



IT'S THERE: Kevin Nicholls fires in the Hatters' eighth-minute equaliser in a scrappy encounter against Oxford on Saturday.

Pictures: JOANNA CROSS

Nicholls on target to make point for Town

PATCHED-UP Luton Town settled for a point against a solid Oxford United side on Saturday.

Hatters boss Joe Kinnear selected five players – Aaron Skelton, Russell Perrett, Adrian Forbes, Matthew Spring and Carl Griffiths – in his starting line-up who are not fully fit and it showed as Luton lacked cohesion during a 1-1 draw.

Only an excellent first-half display by Carl Emberson prevented Oxford from adding to Andy Scott's fourth-minute goal.

But in-form Matthew Taylor, who was released by Oxford as a youngster for being too fat and has been making them eat their words ever since, could also have won the game for Luton after hitting the woodwork twice.

Former England World Cup international defender Mark Wright has applied major surgery to an Oxford team that were relegated as the bottom club from Division Two last season.

Wright has moulded a well-organised side with a strong back-line that had not conceded a goal on their travels this season before Kevin Nicholls' eighth-minute equaliser.

The visitors' front pairing of Scott and ex-Hatter Phil Gray, who were matched together by former Oxford director of football Kinnear, also proved a handful.

Scott fired his side in front early on when he curled a re-taken free-kick over the Hatters' wall and beyond Emberson into the home keeper's bottom right-hand corner.

The wily Gray had won the free-kick on the edge of the penalty box after teasing a foul out of home skipper Skelton.

Luton's response was swift with Nicholls scoring his first goal for the club after charging into the six-yard

matchfacts

LUTON TOWN 1 OXFORD UNITED 1

● **HATTERS:** Carl Emberson, Aaron Skelton, Emmerson Boyce, Russell Perrett, Marvin Johnson, Adrian Forbes (Ian Hillier, 46), Kevin Nicholls, Matthew Spring, Matthew Taylor, Steve Howard, Carl Griffiths (Stuart Douglas, 60). Subs not used: Mark Ovendale, Richard Dryden, Paul Hughes.

● **OXFORD UNITED:** Ian McCaldon, Sam Stockley, Sam Ricketts, Scott Guyett, Phil Bolland, Wayne Hatwell, Martin

Thomas, David Savage, Dean Whitehead, Phil Gray, Andy Scott. Subs not used: Richard Knight, Jon Richardson, Robert Folland, Jamie Brooks, Emmanuel Omoyinni.

● **Shots on target:** Luton 6, Oxford 5.

● **Off target:** Luton 5, Oxford 4.

● **Corners:** Luton 8, Oxford 6.

● **Referee:** Clive Penton.

● **Top Hatter:** Carl Emberson - first-half saviour.

box to meet Skelton's long throw and force the ball over the line.

Scott then headed wide on 20 minutes after a great cross on the turn by Gray before Emberson excelled with three fine saves before the interval.

The former Walsall keeper may have positioned himself or his defensive wall poorly for Scott's early goal but he soon atoned for any mistake made.

His first save denied Scott after Griffiths had lost possession on the half-way line and midfielder Martin Thomas blazed over the rebound.

Taylor then clipped the bar from an acute left-wing angle before Wayne Hatwell was the next Oxford player to be denied when his edge-of-the-area volley was tipped over by the acrobatic

Emberson. Steve Howard blazed high and wide after Skelton, Spring and Forbes had all combined well on the right-wing and Spring warmed Ian McCaldon's hands on 37 minutes with a stinging low drive from 25 yards.

But Emberson again came to his side's rescue on the stroke of half-time with a reflex save to keep out Gray's close-range volley and deny the Northern Ireland international a goal on his return to Kenilworth Road.

Gray and Scott continued to pose problems after the break and, on 59 minutes, Emberson once more frustrated the potent pair.

Scott was released for a clear run on goal after excellent work by Gray but his shot lacked the conviction to beat a

confident Emberson. Luton created little at the other end although Howard was twice denied by some heroic penalty box defending from the visitors.

Stuart Douglas' introduction as an eager second-half substitute applied more pressure on the Oxford back-line but Kinnear's men still struggled to carve out clear-cut chances.

Both sides, however, could have won the game in the last 10 minutes.

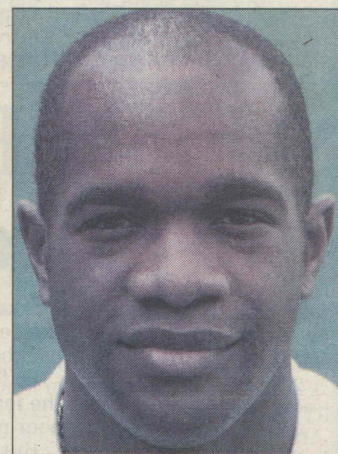
First, Scott shrugged off a challenge from Perrett on 81 minutes before lobbing a stranded Emberson only for the ball to land on the roof of the net.

Then Taylor cracked an excellent curling left-footed effort against the bar from the corner of the penalty box with McCaldon well beaten.

Kinnear believes joint top-scorer Taylor can finish the season with the club's golden boot, saying: "He's as good a finisher as there is in the club and hits the ball as cleanly as anyone. He could be our top scorer."

But Taylor's current role as the club's main goal threat is a concern for Kinnear, who bemoaned the lack of firepower from his strikers after the game.

Howard has scored just two goals in open play during his 18 appearances for the Hatters and Douglas has not found the net since February.



STRUGGLE: Adrian Forbes.

Unfit Forbes is back with the reserves

ADRIAN FORBES will have another run-out for the reserves today (Wednesday) after struggling on his first team return against Oxford.

The 22-year-old winger was replaced by on-loan Spurs man Ian Hillier at half-time in Saturday's match and the £65,000 summer signing will have another outing this afternoon at Leyton Orient.

Kinnear said: "Adrian Forbes was not 100 per cent fit. He had only trained for two days before the match and was feeling pain in his groin."

"He did not look sharp but I have got to play some people to get them back match fit."

Teenage midfielder Lee Mansell has been suffering calf problems this season and Kinnear did not include him in his squad against Oxford, saying: "We decided to rest the kid but he will be back in contention for York."

Andrew Fotiadis and Adam Locke missed Saturday's match with calf strains and are unlikely to return at Bootham Crescent.

Joe Kinnear's verdict



“We did not pass well and had no punch up front. Every time it went up there the play broke down. I'm disappointed because I set standards that were not met and the players are disappointed because they know they should have done a lot better. Only Matthew Taylor and Ian Hillier put decent

quality crosses in and they were our only real threats. We might have been nervous because we have not really played well at home despite still managing to get results. I'm also playing people who are not fully fit in games to get them back to match fitness.”