

Hatters endure injury time agony

Luton Town 1
Plymouth Argyle 1

TEN-MAN Hatters were cruelly denied all three points against Division Two leaders Plymouth Argyle after their gutsiest display of the season.

After taking a first half lead through Chris Coyne, battling midfielder Kevin Nicholls was sensationally dismissed just moments into the second half.

With almost the last touch of the match, Argyle escaped Kenilworth Road with an undeserved point, leaving manager Mike Newell ruing another late goal.

"We keep conceding them and it is desperately bad luck. After a while it digs into you," said Newell, whose side are still in the play-off melting pot.

Newell was forced to make one change from the side that lost to an 84th minute goal at Port Vale.

Sol Davis was suspended after picking up his tenth booking of the season away at Barnsley. The talented but temperamental left back has already seen red twice this season and will miss Hatters' explosive away day at QPR next week. Utility man Alan Neilson replaced him for his first start since picking up an injury in November.

The rivalry between the sides started two seasons ago when Argyle pipped Luton to the Third Division title.

Argyle are now favourites to take the Second Division title even though manager Paul Sturrock left to join Southampton last month. His number two, Kevin Summerfield, has maintained the promotion charge.

The blustery conditions at Kenilworth Road did not help either side to settle down but Plymouth had the first attempt on goal after 15 minutes.

Under pressure Morten Hyldgaard kicked straight at Mickey Evans, whose tame shot gave the Dane plenty of time to recover.

Plymouth's French midfielder David Friio made himself unpopular with the Hatters fans on 30 minutes when he theatrically dived in the box from a challenge from Paul Hughes.

He didn't fool the referee and the Argyle playmaker was cautioned for his cheating.

Luton's immediate response was to be denied a goal by a post. Plymouth failed to clear a corner and Peter Holmes' shot through the crowd took a deflection off Enoch Showunmi. The deflection took the sting out of the shot and the ball rolled agonisingly slowly towards the far post with goalkeeper Luke McCormick stranded. Argyle managed to hook the ball clear when it rebounded into play.

Hatters' fans were given a scare on 35 minutes when only a brilliant save from Hyldgaard denied Nathan Lowndes from giving Argyle the lead.

From a long throw into the box, a flicked on header left Lowndes two yards from goal. His full-blooded volley was somehow kept out by Hyldgaard's reflex save - although how much he knew about it is debatable.

Three minutes from the interval, Luton took the lead with a well-worked free kick. Steve Robinson - who had a sparkling first half - floated his kick to McCormick's back-post and no-one picked up the late run of Chris Coyne, who placed his header into the bottom



■ **Highs and lows for the Hatters: Chris Coyne takes a tumble as he puts Luton ahead and (top) Kevin Nicholls gets his marching orders. Below, Hatters star man Steve Robinson**

of the corner.

The goal gave even more fizz to a crackling atmosphere only marred by the necessity for a large police presence.

Half time strategy went out of the window in the first minute of the second half with the sending-off of Kevin Nicholls.

Hyldgaard was penalised for holding on to the ball for too long, giving Argyle an indirect free inside the box. Newell wryly observed after the game: "You see that every week, don't you?"

What followed was sheer madness. Lowndes picked the ball up determined to take the free kick quickly as Luton attempted to regroup. A gang of Hatters players surrounded him when from nowhere Lowndes went down clutching his face and writhing on the floor in apparent agony.

Nicholls was singled out and sent off, which seemed a staggering decision from where I sat in the Press box. To add insult to injury Coyne, who took a knock in the first half, hobbled off to be replaced by YTS player Curtis Davies.

His fellow centre back Emmerson Boyce took over the captain's armband as Luton regrouped in the face of an Argyle onslaught.

Despite their advantage, Argyle found it difficult to break down a stubborn back-ten.

Substitutes Marino Keith and Martin Phillips had Plymouth's best efforts in the closing stages, a header and a curling shot which both went narrowly over the bar.

Luton looked certain for the three points until seeing their hopes dashed in the cruellest possible way.

The referee's assistant signalled there would be three minutes of additional time but

Argyle left it until the last seconds to break home hearts.

From a corner, centre back Steve Adams rose above everyone else to power in a header.

The corner came from a free kick that should never have been, Hughes winning the ball fairly in midfield.

Throughout the game the fans sang 'Top of the League? You are having a laugh'.

I could not have put it any better myself.

On the sending-off, Newell commented: "The ref says that he (Nicholls) put his forearm into his (Lowndes) face. If that is the case he has let us down. I didn't see it from where I was but their player has made a meal out of it. Sometimes you feel it is not a man's game anymore."



MATCH FACTS



LUTON TOWN: Hyldgaard; Keane, Boyce, Coyne (Davies 47m), Neilson; Nicholls, Robinson, Hughes, Holmes; Showunmi (Crowe 86), Howard. Subs not used: Brill (gkpr), Hillier, Brkovic

Referee: Graham Salisbury (Lancashire)

GOALSCORERS:
Luton: Coyne (42)
Plymouth: Adams (90)

SHOTS ON TARGET
Luton: 4
Plymouth: 6

SHOTS OFF TARGET
Luton: 3
Plymouth: 5

CORNERS
Luton: 8
Plymouth: 5

OFFSIDE
Luton: 5
Plymouth: 6

BOOKINGS
Luton: Holmes (24), Howard (43), Nicholls (46 red)
Plymouth: Friio (30)

ATTENDANCE: 8,499

HATTERS STAR MAN: STEVE ROBINSON

Spirited determination epitomised
Luton's dogged determination

Division Two results

Barnsley	0	Port Vale	0
Brentford	3	Rushden	2
Brighton	2	Colchester	1
Bristol City	0	Oldham	2
Grimsby	0	Hartlepool	2
Luton	1	Plymouth	1
Notts County	L	Chesterfield	L
Peterborough	0	Tranmere	0
Stockport	1	Sheffield Wed	0
Wrexham	3	Swindon	2
Wycombe	2	QPR	2

How they stand

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Plymouth	38	22	11	5	75	33	77
QPR	37	19	13	5	68	36	70
Bristol City	37	19	11	7	49	29	68
Brighton	38	18	9	11	56	38	63
Swindon	37	18	9	10	61	45	64
Hartlepool	37	15	12	10	59	48	57
Luton	36	15	12	9	56	48	57
Bournemouth	36	15	11	10	45	37	56
Port Vale	37	16	8	13	58	51	56
Wrexham	37	16	6	15	44	48	54
Barnsley	38	12	15	11	43	45	51
Sheffield Wed	38	12	12	14	41	49	48
Rushden & D	37	13	8	16	55	56	47
Colchester	36	12	10	14	37	47	46
Blackpool	36	12	9	15	43	50	45
Oldham	37	9	16	12	51	50	43
Tranmere	36	9	15	12	40	51	42
Chesterfield	37	10	11	16	38	56	41
Peterborough	38	9	13	16	45	50	40
Grimsby	38	10	10	18	45	68	40
Stockport	38	8	15	15	50	62	39
Notts County	38	9	10	19	43	61	37
Brentford	37	9	8	20	38	60	35
Wycombe	38	4	16	18	40	62	28