

Luton Town 3 Tranmere Rovers 1

By
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LUTON cruised to a 3-1 win over Tranmere at Kenilworth Road this afternoon after the Merseysiders had snatched a shock equaliser minutes before half time.

The match was played in appalling conditions, with the weather more suited to mid-January.

Continual rain throughout the morning left the Kenilworth Road pitch in a sorry state.

Water was lying in the Oak Road goalmouth, and before the start the Luton groundsmen worked hard with a fork trying to clear it.

The referee inspected the pitch an hour before the kick-off and ruled it perfectly playable.

Everyone was hoping that the pitch, which has been hard after some sunny spells this week, would soon dry out once the rain stopped, which it was promising to do just before the start.

The result of the rain was that the crowd at the open Kenilworth Road end was, to say the least, thin.

Prolific

Luton fielded the same team which beat Brighton on Wednesday night. Wednesday's substitute, Keith Allen, was given a match in the reserves. His place today was taken by Billy McDermott.

George Yardley, once on trial at Luton, and one of soccer's most prolific marksmen, led the Tranmere attack.

And in goal for the Rovers was Jimmy Cumbes, the Surrey fast bowler who was at one time on Lancashire CCC's books.

Cumbes found himself in early trouble when a clearance from his opposite number Read bounced high into the Tranmere penalty area and he had to jump high to collect the ball under pressure from Lewis.

Bruce Rioch set off through the middle on one of his exciting goalward charges with the ball at his feet. He beat two men before bringing a good diving save out of Cumbes.

As usual, Luton had begun at a terrific pace.

Jardine joined in the attack with a long run, and Lewis tricked the Tranmere defence before having his acute angled centre blocked.

Harrison worked hard to reach a penalty area pass before he too had a hard shot blocked.

These thrilling starts by top-of-the-table, enthusiastic Luton never fail to thrill their followers. This afternoon was no exception, and the Oak Road Choir was soon in action.

With all the Luton forwards coming into the match at such an early stage, Cumbes had a troublesome start — especially when the energetic Sheffield headed a Rioch free kick back across the face of the goal, only for Harrison's return to go just wide.

Funny tricks

As expected, the pitch was playing funny tricks. One did not realise how much water was lying on the surface until the ball bounced in mid-field, and there were spurts of water every time it came into contact with the grass.

Work by French resulted in Dougan getting in a good centre, and then Jardine, tackling ferociously, robbed Rowland and set off on another long run which caused Tranmere no end of problems. Again Cumbes was forced into action.

Luton were making all the running until the 11th minute, when Yardley came into the match for the first time, and got involved in the three-man move before Dougan coolly robbed the centre-forward and passed back to Read.

Once again Alan Slough was showing off his skills both on and off the ball, and Graham French set off on a solo run and almost beat Cumbes with a fierce shot that the goalkeeper caught against his chest before being almost knocked off his feet.

Branston, as calm and collective as ever, twice foiled Tranmere's not very good-looking efforts, and got the ball back to Read.

A foul by Casey on Slough brought a Rioch free kick,

TEAMS

LUTON TOWN: Read, Dougan, Jardine; Slough, Branston, Moore; French, Lewis, Sheffield, Rioch, Harrison. Sub: McDermott.

TRANMERE ROVERS: Cumbes; Pointon, Robertson; Casey, Smith, King; Rowlands, Pritchard, Yardley, Sinclair, McNamee. Sub: Beamish.

Referee: Mr H. G. New (Portsmouth).

GOALS

SHEFFIELD (Luton) 22 min
McNAMEE (Tranmere) 42 min
LEWIS (Luton) 60 min
BRANSTON (Luton) 65 min.

Attendance 12,965

which Sheffield very nearly reached in an air-born battle with Smith.

In staking off the close attentions of Yardley, Tony read violated the steps rule, and referee New Signalled that the offence had not escaped his notice and motioned that he would take action the next time.

The rain poured continued to pour down and the umbrellas on the open terracing opened up like so many mushrooms.

Tranmere's attack lacked bite once when Pritchard broke through and his feeble shot was not the sort of thing to trouble Tony Read.

Luton continued to menace, and French worried the whole Tranmere defence with a long run and clever centre, and then from the opposite wing Mike Harrison's accurate centre was met in mid-air by the horizontal SHEFFIELD, who gave Cumbes no chance of preventing Luton's first goal.

Tripped

From the kick-off Dougan put in a terrific run on the right beat off three hefty tackles before being tripped, got in a short pass to Lewis, and the inside right's hard, dipping shot was neatly tipped over by the overworked Tranmere goalkeeper.

Another centre from Harrison was fiercely contested by Sheffield, who managed to get the ball back from a difficult position, but Slough's header went straight to Cumbes.

