

Luton Town is alive and kicking - Lawrence

THE changes at Kenilworth Road this week, have put a spring in the step of the staff, both on the field and off.

Graham Alexander may have wanted to go to improve himself and Sean Evers wouldn't be human if not thrilled at the prospect of playing at the brilliant Madejski Stadium, but others have a great impression of what a post-Kohler Luton Town could be.

Sean Dyche couldn't wait to get back here, Tony Thorpe feels like he is back home and Gerry Harrison, sad to leave, can't wait to return if that can be arranged in the close season.

Harrison would have cost £50,000 which the

receiver could not sanction at short notice and as he had served the maximum three months on loan, had to be rapidly released to allow Lennie Lawrence to bring in a second loan, the most allowed at any one time.

"We hope to resurrect that in the summer," said Lawrence.

Evers, still on the way back from surgery, was the subject of a written offer from Reading before Tuesday's game. That offer was unacceptable and teamwork by Lawrence and Cliff Bassett negotiated the fee up to £500,000 plus add-ons that will fund the Hatters through to next season.

"It was a hectic 48 hours up to the deadline," said the Luton boss, "Loads of predators thought they could pinch our players for nothing. It was like vultures circling a carcass, but this club wasn't a carcass - Luton Town is alive and kicking.

"We have limited resources, nothing new in that, but I have tried to strengthen key areas with what we had. Dyche is not only a strong central defender, he is a good leader and he wants to be here. We won't be able to afford to buy Thorpe, but he could do us a favour and then do better for Bristol City next season.

"We offered Alexander a terrific deal,

Gillingham were after him but their chap nearly fell off his chair when he heard the size of our offer. He has gone for more than that to Preston swayed by the prospect of first division football, having been offered even more still by a club that looks like going down."

Lawrence rates the last month, "The most difficult of my career," but is now happy with the way things are going.

He has had his critics, but his experience of boardroom battles at Middlebrough and winding-up orders at Charlton have served Luton well through uncharted waters when others may well have panicked.

Dyche's debut goal seals happy return

A RARE clean sheet and Sean Dyche's first goal for the club on his return helped the Hatters take a massive stride towards retaining their Second Division status for another year.

It was fitting that the goal came from a defender, because the three-man back line of Dyche, Marvin Johnson and Chris Willmott played a big part in the victory, along with man-of-the-match Kelvin Davis in goal. He made a host of blinding saves to prevent the Gills ruling the roost.

The big, strong men from Kent were a real handful in the air, especially from set pieces, and it was ironic that the only goal of the game was bundled in by Dyche from a flighted Luton corner. It was hardly a classic goal, but it came at a classic time to deflate the opposition, just before half-time.

Although missing the power of Gary Doherty, off on international duty with the Irish youth team for a month, Lennie Lawrence persisted with a three-man strike force, a tactic that served him well in the 1-1 massacre of Reading on Tuesday.

Phil Gray, Stuart Douglas and the other returnee Tony Thorpe all battled away without getting the breaks against an enormous defence.

Matthew Spring and Paul McLaren showed some lovely touches in midfield, but Gavin McGowan, restored to his natural right wing-back position, was the pick of the Town's outfield men.

The start was the Davis and McGowan show. The Town stopper had to stand tall to beat away two tremendous Bob Taylor power shots, but McGowan was beginning to make an impression down the wing. He took Spring's intelligent ball, beat his man and produced what the Hatters have been sorely lacking lately - an excellent cross - that Thorpe volleyed well only to hit an unknowing defender just as it looked bound for

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the net. Then Spring smashed a volley over from another of his crosses.

Pennock's slip let in Douglas for a run at goal, but his pass evaded Thorpe and Gray as they slid in.

Davis excelled himself with a reaction block down to his right when Nicky Southall shot across him on 24 minutes, Dyche was on hand to complete the clearance, then beat that by tipping over Carl Asaba's header from point blank range.

It was exciting end-to-end stuff as Thorpe took on the Gills' central defenders and found some space, but he topped his shot a little and Vince Bartram was able to save.

Soon afterwards, on 42 minutes a Spring corner led to the goal. Having made a hash of putting in low corner kicks to counteract the Gills' height in the middle, Spring fired a higher one in at Douglas on the near post and he nearly profited, but it was headed out for a second corner and this time they hit the jackpot.

Bartram fumbled the ball and Dyche was quick to power in and force the ball over the line amidst a pile of bodies, for his maiden goal for the club.

Luton took the field for the second half to chants of "We're bust and we're one-nil up" from the Kenilworth Road faithful, and they could have spurred their favourites on to an early second half goal. Gray had a good case for a penalty as a combination of Butters and Patterson hauled him down, but a goal kick was given.

However, Luton were playing a dangerous game in trying to sit on a narrow lead, but Gillingham were hardly threatening.

Indeed, despite the lack of ambition, it was Luton who looked the more dangerous. Bartram was forced to save well from Spring, the midfielder curled in a free-kick inches wide, then Bartram foiled McLaren as he was about to slot

home and Butters almost put through his own goal under pressure from Douglas.

But it all could have unravelled at the very end as Davis had to pull out a special save to deny Andy Hessenthaler on 86 minutes and Mark Patterson missed a sitter from right in front of goal in the second minute of injury time.

Luton: Davis, Willmott (booked 74), Thomas, Spring, Dyche, Johnson (booked 62), Gray, McLaren, Douglas, Thorpe (White 81) McGowan. Attendance: 6,705.



■ Tony Thorpe in the thick of the action against Gillingham



■ Thorpe celebrates as Dyche's effort goes into the net for the Hatters