

Hatters quaking in their boots

GAP AT THE BOTTOM GETS WIDER AS HARFORD'S MEN CONCEDE LAST-MINUTE GOAL

LUTON TOWN FC

LEAGUE TWO
LUTON TOWN 1
Gnakpa, 31,
DARLINGTON 2
Clarke, 15, Blundell, 90,

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TOOTHLESS Luton Town surrendered a point in the final minute as Darlington made them pay for another uninspiring home performance.

The Hatters remain rooted to the bottom of the table and in danger of losing touch with their fellow strugglers after Quakers' substitute Greg Blundell stole the win on an afternoon when Hatters didn't convert their possession into chances.

Luton fell behind to Billy Clarke's opener but came back to level through Claude Gnakpa's first goal since his summer move to Kenilworth Road.

But Mick Harford's young side were taught a tough lesson at the death when Blundell pounced on some hesitant defending to leave Luton with just one win at home this campaign.

The day's international fixtures had robbed Darlington of their influential midfielder Franz Burgmeier and half their away support.

Some Quakers fans had made the pilgrimage to the Millennium Stadium to cheer on the Liechtenstein national team starring Burgmeier against Wales but those diehards who made the 430 mile round trip to Kenilworth Road were rewarded a quarter of an hour in.

Rob Purdie's near-post free kick tempted Conrad Logan to come off his line and collect but Clarke got there first and diverted the ball into an empty net to give the visitors the lead.

It fell on Luton's own foreign import to level things up on 32 minutes as Hatters made their pressure pay. Gnakpa was brought down by a crude challenge from Tim Ryan that earned the Darlo defender a yellow card and Luton a goal.

Rossi Jarvis provided the pin-point free kick and Hatters' flying French full back leapt above the crowd to power a header into the top corner.

Luton should have gone in front five minutes later when new signing Garreth O'Connor and the impressive Jake Howells carved open Darlington's defence and slipped Chris Martin through.

The finish was disappointing however as the Hatters' striker smashed his shot straight at the diving body of Simon Brown.

Boss Harford began the game with just one change from the side that won a thrilling Johnstone's Paint Trophy tie against Tuesday night with Keith Keane replacing Ryan Charles.

Keane's inclusion left just one



HEADS UP: Asa Hall wins a high ball in midfield for the Hatters against Darlington yesterday

recognised striker on the pitch in Martin and too often the on-loan Norwich City player cut a lonely figure up front.

Midfielders Asa Hall and Jarvis tried to get forward as much as possible but for a home side Luton didn't pose much of an attacking threat.

Harford tried to remedy this 58 minutes in by bringing on striker Charles and winger Marc Pugh as Hatters went for the precious three points.

Pugh immediately brought some purpose to Luton and delivered a swirling cross for Martin that the striker hit well but straight at the rooted Brown.

With all the early second half play it was easy to forget about a very capable Darlington side who reminded Hatters of their abilities when Purdie finished a 40-yard run with a stinging shot that clipped the top of Logan's crossbar.

It prompted a fightback from the Quakers as goalscorer Clarke almost turned provider when his cross for Liam Hatch was criminally wasted with a wayward header from the striker.

Logan did well to block substitute Blundell's fierce drive as Luton began to look a bad bet for a

point, let alone three.

With that nagging predictability Luton surrendered their share of the spoils when Blundell punished some tired defending in the final minute.

Hatters failed to deal with successive corners and Darlington's Blundell pounced as, from a throw-in, the ball

dropped in the area and he fired into the top of the net from ten yards.

To rub salt in the wounds Hatters hit the post in injury time. Harry Worley drove forward from defence and played in Hall just inside the box. His curled finish beat Brown but not the frame of the goal.

