

Snow joke for Vale as Tony has a ball

TONY THORPE scored his ninth goal of the season, got booked for throwing a celebratory snowball and then won his side a crucial penalty at Port Vale on Saturday.

In-form striker Thorpe opened the scoring on 49 minutes with a far-post header from Kevin Nicholls' corner, but was then officiously cautioned for hurling snow into the jubilant away end.

That seemed a harsh decision but referee Lee Mason ruled in Thorpe's favour on 74 minutes when the 28-year-old forward's quick feet induced a mistimed tackle from Ian Brightwell inches inside the box.

Captain Nicholls then displayed his customary ice cool nerve from the penalty spot and Tony Boyd's late goal for the home side only proved a consolation as Joe Kinnear's men secured their eighth league away win of the season.

But Kinnear admitted that Thorpe's snowball antics were cause for some concern.

The Hatters boss said: "I think he was booked for health and safety reasons. The referee told me it was for inciting the crowd."

"I immediately spoke to him and said 'don't be stupid and get a second yellow now for a genuine tackle. I don't want you to be punished for the first one'."

"I also said the best response

Yellow card for Thorpey fails to spoil celebrations

would be to get us another goal and he went and won us a penalty with his quick feet. He's looking very sharp at the moment and enjoying his football."

Vale's supporters staged a protest march against an Icelandic takeover bid and feared merger with bitter rivals Stoke before Saturday's match.

Matters on the pitch will also be concerning ex-Hatters legend Brian Horton who, as manager, has seen his side win just two games since October.

But Horton's men probably shaded a first-half in which Hatters' creative spark Matthew Spring struggled to make an impression.

Thorpe went close with two early chances, sidefooting weakly at Vale keeper Mark Goodlad when put clear on goal by Steve Howard's header and, on nine minutes, volleying over from the edge of the box.

The Hatters then threatened very little else before the break.

Steve McPhee's looping header almost gave Vale the lead on 10 minutes, but it bounced back off the crossbar and Mark Owendale saved Boyd's stinging 30-yard drive on the half-hour mark.

Dominant displays by Chris Willmott and Chris Coyne, especially in the air, and another solid performance from the versatile and reliable Alan Neilson at left-back helped the Hatters stay on level terms as they struggled for inspiration further up the field, but Steve Brooker's glancing header bounced narrowly wide of Owendale's goal two minutes before half-time.

Kinnear replaced an ineffective Paul Hughes with Dean Crowe at the interval and switched to a 4-3-3 formation.

The change prompted half-an-hour of improved football which was sufficient to clinch maximum points.

An unmarked Thorpe headed into the roof of the net from Nicholls' corner on 49 minutes and he should have grabbed a second goal when he blazed over with only Goodlad to beat after his clever run had been rewarded with a precise Ahmet Brkovic pass.

Howard then shot narrowly wide before Vale twice went close to an equaliser.

First, Steve Rowland volleyed wide on 67 minutes with Owendale well beaten after Coyne had blocked Ian Armstrong's shot.

Then Brooker's deflected drive brushed the side-netting a minute later.

But Brightwell's foul on Thorpe gave Nicholls the opportunity to double the visitors' lead.

Mr Mason's decision proved too much for one home supporter who ran on to the pitch to remonstrate with the Lancashire official.

The fan, escorted away by stewards, was later described as an "egg" by Hatters boss Kinnear and Nicholls smashed the delayed spot-kick low and hard into Goodlad's bottom right-hand corner.

Vale pulled a goal back on 86 minutes when Nicholls' header after an Armstrong corner was returned goalwards by Boyd, whose volley into the ground from the edge of the area bounced into Owendale's top corner.

McPhee went closest to snatching a point for the home side but headed over in the final minute.



WINTER WONDERLAND: Tony Thorpe celebrates his headed goal by hurling a snowball into the away end. He was booked for his exuberance.

matchfacts

PORT VALE 1 LUTON 2

●PORT VALE: Mark Goodlad, Sam Collins, Steve Brooker, Steve McPhee, Marc Bridge-Wilkinson, Mark Boyd, Ian Armstrong, Steve Rowland (Matt Carragher, 76), Paul Byrne, Billy Paynter, Ian Brightwell. Subs not used: Dean Delaney, Sean McClare, John Durnin, Liam Burns.
●HATTERS: Mark Owendale, Emmerson Boyce, Chris Willmott, Chris Coyne, Alan Neilson, Paul Hughes (Dean Crowe, 46), Kevin Nicholls, Matthew Spring, Ahmet Brkovic, Steve Howard, Tony

Thorpe. Subs not used: Carl Emberson, Alan Kimble, Peter Holmes, Ian Hillier.

●Shots on target: Port Vale 4

Luton Town 4.

●Off target: Port Vale 7

Luton Town 6.

●Corners: Port Vale 6

Luton Town 7.

●Referee: Lee Mason (Lancashire).

●TOP HATTER: Chris Willmott – unflappable display from on-loan Wimbledon defender, whose partnership with Chris Coyne suffered no teething problems. Impressive in the air and safe in possession.

playerwatch

ON-LOAN DEFENDER CHRIS WILLMOTT IN THE SPOTLIGHT

●Time on pitch: 90 minutes

●Shots on target: 0

●Shots off target: 0

●Blocked shots: 0

●Passes to own player: 16

●Passes to opposition: 2

●Crosses to own player: 0

●Crosses to opposition: 1

●Pass completion rate: 84.2 per cent

●Dribble ball retained: 1

●Dribble ball lost: 0

●Dribble completion rate: 100 per cent

●Tackles: 6

●Headers: 13

●Clearances, blocks and interceptions: 9

●Offsides: 0

●Free-kicks won: 0

●Free-kicks conceded: 2

●Bookings: 0

●FINAL VERDICT: Willmott turned in a man-of-the-match display at Port Vale. His decision making was impressive, clearing when necessary but also keeping possession when the occasion arose, as his high pass completion rate illustrates. He was strong in the air and his tackling was generally clean despite two fouls.

●This week's home game against Northampton Town is all ticket.

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Joe's view



I WAS not happy with the first-half. It was not much to look at and there was nothing much on the credit side. We shook a few up at half-time and were more positive. We took the first initiative by bringing Dean Crowe on as a third striker.

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No cash for Hatters after Upson call-up

MATTHEW UPSON'S call-up to the England squad for tonight's friendly with Australia will not benefit the Hatters financially.

The 23-year-old defender has been selected by Sven Goran Eriksson for the first time, but because he is no longer an Arsenal player Luton will not receive a penny because of his full international recognition.

Upson's transfer from Kenilworth Road to Highbury in 1997 included a clause covering future England call-ups, but that

does not apply now the former Hatters youth-team captain has signed for Birmingham City.

Steve Robinson has pulled out of the Northern Ireland squad for tonight's international friendly against Finland.

Robinson, previously on standby for the match, was promoted to the full squad over the weekend.

But a trapped nerve in his back saw Robinson miss the Hatters' trip to Port Vale on Saturday and he pulled out of the Irish friendly on Monday.

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