



Luton Town FC

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TOM LEECH reports

from Kenilworth Road



Hatters foiled by late equaliser

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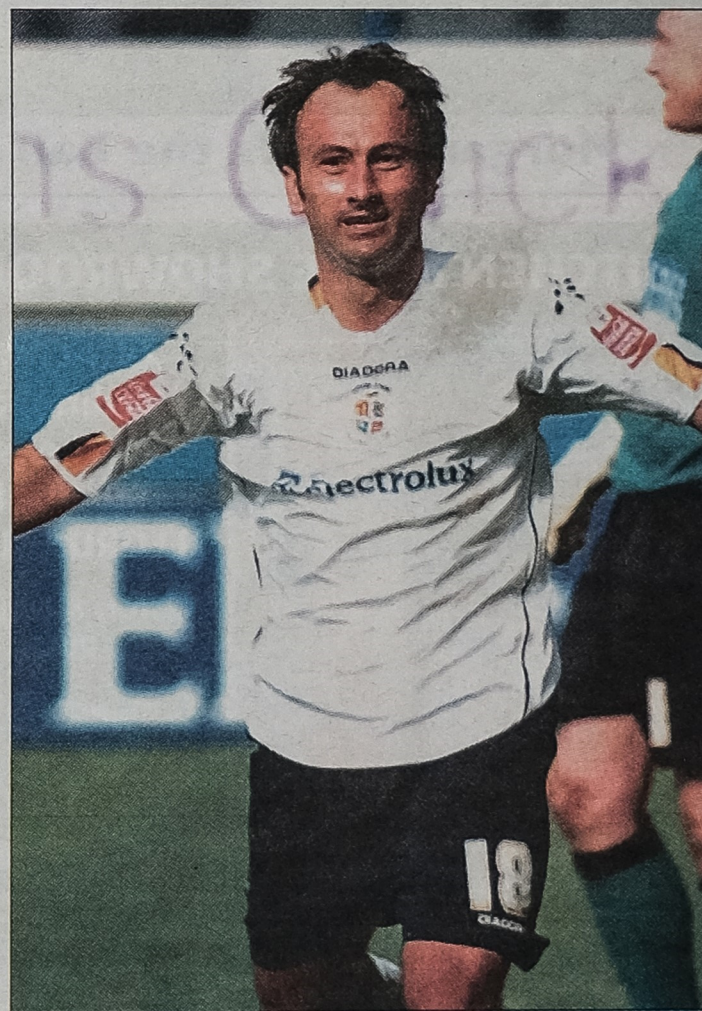


Subs: Bell for Holmes, 62, Nicholls for Morgan, 72
Subs not used: Brill, Stevens, Andrew

MAN OF THE MATCH

Leon Barnett

The defender nullified Akinbiyi's threat with a determined display at the back



Steve Howard applauds Brkovic's (right) goal and, below, Brkovic heading home

THE late goal curse that has dogged Luton's away form struck again on the final home game of the season at Kenilworth Road.

Ahmet Brkovic's second half header looked to have signed off Luton's home campaign with a win against newly-promoted Sheffield United but a minute from time a Michael Tonge free kick denied Hatters all three points – a scenario all too familiar for Town fans and boss Mike Newell.

"It pretty much summed up our season – we dominated for large parts of the game, had chances to win it but didn't," he lamented.

"We played the better stuff, no-one can deny that. I know Sheffield United are promoted so they may have taken their foot off the pedal but we had them beat. It's so annoying when you concede in the last minutes."

Brkovic also missed a penalty in the second half when Rowan Vine blazed over but Newell had nothing but praise for his patched-up side.

"I'm pleased with all the lads," he said. "The fact they're still going after 45 games shows their hunger. We've lost key players to injury and had to blood youngsters in difficult matches but we've held our own in this league."

"We've gone up a level and if we can add quality to the squad here and there we can get closer to those play offs."

There have been some absolutely brilliant games played at Kenilworth Road this season however on the first half showing this wasn't shaping up

to be one of them.

Neither side created any clear chances of any note and both goalkeepers were relatively untested in a dull opening 45 minutes made up of hopelessly off target long shots.

United's Chris Armstrong started the wayward shooting when his 25 yard effort sailed over early on and for Luton Enoch Showunmi's header wide from a good position didn't worry Paddy Kenny in the United goal.

The away side's only shot on target came 34 minutes in when Armstrong ball through almost put Bruce Dyer through. But hassled by Hatters top scorer Howard – who was forced to play in defence again – the ex-Watford striker hit a weak toe poke at Beresford.

Wicked

Showunmi hit a shot well wide and Carlos Edwards followed suit before Hatters almost came close to breaking the deadlock just before half time. Dean Morgan's wicked, curling free kick found its way to Leon Barnett at the far post. The young defender's point blank header forced a good reaction save from Kenny, and as Barnett sped to meet the ball his momentum carried him straight into the away end and an unwanted chance to get up close and personal with the travelling Blades fans.

United started the second half brightly forcing four successive corners but it was Luton who should have gone ahead on 53 minutes when Armstrong conceded a penalty. The midfielder seemed to miss the ball and cut down Vine in the box and the linesman was in no doubt what the outcome was.

The former Portsmouth striker

took the spot kick himself and in keeping with the game proceeded to blaze the ball well over the crossbar.

Peter Holmes almost made up for Vine's miss five minutes later when he burst into the Blades' penalty area. He had to make space for his shot and got it away but it was straight at the imposing frame of Kenny.

At the other end substitute Simon Francis' low driving cross went right across goal, somehow missing fellow sub Jonathan Forte, Ade Akinbiyi and Armstrong.

But that chance aside it was all Luton and on 72 minutes they finally made their dominance pay. Hatters' sub David Bell's deep cross picked out an unmarked Brkovic from eight yards out and the Croatian's header – his eighth of the season – left Kenny stranded.

Warren Feeney almost added a second moments later when his powerful run left United's defenders trailing and his shot had Kenny scrambling across goal to palm wide.

The biggest cheer of the game came with the introduction of Luton captain Kevin Nicholls. The inspirational skipper who, after picking up an injury in March was expected to be out for the season, came on as a second half sub and so nearly completed a dream comeback on 86 minutes. When Feeney was cynically fouled on the edge of the box Nicholls stepped up to take the free-kick which beat the wall and Kenny but cannoned off the crossbar.

To make matters worse Tonge ensured it was honours even in front of the sell out crowd when his free-kick did hit the target in the 89th minute. Although a little closer than Nicholls' effort the England U21 international made no mistake bending the ball around Marlon Beresford to give United an undeserved point.

