

NUMBERS GAME

Late agony has Rovers Mellon-choly

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By **SCOTT McLEOD**

TRANMERE 1

LUTON 3

MORE players than are currently in the Tranmere Rovers squad have turned out for Ray Mathias' side this season.

Thirty-one different footballers have been called upon to don the white shirt for the senior side, with on-loan striker Marvin Robinson the latest.

But none have been more influential than Mickey Mellon. And he was missing against Luton on Saturday.

The experienced Scot had to sit the game out on the sidelines and, without him, Rovers lacked the nous to overcome a resolute Luton side that plays football the Wimbledon way.

The Hatters will never win awards for the quality of their football. But they are a settled side and there is a cohesion to their football.

How can Rovers match that when there is a revolving door at the training ground?

A quick glance down the league tables reveals that the teams with the least changes tend to be the sides that enjoy the most success.

In Division One Brighton are at the foot of the table but have utilised 29 different players.

At the top Portsmouth have only used 22. And in Division Two, mega-rich Wigan lead the table but have only involved 18 players this term.

Cardiff are hot on their heels and have also only used 18 men.

The managers of all those top clubs know what their best XI is. They have also been given the financial backing to build squads strong enough to cope with injuries to key players.

Cardiff provided first hand evidence of that in last Tuesday's FA Cup triumph over Tranmere.

Lennie Lawrence shuffled his pack but his side was still dripping with quality.

By contrast, if Rovers lose a couple of key players the manager feels the necessity to delve into the transfer market for loan players who can provide a short term answer.

Where is the continuity and stability?

Marvin Robinson is a talented striker who has enjoyed top quality coaching at Derby County.

He had a subdued debut against Luton but, given time, he could



SANDWICH MAN: Gary Jones is unable to break through the Luton rearguard



MAN OF THE MATCH

Gareth Roberts

Much happier in his usual role at left-back. Solid performance capped by opportunist strike.

become an impressive addition to the Tranmere squad.

The problem is, Rovers don't have that time. The forward will probably be heading back to the Midlands on December 29, just as Adam Proudlock headed back to Wolves last week after an eye-catching but ultimately unrewarding spell at Prenton Park.

If Tranmere sometimes look like a team of strangers, that is invariably because they are.

And so the absence of such hardy perennials as Mellon and Simon Haworth against Luton was bound to be a blow.

Haworth looked very sharp against Cardiff before hobbling off with a groin injury. He was missed on Saturday.

But while the Welsh striker can be mesmerising and infuriating in equal measure, Mellon has been Mr Reliable this term.

Had he been on the field against

the Hatters maybe Rovers would have found the impetus to build on their early lead, which was given to them after 22 minutes from Gareth Roberts.

The defender smashed home from close range after French 'keeper Cedric Berthelin had brilliantly parried a Stuart Barlow penalty and Robinson's rebound.

Rovers should have built on that lead, handed to them by an inexplicable hand-ball from Kevin Nicholls in a crowded Luton penalty area. They couldn't even muster another shot on goal in the 23 minutes before the interval and their guests' generosity was not repeated.

When Luton's up-and-under style finally broke Tranmere shortly after the hour, Matt Spring turning the ball in from an acute angle despite a vain attempt from Christian Edwards to clear off the line, it was clear there was only going to be one side leaving with the three points.

The most Rovers could hope for was a share of the spoils.

Had Mellon been in the heart of midfield it may possibly have been a different story.

He has been outstanding this season. The Scot is not an eye-catching player, but he works tirelessly and very rarely gives away possession.

He pulls the strings for Rovers and dictates the pace of the side's

football.

Without him, Rovers couldn't get to grips with the powerplay football they were up against.

And so it was with an air of inevitability that Ahmet Brkovic finally put Joe Kinnear's men ahead 12 minutes from the end, curling beyond John Achterberg from the edge of the area after being teed up by Tony Thorpe.

The third came two minutes from time, Steve Howard blasting high into the net from a tight angle after his original shot had been parried by Achterberg.

At the start of the afternoon Luton and Tranmere had been level on points. Both sides knew a victory, combined with results going right elsewhere, could thrust them up into the play-off places.

Until Ray Mathias has some good luck with injuries and is given the opportunity to make decent signings on permanent contracts, it is going to be incredibly hard for Tranmere to clamber up to such heady heights.

TRANMERE (4-4-2): Achterberg; Allen, Gray, Edwards, Roberts; Nicholson, Taylor, Harrison (Olsen 84), Jones; Barlow (Hume 75), Robinson. Not used: Sharps, Howarth, Hay.

LUTON TOWN (4-4-2): Berthelin; Neilson, Coyne, Boyce, Davis (Kimble 55); Spring, Nicholls, Robinson, Brkovic; Howard, Thorpe (Fotiadis 90). Not used: Ovendale, Hillier, Hughes.

REF: Mr A M Penn
BOOKINGS: Roberts, Gray, Nicholson.
ATT: 8,273



GOAL DELIGHT: Gareth Roberts celebrates