After treatment for a leg injury Lewis played on with a noticeable limp.

Read was again well placed to catch the greasy ball cleanly when Rowland got in a rare Tranmere centre.

Tranmere won their first corner in the 33rd minute after a run by Pritchard. It was only half cleared by Luton, and Rowland's shot was headed round for another corner by Branston.

For a brief spell Tranmere came more into their own with some good, though unproductive, play from their inside-forwards. Dougan relieved the pressure when he tried a long shot which went high over the top.

Harrison was fouled by Smith and then French was badly tripped by Casey on the corner of the penalty area. Lewis pushed a short free kick to Rioch, whose low shot was deceptively powerful, and it was only just gathered by Cumbes.

Out of the Tranmere equalised.

And innocent-looking raid on the left by McNAMEE ended in the winger trying a long shot, and the ball dipped under

Easy win for Luton

Read, who really should have stopped it.

The goal came in the 42nd minute and against the run of play. Some of the earlier snap had been soaked out of Luton, but they were still on top at this stage.

The town fought back with a fine, purposeful run by Rioch which ended in Harrison's shot going wide.

Half a minute later a hard shot from Sheffield was only slowed down by Cumbes, and the ball skidded underneath his groping hands only to stop tantalizingly two feet in front of the empty goal.

Luton certainly didn't like having let their visitors off the hook in this manner, and Slough was the next to burst through and have a crisp shot gathered by the Tranmere goalkeeper.

Helping out in defence, Rioch found Sheffield and the centre forward beat his man on the half way line before finding Lewis with a good pass. The ball was shunted on for French whose centre was scrambled away as the half-time whistle blew.

HT: Luton 1 Tranmere 1

Referee New seemed worried about a large puddle in the centre of the field at the Oak Road end. He held up the match and examined it with Branston and Dougan, but then waved play on.

The half had started lethargically, though Lewis deserved better luck after a long race with Cumbes to reach a Sheffield pass.

There was some slack marking by Luton when a free kick was hammered straight down the middle into the goalmouth. Sinclair was allowed too much leeway, and had his foot touched the ball — and it very nearly did — it would certainly have deflected the ball passed Read.

Tranmere continued to come more into the match, and if Sinclair had not been whistled offside while challenging for a Rowland cross he would probably have scored.

In the 56th minute Read was forced to make what was probably the best save of the match. Sinclair was again allowed room on the right and his pass was well met by Rowland, whose fierce shot Read had to take in mid-air and hang on to under pressure from Yardley.

Inactivity

After a period of inactivity Luton's attack was set back in motion by Rioch, who sent French away and the winger's centre was scrambled away.

The Luton crowd was relieved on the hour when Brian Lewis, one of the best opportunists in the Division,



Goalkeeper Cumbes and left-half King help stop a raid by Luton's Lewis and Sheffield

put the Town back into the lead. And what a well taken goal it was.

Harrison, who had been instrumental in laying on the first for Sheffield, put the ball into the middle, Rioch shielded it and then pushed it out to LEWIS, who made as if to shoot, turned sharply the other way, ran round the back of the defence and picked his spot.

And it was obviously a great relief to the Luton players themselves, who immediately regained some of their earlier enthusiasm and skill, and again it was Harrison who got in a hard shot which scraped the outside of a post.

Champions

With their confidence returned Luton began to surge back and began to look once again like champions.

A free kick into the goalmouth by Dougan was nearly headed into his own net by Casey.

It went just wide of a post, and from French's corner the ball dropped invitingly in front of BRANSTON, who smashed it past Cumbes.

A bad kick by Cumbes almost added to Tranmere's discomfort.

It was blocked and chased by Sheffield, who did his level best to get the ball into the net as the

goalkeeper and three defenders ran round in bewildered circles before one of them scrambled it away.

A long clearance by John Moore, who wasn't having the best of matches, was miles out with his attempt to find a Luton forward. Tranmere came back, and a bad back pass to Read by Dougan was collected by Yardley, whose shot was saved by Read.

Laurie Sheffield missed a beautiful chance as he headed French's chipped centre wide from right in front of the posts.

It was the conditions that led to a mix-up by Luton that almost let Tranmere in. With both sides hacking desperately to control the ball it was eventually Sinclair who shot, and Slough deflected the ball inches over the bar.

With 10 minutes to go Bruce Rioch missed the sort of chance that he normally swallows up with the greatest of ease.

Chasing a through ball he made ground quickly, advanced on Cumbes at speed and smashed a shot which beat the goalkeeper all ends up. But it hit the cross bar. Harrison, following up, hit the rebound wide.

Match of the Day

BBC Match of the Day is Sheffield United v Oxford United.