

Thorpe enjoys return to City

HATTERS' striker Tony Thorpe admitted that his old club Bristol City deserved a draw from Saturday's match.

But Thorpe, who scored 61 goals in 122 games during four seasons at Ashton Gate, did not believe referee Mark Cooper was right to play six minutes of second-half stoppage time.

He said: "The referee played too much injury time and, unfortunately, we could not take maximum points."

"You've got to give Bristol City credit, though, because they played right to the end and deserved a draw."

"I hope they go up. Danny Wilson's a great manager."

"They've spent no money this season and they are doing magnificently with the same group of players."

Thorpe's every touch was booed by a home crowd who have still not forgiven him for deciding to leave the club on a free transfer in the summer under the Bosman ruling.

But the 28-year-old forward seemed to revel in the attention, helping to set up Steve Howard's goal and indulging in some clever back-heels before his late substitution was met with jeers from the City supporters.

"The fans expressed their opinion and they are entitled to do that," Thorpe said afterwards.

"But I enjoyed it and it's all water under the bridge now."

"I thought we started off the better of the two teams in the second-half, but Bristol City just kept going and deserved their reward at the end."



TAKE THAT! Hatters felt they got a kick in the teeth at Bristol City. Ahmet Brkovic in the thick of the action.

Kinnear: I felt cheated

JOE Kinnear was left livid by referee Mark Cooper's decision to play six minutes of stoppage time as the Hatters came within a second of ending Bristol City's 16-game unbeaten run.

Steve Howard's predatory 53rd-minute strike gave the visitors a 1-0 lead but recalled keeper Carl Emberson, having been rescued by his woodwork three times, was eventually beaten by substitute Peter Beadle's low volley and Cooper blew the final whistle as the dejected Hatters' players resumed play from the centre circle.

Kinnear banged on Cooper's dressing room door demanding an explanation afterwards, but was refused admission and chose not to share his frustration at the post-match press conference. The furious Luton manager's only comments were made from the team coach, where he said: "I am absolutely gutted and feel cheated to lose a game in the last minute."

"I don't know where the referee found all that time from, but I was very pleased with our performance. In some ways, it was fabulous."

Home manager Danny Wilson, on the other hand, believed Cooper was correct to add on the injury time that enabled his side to snatch a point.

The Hatters' 1988 Littlewoods Cup hero said: "I am sure Joe won't be happy with the overtime, but we were looking at our watches and, at one stage, their keeper took one minute and 45 seconds to take a goal-kick. The referee added time on and



Joe's view

I am absolutely gutted and feel cheated to lose a game in the last minute. I don't know where the referee found all that time from, but I was very pleased with our performance. In some ways, it was fabulous.

was quite right to do so." Wilson also defended the West Midlands' official's decision to send off Hatters' left-back Sol Davis in the second minute of stoppage time.

Davis had made an impressively tenacious return to the Hatters' side with his hamstring heavily strapped up, but he took his aggression a step too far when he lashed out at Scott Murray after fouling the dangerous midfielder and then appeared to throw a punch at City captain Tommy Doherty as he headed for the changing rooms. "He took a swing at Scott Murray and then threw another one at Tommy Doherty, which is stupid," Wilson said afterwards. "He can have no excuses and no defence."

"He could have possibly gone off earlier than he did because Joe Bunnell was unlucky not to get a broken leg when he gave him a seven or eight inch gash down his calf."

Davis, who is already suspended for the Boxing Day home clash with Cardiff, will now miss a whole month of first team fixtures after becoming the fourth Hatters' player to receive his marching orders this season.

The red card for violent conduct is likely to result in a three-match ban which means Davis will be missing for next month's games against Plymouth, Barnsley and Wycombe.

He will be eligible for the New Year's day trip to Chesterfield, but will then have to wait until the February 1 match at Peterborough for his next game. Tony Thorpe (disent), Paul Hughes (retaliation), Howard (foul), Emberson (time wasting) and Ahmet Brkovic (kicking the ball away) all joined Davis in Mr Cooper's crowded notebook.

Brkovic's booking means the Croatian midfielder will also be suspended for next month's home game with Plymouth, depriving Kinnear of his first choice left-sided pairing for that match. But the Hatters are becoming accustomed to chopping and changing their starting line-ups. Matthew Spring and Kevin Nicholls' injuries saw Hughes partner Steve Robinson in the middle of the park, while Dean Crowe started the match as an orthodox right-sided midfielder, swapped positions with Robinson midway through the second-half and

then ended the game on the left-wing.

