HOWARD'S WAY: Luton striker Steve Howard *(No. 19)*, nets one of his three goals at Layer Road yesterday afternoon

Photograph: CLIFFORD HICKS

02/03

Bizarre weekend for U's

Hapless Colchester are struck for five at Layer Road

BRILLIANT one match, terrible the next. That sums up Colchester United's bizarre Easter weekend.

The U's were on the crest of a wave after humiliating promotion-chasing Cardiff City 3-0 on Welsh soil on Saturday, but they were sunk without a trace by Luton Town, on home turf yesterday. Rather ironic, then, that the U's should have spent Sunday relaxing with a swim after the exertions of their Welsh experience!

You couldn't really have two more contrasting results, or two more contrasting performances. It was like watching two different Colchester teams.

A hat-trick from target man Steve Howard, a poacher's goal from Carl Griffiths and a penalty from skipper Kevin Nicholls secured Luton their biggest victory for more than a year.

The Hatters were only one place above the U's in the Division Two table before kick-off, but the two sides were a world apart yesterday. It certainly brought Phil Parkinson's super-confident troops back to earth with a bump. U's keeper Richard McKinney endured an afternoon he would rather forget.

Having kept five clean sheets in his previous eight outings, McKinney was directly responsible for three of Luton's five goals. While Howard was celebrating a hat-trick, McKinney was cursing a hat-trick of blunders.

Of course this is just one poor result in what has otherwise been a marvellous last three months for the Essex club.

United have performed heroics to climb away from the relegation zone and into mid-table, but for the first time they looked like a side who were tired and in need of a rest after their substantial achievements.

It was just their second defeat in 16 matches since former manager Steve Whitton stood down at the end of January, during which time Geraint Williams steered the U's in the right direction as caretaker, and new boss Parkinson scooped a manager-of-the-month award in his first month of management.

Despite yesterday's crushing defeat, the U's are still sitting pretty in 10th slot, with a genuine chance of maintaining this top 10 berth during the final two weekends of the campaign.

Injuries had forced Parkinson's hand a little, with both full-backs Johnnie Jackson and Sam Stockley having picked up injuries during the stirring victory at Ninian Park.

The midfield duo of Bobby Bowry and Thomas Pinault were also rested, with both starting on the bench, and this at least gave Parkinson an opportunity to cast his eye over a couple of youngsters.

Marc Canham, who made his first senior start at Plymouth earlier in the month, was handed his first home start in central midfield, while 18-year-old Greg Halford enjoyed his first-team debut at right-back.

Canham was replaced at half time by Pinault, but Halford was the pick of a poor bunch.

The second year YTS player can be happy with his display down the right flank. He looks to be a name for the future.

For a while, it looked as though it would be a keenly-contested, end-of-season encounter, with both sides safely installed in mid-table and both committed to attack.

But the parity did not last long. McKinney was at full stretch to cling on to Howard's angled drive after three minutes, while Mike Edwards almost gave Colchester an early lead when glancing a header narrowly wide from Karl Duguid's sixth-minute free-kick.

However, Luton did not look back from the moment that Howard bundled home the opening goal in the 14th minute.

Peter Holmes swung over a low cross from the left flank for the lurking Howard to sweep into an empty net from inside the six-yard box.

It was the big man's 20th goal of the season, but it was to prove just the beginning for the ex-Hartlepool and Northampton striker. He was a menace all afternoon.

The U's chief weapon, as an attacking force, was Halford's impressive long throws. The tall teenager can comfortably hurl the ball into the six-yard box from the touchline.

One of Halford's missiles, propelled into the danger area on 19 minutes, ended with Dean Morgan's goalbound header cannoning to safety off defender Alan Neilson.

Two minutes later and Luton were two-up, thanks to McKinney's first glaring error of the afternoon. The Irishman dropped Howard's low cross at the feet of Griffiths, who gratefully poked the loose ball into an unguarded net.

It was Griffiths' first goal for 18 months, in only his second comeback match after a broken leg.

Colchester suffered a slice of bad luck in the 31st minute. Duguid flicked on another delivery from long throw specialist Halford, and McGleish headed firmly against the bar from eight yards out.

United, on the back of their recent fine run, would have fancied their chances of staging a rally, if McGleish's header had dipped under the bar rather than struck the woodwork. As it was, Luton were soon to take complete control.

Joe Kinnear's men netted two more goals before the break to ensure that the second half was largely academic. McKinney again blundered when failing to catch a free-kick, pumped into the box by Sol Davies.

The ball dropped to the feet of Griffiths, and he was promptly upended by McKinney before he could fire into an empty net. It was a blatant penalty.

The U's keeper was booked for the deliberate foul – he was lucky to escape a red card – and he could do little as Nicholls drilled home from the spot.

It was Nicholls' fifth goal of the season, and his third successful penalty. Into the first minute of first-half stoppage time, and the burly presence of Howard again proved too much for the U's beleaguered defence.

He popped up at the far post to head home Nicholl's cross from point blank range. Colchester bossed possession in the second half, yet they could find no way past rookie keeper Rob Beckwith, who was making only his second senior appearance.

Beckwith clawed away McGleish's header from Morgan's 55th-minute corner, and then arched back to fingertip Pinault's 20-yard lob over his bar on 73 minutes.

The visitors were denied a fifth goal by an offside decision, just as Griffiths was turning to celebrate tucking home a cross by Hughes, but they did indeed complete a nap hand in the last minute of normal time.

The hapless McKinney scurried off his line to intercept a long pass by Nicholls, but he was beaten to the ball by Howard, who rounded the U's keeper to roll into an empty net.

Howard's hat-trick goal capped a miserable day for Colchester, and for McKinney in particular.

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Colchester Utd 0 — Luton Town 5

Colchester Utd		Substitutes		Luton Town		Substitutes	
31 McKinney	3	6 Pinault (for Canham, 46)	6	47 Beckwith	8	33 Brill (not used)	
27 HALFORD	7	15 Coote (not used)		17 Boyce	7	22 Bayliss (for Boyce, 75)	
29 Edwards	6	17 Bowry (not used)		24 Davies	7	2 Skelton (for Spring, 88)	
5 Fitzgerald	5	24 Baldwin (for Halford, 78)		3 Neilson	7	43 Judge (for Griffiths, 88)	
19 White	5	32 Gerken (not used)		37 Willmott	6	31 Kimble (not used)	
7 Duguid	6			21 Hughes	7		
10 Izzet	5			4 Spring	6		
16 Canham	5			8 Nicholls	7		
11 Morgan	5			20 Holmes	7		
9 McGleish	6			10 Griffiths	8		
28 May	5			19 HOWARD	9		

Goals

None

Bookings

McKinney (43, foul)
White (53, foul)

4-4-2	Formation	4-4-2
12	Corners	1
2	Offsides	8
6	Shots on target	8
6	Shots off target	5
12	Fouls conceded	9
1	Hit woodwork	0

Goals

Howard 14, 45 and 90
Griffiths 21, Nicholls 43 (pen)

Bookings

Spring (35, ungentlemanly conduct)
Nicholls (82, foul)

DATE: Monday, April 21, 2003
ATTENDANCE: 3,967

VENUE: Layer Road
PITCH: Good

REF: Mr Clive Penton (Sussex) 7
WEATHER: Warm sunshine