

Jake's just great as Hatters capitulate

Luton Town 1 Darlington 2

A MATURE and accomplished performance from left-back Jake Howells was the only real plus point for the Hatters as Darlington darted in at the death to snatch victory at Kemilworth Road on Saturday, writes Mark Wood.

And the 17-year-old admitted he was determined to put in a fine showing on his first league start.

He said: "It was a surprise to me. I wanted to show the fans how good I am and that I can actually play in the first team."

"I knew I had to play well because the fans needed a performance from the team and I wanted to step up and show I could do it when there are injuries."

"I have to do well if I'm going to keep playing in the first team and progress to the higher leagues. Injuries are not a good thing but I have got to take my chances."

Robbed of their most experienced players, a late Greg Blundell strike capped a frustrating afternoon for the Hatters who had battled so hard throughout, and had earlier cancelled out Billy Clarke's strike through Claude Gnaka's header.

And Howells admitted that the late goal knocked the stuffing out of the club's youngsters.

He said: "I was disappointed when the goal went in because we worked so hard as a team."

"We probably need a leader at the back and somebody who can push us on and keep us on a high line."

"Everyone was disappointed and everyone wanted to get a point at least and we knew we could have won with Asa Hall hitting the bar."

Howells attracted great praise from manager Mick Harford and revealed he was set to celebrate his first league start - despite being too young to drink.

He said: "It's good for my confidence. You can't ask for much more - especially when it's Mick Harford."

"I'm probably going to have a few



TALENTED: Claude Gnaka celebrates his first Luton goal, above, and Asa Hall goes close, right, but Town still went down at home to visitors Darlington



J2Os."

And he admitted that he feels the added pressure of there having been so many good players to have come through Town's youth ranks.

He added: "When I saw Springy and stuff go to clubs I thought this is my chance. Because of the young players that have come through like Leon Barnett and Curtis Davies I've got to show I can do it."

A lack of strikers restricted Luton to playing just one up front, a fact that ultimately cost them dear.

Captain Keith Keane headed over Rossi Jarvis' corner after 12 minutes, when he probably should have done better, before they were dealt a hammer blow three minutes later when the visitors took the lead.

Ed Asafu-Adjaye gave away a pointless free-kick on the right and Rob Purdie's cross was met at the front post by Clarke who easily turned the ball past the exposed Conrad Logan.

This strike seemed to wake the Hatters from their slumber and Hall's speculative long range effort on 20 minutes easily looped over the stranded Simon Brown, but sadly dipped wide of the right-hand upright.

Frenchman Gnaka, though, levelled the scores on 31 minutes when he sent a powerful glancing header from Jarvis' free-kick into the top left-hand corner of the net for his first Hatters goal.

And Town should have been in front with a beautiful flowing move six minutes later. Howells' lovely inside pass set Chris Martin free inside the box, but his close range effort was well saved by Brown.

Substitutes Ryan Charles and Marc Pugh injected some life into Luton after the break and they almost seized the lead on 66 minutes, but Jarvis could only fire Howells' great cross straight at Brown.

As the game opened up, Purdie roasted Harry Worley down the right, before clipping the bar with a great 20-yard effort. Darlo went close again with just 15 minutes left when Liam Hatch headed the lively Clarke's cross just wide.

Substitute Ryan Charles and Michael Spillane should have both done better with close range headers in the closing stages, while sandwiched in-between, Darlo sub Blundell burst into Luton's box and forced a decent stop from Logan with a ferocious drive.

But the Quakers snatched it in the dying moments with a great strike from Blundell. Jason Kennedy's pass from a quick throw released Blundell and he made no mistake as he ripped the net from 10 yards out.

Luton still had one last chance to level when Worley's surging run opened up the heart of Darlo's defence, but Hall's effort rattled the bar and the Quakers cleared the danger.

WHAT MICK MADE OF IT

INJURY-HIT Hatters had to win on Saturday, according to Luton boss Mick Harford.

The Town manager was proud of the way his young side battled, but was left to lament his ever-growing injury list.

He said: "I think it has been well documented that we have a young team. The majority of our experienced players are out through injury. That's a massive, massive thing to deal with and I just think they are young kids who will be good players but unfortunately they've been thrown into a situation where they deserve a bit of guidance."

