

A mighty Vine effort sees off Wednesday

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By BEN RUMSBY

TWO moments of magic from Rowan Vine finally ended Luton's miserable away run as they performed the perfect smash-and-grab raid at Sheffield Wednesday.

Having picked up only one point in nine games and four months on their Championship travels, it was no surprise to see the Hatters under pressure for much of the game.

But Wednesday failed to take their chances and Vine punished them twice in a matter of minutes at the start of the second half.

On transfer window deadline-day, there could hardly have been a greater contrast in

activity than between these two sides.

Luton's only arrival was David Bell from Rushden, and they picked an identical XI and substitutes bench from the derby win over QPR 10 days earlier.

Wednesday, meanwhile, named both their last day loan signings from Southampton in their squad, with midfielder Yoann Folly making the starting line-up.

Goalkeeper David Lucas also made his first league appearance for three months, following the end of Nicky Weaver's loan spell.

But it was one of their permanent January acquisitions who caught the eye early on, Marcus Tudgay drilling narrowly wide from the edge of the box before nodding over a John Hills cross.

In a lively start, Richard

Wood almost gifted Steve Howard his sixth goal in five games against Wednesday with a loose clearance, while Paul Underwood saw a shot cleared off the line — all inside the first five minutes.

The home side were attacking from all angles, and a wicked ball from Hills was begging to be headed in, but Wood was unable to oblige.

Despite only one point in their last nine away games, Luton looked confident on the break and Enoch Showunmi would have been through but for some last-ditch defending.

Hills really was pulling the strings for Wednesday, his slide-rule pass finding Deon Burton — whose deflected shot forced a scrambling save from Marlon Beresford.

It was a blow for the home

side therefore when he went down with an innocuous-looking injury shortly before the half-hour mark and was unable to continue, with Leon Best coming on for his second Owls debut following two games on loan in August.

Top scorer Chris Brunt did his best to open the scoring with a 25-yard piledriver that flew narrowly over just after the restart but it was Luton who took the lead from the spot moments later.

Vine set off on a brilliant run down the left, cutting inside by nutmegging Frankie Simek, before tempting Graham Coughlan into an ill-advised challenge. Kevin Nicholls converted the resulting penalty.

The offside flag came to Luton's rescue with Best clean through, but Vine was in prime form and he made it

2-0 with a fierce effort from the edge of the box — only his fourth goal of the season.

Burton O'Brien saw a stinging volley deflected over as Wednesday desperately tried to get back in the game.

However, Luton were looking lethal on the counter-attack and an incisive break was thwarted by the linesman, while Vine almost embarrassed Lucas with a cheeky finish from the tightest of angles.

Owls boss Paul Sturrock brought on Barry Corr, whose first effort at goal was little more than a back pass, while Burton had the ball in the net — though only with the use of his hand.

But Luton held on to record their first back-to-back wins since November, getting their play-off challenge back on track.