

Hughes double lifts Luton

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By Dan Burke

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LUTON put their shaky promotion push back on track with victory over M1 rivals Northampton thanks to a late strike from former Chelsea midfielder Paul Hughes, but manager Joe Kinnear admitted that his side had nearly thrown it all away.

Luton, who had enough chances to win twice over, almost gifted relegation-threatened Northampton a share of the spoils after conceding from their only two meaningful attacks.

"It was a great result and with the work rate we deserved it," said Kinnear. "We carved them open time and time again in the first half, but we almost blew it with sloppy defending.

"They got goals at important times and, fortunately for us, Kevin Nicholls was on fire. He ran the midfield on his own and inspired us to get the three points we deserved."

Luton should have taken the lead in the 10th minute when Tony Thorpe struck

fiercely wide having been put clean through by Paul Hughes. The home side's profligacy was punished in the 23rd minute when the Australian Richard Johnson, on loan from Watford, floated in a free-kick and Daryl Burgess drove past the cruelly exposed Luton goalkeeper Carl Emberson.

Luton were level within three minutes thanks to a magnificent strike by Hughes, who hit home powerfully after a cross from Thorpe on the right, and took the lead in the 58th minute when captain Kevin Nicholls struck an unstoppable curling free-kick from 25 yards.

Northampton equalised with a Johnson penalty on 71 minutes after Chris Willmott handled. But, with five minutes to go, Hughes struck his second with an acrobatic volley.

Luton (4-4-2): Emberson; Coyne, Willmott, Neilson, Boyce (Hillier h-t); Spring, Nicholls, Hughes, Brkovic; Thorpe, Crowe. **Subs:** Holmes, Kimble, Brill, Leary. **Goals:** Hughes (26, 84), Nicholls (58). **Booked:** Thorpe (73).

Northampton (4-4-2): Thompson; Burgess, Reid, Carruthers, Gill; McGregor (Harsley 61), Trollope, Rahim, Asamoah; Johnson, Stamp. **Subs:** Marsh, Sampson, Abbey, Lincoln. **Goals:** Reid (23) Johnson (71 pen). **Booked:** Johnson (75), Stamp (80). **Referee:** K Hill (Royston).