



Luton Town FC

Leeds 2-1 Luton
TOM LEECH reports
from Elland Road



Ton up for Howard but no consolation

NOT even Steve Howard's 100th goal in a Luton shirt could rescue a point for Town

Leeds United inflicted Hatters' 12th away defeat of the season, harsh on Mike Newell's men.

They should have had a penalty seconds before Robbie Blake grabbed United's opener when Sean Gegan handled in the box.

The referee waved away the protests and refused to discuss the decision after the game – much to the annoyance of Newell.

"Everyone in the ground knew it was a penalty," he said. "We all make mistakes but it seems referees don't have the same onus upon them to explain.

"The linesman was 15 yards away so why couldn't he have given it? The lad's arms were waving in the air. To top it all it was a double whammy as they went up the other end and scored."

Eddie Lewis got Leeds' second before Howard scored his momentous goal six minutes from time – how else but from where many of his previous 99 had come from – a trademark bullet header.

Newell admitted it counted for little: "It won't mean a lot to Howie to be honest. It's a fantastic achievement, especially as he's done it in such a quick time but I was willing him on to score his 101st."

No other side in the Championship has lost more on their travels and Luton's



cause was not helped by the absence of captain Kevin Nicholls and Markus Heikkinen – two of the most influential players this season – out with a hamstring injury and 'flu respectively.

Back from the treatment room came Paul Underwood who moved into the centre of midfield alongside converted full back Kevin Foley and Chris Coyne who took the skipper's armband.

They may have been missing some key personnel but Hatters started the opening 15 minutes brightly.

Enjoying long spells of possession

and with their makeshift midfield looking composed, Luton should have created more chances in front of goal.

Instead it was the home side who had the first effort of any note when USA international Lewis tested Marlon Beresford with a stinging low drive from just outside the box which Luton's veteran shot-stopper did well to palm around the post.

Had Foley seen Rowan Vine's cross earlier Luton would have taken the lead on 35 minutes. Vine had done the hard work on the left wing, twisting and turning before crossing into the box.

Foley's run was not quick enough to meet the ball and the stretched effort sailed over.

Hatters were almost made to pay for Foley's miss two minutes later when Blake's overhead kick teed up Rob Hulse from six yards out. But Beresford was quick to dive at the feet of the Leeds forward and prevent him from striking the ball.

The last chance of the half fell to Brkovic on 37 minutes when the Croatian spurned the time he had on the ball on the edge of the box by rushing his shot which fizzed past Neil Sullivan in the Leeds goal but went inches wide.

Leeds' right back Gary Kelly, making

his 500th appearance for the Yorkshire club, carved out an opportunity almost straight from the restart. His marauding run got him to the bye-line before he crossed for an un-marked Blake whose header went way off target.

But Blake did find the back of the net on 49 minutes – although his goal came in controversial circumstances. Inside United's box Howard lobbed the ball over his marker – and the last man – Gegan who appeared to handle the ball. The crowd fell silent expecting a penalty but the referee and his linesman thought otherwise allowing play to carry on.

To rub salt into the wounds at the other end Blake cut inside and slotted home from 18 yards to put Leeds one up.

If Luton felt harshly treated with Leeds' first – they had no-one to blame but themselves for United's second four minutes later.

Hulse was allowed to bully his way into the penalty box brushing aside his marker Leon Barnett with ease. The burly striker then managed to squeeze his cross in-between Barnett and his goalkeeper and Lewis was allowed to slide the ball into an empty net as Hatters were left dumbfounded.

After seeing his side capitulate, Newell made a double substitution on

64 minutes, introducing Enoch Showunmi and ex-Leeds player Warren Feeney to liven up an attack that had produced precious little in the second half.

Feeney nearly broke free of the defence on 80 minutes when he latched on to a Vine through ball but as he shaped to shoot from 25 yards he was cynically hacked down by defender Jonathan Douglas who was rightly booked.

