

DRAMA? HATTERS ARE MAD FOR IT!

MEL HENDERSON

WHERE does one start to describe as dramatic a game as I have witnessed for a long, long time?

Not at the beginning, but at the end, oddly enough. Because it was not until 19 seconds into stoppage time at the end of extra-time that this roller-coaster tie was finally decided. What a pity that such a meagre crowd witnessed such a remarkable series of events as this amazing Worthington Cup-tie swung first one way, then the other.

I looked around me at the disbelieving faces of Luton's die-hard fans. As home skipper Steve Davis had the misfortune to concede an own goal after 118 largely eventful minutes. They were shell-shocked and dumbfounded, convinced their team's heroics had been in vain and that Ipswich were about to scrape through on the away goals rule.

But the drama was far from over. Nerves were clearly fraying as Danny Sonner and James Scowcroft got in a tangle to concede a corner.

As Matthew Spring's flag-kick sailed towards the usually safe hands of Richard Wright, those fans behind him who had made the journey from Suffolk must have been thinking: "That's it, we're through".

But then, horror of horrors, the outstretched arms of Wright could not hold the ball and it fell invitingly from his temporary grasp to the grateful Marvin Johnson.

The Luton defender does not score many goals, but this was too good a chance to miss and the ball looped off his head into the unguarded net.

In no time at all referee Paul Taylor's whistle signalled the end of a night of high, almost unbearable, drama.

Emotions run high at a time like this and the contrast between the two sets of players could hardly have been more marked. Ipswich, their hopes of edging through dashed so cruelly and so late, were a forlorn lot as their opponents' celebrations would have done justice to Wembley itself.

In sheer frustration, substitute Sonner booted the ball 50 yards away into the crowd and acted with admirable calm as he was pursued and berated by Luton's assistant manager, John Moore.

There was little hint – in fact, none at all – that this would prove as eventful a game when it got off to a low-key start.

Luton were shadows of the team who played so well, with such enterprise, at Portman Road a week earlier.

It was only when they resumed after the half-time break, by which time they were trailing to David Johnson's opener, that they finally got their act together.

Seven minutes into the second-half their recovery was well under way. What a way for Andrew Fotiadis to mark his first start of the season – with his first goal. Wily Luton boss Lennie Lawrence pushed defender Davis into attack, hardly a surprise given his scoring record this season and indeed in all his time at the club.

Lawrence also made a succession of substitutions and seven minutes from time he got his reward.

Davis played a key role in setting up Stuart Douglas, whose close control enabled him to carve out what appeared an unlikely scoring chance.

Into extra-time and Davis leapt higher than anyone to head a 98th minute goal, which appeared, until the skipper's unexpected intervention two minutes from the end, to be decisive.

The sight of Ipswich manager George Burley turning to beat the top of the dug-out in sheer frustration summed up the tension of the occasion.

What a remarkable twist it seemed as Davis the hero became Davis the villain, in conceding that late own goal.

But Johnson spared his skipper's blushes when he decided the tie, although one could only sympathise with Wright, surely the most red-faced of them all.



YOU MARVEL: Luton players swamp Marvin Johnson after he put his team through to the third round. George Burley's efforts (below) to rally his players before extra time proved to be in vain as the hungry Hatters provided a dramatic twist to what was a stunning cup tie

