, Darren Patterson, Andrew Fotiadis, (Stuart Douglas,84), Paul McLaren, David Oldfield, Dwight Marshall, Graham Alexander. Subs not used: Simon Davies, Gary Waddock.

GRIMSBY: Aidan Davison, John McDermott, Tony Gallimore, Peter Handyside, Mark Lever, Wayne Burnett, Kevin Donovan, David Smith, Lee Nogan (Steve Livingstone, 46), Jack Lester, Paul Groves. Subs not used: Daryl Clare, Kingsley Black.

LENNIE'S VERDICT

● The only frustrations were that we could have got a third, with David Oldfield missing two chances, and that we didn't really get going until we were two down.

Pictures: Gareth Owen

LUTON TOWN FC 1997-98 THE STORY SO FAR ...

August					
Sat 9	Blackpool				
Sat 16	Swindon (DCL)	3-0	Thorpe 87,	2,842	
Sat 23	SCARBORO	3-0	Douglas 75,	3,142	13
Sat 30	Bristol Rov.	1-1		5,150	12
September					
Sat 6	SOUTHEND (DCL)	1-0	Thorpe 34,	2,815	12
Sat 13	BURNLEY	1-1	Thorpe 60,	5,404	12
October					
Sat 4	WILLSALL	0-0		2,765	13
Sat 11	Northampton	2-1		5,167	12
Sat 18	Chesterfield	1-1	Marshall 43,	4,021	13
Sat 25	WREXHAM (DCL)	1-1	Douglas 87,	3,437	13
Sat 1	Mansfield (DCL)	3-1	Douglas 2, Grey 50,	3,000	13
Sat 8	Cambridge (DCL)	3-1	Davis (S) 38, Thorpe 72,	3,000	13
Sat 15	Bristol City	0-0		9,509	13
November					
Sat 1	WATFORD				
Sat 8	FLYMOUTH ARG	3-0	Thorpe 35, 58, Davies 92	9,041	13
Sat 15	Cambridge Utd	1-0	Thorpe 90,	3,000	13
Sat 22	Carlisle United	1-0	White 87,	4,541	13
Sat 29	Gillingham	2-1	Davis (S) 45, Thorpe 88,	4,504	13
December					
Sat 6	Wycombe	3-3	Oldfield 45, Thorpe 74,	6,219	18
Sat 13	BOURNEMOUTH	2-0	Thorpe 20, 28,	5,167	18
Sat 20	CHESTER (FACU)	3-3	Thorpe 25,	5,767	22
Sat 26	Bournemouth	1-1		6,000	22
Sat 29	Cheltenham (FACU)	1-1		3,000	22
Sat 29	York City	2-1	Alexander 13, Thorpe 72,	3,036	20
January					
Sat 3	GILLINGHAM	2-3	Davis (S) 35, Thorpe 77,	8,408	21
Sat 13	Oldham	0-0		5,000	21
Sat 17	BRISTOL ROVERS	2-0	Thorpe 2, Davis (S) 90,	5,000	21
Fri 23	NORTHAMPTON	1-2	Oldfield 88, Thorpe 90,	6,035	21
Sat 31	Watford	2-3	Davis (S) 45, Thorpe 90,	6,000	21
February					
Sat 7	Blackpool	0-0		5,996	19
Sat 14	BLACKPOOL	1-1	Thorpe 90,	5,000	19
Sat 21	BRENTFORD (AWS)	2-1	Thorpe 31, Oldfield 83		
Sat 28	Swindon	1-1	Thorpe 90,	6,067	19
Sat 28	FULHAM	1-0	Alexander 90,	5,000	19
Sun 22	Fulham (AWS)	2-2	Marshall 30, Thorpe 90,	5,155	
Sat 28	BOURNEMOUTH	1-0	Thorpe 90,	5,499	19
March					
Sat 7	Wrexham	1-0	Davis (S) 90,	3,047	20
Sat 14	Bristol Rov.	1-1	Johnson 81,	3,136	20
Tues 17	Bournemouth (AWS)	0-1		5,367	
Sat 21	Scarboro	0-1		4,458	21
Tues 24	WIGAN	0-1	Oldfield 90,	4,420	22
Sat 28	Brentford (Ag)	0-1	Thorpe 19, Grey 88	5,345	22
April					
Tues 3	Preston	0-1		5,992	22
Sat 4	Northampton	0-1		6,000	22
Sat 11	Grimsby	2-2		5,722	22
Sat 18	Walsall	3-3	Davis (S), Davis (S) 85,	6,000	22
Sat 25	Stockport	1-1		5,000	22
May					
Sat 2	YORK CITY	1-1			
Sat 9	Gillingham	1-1			
Sat 16	Carlisle	1-1			
Sat 23	STOCKPORT	2-1	Davis (S) 45,		
Sat 30	Bristol Rovers	1-1			
Sat 6	Watford	1-1			
Sat 13	CARLISLE	1-0			

