



NO PUSHOVER: Luton's 10 men were the better side after Adrian Forbes' first-half red card but this shove on Ahmet Brkovic went unpunished. Picture: JOANNA CROSS

Flogging a dead horse

LIKE a jaded runner in Saturday's Grand National, Luton Town's season has lost its momentum in the final straight.

The Hatters' play-off hopes ended, barring a mathematical miracle, with Saturday's 0-0 draw against Tranmere.

It was a result that completed a sorry seven-game sequence that has seen the flagging Hatters win just one match and fall away from the pedigree front-runners in this season's race for top-six spots.

Joe Kinnear's men had collected just six points from a possible 21 before last night's visit to Cheltenham and failed to find the net in their last three fixtures – all at Kenilworth Road.

QPR, who the Hatters must now visit on Saturday, moved 11 points clear of Luton over the weekend.

The Loftus Road club still occupy Division Two's sixth place that the Hatters have hopefully coveted for so long and, even allowing for a slip-up of Devon Loch proportions during the run-in, should still be in their possession come May 3.

A 31st-minute red card for Adrian Forbes just a quarter-of-an-hour after he had replaced an injured Tony



Joe's view

‘We murdered them with 10 men and created four clear-cut chances in the last 10 minutes. Their keeper was the best player on the pitch but we would be talking about three points if we had finished better. We're hoping for a miracle now to reach the play-offs. It's not in our own hands and is highly unlikely but we've got to keep going and try and win our remaining matches to keep up the pressure on QPR.’

Thorpe did not help the Hatters' cause.

Forbes was sent off for an off-the-ball elbow on Graham Allen.

It was an inadvisable act of retribution in full sight of the well-placed Premiership referee Andy D'Urso.

Forbes, making only his second appearance since returning from a pre-season cruciate knee ligament injury, reacted after a heavy challenge from the Tranmere skipper and Mr D'Urso immediately brandished his red card.

The Hatters' 10 men were then the better side for the remainder of the match but could not find the elusive

goal that would have secured maximum points against a very disappointing Tranmere team.

Top scorer Steve Howard endured a frustrating afternoon, being penalised repeatedly for offside or foul play.

New loan signing Sammy Igoe was asked to offer more support to Howard after Forbes' dismissal and was the Hatters' most creative force during a lively debut that included several penetrative runs and incisive passes.

Russell Perrett and Chris Coyne were back to their best at the other end after shipping four goals against

Crewe although Tranmere, who harboured stronger play-off hopes than the Hatters going into the game, seemed strangely unadventurous in their attempts to make their numerical advantage count.

In fact, the visitors' better moments probably came before Forbes' early bath.

Tranmere keeper Russell Howarth charged down Ahmet Brkovic's shot on seven minutes after play was allowed to continue despite a strong case against the Croatian midfielder for handball.

The Hatters then survived a 10th-minute scare after a chronic lack of communication between Carl Emberson and Perrett.

Emberson appeared indecisive as Perrett looked to shepherd the ball back to his keeper before poking it through his legs and eventually hacking away a clearance to avoid an embarrassing own goal.

Simon Haworth was an early aerial threat for Tranmere but his shot on the turn was saved by Emberson on 14 minutes.

Forbes was then ordered off before Igoe was denied a debut goal by Howarth after Matthew Spring had released Brkovic down the left-wing.

Another Howarth save prevented Perrett scoring his first goal since September when his close-range side-

footed effort was kept out at the near post just five minutes before the break.

Emberson made a more routine stop from Gary Jones' downward header to keep the scores level at half-time.

The Hatters continued to show a greater urgency to keep their season alive in the second-half and were unlucky not to be awarded a penalty when Brkovic was clearly shoved to the ground by Howarth on 55 minutes.

Igoe then headed over from five yards before Howarth saved his side three times in the last six minutes.

First, substitute Paul Hughes burst into the penalty box before muddling up his feet with only Howarth to beat and the Tranmere keeper stole the ball off his toes.

He then turned Sol Davis' shot from an acute angle around the post for a corner before his outstretched arm denied Spring who, like Hughes, had charged purposefully into the box to get a clear sight of Howarth's goal on 89 minutes.

Tranmere's second-half attempts had been restricted to off-target, long-range efforts from Gareth Roberts, Iain Hume and Haworth.

Both teams can now expect to face each other again in Division Two next season.

matchfacts

LUTON 0 TRANMERE 0

● **HATTERS:** Carl Emberson, Emmer-son Boyce (Ian Hillier 82), Russell Perrett, Chris Coyne, Sol Davis, Sammy Igoe, Kevin Nicholls, Matthew Spring, Ahmet Brkovic (Paul Hughes, 76), Steve Howard, Tony Thorpe (Adrian Forbes, 15). Subs not used: Mark Ovendale, Chris Willmott.

● **TRANMERE:** Russell Howarth, Graham Allen, Gareth Roberts, Ian Sharps, Simon Haworth, Iain Hume, Shane Nicholson (Alex Hay, 71),

Sean Connolly, Tyrone Loran, Gary Jones (Micky Mellon, 46), Iain Anderson. Subs not used: Richard Hinds, Ryan Taylor, Eric Nixon.

● **Shots on target:** Luton Town 7 Tranmere 2.

● **Shots off target:** Luton Town 1 Tranmere 3.

● **Corners:** Luton 3 Tranmere 1.

● **Referee:** Andy D'Urso (Essex).

● **Top Hatter:** Russell Perrett – a typical no-nonsense display to help counter the aerial threat of striker Simon Haworth.

playerwatch

LOAN SIGNING SAMMY IGOE IN THE SPOTLIGHT...

● **Time on pitch:** 90 minutes

● **Shots on target:** 1

● **Shots off target:** 2

● **Blocked shots:** 0

● **Passes to own player:** 19

● **Passes to opposition:** 8

● **Crosses to own player:** 0

● **Crosses to opposition:** 1

● **Pass completion rate:** 67.86 per cent

● **Dribble ball retained:** 4



DEBUT: Sammy Igoe.

Igoe impresses on Town debut

● **Dribble ball lost:** 6

● **Dribble completion rate:** 40 per cent

● **Headers:** 7

● **Tackles:** 6

● **Clearances, blocks and interceptions:** 0

● **Offsides:** 0

● **Free-kicks conceded:** 2

● **Free-kicks won:** 1

● **VERDICT:** Sammy Igoe made a promising Hatters debut. His dribbling skills provided a welcome added dimension to the Hatters' game and he also managed three shots. His passing was incisive at times, although one attempted cross was a slightly disappointing return from the right-winger. But six tackles demonstrated he is not one to shirk a challenge.