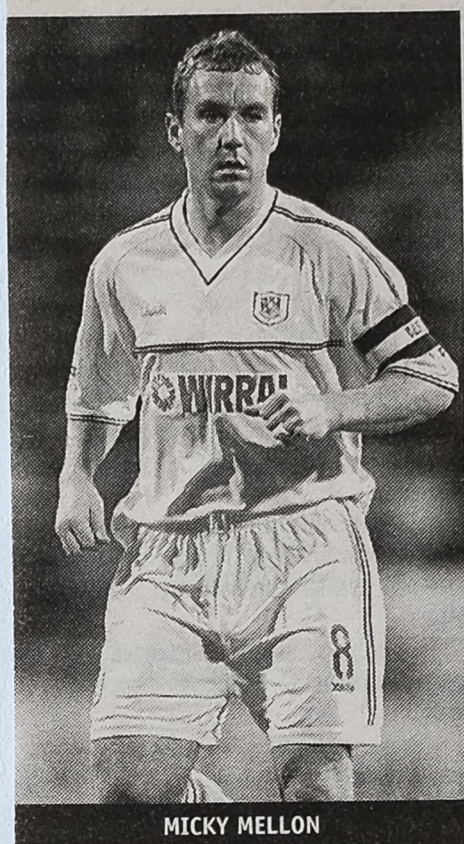


It's becoming a habit for Rovers

Luton 0 Tranmere 1
By **SIMON STONE**

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CAC



MICKY MELLON

MICKY Mellon sent Tranmere into the fifth round for the fourth time in five years with an 81st minute winner against Luton at Kenilworth Road.

The Rovers skipper provided the one moment of inspiration in a physical all-Second Division duel by bursting over halfway and then unleashing a 20 yard drive which flicked off a home defender and crashed in off Marlon Beresford's right hand post.

It maintained Rovers' impressive recent cup record, which has already seen the Merseysiders account for Bolton this term, although manager Brian Little will know his team will have to produce more than this workmanlike display to advance much further.

Little though will wonder how much easier it would have been for his team if Luton defender Sol Davis had been red carded just 11 minutes into the game.

Rovers' Canadian striker Iain Hume clearly felt he had been barged off the ball by Davis as he attempted to reach a lofted ball to the edge of the Luton box — but referee Matt Messias obviously did not see it.

Hume could not disguise his fury and raced towards Davis for a face-to-face confrontation.

The Luton man responded with what looked like a headbutt — which again went unseen by Messias and his two assistants.

Hume appeared to make the most of the incident, collapsing to the ground in apparent agony but the impact had been enough to draw blood and there is no doubt Davis should have been given his marching orders.

It was the most noteworthy incident of the first 81 minutes, although Luton did have the better of what had gone before.

The cash-strapped Hatters had been dealt a crushing blow 24 hours before kick-off when top scorer Adrian Forbes ruptured his cruciate knee ligament in training.

Knowing a fifth round windfall could generate some much-needed revenue, it was a cruel loss for manager Mike Newell to contend with but, with Enoch Showunmi using his muscular presence to unsettle the visitors defence, Luton were still the better side.

The Hatters might have gone ahead inside the opening minute but Lee

Mansell could only flick a goalbound Emmerson Boyce effort over and though Kevin Nicholls and Peter Holmes sent long-range shots wide, it was another half-hour before Luton created another decent opportunity.

Mansell was again the man who failed to find the target, although this time it was the acrobatics of Rovers keeper John Achterberg which denied him with a fine fingertip save after the Luton striker had got on the end of Holmes' far post cross.

Aside from a goalmouth scramble instigated by Graham Allen's knock-down, Tranmere created little in the opening period but through Hume's industry they did start to force the pace at the start of the second.

Gary Jones could not keep a stooping header down, then Hume failed with a couple of half-chances, firing an angled effort over the bar after neatly stepping inside Ahmet Brkovic, then failing to test Marlon Beresford with a mis-hit 25 yard drive.

The introduction of Keith Keane for Mansell on the hour seemed to inject fresh life into the home side and when the substitute was sent flying by Gareth Roberts, the Luton players surrounded Messias pleading for a penalty. The contact had been outside the box but the official decided it was not worthy of a free kick.

As the clock ticked down, the desperation not to lose increased, as did an already high crime count.

Mellon was among the half dozen players cautioned but it was the impact he made late in the game which proved to be the deciding factor.

❖ Newell blasts 'arrogant' referee

MIKE Newell branded referee Matt Messias "arrogant" after his side crashed out of the FA Cup to Tranmere.

The Luton manager was fuming at Messias' refusal to give his team a late penalty when Keith Keane was sent sprawling in the box by Gareth Roberts.

"I can take it when a referee holds his hands up and says he might have made a mistake but in this instance I thought he was just arrogant," said Newell, who clashed angrily with Messias after the final whistle.

"I don't need to look at a video. I know it was a penalty. I told the referee it is my living that he is affecting, he just said 'it's mine as well'."

"I know he had one season in the Premiership but that probably says it all."

Newell was gracious enough to admit defender Sol Davis should have been sent off after apparently catching Tranmere livewire Iain Hume with a head butt after just 11 minutes.

Victorious Tranmere boss Brian Little dismissed the incident as "just one of those things that happen in a football match".

However, he did express relief that Luton had not been given the spot-kick Newell demanded.

"It could have been," he said.

"I winced a bit when it happened."

He added: "We got a little shock right at the start of the game but I thought we were strong after that."

"Micky Mellon has scored quite a few goals for us this season so it was no real surprise that he stepped up and got another one."

"Luton probably feel they deserved more for what they put into the game in the first half, but I thought we were good in the second and we just about edged it."

"I'm pleased to get through another round. This club has quite a cup tradition and hopefully we can carry it on a bit yet."