

Top Hatters storm to top of the table

Luton Town 5 Darlington 2

AN irresistible display of quality football took the Hatters to the top of the league.

They produced a five-star performance for the second home game running and by far their biggest crowd of the season was treated to a game full of goals.

Two of them, from Matthew Spring and Jean-Louis Valois, were candidates for goal-of-the-season in a game full of incident – six bookings and three penalties awarded, each side contriving to miss one.

Darlington came to Kenilworth Road with ambitions of their own to make a major contribution to the game.

They stood to advance into the top three with an away win, and as Joe Kinnear said after the game: "They were always a threat going forward."

But Luton broke their hearts with a devastating spell of three goals inside 15 minutes.

The visitors began the goal feast when Danny Mellanby took full advantage of a terrible 25th minute mistake by reinstated 'keeper Carl Emberson.

But Spring equalised with a thunderbolt of a shot ten minutes later. A super Valois delivery of a corner kick found Steve Howard's head to reward the striker for a fine game two minutes into the second half, but Darlington hit back within five minutes, only for Dean Crowe to comprehensively punish a defensive mistake and begin the deluge.

Kevin Nicholls converted from the spot when Howard was upended and Valois completed the scoring with a gem eight minutes from time.

There was still time for Emberson to redeem his earlier error with a magnificent save from Barry Conlon's penalty kick, harshly awarded by a linesman against Nicholls.

And Spring was thwarted from the penalty spot with the last kick of a dramatic game by Andrew Collett's block on to the bar.

It had been given for Valois being hacked down at the end of a wonderful 80 yard run.

It did little to dampen Kinnear's exuberance. "I am delighted with the result. We played a bit safety first before the interval, but we stepped up a gear and some magnificent finishing saw us home.

"There were so many plusses against a decent side. We played



some sparkling football and people can see that we are well worth watching.

"The fans were magnificent once again and I am pleased they got great value for money."

The dull start to the game betrayed the shape of things to come, but the goal that resulted from Emberson's error livened things up nicely.

The Town 'keeper, preferred to Mark Ovendale, scuffed his clearance from a routine Taylor back-pass straight to Mellanby, who cracked it back past him from 20 yards.

Spring's answer was to launch a ground-to-air missile of a shot from fully 25 yards and at an angle.

It was hit so hard that it only rose a couple of feet from boot to goal and was still going upwards when it bulged into the net behind a despairing Collett.

It was a real stunner but the next goal was a simple bread-and-butter affair. Valois put over a trademark inswinging, pacy corner and Howard was left unmarked right in front to head home.

"He puts them right on your head," beamed Howard. "You don't have to move."

Darlington's equaliser was deserved, but a little fortunate.

Neil Wainwright gave Matthew Taylor a torrid time most of the night. He beat the youngster once again, cut inside and let a shot go. It took a deflection over Emberson and went in off the underside of the bar.

When, on 67 minutes, a Spring effort was cleared off the line, the ball was returned for Dean Crowe to score a vital third goal. Crowe cannily allowed the ball to come through to him, picked his spot, waited for the ball to drop into his stride and buried it in the corner.

Five minutes later Liddle brought down Howard for Kevin Nicholls to smash the penalty hard and high into the roof of the net, leaving Valois to put the icing on the cake on 82 minutes.

As usual with the French artiste, it came out of the blue. He cut inside his marker to strike a right footer that left Collett clutching at thin air. The ball was across and past him for Luton's fifth goal before he started his dive.

Luton Town: Emberson, Boyce, Perrett, Coyne, Taylor, Mansell (Hillier 85), Spring, Nicholls (Forbes 88), Valois, Howard, Crowe.

Attendance: 7,219



■ Top Hatters: Dean Crowe (top), Jean-Louis Valois (left) and Steve Howard (above) who all got on the scoresheet in a scintillating performance at Kenilworth Road on Friday night

