

Artisans display flair for dramatic

IN THE decade since Tranmere Rovers last played host to a top-of-the-table contest they have acquired a new generation of supporters unfamiliar with how tense these affairs can be.

Those of an age to recall the promotion-chasing campaigns of the mid-1990s will not have expected Saturday's meeting of the bookmakers' favourites and the runaway early leaders to provide a showcase for the most attractive football League One has to offer.

This was the wrong occasion to go looking for artistic impression.

But it did produce a taut, edgy drama that was gripping in its own way for the largest crowd of the season at Prenton Park.

At the end of the 1-1 draw Tranmere had justified the respect they are afforded across the division by coming a good deal closer to defeating Luton Town than anyone else so far this season.

They were tight and mean at the back, save for one costly lapse, shaded the fierce battle in midfield and created the chances up front to land a knock-out blow towards the end. But they could not capitalise on them.

If Luton also failed to find the attacking punch that enabled them to defeat nine opponents in the league, they at least demonstrated their resilience.

Mike Newell was the more relieved of the two managers afterwards, with good reason.

"I can tell you our players are really pleased with that point and so am I," said Newell, who took the trouble to shake the hand of every Tranmere opponent at the final whistle.

The former Tranmere reserve team coach added: "Tranmere caused us more problems than anyone else has this season,

NICK HILTON

at Prenton Park



Tranmere 1

Luton 1

which did not surprise me because we knew in advance how strong they would be. I was pleased to fight back.

"So it was a good point particularly considering the chances Tranmere had late on."

Brian Little's frustration at Tranmere's failure to secure a merited victory was tempered by his satisfaction with overall performance.

He also hinted, not for the first time, at some sensitivity to crowd reaction by saying: "Some people get frustrated when we don't win. But it's my job to make sure everyone within our four walls is right. I have got to keep us focused. We are not going to win the league on today's game."

Each manager, however, was compelled to address a major distraction caused by the officials. It is becoming almost a weekly occurrence for Tranmere.

The big issue this time was the penalty that - eventually - brought Tranmere the opening goal just after the half-hour.

The most straightforward aspect of the saga looked, from the press box, to be referee Tony Bates' straightforward decision to award a spot-kick when Ryan Taylor, released into the penalty area by Paul Hall's pass in the 27th minute, went over the late challenge of Curtis Davies.

"Not so," claimed Newell.



Ryan Taylor follows up his own penalty to score Tranmere's goal past Dino Seremet

"They are insisting in the dressing room that Davies made no contact with his tackle."

Either way, Taylor stayed down after the tackle and was offered treatment on the pitch by physio Les Parry.

The full-back says he declined it and as Tranmere's designated penalty taker was keen to get up and take the spot-kick.

However Mr Bates ruled that Taylor could not return to the pitch until play had been restarted, so someone else would have to take the penalty.

Iain Hume took on the responsibility. His spot-kick was too close to goalkeeper Dino Seremet and was beaten out.

Mr Bates noticed Seremet had advanced several feet from his line before the kick and ordered a retake, fending off prolonged arguments from a posse of Luton players, two of whom, skipper Kevin Nicholls and defender Chris Coyne he booked.

Taylor had by this time made his way back on to the pitch - although he says without a signal

from Mr Bates - and the Staffordshire official made no objection to the youngster taking the second penalty kick. Taylor's effort was hardly any further away from Seremet than Hume's but this time the keeper could only beat the ball out in front of him. Taylor was first to the rebound and bundled it home.

The whole performance, from the award of the kick to the goal being scored, lasted a little longer than five minutes.

The affair might end up on the tv quiz "A Question of Sport" in the "What happened next?" section, although it will take some editing down.

There was little goalmouth incident of any other kind to engage the 10,884 spectators until midway through the second half when Tranmere and Hume in particular began to press hard for a second decisive goal.

The Canadian was refused a penalty when he careered into two defenders while pursuing a pass from substitute Calvin Zola in the 67th minute. Three minutes later Hall's determined run through the

MAN OF THE MATCH

Iain Sharps

The skipper for the day oozed authority at the heart of a mean defence.

middle set up a chance for Zola, who scooped it high over the bar from 16 yards.

