

Kev spot-on

LUTON TOWN 1 WALSALL 0

ANDY MacKENZIE reports
from Kenilworth Road

SKIPPER Kevin Nicholls gave Luton a last-gasp win against Walsall with an 89th minute penalty as the Hatters looked to have been frustrated by their plucky opponents last night.

The Town missed a host of first-half chances and struggled to get going after the break.

But Nicholls ensured the League One leaders picked up their fourth win on the spin by converting from the spot after Chris Coyne had been fouled by Neil Emblem.

Hatters kept faith with the starting 11 that won 1-0 at Bradford on Saturday with leading goalscorer Steve Howard shaking off a bout of flu that caused him to miss training on Monday.

For Walsall, player-manager and former Arsenal and England man Paul Merson started on the bench.

The Saddlers were delayed on their way to Kenilworth Road by their team bus breaking down on the M1.

But the Midlands outfit started the game smoothly enough themselves with lone forward Matt Fryatt having the game's first attempt, a speculative 25-yard effort that flew well over in the second minute.

Hatters soon found their rhythm in front of a strangely subdued home crowd with

match facts

LUTON: Marlon Beresford, Alan Neilson, Chris Coyne, Curtis Davies, Sol Davis, Kevin Foley, Kevin Nicholls, Steve Robinson, Ahmet Brkovic, Rowan Vine, Steve Howard. Substitutes: Russell Perrett, Stephen O'Leary, Enoch Showunmi, Dino Seremet, Peter Holmes.

WALSALL: Joe Murphy, Zigor Aranalde, Simon Osborn, Neil Emblem, Ian Roper, Darren Wrack, Matt Fryatt, Mark Wright, Kris Taylor, Daryl Taylor, Andrew Sermon. Substitutes: Michael Standing, Paul Merson, Julian Bennett, Joe Broad, Dean Coleman.

Referee: Kevin Wright (Cambs). Attendance: 7,236.

Chris Coyne and Howard both firing right-footed volleys over the bar in the sixth and 10th minutes respectively.

Steve Robinson went closer still 60 seconds later when he latched on to Howard's flick-on and drove a right-foot effort just past the post from the edge of the penalty area.

Ahmet Brkovic was next to try his luck in the 18th minute after being fed by Kevin Foley, but his low, 20-yard drive went the wrong side of Joe Murphy's upright.

The Town's wayward shooting continued four minutes later with a 22-yard strike from Robinson that flew over the bar.

Luton did manage to hit the target a minute later, but Rowan Vine could only tamely side-foot at Murphy from just inside the

area after being sent clear by Howard.

The one-way traffic continued as Vine latched on to Brkovic's pass in the 25th minute, but saw his cross-shot from the right just evade Howard, sliding in at the far post.

And Brkovic then tricked his way past Simon Osborn in the box with a sublime piece of skill in the 28th minute, only to shoot straight at Murphy from six yards.

The best Walsall could muster was a 45-yard David Beckham-style effort from Andrew Sermon eight minutes before the break that Marlon Beresford watched past the post.

Hatters ended the half on the attack again with Howard somehow heading over from six yards after Kevin Nicholls' corner in the 42nd minute.

Stephen O'Leary came on for Robinson at half-time, but the second-period sank into a scrappy affair as both sides struggled to create openings.

Fryatt almost latched on to Sermon's dangerous cross in the 57th minute as Walsall worked their way back into the game.

Enoch Showunmi came on for Alan Neilson in the 67th minute, but the groans from the home faithful increased in volume as Luton struggled to break down their resolute opponents.

With time running out Coyne rose for a cross and was shoved by Emblem to win the all-important spot-kick, converted by Nicholls in the 89th minute.



TARGET MAN: Steve Howard in the thick of the action against Walsall at Kenilworth Road last night after recovering from a touch of flu.