NATIONWIDE LEAGUE DIVISION TWO

	Played	Won	Drn	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Fulham	38	23	7	8	70	33	+37	76
Bristol City	38	21	7	10	63	33	+30	70
Bournemouth	38	19	12	7	57	34	+23	69
Brentford	38	19	11	8	58	40	+18	68
Burnley Town	38	17	11	8	53	35	+18	62
Wycombe W	38	17	11	8	52	35	+17	62
Watford	38	17	8	13	50	45	+5	59
Gillingham	38	16	8	14	50	47	+3	56
Luton Town	38	15	11	12	47	44	+3	56
Bristol Rovers	38	15	9	14	50	47	+3	54
Millwall	38	14	9	15	59	44	56	51
Chesterfield	38	14	9	15	47	50	-3	51
Oldham	37	13	14	11	50	53	-3	50
Northampton	38	13	11	14	47	50	-3	50
Blackpool	38	12	14	12	46	49	-3	50
Wrexham	38	12	14	13	46	49	-3	50
Wig City	38	12	13	13	45	47	-2	49
Preston	38	12	10	16	45	47	-5	46
Walsall	38	12	10	16	42	47	-5	46
Wigan Athletic	37	10	12	15	37	50	-13	42
Peterboro Angls	38	10	12	16	47	59	-12	42
Stockport	38	10	12	16	37	52	-15	42
Cambridge U	38	10	11	17	39	51	-12	41
Scarboro	38	10	11	17	37	51	-14	41
Luton Town	38	8	14	16	43	54	-43	41
Barnsley	38	8	12	17	41	57	-16	36

APPEARANCES & GOALS

	Appearances	Goals
Andrew Davies	42(1)	1(0)
Steve Davis	42(1)	7(1)
Chris Allen	41(1)	2(0)
Craig Alpin	14(1)	0(0)
Graham Alexander	42	6(0)
Paul McLaren	41	1(0)
Steve Davis	40(1)	1(0)
Mitchell Thomas	40(1)	2(0)
Kevin Ellison	40(1)	1(0)
Dwight Marshall	40(1)	4(0)
Kelvin Davis	40	0(0)
Andrew Fotiadis	40(1)	1(0)
Kevin Grey	39(1)	2(0)
Paul McDonald	39(1)	0(0)
Richard Harvey	3(1)	0(1)
Kevin Donovan	38(1)	0(0)
Stephen Johnson	38(1)	0(0)
Richard Keen	3(1)	0(0)
Mark Stallard	37(1)	0(0)
Paul McDonald	36(1)	0(0)
Paul McLaren	2(0)	0(0)
Stuart Douglas	35(1)	1(0)
Paul Oldfield	35(1)	4(0)
Trevor Peake	1(1)	0(0)
Paul Telfer	34(1)	0(0)
Gary Waddock	34(1)	0(0)
Matthew Spring	32(1)	0(0)
Simon Davies	31(1)	0(0)
Gary Wheldon	31(1)	0(0)
Gary Bradbury	29(1)	0(0)
Steve Thompson	28(1)	0(0)

BAD BOYS

Player	Yellow Cards	Red Cards
Paul McLaren	8	0
Graham Alexander	7	0
Kevin Grey	6	0
Darren Patterson	6	0
Andrew Fotiadis	5	0
Steve Davis	5	0
David Oldfield	4	0
Gary Waddock	3	0
Paul Telfer	3	0
Mitchell Thomas	3	0
Chris Allen	3	0
Dwight Marshall	3	0
Andrew Davies	2	0
Julian James	2	0
Kevin Donovan	2	0
Matthew Spring	2	0
Stephen Johnson	2	0
Stuart Douglas	1	0
Kevin Ellison	1	0
Paul McDonald	1	0
Kelvin Davis	1	0
Gary Bradbury	1	0
Gary Wheldon	1	0

STAR TURNS

KELVIN DAVIS was the Hatters star man against Grimsby Town, adding to his line collection of first class saves this season with several superb first-half stops.

MAN OF THE MATCH STANDINGS

Player	MoM
Steve Davis	4
Graham Alexander	3
Paul McLaren	3
Tony Thorpe	3
Alan White	3
Andrew Davies	2
David Oldfield	2
Gary Waddock	3
Chris Allen	2
Richard Harvey	2
Kevin McDonald	2
Mitchell Thomas	2
Stuart Douglas	1
Phil Gray	1
Julian James	1
Bryan Small	1