On the result and winning goal, Harford said: "I don't think we deserved to lose today but to give two goals away in the way we did is very disappointing."

"You've got to be vigilant and hang in there when you come into the last minutes of the game."

"We've been sloppy defending a throw-in and the guy has got in there."

And Harford revealed if he had had any option he would never have played with just one striker up front.

He said: "We've got one striker who is fully fit. If we had had two who are fully fit we would play two."

"If Ryan (Charles) had played games he would play, but he is not 100 per cent fit."

Harford also once again praised young left-back Jake Howells who put in a phenomenal performance for a 17-year-old, but was left to rue his side's inexperience.

He said: "Young Jake Howells was exceptional. He was the best player on the pitch, but the position we are in we need to win games."

"It's irrelevant what age they are and what experience they've got."

"At a vital stage of the season we've got a calamitous injury list. We've got to cut giving sloppy goals away - we created enough chances."

"We had to win. It sets us back a bit, but we will bounce back."

Harford also praised the vocal support from the Hatters faithful, adding: "These fans are brilliant."

"They've been through a lot of shit the last couple of years."

"They deserve better and we are trying to give them better."



STAR HATTER Jake Howells. The 17-year-old was just outstanding

There's a long way to go: the 2008/09 season in full

AUG	Opponents	Score	Scorers	Att	Pos
Sat 9	PORT VALE	1-3	Parkin 35	7,149	24
Tue 12	PLYMOUTH (LGCP)	2-0	Jarvis 15, Plummer 77	2,682	-
Sat 16	Gillingham	1-0	Parkin 3	5,339	24
Sat 23	NOTTS COUNTY	1-1	Martin 49	6,085	24
Tue 26	Reading (LGCP)	1-5	Charles 81	7,498	-
Sat 30	Exeter City	1-0	Parkin 47	5,328	24
SEP					
Sat 6	Macclesfield	1-2	Charles 90	2,349	24
Sat 13	ALDERSHOT TN	3-1	Spillane 17, Hall 89, Martin 90	6,462	24
Sat 20	Rotherham	0-1		4,095	24
Sat 27	CHESTER CITY	1-1	Hall 41	5,731	24
OCT					
Sat 4	Bradford City	1-1	Spillane 86	13,083	24
Tues 7	BRENTFORD (JP 2)	2-2	Martin 39, 55 (won 4-3 on pens)	2,029	-
Sat 11	DARLINGTON	1-2	Gnaka 31	5,560	24
Sat 18	ACCRINGTON				
Tue 21	Grimby Town				
Sat 25	Bury				
Tues 28	BOURNEMOUTH				
NOV					
Sat 1	Shrewsbury				
Sat 15	DAGENHAM & RED				
Sat 22	Rochdale				
Tue 25	BRENTFORD				
DEC					
Sat 6	BARNET				
Sat 13	Wycombe				
Sat 20	MORECAMBE				
Fri 26	Chesterfield				

DEC	Opponents	Score	Scorers	Att	Pos
Sun 28	LINCOLN CITY				
JAN					
Sat 3	Chester City				
Sat 10	ROTHERHAM				
Sat 17	Darlington				
Sat 24	BRADFORD CITY				
Tue 27	Bournemouth				
Sat 31	BURY				
FEB					
Tue 3	GRIMSBY TOWN				
Sat 7	Accrington				
Sat 14	Dagenham & Red				
Sat 21	SHREWSBURY				
Sat 28	Port Vale				
MAR					
Tue 3	GILLINGHAM				
Sat 7	EXETER CITY				
Tue 10	Notts County				
Sat 14	Aldershot Town				
Sat 21	MACCLESFIELD				
Sat 28	Morecambe				
APR					
Sat 4	WYCOMBE				
Sat 11	Lincoln City				
Mon 13	CHESTERFIELD				
Sat 18	Barnet				
Sat 25	ROCHDALE				
MAY					
Sat 2	Brentford				

Plummer heads home to Bristol

HATTERS: On-loan Bristol City winger Tristan Plummer has returned to the Championship outfit.

Manager Mick Harford said: "Tristan Plummer has returned to Bristol City and I thank Gary Johnson for his kindness. They let us have him free."

