

Goals flow after Spring's opener

LUTON recorded their fifth away win of the season with a spectacular second half display.

After going in behind to a dubious penalty decision, the Hatters fought back with goals from Matthew Spring, Ahmet Brkovic and Steve Howard to end his goal famine which had stretched to four games.

After a dire first 45 minutes, the midfield pairing of Spring and skipper Kevin Nicholls galvanised the Hatters into stunning action.

Manager Joe Kinnear kept the same team that drew with QPR last Saturday, sticking by bad-boys Nicholls and Howard who were sent off in a grim battle.

The teams began the game on equal points and there was nothing in the opening 22 minutes to suggest that either side were better than mid-table mediocrity.

The game erupted when referee Andy Penn gave Rovers the advantage, awarding a penalty for a Nicholls handball. A long throw into the box from left back Gareth Roberts was aimed at a gaggle of players around the penalty spot. Nicholls was among the players who jumped for the ball and a linesman flagged that he had handled it.

The Luton players were furious, remonstrating with the linesman, Chris Coyne having to be dragged away from the official by Spring.

To rub salt into the wounds, Cedric Berthelin produced two magnificent saves, the first from Stuart Barlow's penalty diving to his left and the second from Christian Edwards, who volleyed it straight back at the Frenchman.

Despite being on the floor Berthelin managed to get a hand to the drive but slow reaction from his fellow defenders allowed Roberts to poach the goal from two yards out.

Neither side were impressive and Luton looked predictable. Their best chance of the half fell on 29 minutes. A Nicholls corner found Coyne at the far post. His header came to Howard, but he prodded tamely at Dutch goalkeeper John Achterberg.

Luton's first touch and passing could only be described as erratic; the only thing that was consistent was the torrential rain that made the ball hard to control, although that could not fully excuse Hatters' failure to break down an average Tranmere side.

But as the second half kicked off the rain stopped and Luton flourished.

The Hatters were rampant the entire second half and killed off a shell-shocked Tranmere.

They began with more guile and passion and the only surprise was that it took them until the 69th minute to equalise.

Steve Robinson, hard working throughout, flashed a searching ball across the box to Howard. The striker muscled off Gray and despite being squeezed wide got in a shot. It deflected off Gray and fell fortunately to Spring ten yards out and the midfielder made no mistake.

They underlined their domination on 79 minutes when Ahmet Brkovic got the second to put Hatters ahead. A rare second half Tranmere attack was broken up. Howard made ground with the ball and passed to Thorpe.

The striker had it all to do on the halfway line with his back to goal. But he skinned two defenders and galloped towards the penalty area.

Brkovic burst through the middle unmarked and Thorpe's perfectly weighted ball left the midfielder with just Achterberg to beat. Brkovic opted to shoot first time finishing decisively from 25 yards.

Luton were now overrunning Rovers and



■ On the way: Matthew Spring gets the Hatters' equaliser at Tranmere

should have made it three when Brkovic missed from just five yards.

It made no difference as Howard wrapped up an excellent display three minutes from time. A clever through ball from Spring again found the Tranmere defence wanting. Pulled out of position, Gray allowed Howard to get goalside of him. He left fly with a drive that Achterberg found too hot to handle, spilling it back to the striker who followed up to score.

His own personal relief at getting just his second goal in ten games was all too apparent as he punched the air in front of the Luton faithful.

Kinnear was confident of victory. "Once we equalised I knew we would win. We totally dominated the second half.

"I told Spring to push forward and Brkovic to play behind the front two."

Of the Howard goal, Kinnear commented: "I have been telling Steve the goals will come and hopefully he will go on another scoring run similar to the open at the start of the season."

Looking ahead to next Saturday's FA Cup

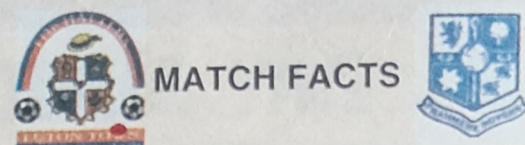
second round tie at Wigan, Kinnear said: "We seem to do well on our travels up north and hopefully that will continue next week."

In the meantime the Hatters are trying to get Howard's red card received against QPR rescinded.

"We shall have to see if people will see sense and make Steve available. We are looking forward to going on a money-spinning cup run."



■ Relief: Steve Howard gets just his second goal in ten games to make sure of victory



MATCH FACTS

LUTON TOWN (4-4-2): Berthelin; Boyce, Coyne, Neilson, Davis (Kimble 54m); Robinson, Spring, Nicholls, Brkovic (Hughes (87); Howard, Thorpe (Fotiadis 89). Subs not used: Ovendale, Hillier

Referee: Andy Penn

GOALSCORERS:

Tranmere: Roberts (22)

Luton: Spring (69) Brkovic (79), Howard (87)

SHOTS ON TARGET

Tranmere: 5

Luton: 5

SHOTS OFF TARGET

Tranmere: 2

Luton: 10

CORNERS

Tranmere: 1

Luton: 4

OFFSIDE

Tranmere: 2

Luton: 2

BOOKINGS

Tranmere: Nicholson (43), Gray (66), Roberts (90)

Luton: Coyne (24)

ATTENDANCE: 8,273

HATTERS' STAR MAN: STEVE HOWARD

Had a hand in all three goals and ended his personal drought

Nationwide Div Two results

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

How they stand

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wigan	20	13	5	2	34	13	44
Cardiff	20	13	4	3	35	15	43
Oldham	20	11	6	3	34	14	39
Bristol City	19	12	2	5	40	23	38
Crewe	20	10	5	5	30	17	35
QPR	20	8	6	6	28	22	30
Luton	20	8	6	6	30	27	30
Chesterfield	20	9	3	8	17	21	30
Brentford	20	8	5	7	25	23	29
Blackpool	20	8	4	8	25	28	28
Tranmere	20	8	3	9	22	33	27
Port Vale	20	7	5	8	25	30	26
Plymouth	20	6	7	7	27	28	25
Northampton	20	7	4	9	21	25	25
Stockport	20	7	3	10	25	29	24
Barnsley	20	6	6	8	24	31	24
Wycombe	20	6	5	9	26	30	23
Swindon	20	6	5	9	24	30	23
Colchester	20	5	7	8	19	26	22
Cheltenham	20	5	6	9	19	25	21
Notts County	19	3	10	6	25	28	19
Peterborough	20	4	6	10	22	29	18
Huddersfield	20	4	6	10	15	24	18
Mansfield	20	4	3	13	32	53	15