

Sol's ready to face Wigan in cup clash

HATTERS left-back Sol Davis is expected to be fit for Saturday's FA Cup second round trip to Wigan.

Davis, 23, was replaced by Alan Kimble at Tranmere on Saturday after a hamstring strain, but should be back at the JJB Stadium having been rested from training earlier this week.

Aaron Skelton would have been in contention to replace suspended skipper Kevin Nicholls at Wigan but requires a cartilage operation.

Centre-back Russell Perrett is also showing no signs of recovering from his groin problem so Alan Neilson is likely to continue in defence with Paul Hughes the most natural replacement for Nicholls.

Fit-again striker Dean Crowe could play a part in Tuesday's LDV Vans Trophy home clash with Cambridge United.

Goals from Mutsa Magadah and Peter Clark earned Hatters under 17s a 2-2 draw at QPR.



CROATIAN SENSATION: Hatters midfielder Ahmet Brkovic tries an overhead kick at Tranmere Rovers on Saturday. Picture: GARETH OWEN

Six of the best for Hatters!

LUTON TOWN made it six away wins out of seven by becoming the only side other than table-topping Wigan to win at Tranmere this season.

Only Judith Chalmers seems to travel better than the Hatters these days and the north-west appears to be the Kenilworth Road club's favourite destination.

Victory at Prenton Park, secured by goals from Matthew Spring, Ahmet Brkovic and Steve Howard, followed previous successes at Tranmere's geographical cousins Stockport, Oldham and Crewe.

Non-league clubs Woking and Stevenage have also been defeated on their own grounds during a remarkable seven-game run in which the only blemish was the disappointing 3-0 loss at Northampton.

Only Wigan have now won more away games in Division Two than Joe Kinnear's men and their latest success moved Luton level on points with crisis club Queen's Park Rangers, who currently occupy the final play-off spot.

Joe view



There was a lot of apprehension in the first-half but we had a good look at them and then totally dominated the second-half. We took away the fear factor and told them to go and win the game. It's was important to put some distance between ourselves and them. We've done exceptionally well coming to this part of the world.

And promotion, via a Millennium Stadium play-off final in May, will remain a viable prospect if Luton can keep displaying such sparkling away form and improve a home record that has seen them win just three out of 10 matches.

The Hatters recovered from a 23rd-minute set-back before taking maximum points at Tranmere.

Ray Mathias' men took the lead midway through the first-half when Hatters captain Kevin Nicholls was adjudged to have handled the ball during

an aerial challenge with home midfielder Gary Jones. Frenchman Cedric Berthelin dived to his left to keep out Stuart Barlow's penalty and then, while sitting on the ground, made an even better instinctive save to prevent on-loan defender Christian Edwards netting from the rebound.

But Berthelin was finally beaten when Gareth Roberts followed up to fire the home side in front.

Kinnear later criticised his defence for not displaying the same reactions as Berthelin

and failing to stop Tranmere's players being first to the loose ball twice in the penalty box.

But that was the exception rather than the rule during a match in which Hatters players competed with controlled aggression and a refusal to allow Tranmere time and space.

Nicholls was particularly impressive. The penalty incident did not appear to trouble the Hatters captain and he went on to enjoy his best performance of the season, executing several crunching tackles, delivering accurate set-pieces and providing reliable support for Spring who could confidently provide greater attacking assistance for strikers Howard and Tony Thorpe in the second-half.

Barlow's penalty and the two follow-up efforts were Tranmere's only shots in an uninspiring first-half.

The Hatters were also tentative in their approach with Howard mustering his side's only on-target attempt after Chris Coyne had headed down a Nicholls corner.

That effort was comfortably

saved by Tranmere keeper John Achterberg, but his goal came under more serious threat as Kinnear demanded a more adventurous attitude from his side at half-time.

Emmerson Boyce headed narrowly wide from Nicholls' free-kick on 51 minutes.

Substitute Alan Kimble, tasting his first league action since the 5-2 August defeat at Blackpool, then drove inches wide with a 67th-minute free-kick after replacing the injured Sol Davis.

Spring levelled the scores two minutes later when he collected Howard's low cross and fired past Achterberg from 10 yards with covering defender Edwards only able to help the ball over the line.

The Hatters went in front on 79 minutes when Howard released striking partner Thorpe and his perfectly-weighted square pass found Brkovic who, having charged into the penalty box, found the corner of the net with an excellent finish from 15 yards.

Thorpe's awareness created an even better chance for Brkovic three minutes later

but, on this occasion, the Croatian midfielder scuffed his shot wide and failed to add to his seven goals this season.

It was left to top scorer Howard to make the points safe.

The 6ft 3in striker went into Saturday's match with just one goal from his previous nine matches but, after going close with a diving header, his 88th-minute strike suggested he is ready to become a scoresheet regular again.

Achterberg saved Howard's first effort after he burst clear on goal having collected Spring's pass, but the Dutch keeper could not prevent Luton's 26-year-old forward rifling his second attempt into the roof of the net from an acute angle.

Tranmere, who only forced their first corner of the game in the fourth and final minute of stoppage time, had been out-fought and out-thought by a devastating second-half display by the Hatters.

Now boss Kinnear is hoping the great north-west run can continue at Wigan's JJB Stadium on Saturday.

matchfacts

TRANMERE 1 LUTON 3

●TRANMERE: John Achterberg, Graham Allen, Gareth Roberts, Kevin Gray, Stuart Barlow (Iain Hume, 75), Danny Harrison (James Olsen, 84), Ryan Taylor, Shane Nicholson, Christian Edwards, Gary Jones, Marvin Robinson. Subs not used: Ian Sharps, Russell Howarth, Alex Hay.

●HATTERS: Cedric Berthelin, Emmerson Boyce, Alan Neilson, Chris Coyne, Sol Davis (Alan Kimble, 55), Steve Robinson, Kevin Nicholls, Matthew Spring, Ahmet Brkovic (Paul Hughes,

88), Steve Howard, Tony Thorpe (Andrew Fotiadis, 90). Subs not used: Mark Owendale, Ian Hillier.

●Shots on target: Tranmere 5 Luton 5.
●Off target: Tranmere 2 Luton 11.
●Corners: Tranmere 1 Luton 3.
●Referee: A Penn.

●TOP HATTER: Kevin Nicholls - an all-action performance that was his best in a Hatters shirt all season. His anchor role in midfield gave Matthew Spring the freedom to attack and his distribution from set-pieces was impeccable.



SPOTLIGHT: Boyce.

playerwatch

HATTERS' ROVING RIGHT-BACK EMMERSON BOYCE...

●Time on pitch: 90 minutes
●Shots on target: 0
●Shots off target: 1
●Blocked shots: 0
●Passes to own player: 18
●Passes to opposition: 7
●Crosses to own player: 0
●Crosses to opposition: 1
●Pass completion rate: 69.2 per cent
●Dribble ball retained: 3
●Dribble ball lost: 0

Boyce so solid at Tranmere

●Dribble completion rate: 100 per cent
●Tackles: 7
●Headers: 16
●Clearances, blocks and interceptions: 11
●Offsides: 0
●Free-kicks won: 0
●Free-kicks conceded: 2
●Bookings: 0
●FINAL VERDICT: Boyce enjoyed

a solid performance. He went close to scoring his first goal of the season with a 51st-minute header but was not as prominent an attacking force as he has been in recent home games, which is illustrated by the fact he only made one cross. But he ran with the ball well and his distribution was reasonably reliable.