



Luton Town FC

Luton 2 Stoke 3

TOM LEECH reports

from Kenilworth Road



Freak own goal does for Hatters

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STOKE City must have thought Christmas had come early as Luton defender Chris Coyne gifted them all three points with a freakish own goal in the dying moments of a see-saw match.

Hatters took the lead through Ahmet Brkovic's fifth goal of the season but a goalkeeping gaffe from Dean Brill allowed Stoke's on-loan striker Paul Gallagher to level the score at half time.

The away side got an unlikely lead late on when Gallagher grabbed his second but captain Kevin Nicholls' penalty seemed to have gained the Hatters a share of the spoils – until Coyne's toe-poke past his own keeper gave Stoke's travelling contingent plenty of festive cheer.

Town manager Mike Newell was understandably disappointed at the result having seen his side dominate for long periods but refused to point the finger of blame.

"It's a travesty," he said. "We deserved to win. We played some decent football but we've been done on the break. You can't say we weren't the better side and that we didn't deserve all three points. But we've got nothing – that's football."

Newell insisted his side, still in the play-off hunt although this win allowed Stoke to leapfrog the Hatters, had not yet seen a side they didn't feel they could beat – if things went their way. "I want to be able to say 'we've been fortunate there' but that hasn't happened so far this season," he lamented.

"The least we deserved was a point after 90 minutes but they won it with a freakish own goal. Stoke were fortunate today and they know that."

The Potters came into the game on the back of an impressive away campaign that had seen them win six away from the Britannia Stadium.

The Christmas punters were expecting a battle between Luton's top scorer Steve Howard and Stoke's imposing skipper Michael Duberry and after 21 minutes it was first blood to Howard with the big striker playing a pivotal role in Town's opener.

Carlos Edwards' throw in was headed out by the Stoke defence but pumped straight back in again for Howard to get on. He rose highest in the box out-muscling Duberry to lay the ball across for Vine on the penalty spot. His strike partner got the slightest of touches to knock it onto Brkovic who slammed the ball in from eight yards out giving Simonsen no chance.

But while Howard was winning his personal battle against Duberry at the other end Coyne was struggling to get to grips with Stoke's Mamady Sidibe. Moments before Luton's opener Sidibe skinned the Aussie centre half and drilled a low cross that Gallagher should have done better with but the Scotsman's weak effort was blocked.

That effort aside it was Luton who had the more clear cut chances – Vine had an early shot inside the penalty area that a well positioned Simonsen had to be alert to keep out and Steve Robinson had a volley that went just over the crossbar.

In fact Hatters deserved to go in at the



Nicholls shoots from the spot to level the score

break two goals up after Howard's improvised back heel from Nicholls' byline cross was clawed out by the Stoke keeper on 42 minutes but instead let the Potters back in the game with a silly goal just before the break.

Dave Brammer played a hopeful ball over the top for Sidibe to chase but the quickest person off the mark was Dean Brill who raced off his line. It was poor judgement from the rookie keeper as Sidibe rounded him with ease before playing the ball across for Gallagher – on a season long loan from Blackburn – to tap into an empty net.

Brill was in the starting line-up because of injury to Marlon Beresford but Newell insisted he'll keep faith with the 20-year-old shot stopper. "He's a young keeper – he made a similar mistake at Southampton last week but he's a decent goalkeeper and a good prospect. I'm quite prepared to throw

young players in – it's the only way they'll learn."

They were handing out complimentary mince pies at Kenilworth Road during half time but Stoke were not as obliging – their scrooge-like defence frustrating Luton at every turn in the second 45 minutes.

Vine had a free-header saved and Simonsen again came to the Potters rescue on 65 minutes when at full stretch he kept out a beautifully flighted Nicholls free kick.

Stoke showed their threat on the break moments later when yet again Brill mistakenly came off his line. Again Sidibe beat him to it leaving Brill in no-man's land but the angle was too tight for the Mali-born hitman to shoot so he teed up Hans Sigurdsson. Before the Iceman could get there Paul Underwood arrived in the nick of time to take it off his toes.

On 70 minutes Brkovic was denied his and Luton's second when his powerful header cannoned off the crossbar. The winger arrived late to latch onto Kevin Foley's cross after another exciting run from Edwards.

But while Hatters threw everything in pursuit of the winner it compromised at the back and Stoke took full advantage eight minutes from time. Again Sidibe was in the thick of it – squeezing in a right-wing cross that Gallagher swooped on and side-footed in at Brill's near post from close range.

