

Gray to the rescue

PHIL Gray bagged a crucial brace as Luton Town kept their play-off dreams alive at Kenilworth Road last night.

The Northern Ireland international scored on 63 and 79 minutes to cancel out a first-half Graham Kavanagh goal.

Gray's double strike was vital for the Hatters, who closed the gap on sixth-placed Stoke to five points.

If they had lost, Lennie Lawrence's men would have been 11 points adrift of their Staffordshire rivals, with little more than pride to play for until May.

It was a remarkable comeback by Luton but a deserved reward for a committed display full of passion in an excellent match.

Lennie Lawrence recalled left-back Matthew Taylor after a five-match suspension, dropping Marvin McGowan to the substitute's bench.

Ex-Hatter David Oldfield was handed a rare start for the visitors and employed as an out-and-out striker.

The home side made a brighter start than in recent games at Kenilworth Road and should have been awarded for their early enterprise on seven minutes.

Leading scorer Liam George had the goal at his mercy after a perfect

Phil's goals keep play-off bid alive



**LUTON 2
STOKE 1**

**Dave Flett
reports from
Kenilworth
Road...**

cushioned header by Gary Doherty but shot woefully wide from eight yards out.

Stuart Douglas and George again went close shortly afterwards as the Hatters took the game to the visitors during an impressive spell of intricate passing.

Stoke did not threaten Nathan Abbey's goal until the 29th minute when the Hatters' keeper parried Graham Kavanagh's firmly-driven free-kick and on-loan Liverpool defender Frode Kippe made a hash of the rebound.

But four minutes later, the

visitors were in front. Left-back Clive Clarke somehow wriggled his way past home defenders Emmerson Boyce and Marvin Johnson before pulling the ball back for Kavanagh, who side-footed firmly past Abbey.

Boyce almost replied immediately for the Hatters but his far-post header from Taylor's deep cross brushed the side-netting.

Luton continued to press forward after the break with George shooting weakly when well positioned at Stoke keeper Gavin Ward on 52 minutes after a Taylor through ball.

Seconds later, Doherty sent a looping header inches over Ward's crossbar from a Julian Watts' free-kick.

On 55 minutes, the Kenilworth Road faithful thought their side had equalised, but Watts' header was mysteriously ruled out by an offside flag.

At the other end, Kavanagh should have doubled his side's

advantage and his evening's tally just past the hour but side-footed badly wide after hesitation from Adam Locke.

It was a miss that proved to be the game's turning point.

On 63 minutes, the Hatters scored a deserved equaliser when Gray's downward header from Taylor's deep corner went past Ward for his fifth goal of the season.

In an exciting end-to-end encounter Abbey then came to his side's rescue, saving bravely at Paul Connor's feet and enjoying a bit of luck when Kippe's header from the follow-up brushed his crossbar.

The home woodwork was rattled again on 74 minutes when sub Kyle Lightbourne, so often the scourge of Luton, headed against the post.

But it was the Hatters who scored a second five minutes later when Gray volleyed firmly past Ward after a Douglas cross.



SIGNED: Boyce.

EMMERSON BOYCE has agreed new improved terms that will keep him at Kenilworth Road until 2,002.

The 20-year-old wing-back signed a new two-year deal on Monday, just two days after scoring his first senior goal for Luton.

big match line-up

● **HATTERS:** Nathan Abbey, Emmerson Boyce (Gavin McGowan, 65 mins), Julian Watts, Gary Doherty, Marvin Johnson, Liam George (Andrew Fotiadis, 75 mins), Adam Locke, Matthew Spring, Matthew Taylor, Phil Gray, Stuart Douglas. Other subs: Andre Scarlett, Stuart Fraser, Daniel Tate.

● **STOKE:** Gavin Ward, Mikael Hansson, Clive Clarke, Nicky Mohan (Ben Petty, 46 mins), Anders Jacobsen, Frode Kippe, James O'Connor, Brynjar Gunnarsson, Graham Kavanagh, David Oldfield (Kyle Lightbourne, 66 mins), Paul Connor (Peter Thorne, 85 mins). Other subs: Phil Robinson, Carl Muggleton.

● **Referee:** Bill Burns (Scarborough).

● **Attendance:** 5,396.

● **Luton top player:** Phil Gray.

Emmerson signs new contract

Hatters boss Lennie Lawrence said: "He deserves it because he was only on kid's wages."

"He battled away on Saturday and came in on the blindside to tuck away his goal well."

"He's a good lad and has done very well."