



Hatters not yet in party mood

LOCAL rivals MK Dons couldn't spoil Luton's promotion party as the Hatters moved to within five points of the League One championship.

A first-half own goal by Dons' captain Ben Chorley was enough to give Mike Newell's men the win, but the game didn't really fit the occasion as Hatters were less than convincing over their relegation threatened neighbours.

The noise in Kenilworth Road was deafening to begin with as the home crowd applauded their heroes onto the pitch, but the celebration atmosphere fizzled out at the end as Luton struggled to overcome former Luton player Danny Wilson's Dons.

After the game Newell's right-hand man Brian Stein explained: "We knew it would be tough - Danny Wilson's done a terrific job there in giving them a chance of staying up. They've improved a lot since we thrashed them at their place.

"We didn't have our shooting boots on today. It was a professional performance but I'm a bit disappointed with our play in the last third. We wasted the opportunities that came our way and they defended well.

"There's three games left which are three cup finals to us."

A view echoed by captain Kevin Nicholls. "We want to go up as champions and send a message out to those Championship sides. We've set out to win this league and it's up to us to wrap it up now.

"It wasn't a great game but at the end of the day it's another three points. One hundred point total at the end of the season would be special but I'm sure the fans would be just as glad to be crowned League One champions."

In what turned out to be a frustrating game, Hatters' play oozed confidence early on with Steve Howard and Peter Holmes both testing Dons' keeper Matt Baker with long range efforts. Only the woodwork denied Howard six minutes in when the big striker almost put the finishing touch to the move of the half. The ball was played into Rowan Vine in the Dons penalty area and the Portsmouth loan-star showed his class when he skillfully chested into the path of Kevin Foley who picked out Howard with a perfect cross, but the 21-goal forward saw his header cannon off the crossbar.

After such a frantic start Luton were guilty of taking their foot off the gas as the half went on and were let off on 30 minutes, Clive Platt choosing to pass instead of shoot when put through on goal by Coyne's poor backpass.

But just a minute later Luton took the lead when Chorley put the ball into his own net. Hatters piled into the Dons box but due to the congestion no-one could get a clear sight of goal. The ball spilled out to right-back Foley on the edge of the area who whipped in another decent cross which was diverted into the net by Chorley's diving header.

The goal shook the Dons into life and Luton had Marlon Beresford to thank for keeping them ahead at half time. The diminutive Wade Small got on the end of a Dean Lewington cross and his headed effort looked destined for the top corner. But just as he has all season the Hatters' veteran shot-stopper pulled off another fantastic save with an out-stretched arm.

