



Two Hatters off in bloody battle

02/03

TWO Hatters players were sent off in an ill-tempered clash that did little credit to either side or Premiership referee Eddie Wolstenholme.

Not even manager Joe Kinnear escaped unblemished as he was involved in an ugly fracas with Rangers boss Ian Holloway at the end of the first half.

Top striker Steve Howard and skipper Kevin Nicholls were ordered off inside 50 minutes but the Hatters should still have won as substitute Andrew Fotiadis spurned a gilt-edged chance in the final moments.

Kinnear was raging at the official after the game and defended Howard and Nicholls. "I hope that is the referee's last game in the Football League."

"Steve says he didn't touch the lad and Nicko got booked for getting a head butt in the back of the head. It was a ridiculous booking."

Of the Holloway incident, Kinnear said: "They were egging officials on to book my players. Managers should never do that."

Holloway retaliated by commenting: "I am disappointed Joe did what he did. I had a lot respect for him."

French goalkeeper Cedric Berthelin was recalled to the side in place of Carl Emberson, his last game of a two-month contract, although Kinnear indicated that he wants to sign him for the rest of the season.

This was the only change from the side that hammered part-timers Guiseley in the FA Cup last Saturday.

In midfield the successful partnership of skipper Kevin Nicholls and Matthew Spring were re-united for the first time in a league game since the October 24 win at Crewe.

QPR were looking for their first win in seven league and cup matches and looking to make amends for the goalless draw with Vauxhall Motors last weekend.

Up front journeyman striker Brett Angell made his debut – for his 16th club.

Not much football was played in the opening 45 minutes but there were plenty of talking points.

QPR came out determined to end their recent dismal form, forcing three corners in the first five minutes and looking hungry for victory. Luton, on the other hand, were slow out of the traps.

Then came two superb saves at either end two minutes apart. On nine minutes a 25-yard free kick swerved round the Hatters' wall by the left boot of Tommy Williams, on loan from Birmingham City. Berthelin was equal to the task, palming it away to safety.

Not to be outdone, a minute later, Rangers' keeper Simon Royce, on loan from Leicester, saved brilliantly from Chris Coyne's snap shot from ten yards.

A short corner from Nicholls came to Spring at the edge of the box. His floated ball in found the Australian defender, who turned his marker before shooting.

Then came the turning point of the game. Brkovic did well on the left hand side to muscle Danny Shittu off the ball but his pass to Howard sold the striker short. Already committed Howard lunged for the ball and his late tackle left Clarke Carlisle writhing in agony.

Referee Wolstenholme issued a straight red and Luton players were furious. They remonstrated with the official but, of course, to no avail.

From then on what had been a niggling game turned into a battle as boots flew in from both sides.

On 19 minutes a clash of heads between



■ Seeing red: Steve Howard gets his marching orders from referee Eddie Wolstenholme in just the seventh minute

Nicholls and Oliver Burgess left both men on the floor. Debutant Angell went in for afters and Nicholls rose to the bait. They squared up to each other without coming to blows but the referee had seen enough to book them.

Already on a yellow Nicholls continued with his aggressive style of play and was lucky to escape a red card, although the writing seemed to be on the wall, when he pushed Callum Willock in the chest in front of the referee five minutes from the break.

The game wasn't pretty and neither side created an attack of any note. The fighting was not just on the pitch. As the referee blew for half time, Kinnear appeared to push opposite number Ian Holloway in the chest.

Another brawl ensued involving both benches and both managers were shepherded off the pitch. It was not a pretty sight.

The tempo of the game was so fast and furious it was almost inevitable there would be more bookings.

The second half started brightly and 10-man Luton had an effort controversially ruled out on 49 minutes.

A counter attack began with Thorpe picking up the ball on the halfway line. He appeared to brush off Carlisle's advances and squared the ball to Brkovic who lashed the ball home from 25 yards. But the referee's assistant flagged for a foul on Carlisle and Mr Wolstenholme agreed. Once again he incurred the wrath of the Luton players.

