

CRUEL TWIST HANDS VICTORY TO POTTERS

Luton2
Stoke3

CHRIS Coyne's own goal gifted Stoke the points at Kenilworth Road as the Potters completed a smash-and-grab raid on Luton.

The Hatters, who were once again without goalkeeper Marlon Beresford with a back problem, started at a high tempo with Kevin Nicholls and Carlos Edwards probing from midfield.

After nine minutes, Edwards' through-ball ran away from Steve Robinson before he could gather, while soon after, Nicholls had appeals for a penalty rightly turned down as he tussled with a defender in the box.

Despite that bright start, however, it was quarter-of-an-hour before either keeper had a save to make. Rowan Vine fired in the first shot as he cut in from the right but Steve Simonsen was equal to the test.

Stoke responded with a chance of their own as Mamady Sidibe crossed dangerously into the area where Paul Gallagher contrived to scuff his shot straight at defender Markus Heikkinen.

But in truth, it was far from inspiring and it took some sloppy defending from the Potters to gift Luton their lead after 20 minutes.

The visitors stood static as the ball drifted into the box from out wide and Ahmet Brkovic had time to pick his spot as he ghosted in at the back to thump home from 12-yards.

Stoke seemed to be missing the influence of top scorer Sambegou Bangoura — who along with Marlon Broomes and John Halls missed out through injury — as they struggled to break Luton down.

But in first half injury-time Gallagher put them back on level terms with a simple goal as keeper Dean Brill was beaten to the ball by Sidibe on the edge of the box and, when he rolled it goalwards, the on loan Blackburn striker won the

race to tap it home.

That could not hide the fact that Stoke had been well below par and at the break, Kevin Harper was sent on to replace Luke Chadwick.

Within eight minutes, however, it was Luton who were again forcing the pace as Edwards flung in a cross and Vine headed close.

Brkovic was beginning to pull the strings from midfield and when he teed up Nicholls after 61 minutes, the midfielder blazed over the crossbar, only for play to be hauled back for a free kick as Vine was crumpled on the edge of the area.

From the resulting set-piece Simonsen leapt across his line to turn Nicholls' curler away before Aussie ace Brkovic tormented the Potters again with 20 minutes left when he rose unmarked only to head against the crossbar.

With seven minutes left, it seemed as though Gallagher had nicked

it for the Potters when he latched onto a cross to strike home from six-yards. But then the game burst into life.

First a surging run from Steve Howard into the area saw him tumbled over by Karl Henry, allowing Nicholls to step up and send Simonsen the wrong way.

But there was still time for one last decisive twist as the ball was squared across the box and Coyne made his unwanted intervention.

05/06



AHMET BRKOVIC

Boskamp keen to keep goal hero

STOKE boss Johan Boskamp spoke of his hopes of keeping striker Paul Gallagher permanently with the Potters after his double against Luton.

Boskamp said: "Gallagher is staying for the season but as for signing him, I don't think we can afford to pay him — we're Stoke not Chelsea.

"Blackburn are already helping us pay part of his wages but I don't know whether he will stay here."

Boskamp added: "You need to have deep strikers who can hold the ball up and you also need to have players who can score and we have that in Gallagher and Sam Bangoura.

"Our secret away from home is that we just keep scoring one more goal than the other team!"

Luton manager Mike Newell said: "It was a travesty. We played some decent stuff in the first half and tried to force the game in the second period. But we got hit on the break.

"The own goal was a sickener but things haven't been going for us.

"That's the second time Stoke have beaten us and I think we've deserved more from each game.

"I'd like to come out after a game and be able to say we were lucky to win or that we didn't deserve the three points, but that hasn't happened to us yet."

Newell also defended 20-year-old goalkeeper Dean Brill, who was at fault for Stoke's own goal.

"I was disappointed with all the goals particularly the first goal but Brill's only a young goalkeeper and that is to be expected," he said.

"He made a similar mistake against Southampton last week but unless you put the youngsters in they will never learn or gain experience."