



L19041

SPRING TIME: Hatters midfielder Matthew Spring scores his side's 72nd-minute winning goal against Shrewsbury Town.

Picture: JOANNA CROSS

Matt finish for happy Hatters

GEORGE GRAHAM'S Arsenal once made a Championship-winning habit of 1-0 scorelines. The uncanny knack even gave voice to a popular terrace song at Highbury in the late 1980s and early '90s.

Luton, under Joe Kinnear, have generally adopted a more cavalier approach to winning games this season with bulging nets a more regular feature than clean sheets.

The football has thrilled home supporters who, with their expectations raised, grew restless before Matthew Spring's 72nd-minute goal grabbed a 1-0 win over fellow promotion hopefuls Shrewsbury.

Spring's effort secured his club's first single-goal victory for 32 matches with the last one coming against Cambridge in March.

But Friday night's taming of the Shrews could prove as crucial as any of the Kenilworth Road goal feasts come May.

It may also prove a psychological turning point in the Hatters season as, previously, Kinnear's men have normally dropped points when they have played poorly.

But against Shrewsbury the Hatters managed to sneak all three despite a largely unconvincing performance.

Kinnear also emphasised the importance of bouncing back from the 4-1 mauling at Mansfield with a clean sheet vital in the exorcism of that particular ghost.

The impact of Mansfield did, however, appear to have dented confidence early on. Distribution from the back was dreadful in the first-half with Chris Coyne the calmest head in a nervous back four.

There were also few chances created at the other end before the break although Steve Howard should have converted at least the second of two early opportunities.

Howard had a fifth-minute header tipped over by former Liverpool youth team keeper Ian Dunbavin on five minutes after Jean-Louis Valois'

Joe's view

I was desperate to win and bounce back quickly and we've made a habit of doing that all season. Our passing from the back was not that clever before the break and we needed to make mistakes in their half if we were going to make any. There's so much expectation when we play at home but the players have to cope with it and they all have a desire to win, which is the good thing. I think we just shaded it and the goal was the best thing in the match. It was a wonderful build-up and a great finish.



cross. But the 6ft 3in striker should have done better moments later when he headed over from almost under the bar after Spring's cross.

Luton then lost their way and ex-Hatters trainee Greg Rioch demonstrated that he has inherited the left foot of his father Bruce by going close with a 35-yard thunderbolt.

Home keeper Carl Emberson then tipped over Matty Redmile's 31st-minute looping header before Spring signalled a warning of things to come when he drove a powerful 30-yard effort wide on the stroke of half-time.

Emberson saved from Shrewsbury goal machine Luke Rodgers early in the second-half, while Howard headed continued to look the most likely source of a goal for the Hatters with Dunbavin saving one and another bouncing wide from Valois' corner.

Rodgers and Luton's Dean Crowe went into the match as two of the division's in-form strikers, but both players missed early chances to break the deadlock around the hour mark.

First, the home crowd held their breath after Russell Perrett mis-

judged a header and gave Rodgers a clear sight of goal.

But the 13-goal forward uncharacteristically scuffed his shot much to the relief of Perrett, an exposed Emberson and the Kenilworth Road faithful. Crowe then squandered as good an opportunity when he dragged his shot wide after collecting Aaron Skelton's mis-hit cross and beating the offside trap.

Former Nottingham Forest striker Nigel Jemson nearly showed the young pretenders how it was done with two long-range efforts from free-kicks. His first curled just over on 67 minutes and, shortly afterwards, he smacked the post after a cleverly-worked set-piece by the visitors.

But Spring upstaged all the striking talent on show when he opened the scoring on 72 minutes.

The 21-year-old midfielder exchanged passes with Crowe and drove into the penalty box before keeping a cool head to fire into the bottom corner of the net.

It was a fitting reward for Spring, who has recently shown signs of recapturing the form that made him a Premiership target as a teenager.

The goal was also a timely one with Kinnear ready to throw on Adrian Forbes to give his side a greater attacking impetus.

Super-sub Forbes was stripped for action before Spring's goal, but then returned to the bench for the rest of the match.

Howard had another header saved and Valois volleyed wide as the Hatters sought a flattering second goal.

Shrewsbury's best attempt at an equaliser came from veteran midfielder Mark Atkins, but his goal-bound effort deflected off Coyne and went over.

Ahmet Brkovic should have given the Hatters a less anxious wait for all three points on 87 minutes but delayed his shot after being sent clear by Valois and allowed Dunbavin to smother at his feet. The Croatian's miss did not cost Luton, however, and Kinnear celebrated by taking the players to Sandown races on Saturday.

playerwatch



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CROATIAN MIDFIELDER AHMET BRKOVIC

OUR super new series Player Watch continues with a look at Ahmet Brkovic. He came under the microscope in Friday's clash with Shrewsbury.

- Shots on target: 1
- Shots off target: 0
- Blocked shots: 0
- Passes to own player: 15
- Passes to opposition: 9
- Crosses to own player: 2
- Crosses to opposition: 5
- Pass completion rate: 55%
- Headers: 7
- Tackles: 4
- Clearances, blocks and interceptions: 6
- Dribble ball retained: 2
- Dribble ball lost: 4
- Dribble completion rate: 33%
- Fouls: 0
- Offsides: 0

● **FINAL VERDICT:** Brkovic's display was unspectacular but hard-working, much like the overall team display. His wastefulness in possession and low pass completion rate was also matched by many of his teammates. The Croatian midfielder, pictured left after the game, should have netted his first Hatters goal on 87 minutes but allowed Ian Dunbavin to save at his feet.

matchfacts

● **HATTERS:** Carl Emberson, Aaron Skelton (Ian Hillier, 83), Russell Perrett, Chris Coyne, Matthew Taylor, Ahmet Brkovic, Kevin Nicholls, Matthew Spring, Jean-Louis Valois, Steve Howard, Dean Crowe. Subs not used: Mark Ovendale, Adrian Forbes, Andrew Fotiadis, Richard Dryden.

● **SHREWSBURY:** Ian Dunbavin, Leon Drysdale, Greg Rloch, Steve Jagielka, Matty Redmile, Andy Tretton, Darren Moss (Ryan Lowe, 90), Mark Atkins,

Luke Rodgers, Nigel Jemson, Karl Murray. Subs not used: Iain Jenkins, Mark Cartwright, Josh Walker, Jamie Tolley.

- Shots on target: Luton 6 Shrewsbury 7
- Off target: Luton 8 Shrewsbury 9
- Corners: Luton 8 Shrewsbury 5
- Referee: Fraser Stretton (Leicester-shire)
- Top Hatter: Spring — probing performance capped by winning goal.

Next three trips are all-ticket

EXCEPTIONAL support means the next three away matches will be all-ticket affairs for Hatters fans.

Saturday's FA Cup first-round trip to Southend United is the first of the trilogy, followed by the matches at Macclesfield Town (November 24) and Kidderminster Harriers (December 1).

Tickets for Southend are £10 for adults, £5 for senior citizens and £1 for children and will be on sale until 6pm on Friday.

The seat prices for Macclesfield are £14 for adults and £9 for senior citizens/juniors, while tickets for the terraces cost £10 for adults and

£6 for senior citizens/juniors. Tickets will be on sale until 6pm on Friday, November 23.

Kidderminster prices are £13 (adults) and £9 (senior citizens/juniors) in the seats and £10 (adults) and £7 (senior citizens/juniors) on the terraces.

Tickets will be on sale until 6pm on Friday, November 30.

The Hatters are also expecting a big crowd for Tuesday night's home match with fellow high-flyers Hull City.

But turnstiles will be open on the night unless the game becomes a sell-out.