

Howard signs off with a scorcher

A MAN down and five minutes to go, losing 2-1, the Hatters found themselves with a free kick inside the penalty area: step forward Steve Howard.

He blasted in Luton's equaliser to end his personal drought of nine goalless games.

It was the perfect way to sign off before serving a suspension that will force him to miss next Saturday's FA Cup fourth round tie with Tranmere Rovers.

Luton fought back twice and had to survive Adrian Forbes' controversial first half sending-off.

The huge queue outside Kenilworth Road for tickets for Rovers tie indicated that cup fever is slowly taking over the town.

But for manager Mike Newell all thoughts were firmly fixed on defeating lowly Stockport County and keeping Hatters' promotion plans on track.

His job was not helped with the suspension of centre back Emmerson Boyce. The ever-present defender had been outstanding all season in the heart of Luton's rearguard and would be sorely missed.

Stepping into his boots was 18-year-old Curtis Davies for his league debut.

Matthew Spring was still ruled out with a groin strain meaning another start for Peter Holmes, who got on the scoresheet in last week's local derby with Rushden & Diamonds.

One man who wasn't thinking of next week's cup tie was Howard, and the big striker looked eager to make up for this, taking just 17 seconds for his first strike.

The early exchanges were all Luton as the home side looked to complete their first double of the season over relegation-threatened County.

Their first real chance of the half came on 13 minutes from a Steve Robinson corner. It was aimed at captain Chris Coyne at the far

Luton Town 2 Stockport County 2

post but he glanced his header across the face of goal to Robinson, still standing by the corner flag.

County boss Sammy McIlroy presided over Northern Ireland's unenviable record of 1,242 minutes without a goal and his Stockport forwards looked equally shot-shy. That all changed on 18 minutes.

Winger Andy Welsh was allowed a clear run down the left wing. Once in the penalty area he cut the ball back for Simon Lynch, who from ten yards, stroked the ball into the bottom corner.

Robinson - whose recent form has also been influential in the surge up the table - will also be missing from next week's line-up due to his collection of yellow cards.

So it was appropriate that Robinson should have a hand in Luton's bizarre equaliser on 31 minutes.

After making a run down the left to the bye-line, Robinson drilled in an innocuous ball that goalkeeper James Spencer looked to have covered at his near post, but right back Danny Griffin made a fatal intervention sliding the ball past the 'keeper.

Six minutes later, with Luton turning up the heat, they were dealt a huge blow when top scorer Adrian Forbes saw red. A high-ball was aimed towards the halfway line where left back Danny Jackman tried to hitch a lift on Forbes' back.

The diminutive striker, in a bout of afters, shoved his face straight into that of his aggressor. Both were called over by referee Alan Butler, who cleared Jackman but stunned the home crowd by sending Forbes for an early bath.

On 41 minutes a Kevin Foley header was well saved to show there was still life in the Hatters' attack and just before half time

Newell bravely swapped midfielder Lee Mansell for forward Enoch Showumni, switching to a 4-3-2 formation, pushing for more goals.

The last action of the half saw a Howard header clip the top of the bar.

After two goals a sending-off and a header hitting the bar, the second half had a lot to live up to - but it failed miserably.

Down to ten-men the Hatters' attack was severely blunted against a side that looked mediocre at best.

Coyne had a header go just wide from a corner and Showumni - whose introduction lifted the crowd - hit a good strike on 65 minutes that produced a one-handed save from Spencer.

Time was taking its toll on the legs of the Luton players and on 71 minutes County got their second.

Jackman's cross into the box found Fraser McLaughlan who timed his run perfectly to sneak in behind the defence to nod home.

Surprisingly, Luton found the inspiration to pile on the pressure for an equaliser.

An Ahmet Brkovic brought another one-handed save and on 80 minutes Kevin Foley tore up the ground before crossing to the back post only for Showumni to spew his shot wide from two yards.

Luton were not to be denied and five minutes from time they grabbed the equaliser.

Defender Robert Clare's back-pass was foolishly picked up by Spencer and the referee gave an indirect free kick inside the area. Spencer petulantly threw the ball in the referee's direction but escaped with a yellow card.

Howard stepped up to power in the shot from eight yards.

Newell said afterwards: "I felt with ten men we actually had the better chances.

"As for the Forbes sending-off, there did not seem much in it but if you square up to someone you will get punished. We just have to accept the decision."



MATCH FACTS



Luton Town: Beresford, Foley, Coyne, Davies, Davis; Mansell, Holmes, Robinson, Brkovic; Howard, Forbes. Subs: Brill, Leary, Nicholls, Crowe, Showumni

Referee: Mr Alan Butler (Nottinghamshire)

GOALSCORERS:

Luton: Griffin (og 31m), Howard (85)
Stockport: Lynch (18), McLaughlan (71)

SHOTS ON TARGET

Luton: 8
Stockport: 6

SHOTS OFF TARGET

Luton: 6
Stockport: 3

CORNERS

Luton: 6
Stockport: 2

OFFSIDE

Luton: 1
Stockport: 4

BOOKINGS

Luton: Forbes (red, 37), Davis (54)
Stockport: Hardiker (28), Gibb (50), Spencer (84)

ATTENDANCE: 5,920

HATTERS STAR MAN: STEVE HOWARD

Carried the attack and salvaged a point

How they stand

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Plymouth	27	16	8	3	62	25	56
QPR	27	15	9	3	49	21	54
Bristol City	26	12	10	4	37	20	46
Port Vale	26	12	6	8	40	34	42
Barnsley	26	11	9	6	34	30	42
Swindon	27	11	8	8	38	32	41
Brighton	26	11	6	9	38	29	39
Hartlepool	26	10	9	7	37	30	39
Luton	26	10	9	7	41	39	39
Wrexham	26	11	4	11	31	29	37
Colchester	26	10	7	9	28	34	37
Rushden & D	27	10	6	11	43	42	36
Bournemouth	27	9	9	9	32	33	36
Blackpool	26	11	3	12	33	36	36
Oldham	27	7	11	9	38	40	32
Sheffield Wed	27	7	11	9	31	35	32
Tranmere	26	7	11	8	28	36	32
Grimsby	26	7	9	10	30	40	30
Brentford	27	8	6	13	28	40	30
Peterborough	27	6	10	11	33	37	28
Stockport	26	5	11	10	34	42	26
Notts County	27	6	6	15	26	46	24
Chesterfield	27	5	9	13	21	42	24
Wycombe	27	4	7	16	28	48	19

Division Two results

Barnsley	1	Bournemouth	1
Bristol City	4	Chesterfield	0
Luton Town	2	Stockport	2
Oldham	1	Sheff Wed	0
Peterborough	0	Brentford	0
Plymouth	3	Rushden	0
Port Vale	5	Grimsby	1
QPR	2	Brighton	1
Swindon	2	Colchester	0
Tranmere	0	Hartlepool	0
Wrexham	0	Notts County	1
Wycombe	0	Blackpool	3



■ You plonker: County goalkeeper James Spencer cannot believe it as full back Danny Griffin slides the ball in for an own goal to make it 1-1 at Kenilworth Road > yesterday. Right: Enoch Showumni goes close for the Hatters