

High drama after a first half farce

03/04

Luton Town 3 Sheffield Wednesday 2

SCHIZOPHRENIC Hatters ended the home season in a blaze of glory with a thrilling three-goal second half comeback.

Steve Howard notched two and the other came from youngster Stephen O'Leary with his first league goal for the Hatters.

Relegation-haunted Wednesday, who needed just a point to secure their status, were two up at the break after some sloppy defending. But the second half display was as good as anything produced by Mike Newell's men this campaign.

With nothing left to play for but pride, Newell made five changes from the side that lost at Wrexham last Saturday.

Newell indicated his belief in Luton's youth last Saturday in the 2-1 defeat by starting with both Stephen O'Leary and Michael Leary in midfield. Through no fault of his own, Leary made way for Steve Robinson – one of Luton's players of the season.

Joining Robinson in the running for that accolade will be Emmerson Boyce, who passed a late fitness test, to take the place of Curtis Davies – another promising young player who along with Kevin Foley, Keith Keane, Leary and O'Leary have given the Kenilworth Road faithful real hope after a summer of despair.

Newell also chose teenager Dean Brill in preference to Moreton Hyldgaard in goal for his first start since November, after a couple of suspect performances from the big Dane. It seemed a clear indication from Newell that Hyldgaard will not be in his plans for next season.

Powerful striker Enoch Showunmi made way for Adrian Forbes as he joined joint top-scorer Howard in attack and veteran utility man Alan Neilson came in for rested Keane at right back.

Hatters began the game well, playing with real fluency and imagination, with the players free from play-off pressure.

They hit the post on nine minutes through Howard, after an intricate passing movement. Foley was allowed to cross and Howard pounced on a weak clearance. He beat Kevin Pressman but not the upright and Forbes' header from the rebound was blocked by defender Derek Geary.

Ex-Hatter and now Wednesday captain Paul McLaren marked his return by creating the opening goal. The midfielder's dinked cross was allowed to reach Jon Shaw and the lanky striker headed home from ten yards on 23 minutes.

Wednesday added a second just after 30 minutes. Chris Brunt's hopeful through ball should have been covered by either Sol Davies or Brill but the defender's half-hearted back-pass deceived the young 'keeper and the grateful Terry Cooke slid in to an empty net.

Luton started the second as they did the first with some exciting, attacking football looking to overturn the two-goal deficit.

Howard got the ball rolling on 54 minutes. O'Leary jinked into the Owls' box and he crossed for Howard, six yards out, to turn the ball in.

It signalled an onslaught from the Hatters but it nearly backfired when Shaw almost



■ Not this time: Kevin Nicholls challenges Kevin Pressman in the five-goal thriller at Kenilworth Road yesterday

made it three but for a brilliant save from Brill.

On 79 minutes Hatters got what they deserved with an equaliser from O'Leary with his first senior goal.

Another Foley cross to the back-post fell to Howard who headed it back for the young Irishman, whose miskick deceived Pressman.

Luton had Brill to thank as relegation-threatened Owls looked for a winner four minutes from time. Dean Smith met Brunt's free kick but the youngster got down well, thwarting the first attempt and the handled follow-up. It wouldn't have counted as Premiership referee Dermot Gallagher had spotted the misdemeanour.

Back at the other end Pressman rolled back the years with a super save from a Howard header – but the striker, linked with a move to Hillsborough at the start of the season – had the last laugh as Hatters ended the season in great style.

With just seconds to go substitute Showunmi and Kevin Nicholls played a series of one-tuos down the right hand side before the gangly striker whipped in a cross for Howard to slide in a dramatic match-winner.

Newell said: "We played decent stuff but we let in two sloppy goals – the story of our season. With nothing to play we could have chucked in the towel at half time but the lads showed great desire as they have all season."



■ Two-goal Steve Howard salutes the Kenilworth Road crowd



MATCH FACTS



LUTON TOWN: Brill; Neilson, Coyne, Boyce, Davis; Foley, O'Leary, Robinson, Nicholls; Howard, Forbes (Showunmi 59) Subs: Hyldgaard (gkpr), Davies, Leary, Mansell

Referee: Dermot Gallagher (Banbury)

GOALSCORERS:
Luton: Howard (54m and 90)), O'Leary (79)
Sheff Wed: Shaw (23), Cooke (33)

SHOTS ON TARGET
Luton: 12
Sheff Wed: 5

SHOTS OFF TARGET
Luton: 9
Sheff Wed: 2

CORNERS
Luton: 7
Sheff Wed: 5

OFFSIDE
Luton: 3
Sheff Wed: 3

BOOKINGS
Luton: (Davis 41)
Sheff Wed: Smith (49)

ATTENDANCE: 7,157

HATTERS STAR MAN:
KEVIN FOLEY
At the heart of every positive move

Division Two results

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

How they stand

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Plymouth	45	25	12	8	83	41	87
QPR	45	21	17	7	77	44	80
Bristol City	44	21	13	10	55	36	76
Brighton	45	21	11	13	62	43	74
Swindon	45	20	12	13	75	57	72
Hartlepool	45	20	12	13	75	60	72
Port Vale	45	20	10	15	71	63	70
Bournemouth	45	17	15	13	56	50	66
Luton	45	17	15	13	69	65	66
Tranmere	45	16	16	13	57	55	64
Colchester	45	17	13	15	52	54	64
Wrexham	45	17	9	19	50	58	60
Barnsley	44	14	17	13	51	55	59
Blackpool	45	16	11	18	57	63	59
Oldham	45	12	20	13	65	55	56
Sheffield Wed	45	13	14	18	47	61	53
Stockport	45	11	19	15	60	67	52
Peterborough	45	12	15	18	57	57	51
Brentford	45	13	11	21	51	69	50
Grimsby	45	13	11	21	54	79	50
Rushden & D	45	13	9	23	60	72	48
Chesterfield	45	11	15	19	48	71	48
Notts County	45	10	11	24	49	77	41
Wycombe	45	6	18	21	49	74	36