

Talk of the Town with Dave Flett

It's double delight for Thorpey!

TONY THORPE'S two-goal blast fired the Hatters to second division safety at Notts County on Saturday.

Lennie Lawrence likened the injured Phil Gray to Alan Shearer last week when lamenting his strikers' performance against Lincoln and singled out Thorpe in particular for his wastefulness in front of goal.

Thorpe's response to that criticism was a clinical display at Meadow Lane that must now make him the club's Ronaldo!

Lawrence did not draw such comparisons but was still left purring by Thorpe's match-winning show, saying: "Thorpey's second goal was a classic Thorpey goal which, with due respect, nobody else could have got.

"He was poor last week and so were we but he's worked hard in training and looked something like his old self. I think we deserved our victory but, if we hadn't had Thorpey, maybe we'd have got a draw."

Lawrence is now hoping that Bristol City will allow the Hatters to take Thorpe on loan at the beginning of next season but on the evidence of this display they will probably want him back and can even recall him before the end of the season.

The 25-year-old striker grabbed the winning goal on 65 minutes in accomplished fashion.

Stuart Douglas fed the ball to him in the County penalty area and a

confident Thorpe, buoyed by his earlier goal, took one touch, where others might have taken three, in guiding the ball past the outstretched arm of helpless home keeper Darren Ward with a cool side-footed curling effort.

Thorpe's first on 33 minutes saw him receive Chris Willmott's excellent crossfield pass just inside the touchline.

Cutting in from the left and shimmying past his marker, Thorpe's 25-yard daisy-cutter beat Ward after taking a deflection off a County defender.

His celebrations after both strikes showed how happy he was to be back on the scoresheet.

Thorpe's hunger for

goalscoring is as insatiable as ever and his disappointment was evident when Lawrence decided to pull him off after 84 minutes with him still chasing a fifth hat-trick in Hatters' colours.

Lawrence later explained his reason for withdrawing Thorpe, saying he wanted to preserve the striker's tired limbs and not risk a further muscle strain.

In between Thorpe's brace, cumbersome home defender Matt Redmile scrambled a 56th-minute equaliser into the roof of the visitors' net after Kelvin Davis had mishandled a left-wing corner.

But Luton were good value for their three points and could have gone into the interval with more than a one-goal cushion.

Patient possession play saw recalled Alan White have a header cleared off the line, Douglas squander a one-on-one with Ward and fit-again Ray McKinnon go close twice.

County were woeful in the Hatters' penalty box with ex-Watford man Peter Beadle the chief culprit, wasting three gilt-edged chances.

Teenage midfielder Michael McIndoe was tireless in a 3-5-2 formation before suffering cramp in the last minute.

match facts

NOTTS COUNTY 1 LUTON 2

● NOTTS COUNTY: Darren Ward, Gary Owers, Dennis Pearce (Francis Tierney, 90), Andy Hughes (Richard Liburd, 57), Matt Redmile, Mark Warren, Gerry Creaney, Ian Richardson, Mark Stallard, Peter Beadle, Shaun Murray (Kevin Rapley, 74).

● HATTERS: Kelvin Davis, Chris Willmott, Mitchell Thomas, Matthew Spring, Alan White, Marvin Johnson, Tony Thorpe (Gary Doherty, 84), Ray McKinnon, Stuart Douglas (Andrew Fotiadis, 90), Michael McIndoe, Stuart Fraser. Sub not used: Nathan Abbey.

● Shots on target: Notts County 6, Luton 6.

● Off target: Notts County 5, Luton 3.

● Corners: Notts County 6, Luton 1.

● Attendance: 5,583. Referee: David Laws.

● Top Hatter: Thorpe - master finisher.



GOAL-DEN BOY: Tony Thorpe celebrates his second goal at Notts County.

Picture by GARETH OWEN

Vultures circle around out-of-contract Chris!

CHRIS WILLMOTT is attracting the attention of several clubs aware that he is out-of-contract at the end of the season.

The vultures are beginning to circle Kenilworth Road with the news that Willmott, 21, could be available in May.

Willmott would not be free to leave under the Bosman ruling, as he is not over 24, but if he does not agree new terms at Luton before May 15 any interested parties would be able to take the Hatters to a tribunal to fix a transfer fee.

Lennie Lawrence's concern is that a tribunal-fixed price might not reflect Willmott's true value.

Since making his first team debut in February, the Bedford-born defender has impressed but has still only made 10 full appearances.

About Willmott, Lawrence said: "People know he's up. I've got to persuade him he's better off sticking here.

"Clubs hover because of the situation and his agent will be advising him.

"He needs to stay for a year longer but players often think they might not get another chance. We don't want to be going to a tribunal."



GUENTCHEV

hattersextra

Bontcho sent packing

BONTCHO GUENTCHEV could have been the man leading Luton's line in the last games of this season and not Tony Thorpe.

Lennie Lawrence revealed this week that the former Bulgarian international visited Kenilworth Road before deadline day to offer his services after an unsuccessful trial at Colchester but his offer was declined.

Guentchev, who made 80 appearances for the Hatters between 1995 and 1997, was released by CSKA Sofia after their exit from this season's European Champions League.

Lennie's verdict

“We were very lively in the first-half and full value for our lead. In the second-half we knew we were going to get bombed and they got a scrappy equaliser. Kelvin was brave once or twice and fortunate once or twice. Then Thorpey got a classic Thorpey goal that, with due respect, nobody else could have got. The support was excellent, as it has been since receivership, and got us going again when we were rocking at 1-1.”



James not forgotten

JULIAN JAMES is still in Lennie Lawrence's short-term plans.

James has missed the whole of this season after breaking his leg at Bristol Rovers last season.

The 29-year-old right-back only had the pin in his leg removed this week but Lawrence said he would like to

offer James, out of contract at the end of this season, a new three-month deal to prove his fitness.

Lawrence said: "I would hope we can squeeze him two or three months to see if he can get back.

"That would be the plan; whether we can financially do it or not remains to be seen."



JULIAN JAMES

Lennie: I still want Mitch

LENNIE LAWRENCE would like to retain Mitchell Thomas' services next season.

The Hatters boss has been impressed with the 33-year-old player coach's performances in recent weeks and would like to gain permission to agree new terms when his current contract runs out in the summer.

Lawrence said: "I don't expect Mitchell to play 40 games a season. He's come in and done well in the last few games and that's all I ask from him.

"He is not the highest paid player by any stretch of the imagination, so if he goes who am I going to get for the same money?

"The answer is nothing and he's still cutting it as a player."

Thomas does not have a separate contract as a club coach and will be free to leave the club under the Bosman ruling.

Ray McKinnon could also walk away at the end of the season and is considering a return to Scotland.