

Battling end to season of woe

THE CURTAIN came down on Luton Town's troublesome season with a battling point against an impressive Port Vale outfit.

But the inconsistency in both penalty areas was evident again as the Hatters failed to hold on to their advantage and then later missed some gilt-edged chances.

Port Vale's Allen Tankard took just 30 seconds to respond to Steve Howard's opening effort in a game that either side could have won in the final stages.

And the result, astonishingly, means that Port Vale are still searching for their first win at Kenilworth Road in 103 years.

But the visitors, managed by former Hatters midfielder Brian Horton, were unfortunate not to have taken victory when two second-half efforts were ruled out for offside.

Hatters boss Joe Kinnear rested club captain Marvin Johnson but Kent Karlisen, who was expected to take his place, was only handed a place on the substitutes' bench.

Stuart Douglas was recalled to the starting line-up and was placed alongside strikers Steve Howard and Liam George.

The Hatters boss called on his players to show pride before going into this "nothing to play for" encounter with the fate of both teams already decided for next season.

And, to their credit, Kinnear's men were intent on producing entertaining football against a Port Vale side playing their seventh game in 15 days.

Stuart Douglas saw early appeals for a penalty rejected when he tumbled inside the box after a challenge from Vale's Matt Carragher.

On 14 minutes, Matthew Taylor struck a low effort that deflected off a Port Vale defender, beat goalkeeper Mark Goodlad but grazed the outside of a post.

However, the Hatters took the lead from the resulting corner when Taylor's swirling cross was met with a powerful header by Howard.

It was the former Northampton Town striker's third goal in 12 starts for the Hatters and his physical presence will no doubt cause problems in the Third Division.

Joe Kinnear's verdict

Again you have to question how long we can hang on to a lead. I thought our work-rate was good and we created so many chances, but to give away a goal in such quick fashion and in the manner that we did is again disappointing. A set play, a corner comes over, a lack of concentration, we didn't get any bodies in the way for the shot and they equalised. As I said to them afterwards, pre-season we'll be concentrating on both boxes. We had numerous opportunities.

match facts

LUTON TOWN 1 PORT VALE 1

● **HATTERS:** Mark Owendale, Paul Shepherd (Kent Karlisen 45), Richard Dryden, Emmerson Boyce, Lee Mansell, Stuart Douglas, Matthew Spring, Paul McLaren, Matthew Taylor, Steve Howard, Liam George (Mark Stein, 61). Subs not used: Scott Ward, Julian Watts, Adam Locke.

● **PORT VALE:** Mark Goodlad, Matt Carragher, Allen Tankard, Tony Naylor, Tommy Widdington, Sagi Burton-Godwin, Mark Bridge-Wilkinson, Alex Smith, Michael Cummins (Liam Burns 75), Stephen Brooker, Ashley Dodd. Subs not used: Ville Viljanen, Richard Eyre, Michael Twiss, Christopher Gowan.

● **Shots on target:** Luton 6 Port Vale 4.

● **Off target:** Luton 5 Port Vale 7.

● **Corners:** Luton 5 Port Vale 4.

● **Referee:** Mike Pike (Cumbria).

● **Top Hatter:** Mansell - hard working.

● **Attendance:** 5,260.

HATTERS boss Joe Kinnear will fly out to Norway on Friday for a two-week scouting mission. He will be in Scandinavia to watch matches alongside Ronnie Gunnarsson, the ex-Sweden defender, who discovered the likes of Ole Gunnar Solskjaer and Oyvind Leonhardsen, while working as Manchester United and Wimbledon's chief scout in Norway.

But moments later Port Vale exposed the frailties in Luton's defence with an untidy goal that left Kinnear fuming.

The visitors won a corner straight from the re-start and Vale's Mark Bridge-Wilkinson's flag-kick was converted by Tankard.

Luton broke straight down the other end and should have restored their lead.

Teenager Lee Mansell robbed Tankard of possession deep in his own half, but Douglas failed to trouble Goodlad.

Port Vale strikers Tony Naylor and Stephen Brooker were causing the Luton defence mounting problems at the other end.

Naylor went close on 32 minutes

with a thunderous effort that went inches wide.

Then Brooker, a former Watford striker, saw a curling effort saved by Mark Owendale.

Norwegian defender Karlisen, the man Kinnear has seen play only one reserve game this season, was called into action just before the interval, replacing the injured Paul Shepherd.

In the second-half, Mansell failed to convert a perfectly-weighted cross from George.

Moments later, Naylor saw his curling effort which left Owendale well beaten, ruled out for offside.

Howard should have grabbed his second of the game but failed to convert a free header from Matthew Spring's cross.

Naylor brought a fine save out of Owendale soon afterwards and Brooker followed up, only to be denied by the linesman's flag again.

Mark Stein, who had replaced George, then saw a flashing effort saved by Goodlad late on.

The result saw Luton complete a poor season without a victory in their last 13 games - their longest win-less league run since 1964.

