

Nico's back after a 21 week gap

The 25-year-old last turned out for Town in their 2-0 August Bank Holiday defeat at Brighton.

Here's how he fared during his comeback...

- VERDICT:** With Peter Holmes and Michael Leary alongside him, Nicholls was able to play a more disciplined passing game, as shown by his high pass completion rate.

"He's some way off being completely ready as a lot of our players are. We weren't going to play him, but we had to as we're down to the bare bones. That's just the circumstances we're working under."



LA-104b

MAN IN THE MIDDLE: Referee Matt Messias, who turned down a second-half Town penalty appeal, books Michael Leary in the first-half.

Mellon cuts up Town

REFEREE Matt Messias was public enemy number one in Luton for turning down a second-half Town penalty appeal as Hatters crashed out of the FA Cup at the weekend.

Rovers skipper Micky Mellon struck the winner nine minutes from time, running at the retreating Hatters defence before arrowing a right-footed effort in off the post from 25 yards.

And although a reshuffled home side huffed and puffed throughout, it was the 70th minute foul on 17-year-old substitute Keith Keane that offered the only real hope of a Luton breakthrough.

Keane played a one-two with Peter Holmes and raced into the box, only to be bodychecked by defender Gary Jones.

But with Hatters fans in the Town's biggest crowd of the season howling for a spot-kick, match official Messias waved play on. Town boss Mike Newell said: "I don't need to see any video replay; I know it was a penalty, if it was

Understrength Luton bow out

in the area. The lad tried to stay on his feet but he's been penalised for his honesty. I can accept referees making mistakes, but I can't accept arrogance and he showed me arrogance at the end.

"I told him this was my living and he said it was his living, too, but it's not. They get above their station."

Rovers boss Brian Little was more nervous about a first-half Luton penalty shout when Lee Mansell

appeared to be held in the area. He said: "I was relieved it wasn't a penalty. I wouldn't have liked it to be given, but I

Hatters were missing Steve Howard and Steve Robinson through suspensions.

With Dean Crowe not training all

week and only passing a fitness test on the day of the game, Enoch Showunmi was Town's lone forward with five men packed into midfield.

Hatters did welcome back Kevin Nicholls in midfield and Emmerson Boyce at the back, who had another solid game alongside skipper Chris Coyne at the heart of the home defence.

Boyce himself was first to threaten when his hooked shot from Holmes' corner was deflected over the bar by Mansell in the opening minute.

But after long range shots from showunmi and Nicholls, Mansell did register the first effort on target after half-an-hour when his far post header from Holmes' cross was tipped over by Cranmere keeper John Achterberg.

The Hatters pressure continued and

Sol Davis sent an angled effort skimming the bar in first-half stoppage time. But Tranmere tightened up after the interval and with the game seemingly heading for a replay Mellon fired the winner after being given time in midfield. Danny Harrison beat Nicholls to a loose ball inside the centre circle and Mellon carried the ball 30 yards unchanged before drilling home.

Mellon could have made it two when he ran clear on goal in injury time. But Marlon Beresford pushed the ball past the post on his last Hatters appearance.

STAR HATTER: Kevin Foley. Showed composure beyond his 19 years.

NEWELL'S VERDICT

"We're disappointed. We had the majority of the game, but just didn't have that cutting edge."

"It was always going to be difficult with players missing through injury and suspension.

"But I can't fault the lads for their effort - it was just the lack of cutting edge and having that

difference that can win
you a game.

"We would have been happy to go up there in a replay and bring some of our players back, but it

"Tranmere set their stall out and made it very difficult for us with five at the back and it worked for them at the end of the day."

[illegible]

For 90 minutes a week you're happy to be ki