

Another Vine mess for unhappy Hatters

02/03

LUTON threw away a golden opportunity to move into the play-off zone with this disappointing defeat to Brentford.

While results elsewhere saw the Hatters' rivals slip up, Joe Kinnear's men unfortunately chose to turn in a dreadful performance themselves to seriously dent Luton's promotion credentials.

Bees striker Rowan Vine stung the Hatters in the second half with a 25-yard drive that sealed the points for the visitors and gave them their first win in six games.

Kinnear kept faith with Carl Emberson in goal, and on-loan Spurs goalkeeper Lars Hirschfeld began on the bench.

Sol Davis was back from his suspension, but Alan Neilson switched flanks to replace injured Emmerson Boyce.

Brentford had slipped into mid-table obscurity since their early-season run which saw them top the table in August, and the formbook pointed to a Luton win.

However, a dreary first half showed no indication that their favourites status was deserved.

To be fair to Luton, hard-working Bees gave them no time on the ball and their hustling tactics upset Luton's style of play immensely.

Luton's two best chances came a minute apart.

On 17 minutes Chris Willmott went up for a corner and Kevin Nicholls picked out the tall defender, but his free header went way over the bar.

Brentford goalkeeper Paul Smith was obviously still shellshocked as his resulting goal kick went straight to the feet of grateful Dean Crowe.

His pace took him clear of the defence and gave him a one-on-one with Smith. But Crowe, who has been in and out of the team all season, was obviously lacking in confidence, and overhit his attempted pass to the onrushing Tony Thorpe.

It was easily the chance of the half and Crowe took his blunder badly.

It was no surprise he did not come back on for the second half.

Brentford hadn't look threatening in attack throughout the first half, but on 43 minutes only a great piece of defending by Willmott denied the Bees the lead.

Powerful striker Mark McCammon forced his way into the box, but blasted his shot straight at Emberson's legs. The rebound fell to Vine on the penalty spot. He was just about to hammer the ball into an empty net when Willmott's last-gasp diving tackle blocked his shot and kept the scores even.

The second half only highlighted Luton's lack of imagination without top goalscorer Steve Howard.

On 50 minutes Brentford scored the game's only goal with a neat

piece of skill in an otherwise turgid 45 minutes.

A goal kick found Vine, who did well to control the ball and he set himself up and from a distance and let rip with his right foot into the top corner.

At 1-0 down, the panic was there for all to see in the Luton players' eyes.

For all their possession, they never looked like scoring. A half-hearted penalty claim from a bundled-over Thorpe and a poor header from a well-placed Paul Hughes was all Luton could muster against the distinctly average Brentford side.

Time and time again the ball was relentlessly pumped into the box but the lack of height, due to the absence of Howard, gave the Brentford defence an easy time.

In the last ten minutes, as predictable Hatters laboured on, Brentford could have grabbed a second.

McCammon ran through as Luton backtracked and managed to get his shot in inside the box to force a good parry from Emberson.

He then got a second bite of the cherry when the resulting cross found him unmarked but his header sailed over.

Boss Joe Kinnear could not hide his anger at the manner of the defeat.

He said: "I don't mind getting beat. It's the way we got beat that really hurts. We were a big disappointment. Overall, we were slack and the spark was missing."

"Too many of the players had an off day and I've said in no uncertain terms that I'm not at all happy with the performance."

Kinnear would still not rule out the play-offs.

He said: "This was a really big game for us. Every game we play from now on is a must-win game if we want to stay in with a chance."

But with performances like this, I wouldn't hold your breath.



■ Stung by the Bees: (From top) Paul Hughes on the ball; Brentford keeper Paul Smith collects a cross from the head of Chris Coyne; Matthew Spring darts through the Londoners' defence.



MATCH FACTS



LUTON TOWN (4-4-2): Emberson; Neilson, Willmott, Coyne, Davis; Brkovic, Nicholls, Boyce (Hillier 46m), Coyne; Crowe (Robinson 46), Thorpe.
Subs not used: Hirschfeld, Kimble, Perrett.

Referee: Andy Hall (West Midlands)

GOALSCORERS:

Luton: none.

Brentford: Vine (50 minutes)

SHOTS ON TARGET

Luton: 3

Brentford: 4

SHOTS OFF TARGET

Luton: 6

Brentford: 4

CORNERS

Luton: 9

Brentford: 3

OFFSIDE

Luton: 3

Brentford: 2

BOOKINGS

Luton: Nicholls (65).

Brentford: Frampton (53), Hutchinson (84).

ATTENDANCE: 6,940.

HATTERS STAR MAN:
Chris Willmott

Did not deserve to be on the losing side, but turned in a great performance.

Division Two results

Barnsley	0	Huddersfield	1
Cheltenham	1	Colchester	1
Chesterfield	0	Crewe	2
LUTON	0	Brentford	1
Northampton	1	Bristol City	2
Oldham	1	Notts County	1
Peterborough	2	Stockport	0
Port Vale	1	Swindon	1
QPR	2	Mansfield	2
Tranmere	2	Blackpool	1
Wycombe	0	Wigan	2

How they stand

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wigan	32	22	7	3	52	19	73
Crewe	32	19	7	6	57	28	64
Cardiff	31	17	8	6	48	26	59
Oldham	33	16	11	6	49	29	59
Bristol City	33	16	8	9	56	37	56
QPR	33	15	9	9	48	37	54
Blackpool	33	14	9	10	44	41	51
Tranmere	33	15	6	12	44	47	51
Luton	32	14	8	10	48	43	50
Plymouth	32	12	10	10	41	36	46
Swindon	33	11	10	12	43	47	43
Wycombe	33	11	9	13	46	42	42
Brentford	31	11	9	11	34	33	42
Chesterfield	33	11	6	16	29	45	39
Barnsley	33	9	9	15	38	49	36
Notts County	33	7	14	12	48	53	35
Peterborough	32	8	11	13	33	39	35
Colchester	32	8	11	13	33	44	35
Port Vale	32	9	8	15	38	50	35
Stockport	33	9	6	18	43	55	33
Huddersfield	32	8	9	15	25	38	33
Mansfield	33	9	6	18	50	69	33
Northampton	33	8	7	18	31	53	31
Cheltenham	33	6	12	15	32	50	30