

'Comic' display no fun for Joe

HATTERS boss Joe Kinnear labelled his side's performance at Bristol Rovers a "Comedy of Errors" but there will have been few laughs on the journey back from the Memorial Ground.

Shakespeare's classic play concerns itself with mistaken identity and, at times during Saturday's 3-2 defeat, Luton's makeshift defence gave the impression they had never even met before.

Kinnear criticised his side for their "Mickey Mouse" defending and after an hour-long post-mortem forced his players to watch the match video on the coach drive home to Luton.

Russell Perrett and Aaron Skelton's absence through injury saw Kinnear switch to a three-man defence of Emmerson Boyce, Marvin Johnson and Jude Stirling and the Luton manager later admitted that trio would not play in his first choice back-line.

Communication across the defence and with goalkeeper Carl Emberson appeared to be lacking. Panic also set in whenever the ball entered the visitors' penalty box, especially when the impressive Nathan Ellington was in possession.

Ellington terrorised the Luton defence during a humid and energy-sapping afternoon – scoring the first goal, setting up the third and forcing several saves from a busy Emberson.

Rovers manager Gerry Francis claimed that his side "did enough to win the game three times over" and the close scoreline certainly flattered the Hatters.

Matthew Taylor equalised minutes before the break after a one-sided first-half and Lee Mansell reduced the deficit late on, but Luton did not deserve to steal a point from the Pirates.

Both teams went into this game with the only 100 per cent records in Division Three. Bristol looked more realistic promotion candidates on this evidence, but Luton were under-strength with six players sidelined through injury.

The home side could have taken the lead three times before Ellington's 29th-minute goal.

Boyce carelessly crashed a clearance against home striker Martin Cameron on 10 minutes with the ball going inches wide.

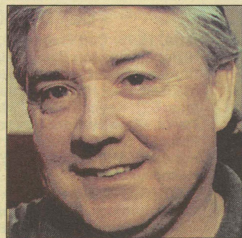
Emberson then saved well from Ellington after Stirling had played the 20-year-old striker on-side and Cameron fired wide a glorious chance from six yards after the Luton keeper had been left exposed by his defence.

Rovers eventually went ahead when Che Wilson lifted the ball over Stirling and Ellington raced in front of Johnson at the near post to sidefoot past Emberson.

Emberson parried a long-range effort from Wilson shortly afterwards and Boyce cleared the danger with Ellington lurking.

The Luton keeper denied Ellington again after the Rovers'

Joe's verdict



The goals we conceded were a comedy of errors. One was an own goal and the keeper fell over for another. You can't afford to give Mickey Mouse goals away. If we hadn't, we'd have won. The back three was nowhere near my first choice but you still expect players to do their best.

striker had escaped the attentions of a tormented Johnson.

At the other end, Luton rarely threatened with Carl Griffiths, Taylor and Steve Howard shots not unduly bothering home keeper Scott Howie.

But the visitors grabbed an unexpected 42nd-minute equaliser after a Wilson blunder.

Kevin Nicholls floated a quick free kick into the Rovers penalty box where Wilson made a complete hash of an attempted header back to Howie.

Taylor capitalised in devastating fashion, collecting the ball before crashing a left-footed drive

into a helpless Howie's bottom corner. The half-fit Griffiths and Paul Hughes were withdrawn at the interval to be replaced by Adrian Forbes and Mansell and Luton enjoyed their best spell of the game early in the second-half.

Ellington, while not quite shackled, was restricted to a clever 59th-minute shot on the turn during this period and the Hatters almost took the lead in bizarre circumstances when Stirling's no-nonsense clearance from inside his own half bounced up and clipped Howie's crossbar.

But calamity struck for the Hatters on 63 minutes when Hillier struck an edge-of-the-area volley which Emberson had covered until the outstretched boot of Boyce sent the ball bouncing down the middle of the goal and over the line.

Bristol scored a third on 76 minutes when Stirling allowed Cameron to cross from the right and Ellington beat Emberson in a race to the ball at the near post.

The Rovers striker laid the ball back to Kevin Gall, who sidefooted powerfully into the top corner from 10 yards. Emberson then saved headers from Steve Foster and an unmarked Ellington before Andy Thomson clipped the foot of the post with a free-kick.

But the home side were given a nervous wait for maximum points when Mansell netted on 82 minutes. Stirling's long throw was not cleared by a Bristol defence under pressure from sub Stuart Douglas and the ball broke loose for Mansell, who fired in off the crossbar.

It proved too little, too late for a Hatters team that were fortunate not to concede five or six goals.

match facts



TOP HATTER: Keeper Carl Emberson.

BRISTOL ROVERS 3 LUTONTOWN 2

● **BRISTOL ROVERS:** Scott Howie, Che Wilson, Andy Thomson, Steve Foster, Mike Trought, Scott Jones, Kevin Gall, Ronnie Mauge, David Hillier, Martin Cameron (David Gilroy, 90), Nathan Ellington. Subs not used: Ryan Clarke, Alvin Bubb, Mark Foran, David Pritchard.

● **HATTERS:** Carl Emberson, Emmerson Boyce, Marvin Johnson, Jude Stirling, Ian Hillier (Stuart Douglas 77), Adam Locke, Kevin Nicholls, Paul Hughes (Lee

Mansell, 46), Matthew Taylor, Steve Howard, Carl Griffiths (Adrian Forbes, 46). Subs not used: Mark Ovendale, Richard Dryden.

● **Shots on target:** Bristol Rovers 12 Luton 8.

● **Off target:** Bristol R 7 Luton 3.

● **Corners:** Bristol R 8 Luton 7.

● **Referee:** Clive Penton (Sussex).

● **Top Hatter:** Carl Emberson – a busy afternoon.



JUMP TO IT: Hatters midfielder Lee Mansell beats Bristol Rovers keeper Scott Howie to the ball and scores the Hatters' second goal at the Memorial Ground. Sadly, for Joe Kinnear's men Mansell's 82nd-minute strike was a case of too little, too late. Luton lost the match 3-2 with Nathan Ellington, David Hillier and Kevin Gall getting the Rovers goals. Matthew Taylor got Luton's other goal, firing in to level the scores at half-time. But Hatters keeper Carl Emberson was kept busy throughout the match and the final scoreline flattered the Kenilworth Road club.

Pictures: GARETH OWEN



FLOORED: Crestfallen Bristol Rovers are on the deck as Luton wing-back Matthew Taylor celebrates his first-half equaliser at the Memorial Ground.