The miss was made to look costly in the 75th minute when Luton's belated emergence as an attacking force earned a swift reward.

Tranmere paid a heavy price for leaving a player unmarked beyond the far post when skipper Nicholls swept in a free-kick from the right. Defender Coyne connected with a powerful header that sent the ball beyond the reach of goalkeeper John Achterberg and into the heart of the net.

Zola made his second expensive miss of the afternoon when good work by Hall sent him clear into the penalty area on 89 minutes, only to drag his shot well wide of the far post.

Then three minutes into injury time Hume and substitute Theo Whitmore demonstrated admirable patience in setting up a shooting chance for the recalled Danny Harrison, who's shot from 15 yards was beaten out by Seremet.



MATCH FACTS



Taylor 32



Coyne 75

TRANMERE: Achterberg, Taylor, Sharps, Goodison, Roberts, Hall, Rankine, Harrison, Beresford (Whitmore 80), Dadi (Zola 57), Hume. Subs: Howarth, Linwood, Dagnall. **BOOKED:** Roberts, Sharps, Hall and Dadi.

REFEREE: Mr Anthony Bates (Staffordshire). **ATT:** 10,884.

NEXT GAME: Bristol v Tranmere Rovers, League Two, Saturday 3pm

WHAT DO YOU THINK? Visit the messageboards at www.icliverpool.co.uk to give your verdict

FOR ROVERS

Our moment of slack cost us, says Little

BRIAN Little felt that a moment of slack marking cost his side victory against leaders Luton Town.

The manager revealed he had shouted instructions to his players just before Hatters defender Chris Coyne popped up at the far post to head home a late equaliser.

Little said: "The message just wasn't heeded. Aside from that, we had three or four really good chances to score. I thought we were in control and I genuinely thought we would get the second goal.

"It's disappointing, but we played arguably the best team in the division and while we have drawn against them, there were positives here."

Mike Newell was adamant that Tranmere are the best side his Luton team have come up against this season. But the former Rovers reserve team coach cast doubt over the penalty decision that allowed Little's men to take the lead.

He said: "The lads didn't think it was a penalty. Then the linesmen got involved and it was retaken. It's petty rules and it's frustrating."

Tranmere scorer Ryan Taylor insisted it was a penalty after he was brought down in the 32nd minute by Curtis Davies. However, Taylor was unable to take the first spot-kick after referee Tony Bates sent him to the sidelines.

He said: "I felt contact. I knocked the ball round the player and he made contact with my hip. That made me tumble. I didn't have any treatment but I think the Luton players influenced him and the referee told me I had to go off the pitch.

"It's disappointing when you are the better team for most of the match and chances are missed."

Meanwhile, Tranmere have been drawn at home against Port Vale in the LDV Vans Trophy second round. The game will take place in the week commencing November 1.



DRAWN: Chris Coyne, right, looks on as he scores Luton's equaliser



goalkeeper Dino Seremet during their Coca-Cola League One match

In a final push for the three points, Hume and Theodore Whitmore tried unsuccessfully to engineer shooting chances before the ball fell for Harrison just inside the box. His curling right-foot shot look destined for the far corner of the net, but somehow Seremet managed to claw it to safety.

Sometimes you just don't get what you deserve.

TRANMERE ROVERS (4-4-2): Achterberg, Taylor, Sharps, Goodison, Roberts, Hall, Rankine, Harrison, Beresford (Whitmore 81), Dadi (Zola 59), Hume.

Unused subs: Howarth, Linwood, Dagnall.

LUTON TOWN (4-4-2): Seremet, Foley, Coyne, Davies, Davis, Brkovic, Robinson, Nicholls, Underwood, McSheffrey, Vine.

Unused subs: Brill, Leary, Blinkhorn, Showunmi, Keane.

REFEREE: Tony Bates, Staffs.
BOOKINGS: Roberts, Sharps, Dadi, Hall, Coyne, Brkovic, Nicholls, Vine.

ATTENDANCE: 10,884.

STAR MAN: Ryan Taylor.

Solid in defence and dangerous raiding down the right flank, as he showed in winning the penalty.



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