

Brkovic keeps Luton buzzing

League One

Robert Pryce

at Kenilworth Road

Luton Town 1

Brkovic 89

Hull City 0

04/05

Luton has few diversions and fewer delights but the football club offers some compensation. After the crap town crown bestowed on it last year, the very first League One title should soon follow.

Nothing has been decided yet, as Luton's manager Mike Newell keeps repeating, but the indications are entirely positive. They won this one-sided League One showdown more convincingly than the scoreline admits to go four points clear at the top.

Each side was missing its leading scorer but Hull miss Stuart Elliott more. Luton are unbeaten in 11 league games; Hull have not won any of their last six after Elliott — the scorer of 23 goals this season, including 12 in his last nine — fractured his cheekbone against Huddersfield on New Year's Day.

The gulf looked vast in the first half on Saturday, when Luton performed as though they had not noticed the difficulties presented by a swirling wind, a pitted pitch and credible opposition. They squeezed the life out of Hull's midfield while setting the defence a series of problems it never got to grips with.

The most intractable was set by Ahmet Brkovic roaming free out of his unfamiliar left-wing position. In the first 20 minutes the slightly built Croat had three opportunities, twice manoeuvring clear to shoot wide and finishing another inventive passing move by heading over.

"I should have a hat-trick," he told himself at half-time and the reproach became more pointed the longer Hull held out. But all was forgiven in the 89th minute, when he

cut across the defence to head in Steve Robinson's right-wing cross at the near post.

Newell had been thinking of taking the 30-year-old midfielder off when the winning goal arrived. "I was really tired," Brkovic admitted. "I was thinking, do I make the near-post run-in? I should make the near-post run-in. So I did. And I was really, really pleased."

It was his 12th and most important goal of a productive season. "He plays anywhere you ask him to," Newell said. "We know he's got ability and quality and his goals have proved it."

He has appeared in the Uefa Cup with Varteks Varazdin but was playing in the Croatian third division with his hometown team in Dubrovnik when his agent arranged a trial for him at Millwall just over five years ago. He completed his passage from the ravishing Dalmatian coast to Britain's crappiest town two years later but did not escape the bottom division until Luton won promotion in 2002.

Much of that team is still at the club. They are a small, tight-knit group that the club's financial constraints have helped keep together. Newell has added only two players — Rowan Vine on loan from Portsmouth and Paul Underwood, his first-choice left-winger, on a free from Rushden — in this, his second season at the club.

"The players are the same players over the last two to three years but we always believe in ourself and our ability and we've been building on this," Brkovic said. "We trust in each other. After the game we're going for sandwich meal talking about the game. Every game we've played, we're talking."

"The spirit in the team is unbelievable. Everyone's buzzing. The whole place is buzzing."

Man of the match: Ahmet Brkovic (Luton)