

Goal after 72 minutes ends Town's run Cherries pip Hatters' bid for the top

BOURNEMOUTH 1 LUTON TOWN 0

LUTON TOWN missed out on the opportunity to top Division Two when Steve Fletcher's second-half goal settled matters at Bournemouth last night.

Lennie Lawrence named an unchanged side for the third successive league game, keeping faith with the players who had secured back-to-back victories against Reading and Cardiff.

In a tight first half, Nathan Abbey kept the Cherries off the score sheet with two excellent reflex saves.

Abbey's one-month contract expires after Saturday's home game with Bury but he did his chances of earning a one-year extension no harm with a focussed first 45 minutes.

His first stop came from home skipper Ian Cox whose strong low shot was beaten out after 16 minutes.

Ten minutes later, Abbey was called on again after confusion on the right between young defenders Gary Doherty and Stuart Fraser.

The 21-year-old stopper elected to stay on his line

DAVE FLETT reports from Dean Court, Bournemouth

when Richard Hughes' cross swung into the box but he reacted magnificently to save Steve Fletcher's point-blank header.

At the other end, Luton hit the woodwork twice, Andrew Fotiadis beating stranded home keeper Mark Ovendale only to see his chip come back off the crossbar after Phil Gray had flicked on Abbey's long punt.

Matthew Spring then saw his 34th minute inswinging corner rebound off the far post with Ovendale again flapping.

In the opening stages of the second period, Luton struggled to break down a resolute home defence, marshalled by the excellent Cox and Eddie Howe.

Lawrence responded by

introducing Stuart Douglas on the hour for the unfortunate Fotiadis.

Douglas had an immediate unsettling effect on the home defence with Gray almost capitalising on 64 minutes when he volleyed just wide.

Moments later, a rare Howe mistake allowed Gray to put the ball back for Douglas whose firm strike was beaten out by an upright Ovendale.

But it was Bournemouth despite posing little threat since the interval, who were in front. Scott Mean skipped past Matthew Taylor and delivered an accurate centre which Fletcher powerfully headed into Abbey's bottom corner after 72 minutes.

Gray squandered an excellent late chance to level the scores, shooting tamely at Ovendale when clear through.

Big match line-up

BOURNEMOUTH: Mark Ovendale, Neil Young, Christer Warren, Eddie Howe, Ian Cox, William Huck, Scott Mean, Steve Robinson, Mark Stein (Gordon Watson 90), Steve Fletcher, Richard Hughes.

HATTERS: Nathan Abbey, Stuart Fraser, Matthew Taylor, Matthew Spring, Julian Watts, Marvin Johnson, Gary Doherty, Paul McLaren (Michael McIndoe 83), Phil Gray, Andrew Fotiadis (Stuart Douglas 60), Liam George. Unused subs: Efetbore Sodje, Daniel Tate, Ray McKinnon. Referee: Anthony Bates (Stoke-on-Trent). Star Man: Matthew Spring.