

Hatters strike to tame the Shrews

01/02

Luton Town 1
Shrewsbury 0

THIS curate's egg of a performance 'good only in parts' nevertheless enabled the Hatters to close within two points of the top of the table, thanks to Matthew Spring's fine 71st minute goal.

Manager Joe Kinnear said before the game that the players were devastated in defeat at Mansfield last week and wanted to put it behind them. After it he said: "We were desperate to win tonight, but I thought we just about deserved it."

They certainly showed an alarming lack of confidence in the first half, as if badly traumatised by last week's

reverse. The defence had the jitters and their passing was truly atrocious with the result that the strikers had nothing to feed on in the danger areas.

But after an early scare in the second half, the Hatters settled down to gain the upper hand.

Not that they had things completely their own way because Nigel Jemson rattled a post with a lovely set-piece move, straight off the training ground.

Immediately however, Luton went down to the other end and scored.

Spring, once again the best player on show, got his reward for the skill and effort he showed and the Hatters at last went on to create chances with the sort of play that has become their trademark this term.

They started the game in bright fashion too, Steve Howard having a brace of crosses dropped on his head within the first five minutes.

The first brought an efficient point blank tip over from Ian Dunbavin, the second a glaring miss from the

resulting corner kick, well-worked by Jean-Louis Valois and Spring.

Sadly they faded fast and that was all they could muster in the way of chances created before the break.

Shrewsbury, on the other hand must have sensed that this could be their night and while they also gave the ball away time and time again, they had the better of the first period. Big defender Matty Redmile came closest with a looping header that Carl Emberson did well to touch over.

Within two minutes of the restart, the tiny but blisteringly-quick Luke Rodgers got away from his marker to fire in a shot from an angle. The Hatters had Emberson to thank for covering his near post to parry and prevent the league's top scorer from adding to his 13 goals so far this season.

A comedy of errors typified the first hour of the match when Russ Perrett totally misjudged a long cross that went clear over his head to Rodgers. But, with only Emberson to beat, the striker completely miskicked to spare the Luton defender's blushes and was hardly seen again.

Perrett was then left for dead on halfway to allow Steve Jagielka a really good chance.

But his shot was saved easily enough by the Luton keeper before Dean Crowe was surprisingly allowed to cheat the offside flag by a linesman, only to pull his shot wide of a yawning net.

Luton began to get their passing game going, but had an enormous stroke of luck when Jemson took a short free kick to smack a pile-driver against Emberson's left post from 25 yards with the keeper beaten.

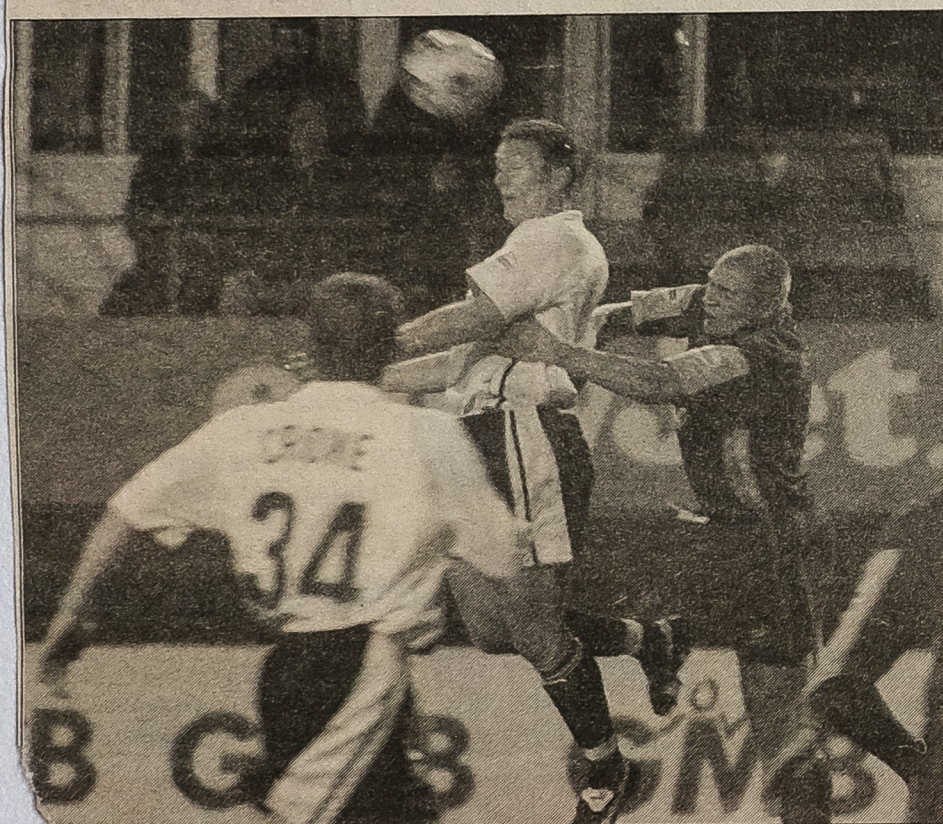
The game turned here because within seconds Spring scored.

He looked to be surrounded by markers just outside the Shrewsbury penalty area with several more defenders between him and the goal.

An inch-perfect one-two with Crowe however, put him clean through to cleverly lift the ball over the advancing Dunbavin into the net. A delighted Spring celebrated in style – and quite rightly too.



■ Double-header one: Jean-Louis Valois rises above the action



Double-header two: Steve Howard fends off an aerial challenge

The way the Town reacted to going ahead will have pleased another large home crowd, because they didn't fall back to defence their lead. They attacked with some panache.

Dunbavin was forced to save at full stretch by a superb Howard header, had to show great bravery to dive at Brkovic's feet to deny the little Croat as Valois unselfishly passed instead of shooting and, when he did have a go at goal, the Frenchman scraped the outside of a post from a Howard knock-down header.

Although the visitors were awarded a number of free kicks that saw everybody charge forward from the back in the hope of a late equaliser, the Luton defence held firm and, in injury time, Valois, trickery created another chance for Howard who was denied at point-blank range by an acrobatic double save.

Luton Town: Emberson, Skelton (Hillier, 83), Perrett, Coyne, Taylor, Brkovic, Spring, Nicholls, Valois, Crowe, Howard.

Substitutes unused: Ovendale (keeper), Forbes, Fotiadis, Dryden.

Attendance: 6,809

Man of the match: Matthew Spring