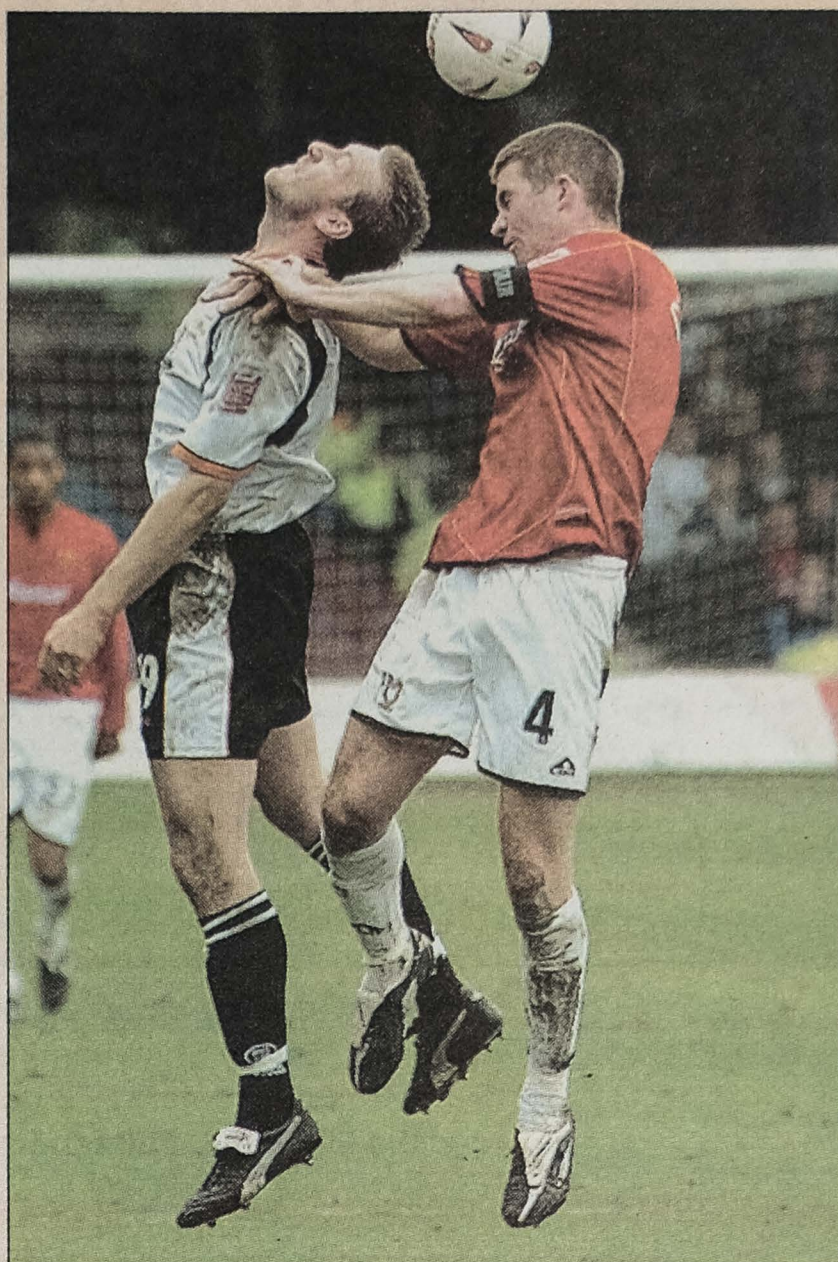
After the break Newell introduced Steve Robinson for the Irishman's first game since he picked up an injury back in February. But not even the highly regarded midfielder could kick-start Luton who were a bit lacklustre in the second half.

Vine flashed a drive across goal that just needed a touch, but it was too fast for the lurking Hatters' players in the box. Howard saw another header go wide - this time from Nicholls' corner. Dons offered even less and never looked like getting anything from the game.

A minute from time recent signing Warren Feeney almost got his first goal in a Luton shirt. Nicholls burst through the midfield before releasing substitute Enoch Showunmi who crossed low for Feeney. But the Northern Ireland international flashed his stooping header just wide of Baker's far post.

It wasn't the thrashing that many had hoped for in the week that Luton guaranteed promotion but as the crowd dispersed to the tune of M People's 'Movin' On Up' the disappointment was short lived and the players were cheered off in recognition of their fantastic achievement this season.

For Wilson's Dons it's back to the drawing board after fellow relegation strugglers Torquay won to go level on points. But the ex-Hatters midfielder still had some kind words to say about his old club: "Luton are a terrific side - strong, skillful and hard-working - and you can see why they're going up. We can learn a lot from them."



■ Above Steve Howard fights for the ball and below Chris Coyne rises highest



Luton Town: Beresford; Foley, Coyne, Davies, Davis; Brkovic (Showunmi '79'), Nicholls, Holmes (Robinson '51'), Underwood; Howard, Vine (Feeney '76'). Subs (not used): Seremet, Hillier.

Referee: Jarnail Singh (Middlesex)

GOALSCORERS:
Luton: OG Ben Chorley
MK Dons:

SHOTS ON TARGET
Luton: 5
MK Dons: 1

SHOTS OFF TARGET
Luton: 9
MK Dons: 3

CORNERS
Luton: 5
MK Dons: 2

OFFSIDE
Luton: 7
MK Dons: 2

BOOKINGS
Luton: Holmes '11'
MK Dons: McClenahan '20', Lewington '63', Chorley '80'

ATTENDANCE: 9,000

HATTERS STAR MAN:

Sol Davis - 'The left back was the most exciting player on the pitch with his darting runs down the flank'