

Just another end of season encounter!

A MATCH in which neither Luton Town nor Brentford had anything to play for, was full of incident from its sensational start to its controversial ending at Griffin Park on Thursday.

There was a second minute sending-off, a penalty save with his first touch in senior football by a rookie goalkeeper and two goals for each side, including an incredible 55 yard strike for Luton's opener.

By the end of the match, a Town player found himself in police custody after an incident reported on our news pages involving a home supporter who needed treatment for facial injuries.

A minute had barely elapsed before Emmerson Boyce slipped, allowing Scott Partridge through. Hatters' keeper Mark Ovendale could only parry the striker's initial shot back to him and, as the Brentford man was about to round him, Ovendale tugged him down.

The Luton 'keeper was duly sent off having lasted only 76 seconds.

Paul Shepherd was the unlucky outfield player to be sacrificed to make way for Town's 19-year-old youth team keeper Scott Ward, who became an instant hero by brilliantly palming away Lloyd Owusu's penalty.

Steve Howard then scored a bizarre opening goal for Luton when Brentford keeper Gottskalksson took a free kick way out of his goal on the wing and scuffed it straight to him. Howard netted from the halfway line. "We are calling Howard 'David Beckham' after that," joked Luton boss Kinnear.

Paul McLaren scored a second goal, but Brentford came back to grab a point.

Nevertheless, Kinnear was pleased with the performance. He said: "If we had played with that spirit all season there is no telling how high up the table we could have finished.

"We showed great resilience and character and should have come in three goals up at the break. Of course, having got two in front I am disappointed we didn't go on to win, but tiredness came into it.

Kinnear was not so happy with the display of the referee. He said: "He wasn't consistent. Having sent off Ovendale, their 'keeper got away with it when Howard was brought down. The referee played advantage and Liam George shot over.

"Their keeper was the key man for them, making three tremendous saves in the first half alone and he got away scot-free.

"That performance doesn't hide the season we have had. The players are honest enough to own up to their errors, but that doesn't help with results.

"Ward did very well and couldn't be faulted with either goal, but defenders lack of concentration cost us dear.

"It has happened so often and if the players can't keep their concentration for 90 minutes, the only way to address the problem is to get in personnel who can - and that is what I will do.

"Lee Mansell ran out of steam because he hasn't been training due to injury so I had to substitute him. I have spoken to him and his father and offered him a three year deal.

"I don't have to do that because he is here for three years anyway, but he has earned it."

Another one to earn a new contract is Ward who, after saving that penalty on Thursday night, was rewarded with a deal to stay with the Hatters until July 2002.

Some familiar faces, however, can expect to be released this week. "I had to keep the nucleus of the squad to fulfil our fixtures, but now the season is over some will be going," said Kinnear.

Rousing finale but just a point for Joe

Luton Town 1
Port Vale 1

DOOMED Hatters gave their vociferous supporters hopes of better things next season by finishing their campaign with a robust performance.

The fans in the Kenilworth Road Wing Stand offered wonderfully enthusiastic support but Joe Kinnear's Hatters were unable to grab a winner.

The game's only two goals came within a minute of each other in the first half.

Steve Howard's header on the quarter hour mark, after Matthew Taylor's shot had been deflected on to a post, was cancelled out by Allen Tankard.

Up from the back for a corner, he got the benefit of a kind bounce in a goalmouth scramble to blast home high past Mark Ovendale's left hand.

Kinnear was hoping that Lee Mansell would solve his problem position on the right side of midfield behind a three-man front line of Stuart Douglas, Howard and Liam George.

The formation looked like paying dividends, with Howard winning everything in the air, but Douglas's control let him down twice when collecting the big striker's headed passes.

And then he had a good shout for a penalty turned down when he fell under challenge when getting on the end of a third.

After 15 minutes, the Hatters went close to taking the lead when Player-of-the-season



■ Synchronised anguish: Lee Mansell and Hatters fan

Taylor cracked in a great skimming left footer, but a slight deflection off a defender moved the ball on to a post and out for a corner.

Justice was done however, when Taylor's inswinging flag kick from the right dropped

smack on to the unmarked Howard's head.

Straight from the restart Vale earned a corner and a setpiece once again proved the Town's undoing.

The defence had a chance to clear but failed and Tankard had time to turn before cracking in the equaliser from close range.

Taylor was thriving in the room given in his revised role and his terrific long ball led to Mansell robbing Tankard before providing Douglas with a great chance.

But he couldn't control the ball and was promptly swamped by back-tracking defenders.

When an Emmerson Boyce clearance was blocked Vale's Tony Naylor found himself in space to whistle a shot inches wide of a post before powerful former Watford striker Stephen Brooker had his goal-bound shot tipped over by a flying Ovendale.

Ragged

After the interval, George ran the visitors defence ragged down the left wing. He set up a great chance for Douglas who needed a touch too many, then whipped in a driven cross that Mansell, coming in fast, could only volley back across the face of goal.

Vale responded with a couple of efforts that went into the net, but only after the offside flag had been raised.

But the best chance of a winner fell to Howard. A deep cross from Taylor went over the 'keeper for Howard to rise at the back post, but the big man headed wide with the goal at his mercy and the Hatters had to settle for a point.

After the game Vale manager and former Luton captain Brian Horton said: "This is a smashing club. I'm a just sad that they have dropped to the bottom division. I think they are much better than that."

Luton Town Ovendale, Shepherd (Karlsen, 44), Dryden, Boyce, Mansell, Spring, McLaren, Taylor, Douglas (Stein, 62), George, Howard. Subs not used Watts, Locke, Ward (GK).

Attendance: 5,260.

Luton Man of the match: Matthew Taylor.



■ Subdued celebration: Steve Howard (left) with Paul McLaren