

PICTURE BY MATT FOWLER

Lucky charms lose allure once fate is sealed

I THINK it was during half time that a black pessimism first gripped me by the throat with all the ruthless vigour of a Jason Cousins tackle.

Little things had gone wrong from the very start. The balloons released from the Bucks Free Press End did not rise majestically to fill the sky, but sort of lolloped sadly.

It was disappointing, too, that we could watch the game in so much comfort when we found there was still loads of elbow-room on the Woodland Terrace at kick-off.

I found myself desperately trying to suck in the whole glorious occasion, but enjoyment was out of the question.

Den, Reg, Andy, Nige, Phil and I tried to laugh this off by making time-checks every two minutes as each of our goal time predictions passed.

There was tension. For the first time I found myself irritated at Reg's lucky blue towel.

ANDREW CHATFIELD recounts his agonised exhortations to Wanderers' heroes

This bizarre fashion accessory, worn round the neck, has become an essential talisman for us all and was unquestionably the decisive factor in the second-round victory over Cambridge.

Yet on Saturday the towel suddenly looked, well, a bit silly.

Then the unthinkable yet inevitable happened. Sutton scored and we sweated patiently until half time.

We all shuffled to the other end of the Woodland. The cold air was filled with suggestions of substitutions.

The second half was witness to the kind of desperate enthusiasm you muster when you visit a dying relative. It will go down in history as the only time the Woodland faithful have sung "Martin O'Neill's sky and blue army"

non-stop for 17 minutes 35 seconds.

I found myself filling with a kind of tearful pride as Cousins, Carroll, Thommo and Gupps hurtled themselves into the brick wall of the Norwich defence, while Hyde performed miracles among the popped balloons.

But the agonising list of if-onlys simply grew. The cries of "Ooh, Tony Hemmings" were replaced by almost religious exhortations to Terry Evans every time we had a corner or free-kick.

The second Norwich goal seemed like a kind of relief. It gave us the go-ahead to abandon hope and get depressed.

I had almost fully recovered by the time Match of the Day showed highlights of what appeared to be an entirely different game, and was totally on the mend when I heard Norwich had drawn Manchester United in the next round. Not even Reg's towel could console me after that.