

Sad Hatters pipped by Mellon's strike

03/04
Luton Town 0 (GAC)
Tranmere Rovers 1

HATTERS FA Cup run came to a shuddering end when Micky Mellon struck ten minutes from the end of a truly awful game at Kenilworth Road.

In front of the biggest crowd of the season, manager Mike Newell's injury-ravaged team never looked like scoring.

The tie looked to be drifting towards a replay when Mellon's goal came, one of only a handful of shots on target from either side.

Today's tie with Rovers – who Hatters comfortably beat 3-1 at the beginning of October – could so easily have been against Bolton Wanderers, had the Premiership side's manager Sam Allardyce taken the competition a bit more seriously.

Not to take anything away from Tranmere, but the Bolton side that went out to Iain Hume's extra time volley in the replay didn't feature stars such as Youri Djorkaeff, Jay Jay Okocha or Ivan Campo who were rested.

After a Kevin Nolan goal salvaged a 1-1 draw at Prenton Park, Allardyce declared that the replay was a nuisance and that the FA Cup was behind Premiership survival and the Carling Cup in his priorities for the season.

Thus his weakened side fell to Brian Little's men who went into the game with just one defeat in 11 league and cup games.

Whereas Allardyce had the option not to play his first-choice XI, Hatters boss Mike Newell had no such luxury.

Already missing through suspension was Steve Howard and Steve Robinson while Matthew Spring failed a late fitness, but the biggest blow came just before kick-off when top scorer Adrian Forbes was ruled out with a knee injury.

It meant a starting place for Enoch Showumni and Luton packed their midfield with a 4-5-1 formation.

Some good news was the return of Emmerson Boyce at centre back and Kevin Nicholls reclaimed his midfield spot after four months out through injury.

But he didn't regain the captain's armband which stayed with Chris Coyne.

Despite their problems, Hatters looked the brighter side early on in a full-blooded Cup tie where time on the ball was at a premium.

And blood literally flowed on 11 minutes



■ Enoch Showumni in the thick of things against Tranmere Rovers

when Sol Davis was involved in an off-the-ball incident with Rovers' Cup hero of the previous round Hume.

As Rovers rushed out of defence Hume was spotted on the floor holding his face. He was helped off and returned with a bandaged forehead.

Tranmere seemed happy to sit back and let Luton attack but bar a few long-range efforts Hatters' attack gave Rovers goalkeeper John Achterberg few problems.

On the half-hour mark Lee Mansell met a corner but had his header tipped over and then in the last minute of the half a Nicholls delivery to the far post found Davis, who slammed his close-range volley against the

crossbar.

The second half was slow to get going, neither side posed any attacking threat and on the hour-mark Mansell, who appeared to be suffering from a hamstring pull, was replaced by youth team winger Keith Keane.

And just eight minutes later Keane almost marked his FA Cup debut with a penalty. Keane and Peter Holmes played a neat one-two and then the youngster was body-checked but the referee saw nothing wrong.

It looked a harsh decision as the Tranmere defender blatantly blocked Keane's route to goal.

On 71 minutes, Nicholls was denied a dream return when his free kick from a promising position flew wide.

And nine minutes later he was indirectly involved with Tranmere's shock winner.

His crunching tackle on Danny Harrison in the middle of the park left the Rovers midfielder writhing in agony but the ricochet fell kindly to Mellon.

He took the ball on ten yards before unleashing a powerful shot past Marlon Beresford.

In the final minutes Luton showed more attacking promise than the previous 80 minutes but were denied another penalty shout on 83 minutes.

Kevin Foley – outstanding at right back – crossed into the box where Sharps looked to have handled as he cut out Showumni's threat. Again the referee saw it differently.

As Luton piled forward Tranmere could have got a second on the break, when Mellon's shot on the edge of the area was well saved by Beresford.



MATCH FACTS



Luton Town: Beresford, Foley, Coyne, Boyce, Davis; Mansell (Keane, 60m), Nicholl (Crowe, 84m), Holmes, Leary, Brkovic; Showumni Subs: Brill (gkpr), Davies, O'Leary

Referee: Matt Messias (S.Yorkshire)

GOALSCORERS:

Luton: -
Tranmere: Mellon (80)

SHOTS ON TARGET

Luton: 3
Tranmere: 4

SHOTS OFF TARGET

Luton: 9
Tranmere: 3

CORNERS

Luton: 5
Tranmere: 8

OFFSIDE

Luton: 7
Tranmere: 5

BOOKINGS

Luton: Leary (38), Holmes (45), Nicholls (80)
Tranmere: Mellon (53), Sharps (70), Taylor (70)

ATTENDANCE: 8,767

HATTERS STAR MAN: EMMERSON BOYCE

Towering display did not deserve to be a loser

How they stand

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Plymouth	28	17	8	3	64	25	59
QPR	28	15	9	4	49	22	54
Bristol City	27	13	10	4	39	21	49
Swindon	28	12	8	8	40	33	44
Wrexham	28	13	4	11	35	30	43
Brighton	27	12	6	9	39	29	42
Port Vale	26	12	6	8	40	34	42
Barnsley	27	11	9	7	34	31	42
Hartlepool	27	10	9	8	38	32	39
Luton	26	10	9	7	41	39	39
Bournemouth	28	10	9	9	33	33	39
Blackpool	27	11	4	12	34	37	37
Colchester	26	10	7	9	28	34	37
Rushden & D	27	10	6	11	43	42	36
Sheffield Wed	28	8	11	9	33	35	35
Oldham	28	7	12	9	39	41	33
Tranmere	26	7	11	8	28	36	32
Grimsby	27	7	9	11	31	43	30
Brentford	28	8	6	14	28	41	30
Peterborough	28	6	10	12	33	39	28
Stockport	27	5	11	11	34	44	26
Chesterfield	28	5	10	13	23	44	25
Notts County	28	6	6	16	27	48	24
Wycombe	28	4	8	16	30	50	20

Division Two results

Blackpool	1	Oldham	1
Bournemouth	1	QPR	0
Brentford	0	Wrexham	1
Brighton	1	Barnsley	0
Chesterfield	2	Wycombe	2
Hartlepool	1	Bristol City	2
Notts County	1	Swindon	2
Sheff Wed	2	Peterborough	0
Stockport	0	Plymouth	2



■ Dean Crowe tries in vain to find a way through



■ Back in action: Kevin Nicholls