

Luton's marathon run ends

Millwall make their League status tell in front of goal while gallant Hatters are left with happy memories and a sense of relief

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By Steve Tongue
AT KENILWORTH ROAD

LUTON TOWN	0
MILLWALL	3
Henry (12), Hulse (36), N'Gouessan (86)	

Half-time: 0-2

Att: 9,768

It was fun while it lasted, this FA Cup run of Luton Town's. It stretched from mid-October, with an away win against Blue Square Bet Premier rivals Cambridge United until just about the last few minutes of yesterday's fifth-round tie.

Then, two Millwall substitutes conjured up a third goal between them, killing off any hope of a late revival. All that was left for the locals after a rare return to the big stage was to applaud their team from a pitch being invaded by police officers, and hope that peace would be maintained in the streets outside.

In 1985, at the time of the previous infamous Cup meeting here, Luton were two divisions ahead of their opponents. By yesterday, after all the misery that has befallen the Bedfordshire club, the gap was 67 places in Millwall's favour.

It took a long time to turn that sort of superiority into meaningful reality yesterday, but the Championship side scored at useful times and, crucially, were able to hold off the rally early in the second half that promised to bring the hopeful home side back into serious contention.

The major disappointment for Luton, a top-flight club 11 years ago, was to concede such a poor first goal little more than 10 minutes into the game. Both centre-halves were at fault in letting James Henry through to score.

Their manager, Paul Buckle, said afterwards: "We never gave ourselves a chance by conceding that goal. That's been our Achilles heel. That gave Millwall the perfect start. I thought Millwall were very professional but our players are frustrated because we weren't at our best and have gifted them goals. As defenders you are paid to clear your lines and if we'd done that, we'd have been okay."

Forewarned by how Norwich City and Wolverhampton Wanderers had failed to see off the Hatters' challenge, as well as by their own current losing run in the League of four games, Millwall did their job to the professional satisfaction of their manager, Kenny Jackett.

"It was an excellent win for us," he said. "The first goal was always going to be important and James saw his opportunity and finished very well. If Luton had scored first it would have been very tough."

That key moment stemmed from a long punt forward by his goalkeeper, David Forde, which one

defender, Ronnie Henry, misheaded and another, Janos Kovacs, failed to control, allowing the sharp-witted winger James Henry to finish smartly.

In contrast, when chances came Luton's way, the finish was not there, and they were punished accordingly. Just before the goal the excellent Forde had kept out Andre Gray at the near post and, soon after, Scott Rendell, whose goal had beaten Norwich in the previous round, headed down a free-kick and Forde saved well from Arnaud Mendy's resulting volley.

A peculiar second goal doubled the difficulty of the task. James Henry did well out on the right and crossed to the far post where Rob Hulse, on loan from Queens Park Rangers and now on his third London club this season, headed the ball into the air and found it falling nicely for him to lob into the far corner of the net.

Luton needed the next goal but it would still not come, even when Buckle boldly put four attackers on the pitch. Forde was out well to thwart the lively Gray, who then failed to latch on to the substitute Karleigh Osborne's pass.

By the finish Millwall were playing on the break and the third goal they had threatened came when Mark Tyler parried a shot by John Marquis, but could not prevent Dany N'Gouessan following up.

With Jackett's side being nine

"Our players are feeling frustrated because we have gifted them goals"

PAUL BUCKLE

Luton manager on his team's defensive display

points off the play-offs, it is arguable that Luton now have most to look forward to for the rest of the season. As often happens in this situation - Mansfield Town, who gave Liverpool such a good game in the third round of the Cup, have suffered too - Luton's League form has dipped, with only one point taken from the last three games against such apparently modest opposition as Forest Green, Barrow and Dartford.

Consequently they have work to do even to match their achievement in the three years since dropping out of the Football League, when they have reached the Conference play-offs each time, only to lose one semi-final and two finals.

The solution offered by Luton's chairman, Nick Owen, yesterday was to increase promotion and relegation with the Football League to three teams each season, because "the Conference has become a bottleneck for clubs needing to progress". But League clubs would seem unlikely to agree.

Luton (4-4-2): Tyler; Taylor, R Henry, Kovacs, Howells; Lawless, Smith, Mendy (Shaw, 69), O'Donnell (Fleetwood, 64), Rendell, Gray.

Millwall (4-4-2): Forde; Dunne, Beevers, Osborne, Lowry, J Henry (A Smith, 89), Trotter, Abdou, Feeney (N'Gouessan, 62); Hulse (Marquis, 70), Keogh.

Referee: Lee Probert.

Man of the match: J Henry (Millwall).

Match rating: 6/10

