

Tonge's magic moment robs Luton nearly men

05/06

LUTON

Brkovic (72)

SHEFFIELD UTD

Tonge (90)

By Daniel King

MICHAEL TONGE robbed Luton of victory with a fabulous last-minute free-kick as Sheffield United's promotion party continued in the sun.

With actor Sean Bean, a United director, in the crowd, Neil Warnock's team could have done with the derring-do of his TV persona *Sharpe* in a lacklustre display.

Warnock is so happy that the end of the season is in sight that he could afford to laugh off the second-half penalty awarded against his captain Chris Morgan by a linesman — and put over the bar by Rowan Vine.

'I'm just glad the game's over and the season is over,' he said. 'It was a quality goal for the equaliser and there's not much more to say. Apart from that, the highlight for me was putting on suncream at half-time.'

Luton seemed set to take full advantage of United's demob-happy mood when their control of the game was finally rewarded with an Ahmet Brkovic goal with 18 minutes to go.

But Mike Newell's side failed to protect their lead, Tonge scoring brilliantly from 20 yards after Chris Armstrong had been fouled by the otherwise flawless Luton captain, Steve Howard.

For Luton manager Newell, the late equaliser summed up a season in which the club will wonder what might have been had resources and better finishing allowed them to build on a great start.

He said: 'We should have won. We created the chances but did not finish them off, and that is the story of our season.'

The only absorbing contest of a wretched first half took place in the stands as the rival fans traded insults. 'Going up, going up, going up,' sang the 1,800 who had travelled down the M1. 'Straight back down, straight back down, straight back down,' came the Luton retort.

If this had been a game of any significance, it would have been hard to disagree with the Luton fans' verdict on United's Premiership prospects.

Warnock's team looked as if they were already on the sunshine break in Europe they flew off to enjoy last night. Only wayward shooting and a poor final ball prevented the home

side from making their superiority count. Vine squandered a golden chance nine minutes into the second half when he fired the penalty he had won well over the bar.

Brkovic headed Luton in front from Keith Keane's left-wing cross and Luton might have had more, Warren Feeney forcing a save from Paddy Kenny and stand-in centre back Howard hitting the bar with a free-kick.

But in the dying moments Howard halted Armstrong's run with a foul which earned a booking and Tonge made him pay for his tired challenge with a wonderful set-piece strike which curled beyond the reach of Marlon Beresford.

LUTON (4-4-2): Beresford; Edwards, Barnett, Howard, Keane; Brkovic, Showunmi, Holmes (Bell 62min), D Morgan (Nicholls 73); Feeney, Vine. Subs (not used): Brill, Stevens, Andrew. Booked: Howard.

SHEFF UTD (4-4-2): Kenny; Gillespie, Lucketti, C Morgan, Unsworth (Forte 45); Geary (Short 81), Tonge, Jagielka, Armstrong; Dyer (Francis 62), Akinbiyi. Subs (not used): Shipperley, Webber. Booked: Dyer, Lucketti. Referee: R Olivier (W Midlands).



TURNING POINT: Michael Tonge swings in a free-kick to level the match for Sheffield United in the dying moments Picture: JIM STEELE