

Thorpey is back with a bang but Hatters blow it

NATHAN ABBEY

TONY THORPE showed why he would be a snip at £150,000 against Notts County on Saturday.

But, sadly for the Hatters, his dazzling first-half display was not enough to earn maximum points against a resilient County side.

Thorpe made one, scored one and almost grabbed a late winner in the Kenilworth Road clash but defensive sloppiness again cost Lennie Lawrence's men as Ian Richardson and Gary Owers clawed back a two-goal deficit with second-half goals.

Gary Doherty, Thorpe and Matthew Taylor all went close to opening the scoring before three minutes of breathtaking magic from the on-loan Bristol City forward unlocked an uncompromising County side.

On 38 minutes, Thorpe darted on to a clever Matthew Spring pass and beat Magpies keeper Darren Ward to the ball before floating a perfect cross to the far post where Doherty headed home.

Thorpe got on the scoresheet himself when, after Stuart Douglas' pass, his nimble feet created space in the penalty box for a shot that he drilled emphatically into Ward's bottom corner.

In those two moments alone, Thorpe illustrated why he is worth every penny of the bargain price Bristol City are prepared to accept for his services. The skillful striker has the ability to petrify opposing defenders with his penalty box talents and his trickery should have provided the platform for a Luton victory.

But the set-piece frailties that have dogged the Hatters all season reared their ugly head once more.

Richardson headed in unchallenged from two yards at the far post when County's Dennis Pearce was given too much space by a snoozing home defence to deliver his cross after a short corner.

It was a depressingly familiar blow for the home team, with the goal a carbon copy of so many others witnessed at Kenilworth Road this season. It was also the visitors first on-target effort.

matchfacts

LUTON TOWN 2 NOTTS COUNTY 2

● **HATTERS:** Nathan Abbey, Stuart Fraser (Emmerson Boyce, 62), Julian Watts, Tony Thorpe, Marvin Johnson, Liam George, Adam Locke, Stuart Douglas (Efetobore Sodie, 82), Matthew Spring, Gary Doherty, Matthew Taylor. Subs not used: Tresor Kandol, Andre Scarlett, Daniel Tate.

● **NOTTS COUNTY:** Darren Ward, Richard Holmes (Francis Tierney, 64), Dennis Pearce, Mark Warren, Matthew Redmile, Ian Richardson, Mark Stallard, Nicky Fenton, Andy Hughes, Gary Owers, Craig Ramage (Kevin Rapley, 46).

● **Shots on target:** Luton 6, Notts County 4.

● **Off target:** Luton 6, Notts County 8.

● **Corners:** Luton 9, Notts County 3.

● **Referee:** Steve Tomlin (Lewes).

● **Top Hatter:** Tony Thorpe – magical moments.

❑ **MICHAEL McINDOE** scored the Hatters reserves goal in a 1-1 Avon Insurance Combination home match with Colchester United. This afternoon's reserve game against Southend United at Kenilworth Road has been called off. The Hatters will hold an internal game next week to monitor the rehabilitation of crooked trio Andrew Fotiadis, Gavin McGowan and Phil Gray.

The second-half had started with Douglas firing wide and Thorpe forcing a save, both from promising positions.

But if Luton were too relaxed at 2-0, they pressed the panic button after going 2-1 down.

The home midfield began to lose both discipline and shape with defensive uncertainty spreading through the back-line.

Only Bristol Rovers can boast as good an away record as Notts

County this season in the Football League and Premiership and the visitors earned another point on their travels when Taylor mis-controlled. Owers punished the teenage wing-back decisively with a thunderous volley that rocketed past Abbey from 20 yards.

In an entertaining encounter, Doherty then bundled the ball into the side netting and Taylor almost made amends for his earlier error when Ward pushed his free-kick behind for a corner.

It was Thorpe though who came closest to snatching full points. The 25-year-old front man had been largely anonymous after his first-half heroics but the visitors defence ignored him at their peril.

On 83 minutes, he raced on to Spring's quickly-taken free-kick but his deft chip from just eight yards out cleared both Ward and the Magpies keeper's cross bar.

County also had their chances to win the match with Mark Stallard and Kevin Rapley testing Abbey.

Lennie Lawrence's verdict

“ We had 15 minutes where Thorpey made one and scored one and we could have come in three up which, on general play, would have been undeserved. But we were too slow to defend a corner and Taylor tried to control a cross instead of clearing it. Then it's 2-2. Two goals should be enough but somehow in this team it isn't. I'm fed up with it and, to be honest, I was pleased with a point at the end. We had six or seven moments of great quality in and around their box but there was not much else. ”