Luton's response came from the penalty spot on 86 minutes when Stoke's defence finally buckled and defender Karl Henry bundled over Howard. Nicholls – suspended for Boxing Day's trip to Derby – took the spot kick belting the ball down the middle.

The equaliser felt justified as Hatters' second half dominance deserved something but in stoppage time Coyne's own goal made sure it wouldn't be a Merry Christmas for Newell's men.

An innocuous ball bounced into Brill's penalty area but it looked to be covered by Coyne who had Duberry for company as he jumped to clear. As they both landed the luckless defender seemed to have lost his bearings as he stuck out a boot, looping the ball over a stranded Brill with just seconds left.



Vine puts in a strong challenge

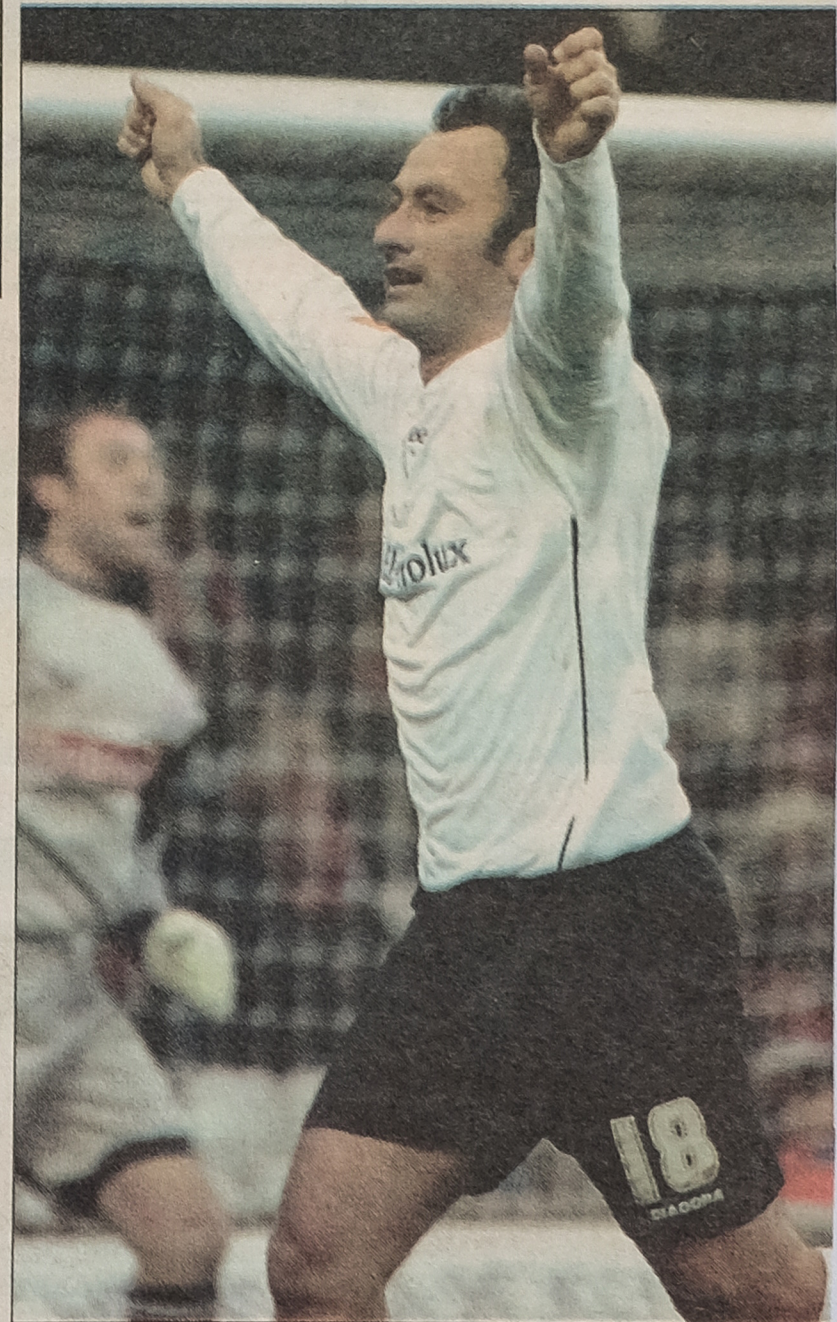


Subs: Feeney for Vine 75, Showunmi for Robinson 88
Subs not used: Beckwith, Barnett Holmes

MAN OF THE MATCH

Kevin Foley

The right back made several telling crosses and looked to attack whenever possible



Brkovic celebrates the opening goal