

Hatters run over by Hess express

Gillingham 2
Luton Town 0
By BILL COLE

99/00

THEY rarely get any joy at Priestfield and there was little to cheer Hatters' fans there again yesterday.

They were already depressed by Gary Doherty's impending departure. But last night Town boss Lennie Lawrence revealed that Doherty's move to Spurs isn't cut and dried yet.

Lawrence said after the game: "The fee has been agreed. The medical's passed with flying colours, but there is a hiccup in him agreeing personal terms.

"If it isn't resolved, he is coming back. He is playing today and playing tomorrow. What I want to see is whether he has signed a Tottenham contract or not."

Hatters' fans saw their side flounder yesterday against a home defence that proved insurmountable for most of the game.

It was only when the Kent side eased up in the last quarter of an hour that the Town attack produced any threats.

Gillingham took the lead out of the blue, through a slightly fortunate Andy Hessenthaler header in the ninth minute and added a second with a super volley from Nicky Southall on the hour.

They then withdrew their most effective players and Luton made something of a task already beyond them.

Hatters posted their first shot on target in the 75th minute, George unlucky to have his header blocked when a score would have put pressure on a home side desperate to take all three points in their quest for the second automatic promotion place.

The need for a vital win could have been the reason for their nervy start. But Luton produced some bright approach play at the beginning of the game.

But a surprised thrust from Gillingham gave them the lead and settled the butterflies a treat.

Steve Butler, a thorn in the side of the Town in seasons past, sprang the offside trap and got away down the home right wing.

He crossed long for the unmarked Ty Gooden, who hit a wild volley that flew across the face of goal and former Watford skipper Hessenthaler was quickest to react.

He got his head to the ball, hit a post and it dribbled over the line.

The goal gave heart to another man who



■ Phil Gray tries to find a way through the Gillingham defence

seems to like playing against the Town.

Carl Asaba returned to the line-up after seven games out injured and twice in three minutes he was only denied by excellent stops from Ben Roberts.

First, he latched on to a ball played over Alan White's head but Roberts was quick off his line to block and gather in the rebound.

Then the ball bounced off Julian Watts' shin into Asaba's run, but Roberts made a brave dive at his feet to stop him again.

Luton were still playing some attractive football, but without Doherty, there was precious little punch up front.

A Spring free kick, thumped in from 40 yards, found Watts' head but George's flick hit Vince Bartram and went off for a corner.

White and Taylor then made good tackles to deny Butler on successive occasions before another excellent tackle outside his area. But Roberts stopped Asaba once more after a cushioned header by Butler had put his fellow striker clear.

Right on half time, Phil Gray had the chance to cash in on Roberts' heroism.

Matthew Spring's free kick was completely missed by Barry Ashby, which must have put Gray off because he put a free header wide from right in front of goal.

In the second half it was all Gillingham for

fully half an hour.

A mistake by Taylor let in Butler. He took it round Roberts, but White came to his rescue by clearing off the line.

But the clinching goal duly followed after 60 minutes.

Gillingham manager Peter Taylor said after the game that it was a planned move – it certainly was an effective one.

From a corner on the right, Southall hit a screaming volley that left Roberts clawing fresh air as it flew past him.

With another game on Monday, Gillingham withdrew Asaba and Hessenthaler after 65 minutes and the Town managed to get into the home penalty area at long last.

George hit a defender on the line with that header. He almost cashed in when Bartram spilled Gray's mis-hit shot and Spring fired inches wide with Bartram merely a spectator. But the Town could not convert from their only period of sustained pressure to allow the home side to press on with their challenge for promotion with this comprehensive win.

Luton: Roberts, Boyce, Taylor, Spring, White, Watts, Johnson, Gray, McLaren (Locke 70), Douglas, George, Subs unused: McGowan, Fraser, Scarlett, Abbey.

Att: 8,667.

Luton man of the match: Ben Roberts



■ Stuart Douglas is brought down by Adrian Pannock



■ Paul McLaren outjumps Paul Smith