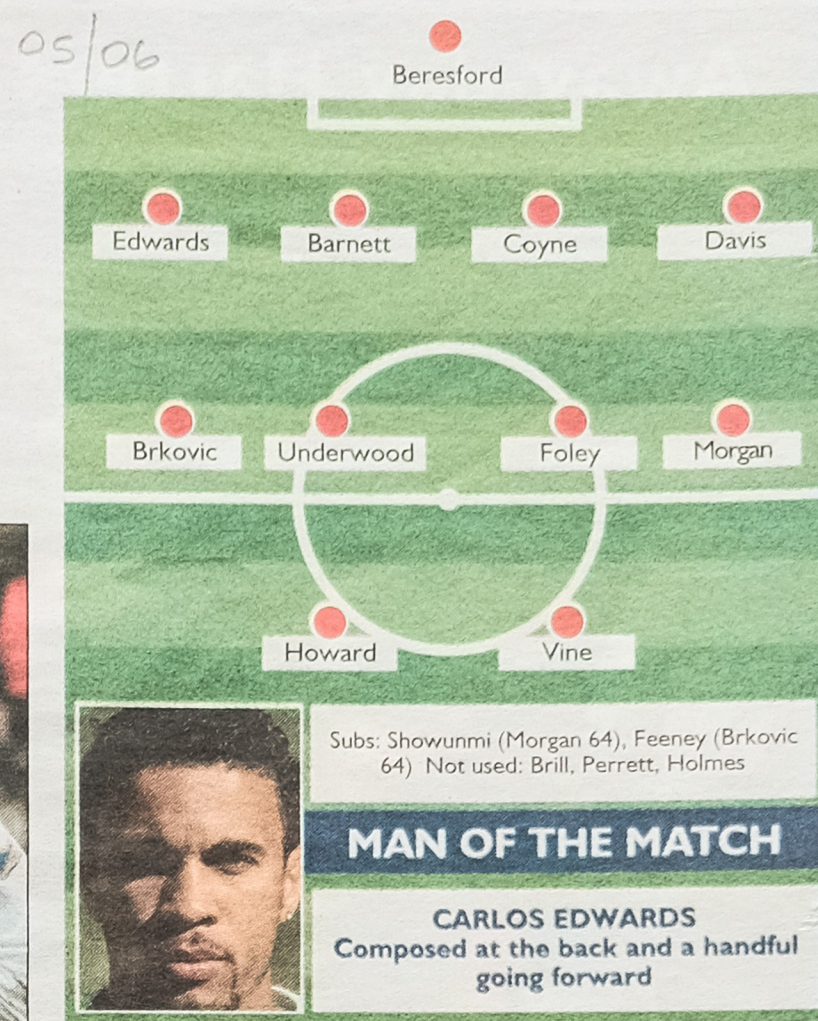
Justice was done moments later when Hatters pulled a goal back through Howard.

The pressure had been building as Luton flooded forward in numbers and with men in the box to aim for Underwood swung in a cross for Howard who crept between two markers to head in his 12th of the season.

Celebrations were muted as Hatters picked the ball out from the back of the net and hurried back for the restart.

But all hopes of snatching a point vanished in the final minute when Sol Davis saw red.

Kelly knocked the ball past the Luton left back and looked to have him beaten for pace before Davis blocked him in full flight earning his second yellow card with which he can have no complaint.



■ Rowan Vine on the ball at Elland Road yesterday, where the Hatters suffered their 12th away defeat of the season to dim their hopes of a play-off place



■ Leon Barnett in the thick of the action

X-Factor for football comes to Luton

IF you think you're more skilful than David Beckham now's your chance to prove it. Auditions for the UK's very first keepy uppy team are coming to Luton on Saturday, March 4.

Try-outs are taking place across the country and hopefuls will audition in front of a panel of judges including Premiership coaches, scouts, ex-pros and agents to become a member of the 100-strong freestyler squad that

will be touring the UK later in the year.

And for the member of the freestyler team that is crowned 'King or Queen of Keepy Uppy' there's a once in a lifetime opportunity to go on a training weekend with some of the world's best players, including Steven Gerrard, Robbie Keane, Roberto Carlos and Freddie Ljungberg.

The audition will take place at the Play Football Soccer Centre in

Luton at 9am. Twenty people will go through to the national final on May 7. Entrants must be 16 or over and bring soft-soled footwear as well as a football they are comfortable with.

For full address details log on to www.playfootball.net

For more information contact Rosanne Snee or Fiona Alexander at GCI on 020 7072 4000 or email rsnee@gciuk.com or faalexander@gciuk.com