

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 tucked 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 visitor 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.

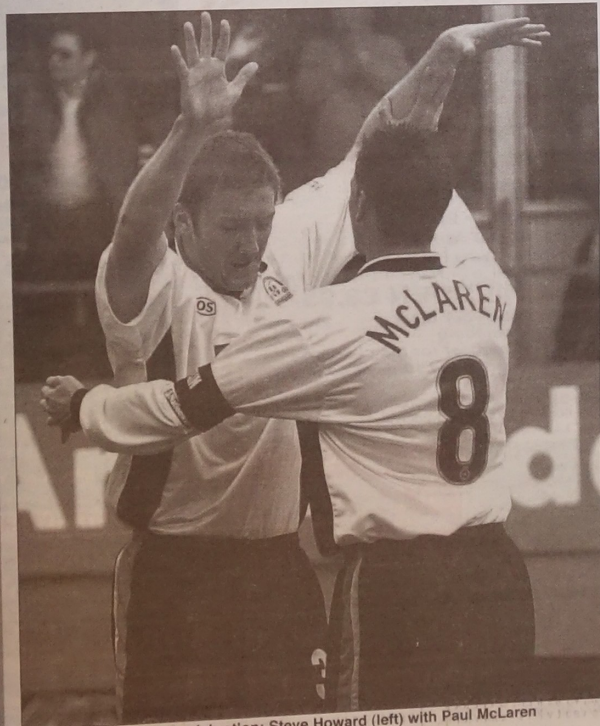
But the best chance of a winner fell to Howard. A deep cross from Taylor went over the 'keeper for Howard to rise at the back post, but the big man headed wide with the goal at his mercy and the Hatters had to settle for a point.

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 (Karlson, 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