City almost went ahead after just seven minutes of Saturday's game when Murray tricked his way past Brkovic and Davis before crossing to Lee Peacock, whose firmly struck low shot beat Emberson but hit the post. Thorpe, made captain for the day against his old club, went close to silencing the boo-boys on 17 minutes, but his looping header bounced wide of Steve Phillips' goal.

Another cross from Murray then saw Christian Roberts head just wide for City. An unchallenged Alan Neilson headed off target from Brkovic's 27th minute corner and Howard's shot on the turn from 20 yards was gathered at the second attempt by Phillips moments later.

Chris Coyne's thunderous free-kick from 35 yards whistled narrowly wide on 38 minutes before Emberson saved Mickey Bell's volley in first-half stoppage time.

Luton took the lead on 53 minutes when Howard marked his comeback from a three-match suspension with his 11th goal of the season. The 6'3" striker kept his cool to sidefoot past an exposed Phillips from six yards out at the far post after Robinson had headed on Thorpe's right-wing cross.

Brkovic's 59th minute deflected header then narrowly missed the target as Hatters enjoyed their best period of the game. But Bristol finished the game strongly, with Kinnear instructing Thorpe and Crowe to stop the threat down the flanks and Howard left to operate alone.

Doherty's 35-yard volley flew over

Emberson on 78 minutes but crashed against the underside of the bar and bounced on the goal-line before Coyne headed away. Beadle headed against the bar from six yards three minutes later and Peacock netted from the rebound, only to see his effort ruled out by an offside flag.

Davis was then red-carded for his ugly dust-up with Murray and, four minutes into injury-time Coyne, who was a colossus at the heart of the Hatters' defence, cleared Liam Rosener's shot off the line.

There was even still time for Louis Carey to head inches wide before Beadle bagged the goal that was deserved on the balance of play but still cruel on a defiant Hatters' defence. The former Watford, Bristol Rovers and Notts County striker capitalised on slack marking to smash a low volley past Emberson from 10 yards after Bell's deep corner.

It was a galling manner in which to lose two points but a draw leaves the Hatters with just one league defeat (against Blackpool) in nine matches against Division Two's top 10 teams.

Strangely, the Hatters' other six league defeats have come against teams currently placed 16th or below in the table and that modest group includes bottom three sides Peterborough, Huddersfield and Mansfield.

After Thursday's sell-out clash with Cardiff, the Hatters only top six opposition in the next 13 matches will be Brentford on February 22.

Time will tell whether that sequence of fixtures is a help or a hindrance in Luton's topsy-turvy season.

match facts

BRISTOL CITY 1 LUTON 1

●BRISTOL CITY: Steve Phillips, Louis Carey, Mickey Bell, Tommy Doherty, Matthew Hill, Scott Murray, Joe Bunnell (sub 49 mins Aaron Brown), Lee Peacock, Brian Tinnion (sub 73 mins, Peter Beadle), Christian Roberts (sub 61 mins, Liam Rosener), Danny Coles. Subs not used: Mike Stowell, Clayton Fortune.

●HATTERS: Carl Emberson, Emmerston Bayce, Chris Coyne, Alan Neilson (sub 71 mins, Ian Hillier), Sol Davis, Dean Crowe, Paul Hughes, Steve

Robinson, Ahmet Brkovic, Steve Howard, Tony Thorpe (sub 90 mins, Alan Kimble). Subs not used: Mark Overdale, Lee Mansell, Andrew Fotiadis.

●Shots on target: Bristol City 8 Luton 3.

●Off target: Bristol City 7 Luton 6.

●Corners: Bristol City 12 Luton 3.

●Referee: Mark Cooper (West Midlands).

●TOP HATTER: Chris Coyne - magnificent presence in the Hatters' defence and frustrated City's dangerous strikers.



MAGNIFICENT: Coyne.

playerwatch

STRIKER DEAN CROWE IS IN THE SPOTLIGHT...

- Time on pitch: 90 minutes
- Shots on target: 0
- Shots off target: 0
- Blocked shots: 0
- Passes to own player: 8
- Passes to opposition: 13
- Crosses to own player: 0
- Crosses to opposition: 4
- Pass completion rate: 48 per cent
- Dribble ball retained: 1
- Dribble ball lost: 5

Crowe has a difficult time

- Dribble completion rate: 17 per cent
- Tackles: 2
- Headers: 4
- Clearances, blocks and interceptions: 1
- Offsides: 0
- Free-kicks won: 0
- Free-kicks conceded: 0
- Bookings: 0
- FINAL VERDICT: Crowe gives it

his best shot in a wide midfield role but it is clearly not his natural position. His distribution was poor, as is illustrated by his low pass completion rate and his pace on the flanks was never really utilised. His crossing was also disappointing, but he did get the ball back to Thorpe in the move that led to Luton's goal.