

Yes, it's the best for 20 years!

HATTERS chairman Mike Watson-Challis promised supporters a "momentous season" in his programme notes before the 2-1 win against Cheltenham – and the history books suggest he is right!

Saturday's victory meant Luton had taken maximum points from their first two league games for the first time in 20 years.

David Pleat's class of 1981 were the last Hatters team to get off to such a good start and that side of Ricky Hill, Brian Stein, Mal Donaghy and co. went on to finish runaway champions of the old Second Division.

Joe Kinnear's men are now top of the Division Three table and, although it is early days, the Hatters look capable of justifying their "promotion favourites" label and fulfilling the expectations of their supporters, who gave new first team coach Mick Harford a rousing reception on his return to Kenilworth Road.

Whatever happens between now and the end of April, it is clear Kinnear will succeed or fail on his own terms.

Only three players – Emmerson Boyce, Matthew Taylor and Lee Mansell – from Saturday's starting line-up were with the club before Kinnear's arrival in February.

In fact, there were more players from last season's squad on the bench than on the pitch.

On-loan Spurs right-back Ian Hillier – the latest addition – made an assured Football League debut and new boys Paul Hughes and Carl Griffiths got the Hatters' goals for the second successive week.

Griffiths arrived at Kenilworth Road with a reowned reputation as a penalty box poacher and, so far, he has not disappointed, netting both his first two goals for the club from inside the six-yard box.

Hughes matching him goal for goal was perhaps less expected, but the former Chelsea and Southampton midfielder is already staking his claim for a more permanent deal than his current three-month contract.

Kevin Nicholls, who was made captain in the absence of Aaron Skelton, also had an excellent match as the side's aggressive midfield enforcer before blotting his copybook with an 80th-minute red card for a second bookable offence.

The former England youth skipper displays the kind of energy and enthusiasm that will inspire those around him.

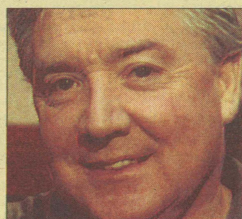
A high free-kick count suggests Kinnear's side have more fight this season but, on Saturday, Nicholls made one reckless challenge too many and was given his marching orders by the Hertfordshire referee Grant Hegley.

Substitute Ian Howarth had pulled a goal back for Cheltenham nine minutes earlier and Nicholls' sending off provided a nervous finish to a match that Luton had threatened to run away with



YELLOW PERIL: Stand-in skipper Kevin Nicholls was booked for this challenge on Cheltenham keeper Carl Muggleton.

Joe's verdict



We completely out-classed them in the first half but then took our foot off the throttle. We lost our shape and gave the ball away recklessly in the second-half. They are long-ball specialists and we cut off their service well in the first-half but not after the break. I also thought the referee was a bit harsh on us at times. They pulled shirts and he let play go on but we ended up with five yellow cards and a red one.

before the break. The home side went ahead on 30 minutes when Griffiths showed strength and awareness to shepherd the ball from Cheltenham defenders before laying it back to Hughes, who casually sidefooted into Carl Muggleton's bottom right-hand corner from the edge of the box.

Griffiths then got himself on the scoresheet seven minutes later after some suicidal defending by Cheltenham.

Muggleton threw the ball out to

unsuspecting full-back Steve Jones who presented possession to an alert Nicholls on the left flank.

The Hatters midfielder then sent a perfectly weighted cross into the six-yard box where predator Griffiths was waiting to tap into an empty net.

Lively Lee Mansell screwed a good chance wide early in the second-half after being sent clear on goal by Steve Howard.

But Cheltenham were only denied a goal shortly afterwards by a spectacular goal-line clearance from Matthew Taylor.

Robins' striker Martin Devaney jinked his way into the Hatters' penalty box before unleashing a fierce shot that whistled past Carl Emberson, only for Taylor to intervene with a brave and athletic diving header.

Taylor and debutant Adrian Forbes both warmed Muggleton's hands at the other end with long-range efforts before Cheltenham sub Howarth pulled a goal back on 71 minutes.

Howarth rose to meet Russell Milton's right-wing free-kick and sent a powerful header into Emberson's bottom corner.

Luton's tight grasp on the match was slipping and, even though Mansell forced another save from Muggleton, Cheltenham's veteran striker Neil Grayson should have equalised on 74 minutes but blazed wildly over from just five yards.

Nicholls was then sent off and Cheltenham's Michael Duff hit the post in a nail-biting finale for the home supporters and Kinnear, who watched on anxiously from the players' tunnel as he served the last game of his much-publicised touchline ban.

That's your lot



RED MIST: Nicholls is sent off for a second offence. Pictures by JANE SHERLOCK

matchfacts



TOP HATTER: Scorer Carl Griffiths.

LUTONTOWN 2 CHELTENHAM TOWN 1

● **HATTERS:** Carl Emberson, Ian Hillier, Emmerson Boyce, Russell Perrett, Matthew Taylor, Adrian Forbes (Liam George, 74), Paul Hughes, Kevin Nicholls, Lee Mansell, Steve Howard (Andrew Fotiadis, 62), Carl Griffiths (Adam Locke, 86). Subs not used: Mark Ovendale, Richard Dryden.

● **CHELTENHAM TOWN:** Carl Muggleton, Michael Duff, Jamie Victory, Chris Banks, Mark Yates, Hugh McAuley (Neil Grayson, 28),

Russell Milton, Richard Walker, Martin Devaney, Julian Alsop (Tom Naylor, 52), Steve Jones (Neil Howarth, 65). Subs not used: Shane Higgs, Jason White.

● **Shots on target:** Luton 5 Cheltenham 6.

● **Off target:** Luton 4 Cheltenham 5.

● **Corners:** Luton 4 Cheltenham 8.

● **Referee:** Grant Hegley (Herts).

● **Top Hatter:** Carl Griffiths - penalty-box predator.