

HATTERS GRAB LATE VICTORY

02/03

By **SCOTT McLEOD**

At Prenton Park

TRANMERE **1**

LUTON **3**

IF YOU don't create chances, you don't win matches.

Tranmere are a more cultured football team than Joe Kinnear's battlers from Luton.

But they deserved to lose to the Hatters 3-1 this afternoon, despite leading for more than half the match, because they created virtually nothing in the way of chances.

By contrast, Luton's more combative, direct style ensured they fought their way back into the game after falling behind to Gareth Roberts' 23rd minute goal.

The majority of their chances came from set-pieces. But the goals which turned the game on its head, netted by Matt Spring, Ahmet Brkovic and Steve Howard in the final half hour, were all quality finishes from chances carved in open play.

It was a harsh lesson for Rovers but they can have no complaints with the outcome.

A month ago Stuart Barlow would have probably shied away from the responsibility of taking a penalty.

But in the last few weeks he has rediscovered his scoring touch and his confidence has come flooding back.

And so when Luton's Kevin Nicholls handed Rovers a spot kick by inexplicably fisting the ball away as he challenged with Marvin Robinson for a long throw from Gareth Roberts, it was Barlow who stepped forward and claimed the responsibility of taking the penalty.

He brushed aside Shane Nicholson, who had expected to take the kick, and promptly saw his well placed right-foot effort brilliantly parried by Cedric Berthelin in the Hatters' goal.

The Frenchman, who is on loan from Lens, even managed to push away the rebound from Robinson as he lay on the ground.

But he could do nothing to stop the third goalbound effort in quick succession flying beyond him and into the net.

The scorer was Gareth Roberts, who celebrated in his now customary manner by wheeling away and ripping off his shirt.

That goal came on 22 minutes. Before then the lack of eye-catching action on the pitch meant many fans were left to discuss the events of the morning in the Prentonian Suite.

It was there that the Tranmere & Wirral Supporters Trust held their first AGM. The meeting was dominated by the proposal to forge a partnership with local charity Weston Spirit in a bid to buy Tranmere.

Not surprisingly, the partnership received unanimous support from the Trust members, who were urged to press ahead with the audacious bid by former FA Chief Executive and keen Luton fan Graham Kelly.

Kelly was in tune with Tranmere's fans during that meeting. He probably wasn't quite so like-minded after 3pm.

The Luton side he follows are a fiercely competitive outfit. They produce some thunderous challenges and make life very difficult for their opponents.

Ironically, while Luton lacked the neat and compact passing game of their hosts, they had the better of the chances after falling behind.

Had new boy Robinson had more fortune with the linesman's flag, however, that would have been a different story.

As it was, Luton's first chance came with 29 minutes on the clock. A

corner from the right by Nicholls was headed down into a crowded six-yard box by defender Steve Coyne but Steve Howard's weak touch was saved with ease by John Achterberg.

Nicholls tried his best to make amends for his bizarre handball which indirectly led to the opening goal by providing the ammunition for Luton every time they were awarded a free-kick or earned a corner.

One such free-kick, which was curled into the area on 51 minutes, was flicked inches wide of the post by full-back Emerson Boyce.

It was another reminder for Rovers that, while they were dominating the game, their visitors remained a threat.

Former Wimbledon midfielder Alan Kimble was introduced by Luton boss Joe Kinnear 10 minutes

Rovers' sixth different attacking partnership of the season.

Robinson was the 31st player to turn out for Tranmere in all competitions this season, giving Rovers a higher player count than

into the second period, replacing defender Sol Davis as the Hatters went in search of the equaliser.

But while the chances kept coming along for Luton from set-pieces, Tranmere seemed comfortable in their position of dominance.

Urged on by an increasingly edgy home crowd, Rovers came close to adding to their lead in the 65th minute. A cross from the left by Nicholson was headed down towards the front post by Barlow but it was just too far in front of Robinson, who failed to reach the ball as he stretched towards the by-line.

Moments later at the other end and Rovers were again under threat from a Luton set-piece.

This time it was a well-struck free-kick from Kimble which skipped wide of the post from 25 yards.

When the equaliser did arrive in the

any other club in the entire Nationwide League.

The suspension of Mickey Mellon gave youngster Danny Harrison the chance to play in midfield alongside Gary Jones.

69th minute it was something of a shock in that it came from open play.

A Steve Robinson cross from the right was turned into the path of Steve Howard by Matt Spring.

The striker's shot on the turn from a tight angle was scuffed but had enough pace on it to beat Achterberg.

Christian Edwards dashed back in an attempt to clear off the line but failed as he tumbled across the line.

Barlow was sacrificed with 16 minutes left and replaced by Australian striker Iain Hume.

The departure of the veteran forward was not well received by the Rovers fans in the Bebington Kop, who chanted "You don't know what you're doing," and as the game entered the latter stages Tranmere's lack of cutting edge ensured it was Kinnear's men who looked the more likely to grab the winner.



IN THE THICK OF IT: Tranmere midfielder Gary Jones does battle with the Hatters this afternoon

TEAM NEWS

RAY MATHIAS handed on-loan Derby County striker Marvin Robinson his debut.

The big forward partnered Stuart Barlow in place of the injured Simon Haworth, making it

And they put themselves in a position to do just that when Ahmet Brkovic made the most of the acres of space afforded him down the centre of the pitch by curling a shot beyond Achterberg from 20 yards in the 79th minute.

The chance was handed to him on a plate by the lively Thorpe, who played the ball into Brkovic's path following a fine run down the right.

James Olsen came on for Danny Harrison with seven minutes remaining. The third goal came two minutes from time when Steve Howard lashed the ball beyond Achterberg from the tightest of angles on the right edge of the area.

TRANMERE (4-4-2): Achterberg; Allen, Roberts, Gray, Edwards; Harrison, Jones, Taylor, Nicholson; Robinson, Barlow. Subs: Sharps, Howarth, Hume, Hay, Olsen.

LUTON (4-4-2): Berthelin; Neilson, Davis, Coyne, Boyce; Spring, Nicholls, Brkovic, Robinson; Howard, Thorpe. Subs: Ovendale, Hillier, Kimble, Hughes, Fotiadis.

REF: Mr A M Penn

BOOKED: Nicholson, Gray (Tranmere).