



Luton Town FC

Stoke City 2 - Luton 1
TOM LEECH reports
from The Britannia
Stadium



■ Steve Howard gets his marching orders



Subs: Showunmi for Feeney 63, Edwards for Brkovic 70, Davies for Morgan 46
Not used Brill, Perrett

MAN OF THE MATCH

Marcus Heikkinen

The Finnish international gave everything in the heart of the defence

Howard sent off as Hatters crash

UNLUCKY Luton Town were left wondering what could have been as they fell to their first defeat since Easter.

Hatters got off to the best possible start when Summer signing Dean Morgan gave them an early lead, but it was referee Andy D'Urso who grabbed the spotlight with his bizarre decision to send Steve Howard off for supposedly spitting.

Forced to play more than an hour with ten men, Luton still showed the form that had taken them to the top of the league, but they were cruelly robbed of a point when Stoke followed up Marlon Broomes equaliser with a last minute wonder goal from Dave Brammer.

Struggling to understand the Essex official's decision, Hatters boss Mike Newell fumed: 'Howie's been sent off for spitting at their number two (Carl Hoefkens). He didn't know anything about it.'

'Howie doesn't spit at other players. I know my players and he is not like that. If someone spat at me I would punch them. We will be appealing.'

'The ref has sent Howie off before last season at Brentford so there is history there. What I can't understand is why did he think Howie would spit? We were 1-0 up and in control. The referee was wrong. He has been wrong before and today it has cost us the match.'

'We were the better side even with ten men. We kept playing our football and pressing for more goals, but hands up, we got beaten by a great goal. That strike deserved to win any game.'

Luton made just one change from the side that started the previous three games as they welcomed back Marlon Beresford from injury. But the

experienced goalkeeper had little to deal with on his return as the Hatters made all the running early on.

Howard twice went close to opening the scoring with a header which went wide and a snap shot from distance that forced Stoke keeper Steve Simonsen into a save.

Simonsen wasn't helped by his defence in front of him who looked shaky every time the ball reached Howard and strike partner Warren Feeney, and it was a shocking error from right back John Halls that helped give Luton the lead after nine minutes.

As the ball hung in the air it seemed Halls had everything covered with no Luton player around to challenge him. But rather than head clear, his misplaced back header went straight to Morgan just inside the box who showed great composure in front of goal, taking the ball down before coolly despatching it into the bottom corner.

Hatters were dominating the game at this stage but things were turned upside down on 26 minutes when Howard was dismissed. Ahmet Brkovic swung the ball into Stoke's penalty area and Howard jumped with Michael Duberry for the header.

The ref judged Howard to have fouled the Stoke captain and as play was about to resume D'Urso produced the red card that had everybody puzzled. Not one Stoke player approached him to contest anything that Howard might have done and the Luton bench couldn't seem to get a reason as to why the forward was given his marching orders.

On the half hour Brammer showed signs of a fightback when his long range effort flashed just over the bar - it was a sign of things to come. But it was Luton who had the last chance of the half when only the woodwork thwarted Feeney's powerful run and shot.

The Ulsterman is still to score in a

Luton shirt but if he keeps producing performances like this it won't be long until the goals start flooding in for the diminutive striker.

Former Manchester United prodigy Luke Chadwick, on loan from West Ham, was the catalyst for Stoke's revival after the break. The winger gave Kevin Foley no respite down the flanks throughout and had a penalty claim turned down on 56 minutes when he went down under a challenge from Sol Davis.

Two minutes later he whizzed a shot wide after a good Stoke move and two minutes after that the home side were level.

Kevin Harper whipped a cross into the box that no one dealt with and the ricochet fell for the perfectly placed and unmarked Broomes.

The defender hit a weak looking shot first time that somehow went under Beresford and bobbed in.

With the bit between their teeth Stoke pressed home their numerical advantage and only the angle of the crossbar could deny Brammer with another stinging 30 yarder.

Newell introduced Enoch Showunmi for Feeney and the substitute had a glorious chance to snatch the win for the Hatters on 77 minutes. The striker latched on to Paul Underwood's long pass and beat his marker for pace. From a tight angle he blasted the ball straight at Simonsen and from the rebound could only force a corner.

It was a pulsating final ten minutes as both teams went all out for the win. But with the clock running down Luton's defending got more and more desperate as Stoke swarmed forward.

In the last second Brammer was teed up again on the edge of the area. It was third time lucky for the midfielder as he watched his thunderbolt almost burst the net leaving Luton with nothing from a decent display.



■ Enoch Showunmi goes close for Town