



Luton Town FC

Luton 2 - Sheffield Wed 2

TOM LEECH reports

from Kenilworth Road



Newell's TV stars provide football worth paying for

THEY say it's official – The Premiership is overhyped, overpaid and overexposed.

The best teams in the land are strangling the life out of the game with stifling tactics that are boring fans who in turn are not going to expensively-priced games and are turning off their satellite TVs.

But there is hope.

If Friday night is anything to go by it's the second tier of English football that can revitalise the national sport – and Mike Newell's side are leading the charge with some scintillating performances that must fill every Hatters fan with optimism.

In front of the Sky cameras for the second time in a week, Luton Town showed the big clubs how to entertain a crowd that had people on the edge of their seats – in Kenilworth Road and at home.

After last weekend's win at Hull, the Hatters make good TV it seems and Friday was no exception. Steve Howard grabbed a brace which gave Luton a point in a game they should have won.

Newell, understandably frustrated after Luton's dominance admitted: "I'm disappointed we didn't win at home but it's a point gained rather than two dropped.

"We had the majority of the game again but we weren't ruthless enough.

"We got caught out on the break but you're always going to concede goals – all teams do. Ten games and 18 points is a decent start as far as I'm concerned."

Luton finished a massive 26 points ahead of Wednesday last season who scraped into the division through the play offs so it was no surprise that Hatters controlled the game for so long. Newell explained: "People were asking me in the build-up to this game 'why are Luton doing better than the other two promoted teams in the Championship?'. The answer, without wanting to sound arrogant, is that we are a better side than Hull and Sheffield Wednesday.

"Wednesday did exactly what Leeds and Wolves did when they came here. They came to make it difficult and get a point and as the home side you've got to expect that."

Therein lies the problem. It's a huge compliment that teams visit Luton with a 'damage limitation' plan but when Luton press forward it is leaving them vulnerable on the counter-attack.

Wednesday manager Paul Sturrock pointed out Luton's supposed vulnerability. He said: "They attack with eight men – the full backs push forward and basically act like wingers almost. But that leaves spaces and holes that we took advantage of. They've got a style of play that has caught out a few teams so far. But I thought a draw was a fair result.

"This is a hard place to come – they know how to hurt teams. Any side would be happy to come to Kenilworth Road and get a point."

The Scot, who, when managing Plymouth pipped Luton to the League Two title in 2001/02, conceded the future is bright for the Hatters who are among the pacesetters in the division. "Luton are going to pummel teams here – they wear you down. Up front is a good example in Howard and (Warren) Feeney as that pair just keep going at defences for 90 minutes."

Luton were quick out of the blocks and Howard got them off to the best possible start when he headed in Nicholls' quick free kick after just two minutes. Feeney's mesmerising dribble was bought to a sudden halt by Wednesday captain Glenn Whelan and Luton were awarded a free kick on the edge of the area.

While the visitors tried to organise themselves Nicholls got the nod from referee Richard Beeby to take it quickly. Howard caught his marker Graeme Lee napping with his run into the box and the striker's header gave David Lucas no chance in the Owls' net.

Lee made amends for his sleepy start on 14 minutes when he levelled for Wednesday against the run of play. From a rare Wednesday corner Nicholls inadvertently got a touch on the ball with an outstretched leg. The ball went straight to Lee on the penalty spot whose dipped header went in just under the crossbar.

Rather than sulk about that outrageous fortune, Hatters went on all-out attack looking to turn their superior possession into goals. Feeney went as close as anyone with a curling shot that was tipped around the post and only a superb reflex save by Lucas from Steve Robinson's goalbound header kept Luton at bay before the break. That's not to say Wednesday didn't contribute to a gripping half – Whelan and Chris Brunt tested Marlon Beresford with long range efforts.

The visitors came out with more belief in the second half. Brunt had a freekick palmed over one-handed by Beresford and Graham

should have done better when put through by Brunt on the hour mark but he blasted wide when faced with just Beresford to beat.

Four minutes later Graham had clearly learned his lesson when he put Wednesday ahead with almost a carbon copy of his earlier chance. This time full back John Hills put the ball over the top and the Owls striker beat Chris Coyne for pace before beating Beresford with a well-placed volley.

It took just two minutes for Hatters to redress the balance when Howard and Nicholls linked up again. The skipper's cross into the box was aimed at the big target man who did well to rise above two Wednesday defenders and bag his, and Luton's, second of the night with a glancing header.

From then on it was all hands to the pumps for the Owls who put all ten outfield players behind the ball, but yet again the Yorkshire side had Lucas to thank for a world class save.

Dean Morgan drilled a cross into the six-yard box that beat everyone but Feeney at the far post who slid in. Somehow the busy 'keeper got a hand to the strike denying the Ulsterman the goal he so clearly deserved for a dedicated performance.

Carlos Edwards and Robinson all tried in vain late on to get the win and Coyne hit the foot of the post at the death with a header.

Next up for Luton is last season's beaten play off finalists Preston North End on Tuesday night

Newell said: "Preston will be difficult. They're good away from Deepdale and we'll have to be wary of them. But there's no need for the lads to be dejected after that performance."



Subs: Showunmi (Morgan '78'), Heikkinen (Davis '88')
Subs not used: Brill, Keane, Holmes

MAN OF THE MATCH

KEVIN NICHOLLS

The skipper is the heartbeat of this Luton side. If there's a better midfielder in the Championship – we've yet to see him



Never give up: Visiting boss Paul Sturrock praised the Luton players' determination, displayed here by Sol Davis, top and Ahmet Brkovic, below



Feel the four-ce: Steve Howard scored his third and fourth of the season

