

Hill's boys booed as the samba music dies

RICKY HILL'S first game in charge started as a carnival at Kenilworth Road for the Hatters but soon turned into a procession for visitors Notts County.

A samba band greeted Hill's side before Saturday's eagerly-awaited Division Two curtain-raiser. But the boos his players received as they trudged off the pitch at the end will not have been welcome music to the new manager's ears.

Hill said afterwards that some of his players had suffered 'stage fright' and, while the game was not quite a horror show, it was not the kind of start the new manager would have hoped for at the stadium that was so often a theatre of dreams during his 14 impeccable years as a player.

Mark Stallard's 24th-minute winning goal brought an abrupt end to Hill's honeymoon as Hatters boss and underlined the hard work that needs to be done before chairman Mike Watson-Challis can bring back 'the glory days' he craves for the club.

Hill has inherited a squad that previous manager Lennie Lawrence said required three experienced additions to challenge for promotion.

The new boss has made two astute signings in Mark Stein and Mark Ovendale but, since Lawrence's comments, Phil Gray has also departed for Burnley and his presence – or that of Tottenham's ex-Hatter Gary Dohererty – was sorely missed on Saturday.

Stein was asked too often to use his five foot six frame to compete in the air for hopeful forward balls against County's six-foot defenders Mark Warren and Matthew Redmile.

The ex-Chelsea striker has always performed better alongside a target man and it is clear why such a player remains high on Hill's shopping list.

At the other end, Ovendale provided assurance between the sticks and made two fine saves to prevent a heavier defeat for his new club.

All this came after a bright start from the home team.

Matthew Spring clattered the crossbar after just three minutes but that turned out to be Luton's only notable first-half effort.

The visitors signalled a warning when Craig Ramage headed against a post after a cross from Andy McDermott, rejected by the Hatters after one trial game at St Albans in pre-season.

Four minutes later, Ramage's free-kick from the left was headed past Ovendale at the near post by Stallard.

Hill opted for Paul McLaren as his defensive lynchpin at the back with Julian Watts to his right and Marvin Johnson on the left.

Watts and Johnson both lacked sharpness after missing large chunks of the pre-season and Adam Locke, who had a hernia operation in the summer, also looked sluggish.

A sloppy back pass from Locke just seconds after the break almost saw Luton fall further behind, but Watts saved his team-mate's blushes with a tremendous sliding lunge as County's on-loan Montpellier striker David Joseph shaped to shoot.

Fotiadis then raced clear and thundered his shot against a post, but the home side never managed a concerted period of pressure despite a staggering corner count of 15-1 in their favour.

Frustratingly, for the Hatters fans, a large majority of those set-pieces were delivered straight into the hands of County keeper Darren Ward.

On 57 minutes, Ovendale gave an indication of why the Luton board have decided to splash out nearly half-a-million pounds on his talents.

match facts

LUTON 0 NOTTS CO 1

● **HATTERS:** Mark Ovendale, Emmer-son Boyce, Julian Watts (Stuart Fraser, 79), Paul McLaren, Marvin Johnson, Matthew Taylor, Matthew Spring, Adam Locke (Peter Holmes, 58), Liam George, Mark Stein, Andrew Fotiadis. Subs not used: Jude Stirling, Dean Brennan, Nathan Abbey.

● **NOTTS COUNTY:** Darren Ward, Mark Warren, Matthew Redmile, Andy McDermott, Andy Hughes, Craig Ramage, Mark Stallard, David Joseph, Alex Dyer, Gary Owers, Richard Liburd, (Richard Holmes, 88).

● **Shots on target:** Luton 5 Notts Co 3.

● **Off target:** Luton 3 Notts Co 3.

● **Corners:** Luton 15 Notts Co 1.

● **Top Hatter:** Ovendale – solid debut.

The 26-year-old keeper charged off his line to smother an Andy Hughes' shot after Joseph had left Locke on his backside near the halfway line and squared across the home goal.

Liam George then forced Ward into an acrobatic save from an unconventional looping header before sub Peter Holmes drove wide from 25 yards.

But Ovendale came to the Hatters' rescue again moments later when he was alert to the danger after Johnson was dispossessed by Joseph.

The lively Frenchman was clear on goal but Ovendale was quick to save at his feet.

Fotiadis should still have salvaged a point two minutes from time for Luton but, after the ball broke loose to him in the visitors penalty box, he blazed woefully into the Kenilworth Road stand with only Ward to beat.

It was a disappointing end to an afternoon when every Hatters outfield player except Emmer-son Boyce performed below par.

The game also provided an unhappy reminder of Luton's main frailties from last season, namely their inability to break down uncompromising defences and their vulnerability to counter-attacks.

Afterwards, Hill made it clear that he would not tolerate similar performances in the future.

But his Division Two baptism does not get any easier with a trip to title-favourites Wigan the next test on Saturday.