

STOKE SPIRIT HAUNTS THEM

LUTON TOWN ②
Brkovic 20,
Nicholls (pen) 87

STOKE CITY ③
Gallagher 45, 82,
Coyne o.g 90

Att: 8,296 Rating: ★★/★★★

05/06

IF STOKE were concerned about what would happen when Sammy Bangoura heads to the African Nations Cup next month, they need not worry.

Guinean forward Bangoura, who had scored seven times in the last six games, was missing yesterday because of suspension and the outcome was just the same: a thrilling, last-gasp victory achieved with a never-say-die attitude that could well take Stoke into the Premiership.

Luton had been one of the strongest teams in the division, but their slide has been mirrored by the climb of a Stoke side who have now won away from home seven times.

By **SIMON JAMES**

Bangoura's goals have been the foundation but without him, Paul Gallagher, the Scottish Under-21 striker, seized his moment.

In the first half, he miskicked the ball from a great chance but that knocked him into a shape where he scored twice and was a constant threat.

In the end, it was an own goal in the 92nd minute from Chris Coyne which gave Stoke the points and the celebrations as they confirmed their position in the top six.

It was a dull match which exploded with drama in the final seven minutes, when Stoke took the lead, lost it and then regained it again to provide themselves with a major fillip as the holiday season games beckon.

Instead of thinking about defending when Luton hit back at 2-2, they sensed a victory in the cold Bedfordshire air and they achieved it, to the delight of manager Johan Boskamp.

While there has been talk of him not staying with the club because of internal rows, the job he is doing might be proof they are more than on the right track.

He has acquired one of the best strikers in the country in Bangoura. But behind him, he has a strong squad — from the experience of Michael Duberry in defence to the hard-working midfielder player Dave Brammer.

Boskamp said: "We were much better as a team after the break and the ball went for us more."

When these sides met at the Britannia Stadium in August, Stoke won 2-1 — with a goal in

the final minute. "It must be our speciality to beat them like this," said Boskamp.

But it did not look like it would end this way, especially after Luton had taken the lead in the 20th minute.

Steve Simonsen, the Stoke goalkeeper, had seen his punch not travel as far as he would have liked and when the ball was sent back into the box, Steve Howard flicked it in on.

Rowan Vine tried and failed with an overhead attempt, but Croatian Ahmet Brkovic was on hand to drive the loose ball home from 10 yards.

Stoke drew level in the final minute of the first half. Luton goalkeeper Dean Brill sped from his line as Mamady Sidibe burst in, an error of judgement as the striker took the ball around him.

Even with the empty goal, his shot was not good, going across the six yard box where Gallagher met it to score.

Simonsen made a superb save to tip over Kevin Nicholls' free kick before Gallagher popped up to drive Stoke in front with seven minutes left.

But three minutes later, Howard was brought down in the area under a challenge from Karl Henry and Nicholls smashed home the penalty.

Stoke were not finished yet and their pressure paid off when Coyne turned the ball past Brill in the 92nd minute.

Angry Luton manager Mike Newell said: "It is a travesty because we did enough to win and played some decent stuff."

STAR MAN: KEVIN NICHOLLS (Luton)



STOKE CITY	DEFENSIVE BLOCK	DEFENSIVE CLEARANCE	SHOT ON TARGET	SHOT OFF TARGET	FOULS COMMITTED	FREE KICKS WON	CAUGHT OFFSIDE	CROSSES	LUTON TOWN	DEFENSIVE BLOCK	DEFENSIVE CLEARANCE	SHOT ON TARGET	SHOT OFF TARGET	FOULS COMMITTED	FREE KICKS WON	CAUGHT OFFSIDE	CROSSES
Underwood	-	-	-	1	1	3	-	1	Buxton	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-
Coyne	-	1	-	-	2	-	-	-	Hoefkens	-	-	-	-	1	2	-	-
Helkkinen	1	1	-	-	-	2	-	-	Duberry	-	-	-	-	1	2	-	-
Foley	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	Henry	-	-	-	-	2	3	-	-
Brkovic	-	-	1	-	2	-	-	1	Sigurdsson	-	-	1	-	5	-	1	-
Robinson	-	-	-	2	2	2	-	-	Brammer	-	-	1	2	-	-	-	-
Nicholls	-	-	2	-	-	4	-	1	Russell	-	-	-	-	3	1	-	-
Edwards	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	Chadwick	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-
Howard	-	1	3	2	3	3	-	4	Gallagher	-	-	4	-	3	-	4	-
Vine	-	-	2	-	3	2	1	-	Sidibe	-	-	-	-	1	3	-	2
SUBSTITUTES									SUBSTITUTES								
Feeney	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	Harper	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-
									Sweeney	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

KEEPER: Brill 2 saves (2 Catch)

42% POSSESSION 58%

KEEPER: Simonsen 10 saves (1 Tip Over, 9 Catch)

DUEL: Stoke's Darel Russell, left, and Luton's Kevin Nicholls

PICTURE: Action Images

LUTON TOWN

PLAYER RATINGS

DEAN BRILL 6/10

No chance with goal and though didn't have much to do, did everything asked

KEVIN FOLEY 7/10

Moved forward when he could and linked well with midfield

MARKUS HEIKKENEN 6/10

A superb presence, showing immense confidence and strength in air

CHRIS COYNE 6/10

A busy afternoon marking the pacy Sidibe, but did well against a tricky striker

PAUL UNDERWOOD 7/10

One of the best left-backs in the division, with control and fierce shot

STEVE ROBINSON 6/10

Got involved as much as he could but could have seen more ball

CARLOS EDWARDS 7/10

Always quick to set counter-attack going but didn't always get good support

KEVIN NICHOLLS 8/10

Involved from the start, calling for the ball and distributing it well

AHMET BRKOVIC 7/10

Took goal well but drifted in and out of game too often to make further mark

ROWAN VINE 7/10

A striker with a sense of the unexpected, looking to shoot whatever the angle

STEVE HOWARD 6/10

Flicked ball on well for Brkovic's goal but never presented with chance himself

SUBSTITUTES

Warren Feeney 75, 6

STOKE CITY

PLAYER RATINGS

STEVE SIMONSEN 6/10

His punch-out led to Luton's opener but saved well from Nicholl's free kick

KARL HENRY 7/10

Made amazing clearance with head to deny Howard and showed skill throughout

MICHAEL DUBERRY 6/10

A player with immense experience which was needed as Luton dominated second half

CARL HOEFKENS 6/10

Kept close to Vine which led to a long and tiring afternoon against a difficult striker

LEWIS BUXTON 6/10

Found himself out of position on occasions which Luton almost exploited

LUKE CHADWICK 6/10

Had a good first half but had been injured and didn't appear after break

DAREL RUSSELL 6/10

Often by-passed by the ball, but did slip into some good attacking positions

DAVE BRAMMER 6/10

Good link man who was as effective in the way he regularly dropped back

HANS SIGURDSSON 6/10

Wasted great chance to set up Gallagher from inside the area and relatively quiet

PAUL GALLAGHER 7/10

Missed great chance but then quickly on hand to score the equaliser

MAMADY SIDIBE 7/10

Has great presence and an awkwardness that works in his favour

SUBSTITUTES

Kevin Harper 45, 6; Peter Sweeney 75, 6

'It is a travesty because we did enough to win and played some decent stuff'

Mike Newell

'We were much better as a team after the break and the ball went for us more'

Johan Boskamp