

Tranmere see

02/03

Rovers outfought and outmanoeuvred by



NICK HILTON
at Prenton
Park

TRANMERE R .. 1

(Roberts 21)

LUTON TOWN ... 3

(Spring 70 Brkovic 79 Howard 89)

TRANMERE ROVERS: Achterberg, Allen, Gray, Edwards, Roberts, Taylor, Harrison (Olsen 84), Jones, Nicholson, Barlow (Hume 73) M Robinson. Subs: Sharps, Howarth, Hay.

LUTON TOWN: Berthelin, Boyce, Nielson, Coyne, Davis (Kimble 54), S Robinson, Spring, Nichols, Brkovic (Hughes 87), Thorpe (Fotiadis 91), Howard. Subs: Ovendale, Hillier.

BOOKINGS: Tranmere's Roberts and Nicholson.

REFEREE: Andy Penn (West Midlands).
ATT: 8,273.

Pictures: JASON ROBERTS

JUST when Tranmere Rovers had found the confidence to start taking points rather than regular beatings on the road, they go and lose the plot at home.

Fortress Prenton Park, as they have proudly described it this season, fell meekly on Saturday, its battlements torn down by the direct, strong-arm tactics of Luton Town.

During a second half when the visitors daringly seized the initiative and ruthlessly pressed it home, Tranmere could not find a way to mount any kind of effective resistance.

It was as if Tranmere did not know how to counter the Luton long-ball game, a variation of a formula their manager Joe Kinnear adopted during a previous spell at Wimbledon.

Tranmere manager Ray Mathias frankly confessed his team were outfought and outmanoeuvred on the day.

He said: "We defended too deep, gave Luton too much room in the middle of the park and most disappointingly for me, we did not get our own game going.

"We allowed Luton to dominate and we never got to grips with them throughout. If you defend on the edge of your own box, you are inviting trouble.

"Luton knocked the ball forward, supported their front players and won all of the second balls.

"A team has to win a percentage of second balls in any game but in the second half of this one, we did not win any.

GROUNDING: Tranmere's Gary Jones is held down as he attempts to challenge for the ball in the air

fortress taken

Town marauders, admits manager Mathias



PHYSICAL PRESENCE: Tranmere Rovers' new loan-signing Marvin Robinson charges forward (top), while (above) young Canadian striker Ian Hume gets a shot in on goal and (right) Welshman Gareth Roberts celebrates his first-half goal for the home side

"Luton squeezed us and closed us down but there were still times when we could have got the ball down and passed it better than we did. We will have to adapt better when we play a team like that again."

The absence of two of Tranmere's more influential players did not help their cause.

The strength and work-rate of loan signing Marvin Robinson gave Tranmere a physical presence up front to compensate for the loss of the injured Simon Haworth.

But Tranmere more obviously missed the suspended Mickey Mellon, whose neat and tidy passing often makes the glue that knits the team together from midfield.

During the first half it did not look as if either side was capable of establishing a decisive advantage over the other.

For the most part they simply cancelled each other out, the result being precious little goalmouth incident at either end.

Tranmere led at the break, thanks to a penalty awarded on 21 minutes when Luton defender Kevin Nicholl's needlessly handled a long throw from the left by Gareth Roberts.

Striker Stuart Barlow saw his spot-kick beaten out by goal-keeper Cedric Berthelin, who also stopped Robinson's effort from the rebound, but the second rebound was then driven over the line by Roberts for the left-back's third goal of the season.

Otherwise Tranmere did not give Berthelin any serious work to do.

At the other end John Achterberg was no busier. His only moment of alarm in the first half came on 29

minutes when Steve Howard deflected a header from Chris Coyne straight into his hands from point-blank range.

But everything changed after the interval when Luton upped the tempo of their own football and increased the pressure on Tranmere in every area of the pitch.

The mood of the home supporters became increasingly anxious as Luton's football became ever more assertive and ever more dominant.

Tranmere held out until the 69th minute, surviving near misses by Emmerson Boyce and Alan Kimble.

But once Luton drew level, the contest could only have had one winner.

The equaliser was a messy affair, with Howard turning on to a pass from the right by Steve Robinson to fire the ball into the goalmouth, where Matthew Spring knocked it over the line, in spite of desperate attempts by

Christian Edwards to keep the ball out.

The second goal 10 minutes later demonstrated Luton's ability to lace some slick passing movements into their mixture.

Tranmere were opened up through the inside right channel by Howard's run and a precise ball set up Ahmet Brkovic, who swept it first time into the top corner of the net from 15 yards.

Brkovic missed an easier chance on 83 minutes, failing to hit the target from eight yards after Steve Robinson had caused more mayhem down the right.

But the third goal Luton's superiority merited arrived on 88 minutes through Howard, who lashed the ball into the roof of the net from a tight angle on the right after Achterberg could only beat out the striker's shot from just outside the box.