

Defiant Joe not worried by loss

HATTERS boss Joe Kinnear watched his side surrender top spot in Division Three to Saturday's opponents Rochdale but then defiantly said: "I'm still confident we can finish above them".

On-loan Bolton Wanderers striker Paul Wheatcroft ended the Hatters' unbeaten home record this season with the only goal of the game on 39 minutes.

Kinnear's side also became the first-ever Luton team not to beat Rochdale in a home game as they failed to find the net for the first time in a league match this campaign.

The unfashionable Lancashire club have long been starved of success, having been a member of the Football League's basement division for the last 27 years, which is longer than any other team in England.

But Steve Parkin's side sat proudly at the top of the third division after Saturday's win and now it remains to be seen whether their squad can sustain a prolonged promotion push.

Kinnear admitted Rochdale were the best team Luton had faced this season but felt his players should still have taken at least a point from the match.

He said: "I think we did more than enough to get a share of the spoils. There was nothing between the two sides but we missed our opportunities. Carl Emberson only had two saves to make but Rochdale's goalkeeper was the best player in their side."

"They are the best side we have played but we missed more chances than they had."

"It's not the end of the world though. We're only three points off the top and I'm still confident we can finish above them."

Luton dropped to third after Saturday's result with Plymouth, who have also beaten the Kenilworth Road club, moving up to second.

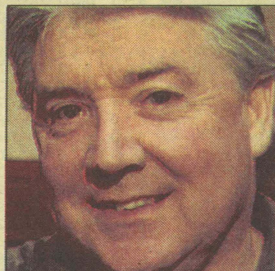
Rochdale's victory was more solid than spectacular with a determined defence complimented by simple, slick and accurate passing throughout the team.

The visitors chose the right passes at the right times while Luton often struggled to keep possession.

It was a frustrating afternoon for Kinnear and his players, who failed to produce their recent scintillating form in front of an expectant home crowd that had snapped up every available ticket.

Jean-Louis Valois and Matthew Taylor both struggled to attain their usual high standards down the left flank and the Hatters' midfield were poor throughout. Dean Crowe did plenty of harassing in

Joe verdict



We spent 45 minutes camped in their half after the break but were not ruthless with our chances. Steve Howard had a great opportunity with his head and Andrew Fotiadis missed a sitter when he was unmarked six yards out. We could not score from there even though we've been smashing them in from 35 yards recently. I'm disappointed that we did not draw.

attack but for little reward and striking partner Steve Howard met a rare aerial match in Rochdale's powerful centre-back Gareth Griffiths.

Rochdale almost went in front on 13 minutes when evergreen midfielder Tony Ford, who is now 42 and the oldest outfield player in the Football League, forced a near-post save from Emberson.

Howard appeared to be unlucky to be penalised moments later at the other end for a sliding tackle on giant American keeper Marcus Hahnemann.

Referee Steve Tomlin blew his whistle for a foul to deny Crowe his third Hatters goal after the on-loan striker had swept the loose ball into an inviting net.

Howard headed over after an Ian Hillier cross on 33 minutes before Emberson punched away a header from 38-year-old veteran defender Richard Jobson.

Rochdale went ahead on 39 minutes when Clive Platt released Ford. His low shot was only parried by Emberson's outstretched right hand into the path of Wheatcroft, who tapped the ball into a gaping goal.

Kinnear later asked questions of his defence, saying: "Matthew Taylor sold himself and let Tony Ford get a strike in. We were then too slow to react after Carl Emberson had made a decent save."

Skipper Kevin Nicholls and Taylor both went close from long range after the break and, on 62 minutes, Hahnemann saved Howard's low drive.

Nicholls pounced on the rebound but his header was cleared off the line by Jobson.

Hahnemann, who is currently on loan from Fulham then distinguished himself with late saves to deny sub Adrian Forbes and Valois.

The French winger's long-range shooting had been unusually wayward before his 87th-minute effort was kept out at the near post.

Substitute Andrew Fotiadis had the last chance to salvage a point in the second minute of stoppage time but scuffed a good opportunity from six yards out.

Equally, Rochdale's Matt Doughty could have increased his side's margin of victory twice late on.