The stats

FOOTBALL LEAGUE TWO

Friday				
Dag & Red	2	Barnet	0	
Lincoln City	1	Rochdale	1	
Yesterday				
Acc'ton St'ley	2	Bradford	3	
Bournemouth	0	Rotherham	0	
Bury	0	Exeter	1	
Chesterfield	1	Chester	1	
Gillingham	5	Morecambe	0	
Grimsby	1	Wycombe	1	
Luton	1	Darlington	2	
Macclesfield	4	Aldershot	2	
Shrewsbury	1	Port Vale	2	

THE SQUAD

Logan; Asafu-Adjaye (Charles '58'), Worley, Spillane, Howells; Gnakpa, Jarvis, Hall, Keane, O'Connor (Pugh '58'); Martin. Subs: Brill, Roper, McVeigh

LEAGUE TWO TABLE

TEAM	P	W	D	L	F	A	W	D	L	F	A	GD	PTS
1 WYCOMBE	10	3	2	0	7	3	3	2	0	5	1	8	22
2 DAG & RED	10	3	2	0	13	2	3	0	2	9	6	14	20
3 BRADFORD	10	3	1	1	10	6	3	0	2	9	7	6	19
4 BURY	10	3	1	1	6	3	2	3	0	10	7	6	19
5 SHREWSBURY	10	4	0	1	15	2	1	3	1	5	5	13	18
6 BRENTFORD	9	3	2	0	8	2	2	1	1	2	1	7	18
7 EXETER	10	2	1	2	7	5	3	1	1	8	6	4	17
8 GILLINGHAM	10	4	0	1	10	1	1	1	3	4	14	-1	16
9 DARLINGTON	10	2	2	1	8	5	2	1	2	10	6	7	15
10 ALDERSHOT	10	3	2	0	11	8	1	0	4	5	10	-2	14
11 ROCHEDALE	10	2	1	2	6	6	1	3	1	6	6	0	13
12 NOTTS COUNTY	9	1	3	0	5	4	1	3	1	7	7	1	12
13 MACCLESFIELD	10	2	0	3	7	15	2	0	3	5	8	-11	12
14 CHESTERFIELD	10	1	1	3	3	6	2	1	2	7	8	-4	11
15 LINCOLN CITY	10	1	3	1	6	6	1	1	3	4	6	-2	10
16 PORT VALE	10	1	0	4	5	11	2	1	2	7	6	-5	10
17 CHESTER	10	1	2	2	7	7	1	2	2	6	12	-6	10
18 MORECAMBE	10	1	2	2	6	8	0	3	2	4	10	-8	8
19 ACC'TON ST	10	1	1	3	6	8	1	0	4	4	8	-6	7
20 BARNET	10	1	1	3	5	8	1	0	4	3	12	-12	7
21 GRIMSBY	10	0	2	3	2	6	0	2	3	3	13	-14	4
22 ROTHERHAM	10	4	1	0	11	4	1	3	1	4	3	8	2
23 BOURMOUTH	10	1	2	2	4	4	1	2	2	7	9	-2	-7
24 LUTON	10	1	2	2	7	8	2	1	2	4	4	-1	-18

Post match...

IT is back to the drawing board for Hatters manager Mick Harford who saw Luton's double header of home games get off to a heartbreaking start.

"We had to win today," he said. "I'd set a target of six points in the next two games. But we'll start again on the training ground on Monday.

"We need wins. We're at a vital time of the season and we have a calamitous injury list.

"We have one striker who's fully fit. If we had two I'd play them but that's no excuse for being beaten.

"I think it's been well documented we have a young team with a lot of our experienced players out through injury.

"They're young kids who will become good players - I've no doubt about that. We didn't deserve to lose but the manner of Darlington's goals was disappointing.

"You have to be vigilant and stick together but we were sloppy at the the end - maybe it's naivety. We've got to cut out giving sloppy goals away."

One player who didn't disappoint was 17-year-old Jake Howells who Harford described as 'exceptional - the best player on the pitch'.

With his boss's endorsement ringing in his ears Howells admitted: "It's good for my confidence to hear the manager talk like that.

"I didn't expect the praise but wanted to show the fans I'm ready for the first team and show with all the injuries I can step in."

Captain Keith Keane also bemoaned the busy treatment room at Kenilworth Road and added: "We're dying to win out there and get to nought as soon as possible.

"If we can get there by Christmas I believe we've got a good chance of staying up."

MAN OF THE MATCH



JAKE HOWELLS

Another bright prospect from the Town conveyor belt

MATCH FACTS

SHOTS ON TARGET

LUTON 4 DARLINGTON 4

SHOTS OFF TARGET

LUTON 6 DARLINGTON 3

BOOKINGS

LUTON: -

DARLINGTON: Ryan, 31, Austin, 63, Hatch, 73

REFEREE: James Linington (Isle of Wight)

ATTENDANCE: 5,560