

Oh brother! Zema's goal sends Town crashing

IT WAS Friday the 13th and the Hatters Horror Show continued at Cambridge United.

A sending off, a goalkeeping blunder and a match-winning effort from a former Luton-based Sunday morning footballer sealed Town's fate on this occasion.

Mark Stein's predatory strike had given the visitors a surprise early lead but, when Matthew Spring was shown the red card on 33 minutes for a second bookable offence, the match had its turning point.

Mark Ovendale's blunder gifted Cambridge's impressive Tom Youngs an equaliser early in the second-half and then Zema Abbey pounced to secure the points on 80 minutes.

Yes, THAT Zema Abbey – the brother of Hatters reserve goalkeeper Nathan and a North Home Counties League forward with St Joseph's just 18 months ago.

I know because my Sunday morning team played against him and he only managed to score once against us!

But with the general quality of Friday night's match it is not difficult to see how Abbey has made the transition from park footballer to Division Two striker.

This match would not have looked out of place on any one of the Lothair Road pitches!

Cambridge won but were little better than a Luton team who, even allowing for Spring's dismissal, have the air of a side not knowing where their next win is coming from regardless of the opposition – a bit like the current England team.

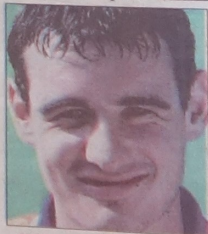
Friday's defeat at the Abbey Stadium was the Hatters' 12th game without victory and, before last night's matches, only Stockport County had waited longer for a win from the 134 league clubs in England and Scotland.

Ricky Hill's men, like the national team, are also not short of hard luck stories.

Spring's sending off seemed harsh and, just two minutes before Abbey's winning strike, Gavin McGowan's deep cross into the penalty box was punched away by the Cambridge striker, but referee John Brandwood chose to ignore loud appeals from the away end.

Stein had earlier given the visitors a perfect start when he hooked in from close range on 16 minutes after Julian Watts had headed down Spring's corner. Cambridge keeper Lionel Perez could only juggle the Hatters striker's effort into the roof of his own net.

Spring picked up his first yellow card on 21 minutes for a reckless challenge on Abbey, but



OFF: Matthew Spring.

seemed to have recovered his composure shortly afterwards when his fierce 30-yard drive forced a good save from Perez. That was as good as it got for Spring, however, and two minutes later he was trudging disconsolately back to the dressing room.

The Hatters midfielder kicked the ball away after Watts had flattened Swedish striker Jonas Axeldal on the edge of the box.

Hatters boss Hill later insisted that Spring did not have time to react to the referee's whistle and told Mr Brandwood as much in a frank discussion at the end of the game.

But the Lichfield official had a different view and the 21-year-old youngster received his marching orders for the first time since his full debut.

George was dropped back into midfield in Spring's absence until half-time when Hill withdrew Tresor Kandol for Peter Holmes.

Cambridge only seriously tested

match facts

CAMBRIDGE 2 LUTON 1

● **CAMBRIDGE UNITED:** Lionel Perez, Steve McAnespie, Tom Cowan, Andrew Duncan, John Dreyer, Tom Youngs, Paul Wanless, Ian Ashbee, Jonas Axeldal (Neil Mustoe, 69), Zema Abbey (John Taylor, 90), Alex Russell. Subs not used: Shaun Marshall, Marc Joseph, Steve Slade.

● **HATTERS:** Mark Ovendale, Paul McLaren, Julian Watts, Emmerson Boyce, Gavin McGowan (Dean Brennan, 90), Matthew Spring, Adam Locke, Matthew Taylor, Liam George, Mark Stein, Tresor Kandol (Peter Holmes, 46). Subs not used: Stuart Fraser, Friedrich Breitenfelder, Nathan Abbey.

● **Referee:** John Brandwood.

● **Shots on target:** Cambridge 12 Luton 3.

● **Off target:** Cambridge 7 Luton 2.

● **Corners:** Cambridge 10 Luton 5.

● **Star Man:** Paul McLaren – composure on the ball.

before the break despite their numerical advantage and the Hatters keeper responded well to keep out Alex Russell's low drive.

But nine minutes into the second-half, the chink in Ovendale's otherwise impressive goalkeeping armoury was exposed as the home side equalised.

The Hatters keeper, as at Bristol Rovers two weeks earlier, misjudged a cross and was lured off his line by a long ball into the box from veteran ex-Hatter John Dreyer.

Youngs completed the formality of heading into an open net with Ovendale stranded between his goal and the Cambridge player. Ovendale made some amends when he beat out Tom Cowan's stinging effort, but he was beaten again 10 minutes from time as the home side carved open the Hatters defence.

Paul Wanless' neatly-threaded through ball was collected by Youngs, who burst clear of a flat-footed Luton back line.

Ovendale did well to save Youngs' shot but Abbey was well-placed to sidefoot into the unguarded goal. It was a sweet moment for the former Hatters trialist who could yet complete his fairytale story with a £1million move to the Premiership.

A growing army of scouts and admirers are gathering by the game at