



BOTTOM OF LEAGUE 2

	P	W	D	L	Pts
Macclesfield	5	1	0	4	3
Grimsby	5	0	2	3	2
Barnet	5	0	0	5	0
Rotherham	5	3	1	1	-7
Bournemouth	5	0	3	2	-14
Luton	5	2	1	2	-23

Fighting back: Macclesfield's Gareth Evans outmuscles Sol Davis and George Pilkington as his side compound more misery on Luton, who remain on -23 points in League Two

Luton woes continue

08/09

Nick Townsend
at Moss Rose

LUTON TOWN have arrived on the latest stage of their *Beat the Injustice* tour. Here, 20 or so miles south of the City of Manchester Stadium where the representative of the Abu Dhabi ruling family promised the world for the club he had acquired, is the opposite end of football's food chain, where success equates not with long overdue glory, but with preservation of League status for Mick Harford and his men.

The former striker's features contain hard, merciless eyes. You wouldn't want to cross Harford. Almost certainly you would want to be led by him into what will be an unremittingly nervous campaign, with one aim in mind: survival.

Though that aim should really involve only the three members of League Two's MPMS — the Minus Points Martyrs — Luton (minus 30 at the season's start), Rotherham (minus 17) and Bournemouth (minus 17), there is already a suspicion that others may be clawed into the fray, including yesterday's hosts. Macclesfield's league record beforehand was four games, nil points, goals scored

MACCLESFIELD
Yeo 12
Jennings 61

2

LUTON
Charles 90

1

nil, goals against 14. How bad could Keith Alexander's side be?

Actually, not that bad at all. Veteran Simon Yeo's 12th minute lob for the opener would have graced the Premier League; so would James Jennings' drive on the hour. Luton's stoppage-time reply from substitute Ryan Charles left Harford unmoved. Another 23 points are still required for his team just to reach par.

Whatever the denouement at season's end, there will be blood. There is no parachute payment exit from League Two, just a freefall to the Blue Square Premier. The FA and Football League have done their damndest to condemn Luton. To say it's draconian gives Draco a bad name. Most assumed, though, that the

Hatters would accept their fate meekly. Not so, despite the result yesterday. Luton will continue to believe there can be a reprieve. In the past 10 seasons, the average total required to avoid relegation from League Two has been 44.8 points. Luton, therefore, need around 75. They are still approximately on target.

Luton's plight is a sorry story of almost Byzantine complexity. The club were deducted 10 points by the FA in June for breaches of regulations, under the then chairman, regarding payments to agents. The Football League had already deducted 20 points from Luton for the club's failure to comply with its insolvency policy. That was the price that Luton Town Football Club 2020 Ltd, the consortium fronted by television presenter Nick Owen that took the club out of administration, had to pay to allow them to compete in League Two.

Gary Sweet, life-long fan and managing director of LTFC 2020, revealed that in the past year an approach was made to Luton in an Abu Dhabi-style deal. "We had an offer of a significant amount of money from an individual from the former Eastern Bloc," he says.

"But he had no obvious interest in English football. I declined that offer on the basis that this club has been kicked around politically far too much in the last 20 years."

The club's outgoings, particularly expenditure on players' contracts, have been reduced, drastically. "Our budget last season was just shy of £5m overall. Now it's below £1.8m. But we have to get that down much lower in order to survive," explained Sweet. Maintaining League Two status, though, is the priority. "Though we do have a contingency plan, fall-

ing out of the League means you do take a risk of losing survival as a business," Luton's plight has been alleviated by some altruistic gestures.

Harford tells how the now-departed Don Hutchison waived his month's severance pay at the end of his contract. The money has been used to sponsor two youth players.

If anyone is equipped to preserve Luton's League status, it is Harford, the former Hatters' striker. "Gets in the blood, the old place," he said of that anach-

ronism, Kenilworth Road, the previous morning after training. "My time here as a player was probably the best time in my career. But I'm not here for sentimental reasons. I believe I'm the best man to get us out of the trouble we're in. We need togetherness, the willingness to work for each other, the passion to point fingers at each other without it going outside the dressing room."

The process of accruing safety points has a strange fascination about it. Amongst the elite, it is all about extracting another few thousand a week on a contract for another Bentley or Hummer. Three divisions down, where Robinho's weekly income could easily pay the salaries of Luton Town's entire team, this is car-crash football. Will Luton scramble out alive from the wreckage?

Star man: Danny Thomas (Macclesfield)

Referee: A Penn

Attendance: 2,349

MACCLESFIELD: Brain 7, Flynn 6, Bristley 7, Morgan 6, Reid 6, Thomas 8 (Harvey 85min), Dunfield 6, Bell 6, Jennings 7, Yeo 7 (Hessey 77min), Evans 6 (Rooney 82min)

LUTON: Brill 6, Keane 6, Pilkington 6, Spillane 6, Davis 6 (Charles, h-t 7), Gnaka 6 (Hall 61min), Jarvis 6 (Plummer 72min), Watson 6, Emanuel 6, Parkin 7, Martin 6

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Mick Harford

