

Rocky horror show

NATHAN ABBEY faces the toughest test of his career after a nightmare show gifted three points to Bristol Rovers.

The 21-year-old Hatters keeper was barracked and booed by large sections of the crowd after his blunders handed title-chasing Rovers a 2-1 half-time lead.

Such mistakes and hostile treatment from fans have finished goalkeepers' careers at Luton and other clubs.

Even the past heroics of Andy Dibble and Ian Feuer could not save them from ignominious ends to their Kenilworth Road careers after their confidence deserted them.

And how Abbey reacts to his ordeal on Saturday will be the key to his future at Luton Town, as well as a tremendous test of his character.

What made Abbey's aberrations so difficult to stomach for many home fans was the fact that Luton had completely outplayed their high-flying visitors during the opening exchanges.

Stuart Douglas' pace and Phil Gray's strength unsettled Rovers' three-man defence from the start and it was no surprise when the pair combined to give their side a 13th-minute lead.

match facts

LUTON TOWN 1 BRISTOL ROVERS 4

● **HATTERS:** Nathan Abbey, Emmerson Boyce, Julian Watts, Gary Doherty, Marvin Johnson, Liam George (Andrew Fotiadis, 71), Adam Locke, Matthew Spring (Alan White, 65), Phil Gray, Stuart Douglas, Matthew Taylor. Subs not used: Gavin McGowan, Stuart Fraser, Daniel Tate.

● **BRISTOL ROVERS:** Lee Jones, Robbie Pethick, Andy Thomson, Andy Tillson,

Steve Foster, Mark Walters, Trevor Challis, David Hillier, Vitalijs Astafevs, Jamie Cureton, Jason Roberts.

● **Shots on target:** Luton 8, Bristol Rovers 6.

● **Off target:** Luton 4, Bristol Rovers 6.

● **Corners:** Luton 6, Bristol Rovers 8.

● **Top Hatter:** Douglas – menacing.

● **Referee:** Mick Fletcher (Warley).

Douglas exploded past Steve Foster and ran half the length of the pitch before pulling the ball back from the by-line to Gray, who easily converted from close range.

Gray returned the favour on 25 minutes, releasing Douglas, who rounded Rovers keeper Lee Jones and shot past covering defender Andy Tillson, only to see the ball rebound off a post.

It was a determined and breathtaking start by the Hatters, but Rovers got back on level terms after rocky Abbey's first clanger of the afternoon on 26 minutes.

The home keeper's poor kick fell straight to Robbie Pethick 35 yards from

goal. He fed Jason Roberts who, with Abbey racing to get back into position, coolly placed the ball into the bottom corner.

Douglas continued to terrorise the visitors at the other end and twice went close to putting Luton back in front before Abbey's second body blow on 38 minutes.

This time, the Hatters keeper spilled a harmless, over-hit pass from Pethick and a surprised Cureton seized on the loose ball to give Rovers the lead.

The Hatters second highest crowd of the season had created an electric atmosphere for the first 25 minutes but

that was quickly replaced by anger as fans vented their fury at the hapless Abbey.

Every catch he made until the half-time whistle was heralded with a loud chorus of boos or sarcastic cheers and he was jeered for the rest of the game.

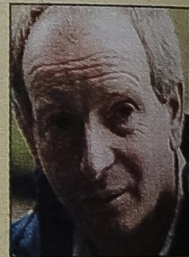
But Abbey had little chance to redeem himself after the break and was not at fault for the visitors third and fourth goals.

On 58 minutes, Cureton netted his 19th of the season, cutting inside Gary Doherty to fire expertly into the top corner after the Irish under-21 international had played him onside.

At 3-1, the Hatters bravely fought for a route back into the game with a Doherty header forcing a fine save from Jones on the hour.

Substitute Alan White then headed a Matthew Taylor corner against the inside of a post and fellow replacement Andrew Fotiadis was denied by another fine Jones stop.

But Roberts rubbed salt into the home side's wounds at the death when he muscled his way to the edge of the penalty box before curling in his 22nd goal of the season.



Lennie's verdict

It was the blackest day of the season so far. You would not have believed that statement possible after 25 minutes. But then we've given them two goals and, although we've often come back from behind, the nature of the goals destroyed us. You cannot afford to make mistakes of that nature that frequently against Bristol Rovers. The one criticism of the outfield players was that they finished a bit ragged.