



BANG ON TIME: It's 4.19pm as Steve Howard rises to head home his 23rd goal of the season. It gave Hatters the lead against Stockport.

Picture: JANE SHERLOCK

Home form so costly

LUTON came within eight minutes of signing off their Kenilworth Road season with a win against Stockport County on Saturday.

Another great goalkeeping display from teenage sensation Robert Beckwith and Steve Howard's 23rd goal of the season meant the Hatters were 1-0 up as the game entered the closing stages.

But Luton's home form has been patchy all season so it was no surprise when Stockport skipper Dave Challinor spoiled the end-of-season party with a late set-piece header.

In truth a point was the least County deserved but, for the third game running, 18-year-old Beckwith shone between the sticks to deny them time and again.

After hammering Colchester 5-0 at Easter, an unchanged Luton side found Stockport, who came into the game on a four-game winning streak, a much tougher nut to crack.

In the opening period Luton



Joe's view

They had far too much of the ball for my liking. We defended too deep. We needed that second goal and when we had that chance with Griff if he taps it in it's all over. Then we got done at a set-piece, which is annoying. You can either win or lose games from set-plays. Howie went AWOL. He'd been picking up Challinor at all the other set-pieces but the flick beat him and no-one else picked up Challinor.

struggled to break down a resolute County rearguard who were playing a very high defensive line. Howard, in particular, was getting increasingly frustrated as he repeatedly got caught offside.

The away side, missing top scorer Luke Beckett, had the game's first chance on five minutes when midfielder Aaron Lescott met Ali Gibb's cross from close range but was thwarted by Beckwith's reflexes.

Luton's best effort of the half followed four minutes later when Peter Holmes' good

run and cross from the left saw Howard beat his marker but plant a header the wrong side of the left upright.

County then made four excellent chances in the space of five minutes. First Beckwith dived low to his left to brilliantly turn away Jim Goodwin's free-kick after Matthew Spring had been harshly penalised for what looked like a legitimate tackle on the very edge of Luton's box.

Moments later Goodwin's scuffed free-kick was diverted towards goal by Andy Welsh, only for Beckwith to parry to

safety. Aaron Wilbraham then tested the youngster at his near post before Lescott sliced a good chance wide from 14 yards. Early in the second-half Beckwith again rescued his teammates, blocking Jon Daly's angled shot.

But Luton took the lead on 61 minutes with what turned out to be their only effort on target in the entire game.

Emmerson Boyce fed substitute Ahmet Brkovic on the right. He crossed for Howard to bullet a far-post header past Tidman in the County goal.

The Croatian had only been on the field for two minutes after missing the previous four games through a combination of injury and suspension.

Luton's inspired keeper then rode his luck as he missed his punch after a Gibb cross and looked on as Wilbraham headed wide of the gaping goal from six yards.

Carl Griffiths had an even simpler 70th-minute chance to make the game safe.

Brkovic wriggled free in the box and, after seeing his first

shot blocked, dragged his follow up across goal.

The ball however fell to Griffiths on the six-yard line and as the crowd waited to salute the inevitable bulging of the net he somehow side-footed wide.

That miss proved costly when Challinor popped up for his first Stockport goal in 60 appearances to prevent Luton doing the double over Carlton Palmer's side.

The defender was the first to react when Daly flicked on a

82nd-minute corner and planted an unstoppable header into Beckwith's top corner.

Brkovic broke clear on the left on 84 minutes with a great chance to put Luton back in the driving seat.

But having beaten the off-side trap, he selfishly opted to shoot wide from an angle instead of squaring to an unmarked Howard.

Now Luton need a point from their final game away to Swindon on Saturday to be certain of finishing in eighth spot.

matchfacts

LUTON 1 STOCKPORT 1

● **HATTERS:** Robert Beckwith, Emmerson Boyce, Chris Willmott (David Bayliss, 46), Alan Neilson, Sol Davis, Paul Hughes (Ahmet Brkovic 59), Kevin Nicholls, Matthew Spring, Peter Holmes, Steve Howard, Carl Griffiths (Aaron Skelton, 81). Subs not used: Alan Kimble, Dean Brill.

● **STOCKPORT:** Ola Tidman, Jim Goodwin, Dave Challinor, Gordon Greer, Peter Clark, Aaron Lescott, Fraser McLachlan (Robert Clare, 64), Ali Gibb,

Andy Welsh (Rickle Lambert, 81), Jon Daly, Aaron Wilbraham. Subs not used: James Spencer, John Hardicker, Anthony Tonkin.

● **Shots on target:** Luton 1 Stockport 7.

● **Shots off target:** Luton 7 Stockport 4.

● **Corners:** Luton 3 Stockport 6.

● **Booked:** Luton: Bayliss 85.

● **Attendance:** 6,010.

● **Referee:** Mike Thorpe (Suffolk).
● **Man of match:** Robert Beckwith: Another fine display of his shot-stopping abilities.



PRAISED: Beckwith.

MANAGER Joe Kinnear has been singing the praises of young Hatters shot-stopper Robert Beckwith.

The Hatters' boss is delighted with his stand-in keeper after another fine performance in Saturday's draw with Stockport County.

The ice-cool keeper has shown a safe pair of hands since Mark Ovendale's last-minute hip injury opened the

Ice-cool Becks rapidly proving he's the real deal

door for his debut against Bristol City

After Beckwith's performance in that match, Kinnear said: "He did exceptionally well. His kicking was magnificent. He made one top-class save in the second-half.

"He can look back and be very pleased with himself.

He's done enough to stay in the side until the end of the season."

Former Hatter Danny Wilson was also quick to acknowledge the impressive debut of the rookie keeper, saying: "He played very well. In these situations youngsters usually either play a blinder or have a stinker.

Maybe it helped that he had no time to think about it."

Becks followed it up with another good performance, keeping his first senior clean sheet in Luton's 5-0 demolition of Colchester.

Kinnear said: "Beckwith did not look out of place. There were no signs of nerves. The two centre-halves

were magnificent and there were plusses all around the pitch. Nicholls was in control, Spring ran at them and Griffiths did well for fitness."

Stockport boss Carlton Palmer also heaped praise on Beckwith. Palmer said: "He has done ever so well and made three or four really good saves against us."