



■ Stuart Douglas is robbed of the ball by a Notts County defender in yesterday's tough clash



■ Tony Thorpe, arms aloft, celebrates his first goal for the Hatters

Thorpe to the rescue

98/99

**Notts County 1
Luton Town 2**

Report by BILL COLE

TWO Tony Thorpe goals, one lucky, one beautifully taken, earned the Hatters the points that pretty well ensure their second division survival for another year.

The Luton side that dominated the first half, conceded a scrappy equaliser but had the character to fight back with a winner having provided all the style on show at a sunny Meadow Lane.

They still had to survive some desperate late pressure from a Magpies side still not safe themselves.

That late pressure could have brought them a share of the spoils but, by the same token, the Hatters had chances to make the win even more decisive.

Mark Stallard had an early glimpse of goal for County and was well shut down by the young Luton defence before Alan White almost had great cause to celebrate his inclusion in the side now that Sean Dyche has returned to Bristol City.

White got his head to a Spring free-kick and was unlucky to see it headed off the line from under the bar.

Town boss Lennie Lawrence had obviously given Mitchell Thomas instructions to get into the attack as often as possible after being the only success up front against Lincoln last week.

Thomas, however, was too keen on the quarter hour when he took a ball off Spring's toe as he was about to put his boot to a clear chance.

Stuart Douglas was put clean through five minutes later. He should not have had trouble controlling a ball from Michael McIndoe that fell nicely into his stride, but he hesitated and allowed veteran Gary Owers to get back and half block his shot. Keeper Darren Ward did the rest.

Douglas was causing the home defence a problem or two nevertheless and Mark Warren caught him on the edge of the box to stop one of his runs.

It could have been a penalty. Instead Spring fired in a free-kick that almost squeezed in at the near post where Ward only just got to it.

County's first goal attempt came after 31 minutes but it was involuntary. The usually dangerous Peter Beadle's control let him down and Stallard's sharp pass hit his shin and zipped into Davis' arms. The ball was transferred upfield immediately by the increasingly impressive Chris Willmott.

His splendid 60-yard crossfield pass to the left flank dropped right at Thorpe's feet, the striker cut across the face of goal before unleashing a

drive that took a deflection into the net leaving Ward helpless. It may have been fortunate but it was deserved.

Straight away Thorpe fed Douglas only for Ward to hack away. It fell nicely to Ray McKinnon 40 yards out but, with an empty net in front of him and the ball under control, he was miles out with his shot and County survived.

McKinnon had a chance to redeem himself from closer range when Thorpe passed on a Thomas flick-header, but McKinnon's drive flew just wide of goal.

It was fitting that the first half ended with some strong defending from White and Willmott, who gave Stallard nowhere to go when he made a half-break.

Magpies had obviously had a tough ride in the dressing room at half-time because they came out fired up.

A Dennis Pearce centre represented a threat to the Luton defence but Davis made a brave save at Beadle's feet to get to the cross first.

Just when the Hatters looked to have repulsed the home threat County equalised.

They grabbed all three points at Kenilworth Road earlier in the season with a winning goal from a hand ball.

This time they got back into the game with a scrambled leveller.

A corner on the left was played in long, headed back into the near post area where Davis got a hand to it. But the ball slipped from his grasp and after an almighty scramble rugged defender

Matt Redmile knocked it in from a yard out.

Davis made amends with a great save with his feet when substitute Richard Liburd looked like scoring, but the Hatters battled back.

After 65 minutes Douglas took the ball off Thorpe's toe only to blaze wide but seconds later, from Fraser's ball into the box, Douglas set up his strike partner for the winner.

He could have shot from an angle himself, but instead he squared a ball across the box for Thorpe to slot a pure opportunist goal past Ward who stood no chance whatsoever.

White almost crowned a great performance but just couldn't reach Spring's pacey free-kick, before he was forced to resume defensive duties.

Down at the other end a Richardson shot took an incredible bobble that almost shot the ball over Davis, but he was able to parry to Beadle who smashed the ball into the stand with the goal at his mercy.

Marvin Johnson then had to play a skipper's part to head off the line and Beadle missed another sitter, wide and high of the target with a free header.

There was still time for Town sub Gary Doherty to make a super run at County's defence and Gerry Creaney to loop a free kick wide after Willmott had been harshly adjudged to have pulled down Stallard.

Luton: Davis, Willmott, Thomas, Spring, White, Johnson, Thorpe (Doherty 83), McKinnon, Douglas (Fotiadis 89), McIndoe, Fraser. Sub not used: Abbey. Attendance 5,583.