

Lone Tony!

MANSFIELD TOWN 3 LUTON TOWN 2

DAVE FLETT reports from
the Field Mill Ground

LUTON Town's faltering play-off push was dealt another blow with defeat at relegation-threatened Mansfield last night.

Tony Thorpe scored twice for the Hatters to take his tally to 14 goals for the season, but Mansfield held on for victory as Luton saved their best period of the game for the last 10 minutes.

Hatters boss Joe Kinnear gave new signing Duncan Jupp his full debut in place of Ian Hillier at right-back.

Ahmet Brkovic also made the starting line-up because of Steve Howard's injury, allowing Dean Crowe to partner Tony Thorpe in attack.

Chris Coyne, who was sent off on his last trip to Mansfield, was unfortunate to receive a second-minute yellow card for an inadvertent handball after he slipped. The home side went ahead on nine minutes when an unmarked Rhys Day fired into the bottom corner from 10 yards after Bobby Hassell's low cross from the right.

Thorpe levelled the scores four minutes later with his 13th goal of the season.

Striking partner Crowe laid the ball back to Matthew Spring, whose forward pass brought a mistake from ex-England defender and Mansfield player-manager Keith Curle.

Thorpe seized on Curle's error and displayed nimble footwork to round exposed home keeper Keith Welch before prodding the ball into the net.

match facts

MANSFIELD TOWN: Keith Welch, Ilyseden Christie, Wayne Corden (sub 85 mins, Liam Lawrence), Bobby Hassell (sub 81 mins, Matthew Gadsby), Tom Curtis, Adam Eaton, Craig Mitchell (sub 90 mins, Andy White), Junior Mendes, Keith Curle, Rhys Day, Lee Williamson. **Other subs:**

Jason White, Neil MacKenzie, **LUTON TOWN:** Lars Hirschfeld, Duncan Jupp, Chris Coyne, Chris Willmott, Sol Davis, Ahmet Brkovic, Kevin Nicholls, Matthew Spring, Paul Hughes (sub 72 mins, Peter Holmes), Dean Crowe (sub 90 mins, Russell Perrett), Tony Thorpe. **Other subs:** Carl Emberson, Michael Leary, Alan Kimble.

REFEREE: Clive Wilkes.

ATTENDANCE: 4,829.

TOP HATTER: Tony Thorpe – yet another go-it-alone display.

More intricate dribbling by Thorpe created a chance for himself after 25 minutes, but Welch saved his low shot.

Mansfield regained the lead on 29 minutes when Sol Davis mis-hit an attempted clearance into the path of hot-shot striker Ilyseden Christie.

He netted his 19th goal of the season with a firm shot on the turn into Lars Hirschfeld's bottom right-hand corner.

An end to end first half-hour then saw Welch turn behind Paul Hughes' downward header before Christie went close again with a shot across the face of goal after a strong run.

Mansfield finished the first-half strongly and did not sit back on their advantage after the break.

Mitchell's shot sailed just wide on 52 minutes after Welch's long goal-kick had cleared Hatters' last man Davis.

Day then headed wide from close range and Coyne nicked the ball off Christie's toe when the Mansfield striker seemed poised to score.

The Hatters received a major let-off on 61 minutes when captain Kevin Nicholls fouled Mendes twice.

Nicholls' second misdemeanour was a blatant foul inside the penalty area but Premiership referee Clive Wilkes surprisingly and, fortunately for the Hatters, decided to punish the first offence instead and awarded a free-kick.

The Hatters rare counter attacks regularly broke down because of frustrating offside offences or poor play on the flanks.

Spring did force Welch into a comfortable save on 67 minutes with a 30-yard drive and Nicholls tumbled in the box moments later, but Wilkes ignored the Hatters' captain's penalty appeals.

Mansfield scored an inevitable third goal on 79 minutes when the impressive Corden fired expertly into the top corner from the edge of the area after several failed attempts to clear their lines by Luton.

But Thorpe pulled a goal back for the Hatters, again keeping his cool to round Welch and put the ball in an unguarded net after Spring's pass.

Nervous Mansfield were then holding on at the end, with Welch pulling off a fine save to keep out Peter Holmes' 88th minute shot.



TAKE THAT! Kevin Nicholls fires in a fierce shot during last night's crucial Second Division match at Mansfield.
Picture: GARETH OWEN