

'This result has knocked the stuffing out of us'

LUTON TOWN 1
Craddock 39

EXETER CITY 2
Stansfield 4, Sercombe 29

League Two
Kenilworth Road

BY TOM LEECH
sport@lsnmedia.co.uk

LUTON Town manager Mick Harford admitted that Saturday's defeat may have been one knock-back too many for the beleaguered club.

Coming into a double header of home fixtures unbeaten in four and winning a place at the Johnstone's Paint Trophy, it was crucial the Hatters took maximum points from the games against Gillingham and Exeter to stand a fighting chance of beating the drop.

Instead, they recorded just a single point while teams around them compounded the misery by putting more distance between themselves and the league's bottom club.

Harford kept faith with the same starting XI that played out the drab 0-0 with Gillingham, but it was clear from the fifth minute Exeter would pose more threat than the cautious Kent side.

Their attacking intent was evident when City's Adam Stansfield gave the visitors the lead with a free

header and a mix-up at the back allowed Liam Sercombe to tap-in their second just before the half hour mark.

Tom Craddock gave the home fans hope of a comeback with a well-worked goal but it proved to be no more than a consolation as Luton lay siege to the Grecians' goal for the entire second half yet didn't muster a single shot on target.

The manner of the defeat and the end of their unbeaten run appeared to have taken its toll on the team and manager who said: "It's a big game to lose, we've got to a point where we feel we're in with a chance of achieving something but we seem to default at the vital time.

"It's a disappointing result – the performance wasn't bad. We just didn't get that break. The players didn't deserve to lose the game.

"I'm disappointed for the players. I've had my career, I just want the best for these players – who are a good honest bunch who give you 100 per cent. A result like this will knock the stuffing out of them but trust me they'll be back, fighting and scrapping for the safety of Luton Town Football Club.

"We'll never give up. I still believe it – I've said to the players I still think we can do it. I'm certain we can do it. Those type of results don't help."

The game was won, or rather lost, in midfield where Luton's three were simply outnumbered by Exeter's five.



The ball was passed around the Hatters for long periods and City showed why they are chasing their second successive promotion.

They certainly didn't need the helping hand given to them by two poor pieces of defending. Firstly from a standing jump Stanfield powered a free header past the exposed Dean Brill and when Luton tried to play the offside trap they were stung by Sercombe who followed up Alex Russell's shot that was saved to brush the ball into an empty net.

Right back Ed-Asafu-Adjaye accepted the system was to blame. He said: "The spirit was still good, even at two down. Our shape didn't really deal with the way they were playing in the first 20 minutes. At the end of the half I thought we began to deal with it and play to our strengths and their weaknesses.

"Even though we were behind at half time we still wanted to go on and win the game."

He had every right to be optimistic because in between Exeter's strikes Chris Martin hit the crossbar with a stinging long-range effort and six minutes before the break Luton pulled a goal back with a superb move. Man-of-the-match Kevin Gallen showed great awareness to pick out Ian Henderson with a raking cross-field ball that the Hatters' winger latched onto. He reached the byline before pulling the ball back for Craddock who drilled in his seventh of the season.

The foothold in the game should have slipped away from the restart when City's Steve Basham beat the offside trap to face Brill one-on-one. For some reason, rather than finish the game before the second half, he softly passed the ball back to a relieved Brill and had to endure the howls of derision from the Kenilworth Road crowd.

The woodwork came to the Grecians' rescue again in the final action of the half when Asafu-Adjaye's perfectly flighted cross was sent goalwards by Sam Parkin. It looped over keeper Paul Jones and bounced off the frame of the goal denying Luton what would have been a deserved equaliser after their dreadful start.

It would be as close as they'd come and after an insipid second 45 minutes Harford reflected: "We've been



ON A WING AND A PRAYER: Ian Henderson latches on to Kevin Gallen's pass, left. Above, Asa Hall finds no way through in the second half as Luton fell to their sixth home defeat and edged closer to the relegation trapdoor

of a good day out because it's the fans who've suffered over the last few years in terms of administration and points deductions. They're the ones who come week-in, week-out and were fantastic today. They deserve better. It's not a distraction, it's helped us in terms of people wanting to play at Wembley. There's people getting fit now who when they are fit will be in the team so there's competition for places.

"Kevin Nicholls and Rossi Jarvis are injured at the moment. I did try and get someone in but I thought Kevin Gallen in the last two games has been great. But we are light in midfield.

"It's been a tough season in terms of the situation and we see to get one set back after another. But that's football. I think when the squad is fully fit, ready to play and raring to go we're a match for anybody in this league.

"We've missed them all season and if they were fit I think we'd be in a better position."

While not mathematically impossible the task now looks too big from a team that have yet to record back-to-back victories.

The view from the dressing room, according to Asafu-Adjaye, is still positive however.

"We'll bounce back from this. There's still a lot of games to play and points to play for."

LUTON: Brill; Asafu-Adjaye, Bower, Keane, Davis; Henderson (Charles 64), Hall, Gallen (Spillane 84); Parkin, Martin (Howells 84), Craddock. Subs Not Used: Button, Gnackpa.

■ KEVIN Gallen, Michael Spillane and Chris Martin will be attending a Luton Town Supporters Club players evening at the club tomorrow (March 12). The event will be held in the Eric Morecambe Suite at 7 for 7.15pm. Tickets cost £3 for members and £5 for non-members and are available by calling: 01908 56933.



DENIED: Only the woodwork could deny Chris Martin's blast