Just as Luton seemed to be getting to grips with their handicap captain Nicholls picked up his second yellow for clipping the heels of Burgess.

It was a harsh decision and it left Luton with a mountain to climb. It seemed clumsy rather than malicious.

Even with a two-man advantage, QPR failed

to take the initiative but they did have a golden chance on 75 minutes.

Shittu, who was barracked throughout the game for his vocal support of the Howard dismissal, found himself unmarked in the box after a Berthelin punch from a cross. Justice was done when he vollied high and wide.

Kinnear introduced Fotiadis for the hard-working Thorpe and the forward should have snatched the points in the dying minutes with the chance of the game.

QPR tried to play him offside near the halfway line but the flag stayed down. He raced through unchallenged to leave him one-on-one with Royce but only succeeded in fluffing his lines, firing straight at the keeper's legs.

Insult was added to injury when moments later the substitute was himself replaced.

Kinnear added: "Fotty should have won it. I still say it was a moral victory for us."

■ Stunned: Hatters skipper Kevin Nicholls is the second player to be sent off in a bad-tempered Division Two game at Kenilworth Road



MATCH FACTS



LUTON TOWN: (4-4-2): Berthlin; Boyce, Neilson, Coyne, Davis; Robinson, Nicholls, Spring, Brkovic; Howard, Thorpe (Fotiadis (Hillier 90m))
Subs not used: Emberson, Holmes, Hughes

Referee: Eddie Wolstenholme (Lancashire)

GOALSCORERS:

Luton: -
QPR: -

SHOTS ON TARGET

Luton: 4
QPR: 3

SHOTS OFF TARGET

Luton: 5
QPR: 10

CORNERS

Luton: 8
QPR: 4

OFFSIDE

Luton: 3
QPR: 2

SENDINGS OFF

Luton: Howard (13), Nicholls (50)
QPR: -

BOOKINGS

Luton: Nicholls (19), Thorpe (42), Spring (57)
Brkovic (89)
QPR: Forbes (5), Angell (19)

ATTENDANCE: 9,477

HATTERS' STAR MAN:

CHRIS COYNE

Kept his head, did his job well

Nationwide Div Two results

Brentford	0	Wigan	1
Crewe	3	Blackpool	0
Huddersfield	2	Swindon	3
Luton	0	QPR	0
Mansfield	4	Bristol City	5
Northampton	3	Port Vale	0
Notts County	2	Colchester	3
Oldham	0	Cheltenham	0
Peterborough	1	Barnsley	3
Plymouth	4	Stockport	1
Wycombe	1	Tranmere	3

How they stand

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wigan	19	12	5	2	33	13	41
Oldham	19	11	5	3	32	12	38
Bristol City	18	12	1	5	38	21	37
Cardiff	18	11	4	3	30	15	37
Crewe	19	10	4	5	28	15	34
QPR	19	8	6	5	28	18	30
Brentford	19	8	5	6	25	22	29
Luton	19	7	6	6	27	26	27
Blackpool	19	8	3	8	24	27	27
Chesterfield	19	8	3	7	16	20	27
Tranmere	19	8	3	8	21	30	27
Northampton	19	7	4	8	21	24	25
Plymouth	19	6	6	7	27	28	24
Wycombe	19	6	5	8	25	28	23
Barnsley	19	6	5	8	22	29	23
Port Vale	19	6	5	8	21	28	23
Swindon	19	6	4	9	23	29	22
Stockport	19	6	3	10	23	28	21
Colchester	19	5	6	8	19	26	21
Notts County	18	3	9	6	22	27	18
Cheltenham	19	4	6	9	18	25	18
Huddersfield	19	4	6	9	15	23	18
Peterborough	19	4	5	10	21	28	17
Mansfield	19	4	3	12	30	49	15