

Bell's strike can't halt Hatters slide

by Carl Field

A MUCH improved second half performance from the Hatters almost sparked a memorable comeback, but it was Town's defensive frailties that once again let them down again in Carlisle.

Luton would have been disappointed with the manner in which they gifted the home side two goals in the first half, but were much better after the break, and almost grabbed a deserved point after David Bell's second half strike had given them a lifeline.

Youth team graduate Ryan Charles was handed his first senior start in place of Drew Talbot and was one of three changes from the weekend's dismal 2-0 defeat at Southend.

Sol Davis and Lewis Emanuel came in for Alan Goodall (groin) and Steve Robinson (illness) respectively, as the Hatters squared up against a side looking to extend their remarkable run of 12 straight home wins.

Luton started brightly and came close to scoring in the 12th minute when Bell brilliantly dispossessed Grant Smith in the centre of mid-field and ran towards the opposition box, before flashing a shot just over the crossbar.

However, the visitors had to be alert a minute late, when Simon Hackney got on the end of David Raven's cross from the right, and his left-footed volley from eight yards forced a good save out of Dean Brill.

The Hatters stopper then had to be at his best again on 20 minutes to turn Grant Smith's drive round the post for a corner.

That save though was just a stay of execution for the Hatters, with United taking the lead from Marc Bridge-Wilkinson's corner.

Some shoddy Town defending allowed unmarked Carlisle skipper Danny Livesey time and room to fire his side in from close range.

Shellshocked by the goal, Luton allowed the Cumbrians to immedi-



Picture by Gareth Owen

BACK ON SONG: Luton Town's goalscorer David Bell fires in a rasping shot in the first half

Carlisle 2 Luton 1

ately hit them on the counter. Brill was doing his utmost to keep his side in the game and foiled efforts from Peter Murphy and Hackney in quick succession. But he will have to take his share of the blame for Carlisle's second goal on 29 minutes when, after attempting to come out and punch Chris Lumsdon's cross from the

right, Murphy easily beat him to it and headed into an empty net. Hatters tried in vain to get themselves back into the game and had another half chance when, from Bell's inswinging corner, Matthew Spring's shot was blocked and the ball fell to the feet of Keith Keane. But, unfortunately for the young skipper, his shot was wide of the mark. And Paul McVeigh's wild effort just before the break summed up a dismal opening half for Mick Harford's men.

Luton came out for the second period a completely different prospect altogether and were undoubtedly the better side in the opening exchanges. And they handed themselves a lifeline on 51 minutes when Richard Jackson's surging run and cross found veteran striker Paul Furlong in the box and, although he was beaten to it, the ball was only half cleared to Bell, who buried an unstoppable low drive into the bot-

CARLISLE UNITED



Unused subs: Howarth, Arison

LUTON TOWN



Unused subs: Hutchison, Currie, Beavan

Referee: Graham Laws (Tyne & Wear)

Attendance: 5,489

tom corner from 25 yards. Hatters then had a glorious opportunity to level just two minutes later, but Furlong just couldn't keep his shot down from the edge of the box. The frustrated home fans were beginning to get restless and Carlisle should have wrapped the game up just before the hour mark when they whipped in a dangerous ball across the face of the goal, but Keane intervened with a last-ditch clearance. Three minutes later, McVeigh forced a decent save out of Keiren Westwood with a stinging right footed shot from long range. Harford went for broke in the closing stages, throwing on strike duo Drew Talbot and Sam Parkin in a desperate attempt to salvage a point, but it was all to no avail. Despite leaving Brunton Park with nothing, Luton can take a lot of heart from their drastically improved second half performance.

STAR HATTER David Bell. Almost back to his very best.