

Hatters off to a stuttering start

Luton 0, Notts County 1

by PETE KENYON

RICKY HILL kicked off his managerial career with defeat as Hatters crashed to County.

Luton fans were out in force, to greet their former hero, and prematch chants of 'when he gets the ball he beats them all, Ricky,

Ricky Hill' brought back memories of the glory years of the 80s.

But once the match kicked off, it was the same old problems – and how Luton missed Phil Grey, who departed for the lure of Burnley's cash up front.

With no target man, and no-one able to hold the ball up chances for Hatters were at a premium.

Only heroics in the Luton goal from new signing Mark Ovendale, a £425,000 signing

from Bournemouth, stopped a rout.

Liam George looked sharp but apart from him and Ovendale, the rest just didn't perform.

Former Hatter Mark Stein, a Bosman signing from Bournemouth, huffed and puffed in the sun, but you can't help feeling his best days are well behind him.

His first touch frequently let him down and he looked a pale shadow of his former self.

Paul McLaren provided Luton's best effort of the first half but his 20-yard drive after just two minutes hammered onto the cross bar and out to safety.

County's Craig Ramage also hit the woodwork with a powerful header, but for the most part the first half was a poor affair, brightened only by Mark Stallard's 24th minute goal.

County were awarded a dubious free kick near the left edge of the box, and Stallard sneaked in front of his marker to head Ramage's dead-ball kick in at the near post.

Luton might of had a penalty five minutes before the break, but the referee Andy D'Urso judged Alex

Dyer's challenge on Mark Stein a fair one. It looked a poor decision.

After the break Andrew Fotiadis rifled an angled volley on to the underside of the bar after springing County's offside trap and running onto Adams Locke's chipped through ball.

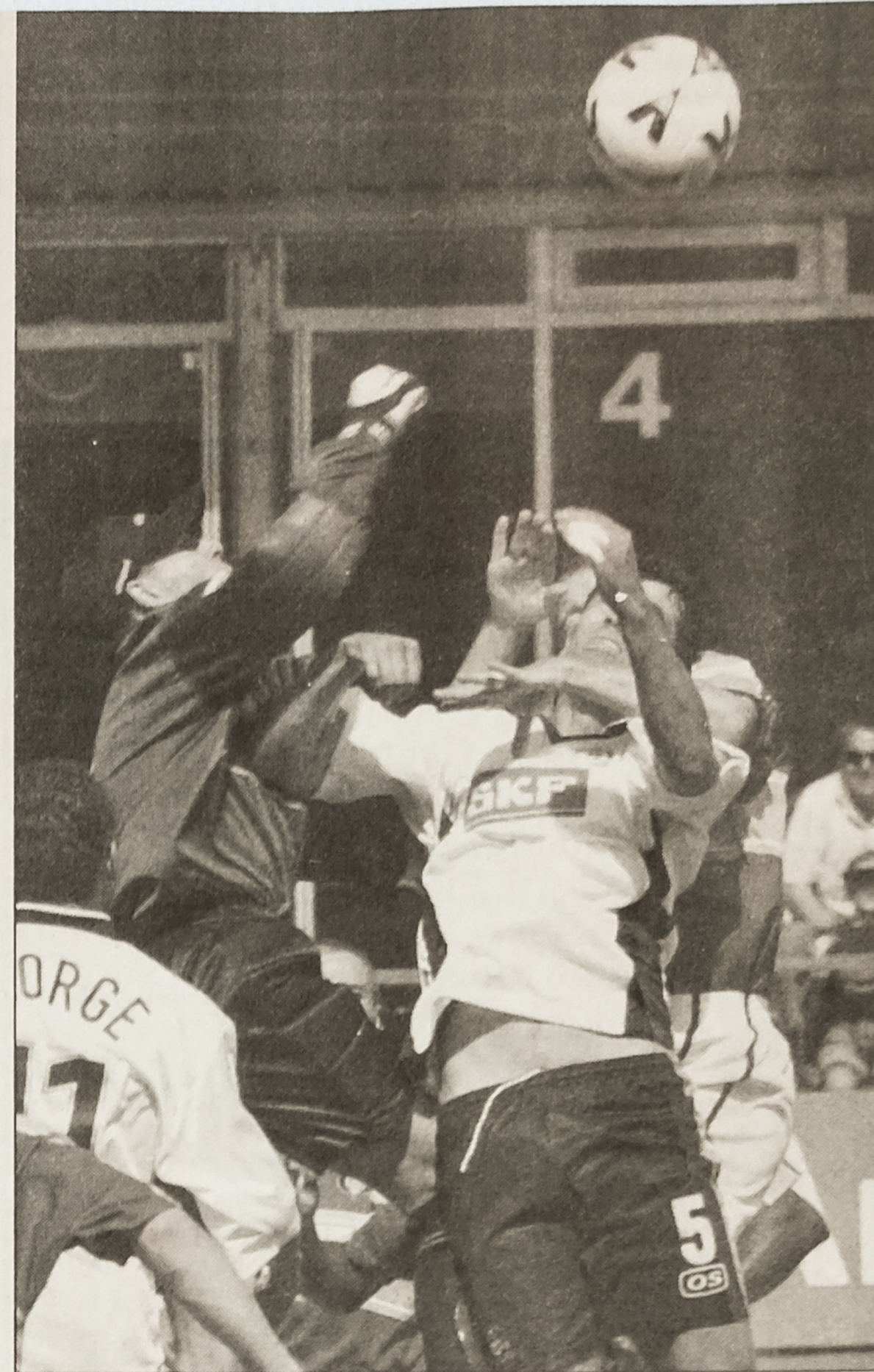
And Darren Ward had to make an acrobatic save diving backwards after Paul McLaren's free kick ricocheted off George's back and looked to be looping just under the bar.

But it was County who created the best chances of the half and only a fine performance on his debut by Ovendale kept Hatters in the game.

Just before the hour Lock lost possession in his own half and as David Joseph raced goal wards it was four against one.

A square pass through to an unmarked Andy Hughes 10 yards out and in a central position looked certain to end in a goal – but Ovendale made himself as big a target as possible to smother the effort.

Twenty minutes from time Marvin Johnson got caught in possession just outside his



■ Julian Watts beaten during one of Luton's corner

own box and again Ovendale had to be alert to snaffle the ball from Joseph as he tried to round the keeper.

New boy Peter Holmes came on to replace Lock and Hatters at times dreadful football showed more cohesion but without a cutting edge upfront.

A draw would have been cruel on a well organised County side – but three minutes from time Fotiadis

should have secured a point but smashed a clear-cut chance high over the bar from 12 yards after George had put him through with a nifty reverse pass.

Team: Ovendale, Boyce; Watts (Fraser 78); McLaren; Johnson, Taylor, Spring, Locke (Holmes 58), George, Steine, Fotiadis, Man of the Match: Ovendale
Attendance: 7059



■ Fotiadis holds off challenge from Notts County defender