First, Doughty unleashed a 25-yard drive that beat Emberson but narrowly missed the Luton keeper's top corner on 85 minutes.

Then, deep into injury-time, he raced away from last man Matthew Spring and rounded Emberson only to shoot into the sidenetting.



IN THE NIC OF TIME: Hatters captain Kevin Nicholls executes a perfect tackle to prevent Rochdale defender Sean McAuley from clearing during Saturday's top-of-the-table clash. But Nicholls could not prevent a 1-0 defeat. **Picture: JOANNA CROSS**

matchfacts



TOP MAN: Steve Howard.

LUTON TOWN 0 ROCHDALE 1

● **HATTERS:** Carl Emberson, Ian Hillier, Russell Perrett (Emmerson Boyce, 46, Andrew Fotiadis 90), Chris Coyne, Matthew Taylor, Ahmet Brkovic (Adrian Forbes, 46), Kevin Nicholls, Matthew Spring, Jean-Louis Valois, Steve Howard, Dean Crowe. Subs not used: Mark Ovendale, Richard Dryden.
● **ROCHDALE:** Marcus Hahnemann, Wayne Evans, Sean McAuley, Richard Jobson, Gareth Griffiths, Tony Ford (Dave Flitcroft, 81), Gary

Jones, Michael Oliver, Matt Doughty, Clive Platt, Paul Wheatcroft (Kevin Townson, 69). Subs not used: Matthew Gilkes, Dave Bayliss, Kieron Durkan.

● **Shots on target:** Luton 8 Rochdale 6.

● **Off target:** Luton 8 Rochdale 6.

● **Corners:** Luton 9 Rochdale 3.

● **Referee:** Steve Tomlin (Sussex).

● **Top Hatter:** Steve Howard — always willing and contested for everything.

playerwatch

HATTERS RIGHT BACK IAN HILLIER

IN our new feature we throw the spotlight on a Hatters player's performance in the weekend's big game. First to be analysed is on-loan full back Ian Hillier's display against Rochdale...

Time on pitch: 90 minutes, **Shots on Target:** 0, **Shots off Target:** 0, **Blocked Shots:** 0.

Passes to own Player: 18, **Passes to opposition:** 11, **Crosses to own Player:** 1, **Crosses to opposition:** 4, **Pass Completion Rate:** 56 per cent.

Headers: 11, **Tackles:** 8,

Clearances, Blocks and Interceptions: 13.

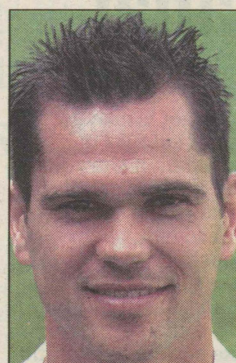
Dribble Ball Retained: 1, **Dribble Ball Lost:** 2, **Dribble Completion Rate:** 33 per cent. **Fouls:** 3, **Offsides:** 0.

Final Comment: Ian Hillier's display reflected that of many in a Hatters shirt. He showed plenty of commitment as is illustrated by his tackle tally and the high number of clearances, blocks and interceptions he made but his low pass completion rate points to a lack of quality when in possession.



COMMITMENT: Ian Hillier.

Town take on Tony Adams



TEST: Aaron Skelton.

HATTERS fringe players and those returning from injury will take on Arsenal skipper and former England talisman Tony Adams at the London club's training ground (today).

Joe Kinnear has arranged a behind-closed doors friendly with Gunners coach Pat Rice, designed to help players from both clubs who are returning from injury.

First-team captain Aaron Skelton is expected to play in the match with Kinnear hoping that the ex-Colchester man will be fit to fill the side's problematic right-midfield slot against Swansea on Saturday.

Paul Hughes, Adrian Forbes, Lee Mansell, Ahmet Brkovic, Peter Holmes and Ian Hillier have all filled the position during Skelton's absence with a hip injury.

Club skipper Marvin Johnson will not play in the match after aggravating his hamstring problem.

● **EX-HATTERS** trialist Didier Santini has signed a one-month contract with Scottish Premier Division side Livingston.

● **LUTON'S** juniors will play host to Brentford in the second round of the AXA FA Youth Cup on Tuesday, November 6.