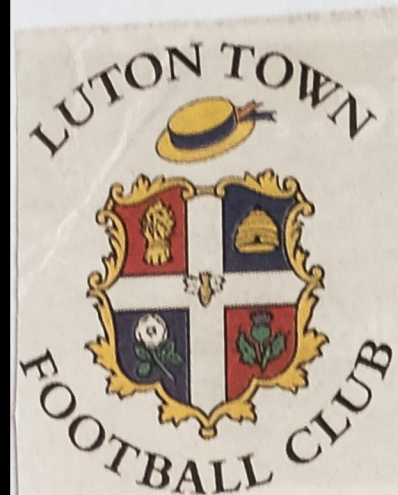




Luton Town FC

Millwall 2-1 Luton
TOM LEECH reports
from the New Den



Frustrated Newell hints at rebuilding

05/06

ANOTHER late goal conceded on their travels looks to have put to bed any hopes Hatters had of sneaking into the play-offs this season.

The win for relegation-threatened Millwall might not be enough to keep the Lions in the Championship but the defeat for Mike Newell's men means that Hatters are surely destined for mid-table consolidation.

"I'm gutted but I'm getting used to not getting what we deserve when we play away," lamented the Luton boss after seeing his side lose their 13th game outside of Kenilworth Road to a team who before yesterday had won only twice at home.

Luton went a goal down to Millwall forward Ben May's strike in an awful first half performance that Newell admitted was well below par: "Millwall are fighting for their lives and looked like it meant more to them. I told the players at half time to go out and compete and the football would take care of itself."

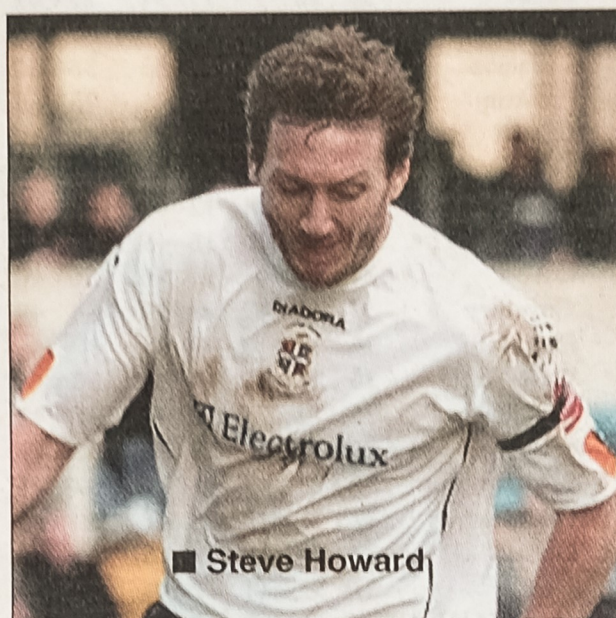
Substitute Marvin Williams stole all three points for the Lions with a dramatic last minute winner but Luton were yet again guilty of not killing the game off – something not lost on Newell.

"The game should've been over midway through the second half but we didn't take our chances," he said. "We just haven't got the players to finish off teams. There must be something wrong with the way we play away from home and we'll aim to put it right for next season. If we can do that we'll be up there – we're capable of being a top six side."

Newell also hinted that he'll be restructuring last season's League One title winners to deal with the demands of the Championship.

"There'll be restrictions and limits on what we can bring in but I will be strengthening the squad over the summer," he said.

"If I'm given the opportunity to bring in who I'd like then we'll have a chance next season. I'm happy with the core of players I've got but it's not down to tactics or



■ Steve Howard

anything like that – better players win you matches."

Luton welcomed back one of their better players – talismanic captain Kevin Nicholls in midfield along with Peter Holmes who made his first start since Boxing Day. Markus Heikkinen, absent from last weekend's defeat at Leeds with flu, replaced Leon Barnett to partner Coyne in central defence.

It was World Cup hopeful Coyne who prevented the home side taking the lead early on. Just 11 minutes had passed when Millwall's much-travelled striker Carl Asaba was in the right place at the right time to take full advantage when Marlon Beresford spilled David Livermore's free kick.

With the goal unguarded and just five yards out Asaba should have poached one of the easiest goals of his long career. But before he could pull the trigger Aussie Coyne bravely slid in to swipe the ball to safety.

In a scrappy opening half the only Luton player to rise above the mediocrity was Nicholls. With Millwall's five-man midfield the skipper had his work cut out but took to the task with relish, battling for every ball and leading by example.

Nicholls' endeavours counted for little however as the Lions took the lead on 32 minutes with a goal that was made far too easy by Luton's sloppy defending.

Asaba drilled the ball into strike partner May's feet and with his back to goal in the penalty area May was allowed to turn and

given time to get a shot off. He did just that, wrong footing Beresford with a low drive.

After such a woeful opening 45 minutes the second half could only get better – and it did, almost from the kick off as Coyne equalised.

Paul Underwood's long ball into the box caused pandemonium among the jittery Millwall defence and as Steve Howard jumped there was a strong claim for handball as his marker struggled to contain the big forward.

Referee Uriah Rennie let play continue and, just as quickly as he had been to thwart Asaba at the other end, Coyne ghosted in to slam in his third of the season from close range.

Shots began to rain down on Lions' goalkeeper Andy Marshall as Howard, Rowan Vine and Carlos Edwards all tested the Millwall shot-stopper.

Edwards came closest on 55 minutes when he ran the length of the pitch almost unchallenged before blasting straight at Marshall from 12 yards. The Trinidad & Tobago international switched positions with Kevin Foley at the break and the change rejuvenated the Hatters.

Relieved of his defensive duties Edwards' marauding right wing runs provided Luton with an attacking edge that struggling Millwall simply didn't have.

Only another fine save on the hour-mark denied Ahmet Brkovic when the Croatia's snap shot was diverted around the post by Marshall's trailing leg.

Luton failed to capitalise on their dominant spell and on 75 minutes, when only moments before Edwards had fizzed a shot wide after Alan Dunne gifted him a clear sight of goal with a misplaced pass, Millwall went close when Livermore's long range effort went inches past the post.

It was a warning that Luton failed to heed as the home side snatched an unlikely winner in the final minute.

An innocuous enough ball was put into the Hatters' area and either Foley or Coyne could have launched it to the nearby Canary Wharf which looms over the New Den. Instead they hesitated and allowed substitute Williams to sneak in and toe poke past a bewildered Beresford.



Subs: Feeney (Vine 73), Showunmi (Holmes 86), Morgan (Brkovic 86) Not used: Brill, Barnett

MAN OF THE MATCH

KEVIN NICHOLLS
 Skipper's return only highlight in dire game



■ Ahmet Brkovic shields the ball