

Cobblers get nailed by Hatters 'Odd Couple'

“The young defenders who came in did excellently. We deserved a second or third goal. Liam George terrorised them like he did at Stoke, Mark Ovendale made the saves he's capable of and the midfield snapped at their heels. The team must carry that form into the next game and look to take 10 points out of the next 15.”

IT WAS a game of two managers at the Sixfields Stadium on Saturday and the 'Odd Couple' somehow worked together to secure a priceless three points.

The Northampton match was popularly billed as Joe Kinnear's first as Hatters boss and will probably be remembered as such by the record books.

But equally Lil Fuccillo can lay claim to a "farewell victory" to mark the end of his short-lived managerial reign at Kenilworth Road.

After all, Kinnear had said before the game that Fuccillo would still pick the team for the Cobblers' trip and that he would watch the first-half from the stands.

But the ex-Wimbledon manager could not resist the lure of the dug-out and both men were barking out orders from the touchline throughout the match.

The confusion continued after the game when Fuccillo emerged to conduct his post-match press conference only to find Kinnear already extolling the virtues of his new charges.

It was a somewhat farcical end for Fuccillo but perhaps symptomatic of a season when managerial appointments have been almost as frequent as victories.

Kinnear, at least, has the full backing of the Kenilworth Road directors and if he can repay that faith by leading a successful relegation fight any mistakes made by the new board this season will probably be forgiven if not forgotten.

Hatters fans will be hoping the first step in that process was made with their side's first-ever victory at Northampton's Sixfields Stadium.

match/acts

NORTHAMPTON TOWN 0 LUTON TOWN 1

● **NORTHAMPTON:** Keith Welch, Lee Canoville (Richard Green, 46), John Frain, Ian Sampson, David Savage, James Hunt, Marco Gabbiadini, John Hodge (Steve Howard, 46), Richard Hope, Jamie Forrester, Christian Hargreaves (Kevin Nicholson, 77) Subs not used: Adam Sollitt, Andrew Morrow.

● **HATTERS:** Mark Ovendale, Jude Stirling, Emmerson Boyce, Richard

Dryden, Petri Helin, Lee Mansell, Matthew Spring, Keith Rowland, Matthew Taylor, Liam George, Stuart Douglas (Andrew Fotladiis, 87). Subs not used: Mark Stein, Nathan Abbey, Peter Holmes, Friedrich Breitenfelder.

● **Shots on target:** N'ton 5, Luton 8.

● **Off target:** N'ton 4, Luton 4.

● **Corners:** N'ton 1, Luton 1.

● **Top Hatter:** Boyce - focussed.

Luton had not won since Boxing Day before Saturday's trip but showed plenty of fighting spirit to beat their neighbours.

Stuart Douglas packed plenty of punch early on for the visitors and his fourth-minute goal could prove to be the knockout blow for Northampton's promotion hopes.

The 22-year-old striker was left unmarked in the Cobblers' penalty box and headed Petri Helin's right-wing cross into the roof of the net.

Luton did not look back after that excellent start and would have come away with a bigger margin of victory but for Matthew Spring missing a penalty for the first time.

Teenage midfielder Lee Mansell was tigerish in the tackle for the first hour and, along with loan debutant Keith Rowland, has added some much-needed mobility to the Hatters' midfield.

Former Cobblers loan defender Richard Dryden, Fuccillo's last signing as manager, also slotted in well on the left-hand side of a three-man defence.

Dryden helped set the tone with

some crunching challenges early on and, although a lack of fitness caught up with him later on, youngsters Emmerson Boyce and Jude Stirling provided strong and assured cover.

Boyce executed a brilliant last-ditch tackle on Jamie Forrester after just 10 minutes and enjoyed a fine game against one of the division's deadliest strikers.



TAKING IT ON THE CHIN: Luton debutant Keith Rowland at Northampton.

Stirling, on his right-hand side, might still be raw in terms of positional sense but lacks nothing in presence or confidence and, at 18, could have a bright future if he keeps listening and learning.

At the other end, Douglas grabbed the goal but it was his striking partner Liam George who caught Kinnear's eye.

Kinnear called George "one of the most exciting strikers in the division" and the enigmatic Irishman ran the Northampton defence ragged in the second-half, culminating in the award of a 68th-minute penalty.

Luton controlled proceedings before the break and Matthew Taylor could have twice doubled the visitors' lead.

First, the 19-year-old wing-back had a 24th-minute stinging shot beaten out by Northampton keeper Keith Welch after a strong run by Rowland.

Then, his close-range header was kept out by Welch after more good

flank work by Finnish international Helin. Disgusted home manager Kevin Wilson made his feelings known about the home side's awful display at half-time with a double substitution but, apart from a couple of inspirational moments from Forrester, little changed.

George was only denied a goal by Welch's outstretched leg on 63 minutes after playing a neat one-two with Rowland.

Forrester responded at the other end with two quick reminders of his forward talents, but Mark Ovendale was equal to both attempts.

Ovendale beat out Forrester's curling shot after the former Leeds striker had cut inside Boyce for the first time and then the Hatters keeper turned his point-blank shot behind for a corner.

But that was as good as it got for Northampton with George brushing the top of the netting with a 25-yard lob before winning his side's penalty.

The ex-Republic of Ireland under-21 international teased a mesmerised Ian Sampson with his ball skills and the Northampton defender's torture was only ended when his desperate lunge for the ball saw George topple over in the box.

But Spring, successful in his three previous attempts from the spot, smashed his penalty against the bar.

The Hatters captain's miss deprived the visitors' fans a rare luxury of some breathing space, but it was still George who went closest to adding to the scoreline.

On 85 minutes, his surging run ended with a shot that flashed just wide and, in injury time, he dragged another effort off target after a merry dribble.