

Future looks bleak as Doc-less Luton flop against Gills

GARY DOHERTY has gone and, without him, Luton Town's chances of mounting a Division Two promotion challenge in the foreseeable future look bleaker than ever.

The gap between the Hatters and the top clubs in Division Two, let alone those from higher up the Football League, is getting wider.

Even Gillingham, who have never played outside the bottom two divisions and have been on the brink of bankruptcy, now boast three new stands at a revamped Priestfield Stadium, attendances of over 8,000 and a side that proved far too strong for Lennie Lawrence's men on Saturday.

For Luton, the same problems face the amiable Cliff Bassett and any prospective investors as have done previous regimes – primarily, the need to sell to survive until the club can move to a new home.

But the chief concern for Hatters fans is how many more talented players can the club afford to lose in the meantime, especially with a youth set-up that is now struggling to compete against Premiership clubs scouring the area.

The finishing prowess of Tony Thorpe, the talismanic qualities of Steve Davis and the goalkeeping excellence of Kelvin Davis have never been replaced and there will be no ready made substitute for the versatility of Doherty.

His consistency at both ends of the pitch will be sorely missed. The attacking threat that had brought him five goals in five games certainly was on Saturday.

Without Doherty, Gillingham's powerful back three of Adrian Pennock, Barry Ashby and Guy Butters enjoyed a comfortable afternoon.

Home boss Peter Taylor could even afford the luxury of substituting key players Andy Hessenthaler and Carl Asaba with 25 minutes to go, safe in the knowledge that his side's two-goal cushion was enough to secure maximum points.

In a shot-shy first-half, Luton only managed to threaten Vince Bartram's goal twice, both from Matthew Spring free-kicks.

After 19 minutes, Liam George's

match facts

GILLINGHAM 2 LUTON 0

● **GILLINGHAM:** Vince Bartram, Adrian Pennock, Junior Lewis, Barry Ashby, Guy Butters, Nicky Southall, Paul Smith, Andy Hessenthaler (Nayron Nosworthy, 65), Ty Gooden, Steve Butler, Carl Asaba (Lee Matthews, 65).

● **HATTERS:** Ben Roberts, Emmerson Boyce, Matthew Taylor, Matthew Spring, Alan White, Julian Watts, Marvin Johnson, Phil Gray, Paul McLaren (Adam Locke, 68), Stuart Douglas, Liam George. Subs not used: Gavin McGowan, Stuart Fraser, Andre Scarlett, Nathan Abbey.

● **Shots on target:** Gillingham 6, Luton Town 3.

● **Off target:** Gillingham 8, Luton Town 5.

● **Corners:** Gillingham 7, Luton Town 2.

● **Referee:** Alan Wiley (Burntwood, Staffordshire).

● **Top Hatter:** White – solid display.

THE Luton Town Supporters Club annual Player of the Season Presentation Evening is on Sunday at the Kent Social Club in Tenby Drive. Admission is £4 for supporters club members and people who join on the night or £5 for non-members. The evening starts at 8pm and all first team players will be present.

hooked shot was saved by Bartram and Phil Gray, taunted about his waistline for the second successive away game, headed wide on the stroke of half-time.

At the other end, Ben Roberts was made to work a lot harder by the promotion-chasing Gills but was powerless to stop Hessenthaler's ninth-minute goal.

The energetic ex-Watford midfielder reacted quickly to direct Ty Gooden's miscued volley into the bottom corner with his head.

Roberts then raced off his line twice to keep his side in the game before the interval, producing brave stops from the pacy Asaba,

who was otherwise well-marshalled by Alan White.

Gillingham continued to press for a second goal after the break with Paul Smith sending a looping shot over and White clearing Butler's chip off the line.

The home side's reward came on the hour when Nicky Southall's textbook volley from the edge of the area after Gooden's corner rocketed past Roberts.

Veteran Butler, still a handful at 38, saw his downward header saved low by Roberts seconds later, with Gooden again the provider.

Luton's only chances of a consolation came in the last 15 minutes as Gillingham took their foot off the accelerator. On 76 minutes, George's downward header was beaten out by Bartram.

Moments later, Gray's bobbling shot was fumbled by the Gillingham keeper but he recovered in time to deny George.

And Spring, who along with White shone in a generally poor outfield display by the Hatters, rifled wide with only seven minutes to go.

Lennie Lawrence's verdict

‘We offered very little as an attacking threat and we didn't really function at all at the front. They're a difficult team to play against with strength in every single department. I know for an absolute fact they were extremely concerned about Gary Doherty but you can't say if he'd been there, this or that would have happened. He wasn't and we must get on with it, although we're still entitled to attack more effectively than we did. I've seen Gillingham sit on a lead a dozen times over the last two or three seasons. It was a classic display from them.’

