

Peter's perfect reply

HATTERS striker Peter Thomson responded to a 'kick up the backside' from manager Lil Fuccillo with a match-winning two-goal blast at Stoke City.

Thomson's brace, including a goal of the season contender, secured his side's first away victory of the season.

It also served as a perfect riposte after Fuccillo had criticised the 6ft 3in striker's contribution since a £100,000 move from Dutch club NAC Breda.

Thomson arrived at Kenilworth Road in September but, before Saturday, had only started two other league games.

Fuccillo handed him his third start at the Britannia Stadium but, with plans to sign a new target man well publicised, warned the former Bury trainee that it was time to start producing.

Thomson did produce and his display was a revelation for the Hatters boss, who could now put his transfer market raid on hold. A delighted Fuccillo said afterwards: "He got a kick up the backside and his response got the reward it deserved. He's showed good things in training and he displayed great skill for his second goal."

"I took the mickey afterwards and said he meant to cross it, but he gave me the biggest bite on my arm ever which I think means it was a shot."

Thomson also showed plenty of bite on the field, causing Stoke problems with his physique, power and willingness.

He harassed the home defence relentlessly and formed an impressive partnership with Liam George.

match facts

● **STOKE CITY:** Carl Muggleton, Mikael Hansson, Clive Clarke, Nicky Mohan, Brynjar Gunnarsson (Henrik Risom, 68), Graham Kavanagh, Peter Thorne, Tony Dorigo (Stefan Thordarson, 79), James O'Connor, Frodde Kippe, Andy Cooke (Rikhardur Dadason, 56).

● **HATTERS:** Nathan Abbey, Adrian Whitbread, Julian Watts, Marvin Johnson, Petri Helin, Adam Locke, Matthew Spring, Paul McLaren, Matthew Taylor, Liam

STOKE CITY 1 LUTON 3

George (Kent Karlsen, 90), Peter Thomson (Andrew Fotiadis, 90). Subs not used: Mark Ovendale, Stuart Fraser, Lee Nogan.

● **Shots on target:** Stoke 4 Luton 6.

● **Off target:** Stoke 8 Luton 1.

● **Corners:** Stoke 6 Luton 3.

● **Referee:** B Curson.

● **Top Hatter:** Thomson – a revelation.

The forwards were paired as a front two for the first time, but enjoyed an almost telepathic understanding which was best illustrated by Luton's brilliant third goal.

George, who teased and tormented all afternoon, threw an outrageous dummy on the half-way line before peeling off and collecting Thomson's lay-off on the left-wing. The Republic of Ireland under-21 international then raced down the line before crossing for Thomson who had charged into the home side's penalty box.

A scoring chance seemed to have been lost as the ball ran across Thomson's body, but the big striker then sent a delightful chip from an acute angle sailing over Stoke keeper Carl Muggleton and into the goal off a post.

That excellent 62nd-minute strike sealed victory for the Hatters against a Stoke side whose confidence has taken a hammering after successive cup defeats – one at the hands of non-league Nuneaton Borough and the other an 8-0 drubbing

against Liverpool. But Luton also deserve credit after bouncing back from their season's nadir at Port Vale on the previous Saturday.

And the Hatters second visit to the Potteries in seven days offered promise for those hoping that Fuccillo can mould together a side capable of climbing out of relegation trouble.

Three changes were made from the sorry display at Vale Park. Thomson replaced Lee Nogan and deservedly grabbed the glory, but there were also fine performances from Marvin Johnson and Adam Locke, who came in for Kent Karlsen and an ill Emmerson Boyce. Johnson, a natural left-footed player, gave much-needed balance to the Hatters' three-man defence.

Locke has previously this season been found wanting in a central-midfield partnership, but looked far more comfortable working alongside Matthew Spring and Paul McLaren, with Petri Helin

restored to right-wing-back. The 30-year-old midfielder revelled in his holding role, using the ball sensibly, tidying up well and rarely giving away possession.

Skipper McLaren also stamped his authority on the game early on and opened the scoring with a quality 15th-minute strike. Goals from McLaren are collector's items – he has scored just three in 149 league games – but when they go in they tend not to be two-yard tap-ins.

This effort was no exception with Muggleton unable to stop the Hatters captain's 30-yard piledriver after good work on the wing by George.

Stoke's fans grew impatient after their recent disappointments, but jeers turned to cheers temporarily when Mikael Hansson broke down the right wing and crossed for Nicky Mohan to sidefoot into the bottom corner for a 35th-minute equaliser.

The home side's best spell followed and only Nathan Abbey kept Luton level on the stroke of half-time with a great reflex save to keep out Peter Thorne's header.

But Abbey had little more to do and the visitors went back in front after 51 minutes.

On-loan defender Adrian Whitbread, who was a constant threat at set-pieces, headed Matthew Taylor's free-kick back across goal and Thomson reacted well to hook the ball into Muggleton's bottom corner.

Thomson then added his side's magnificent third goal before he and George were substituted in injury time, one after the other, to receive standing ovations from the jubilant away end.



Fuccillo's verdict

“If you compare this week with last week

we look like two different teams. The three defenders defended with their lives and the midfield players worked well. We did not give anything away in 90 minutes. We have got to put a run of six, seven or eight games together now, then we could move up to half-way in the table and confidence and fans will start coming back to the club.”

Stu's out until 2001