

Harford agonises over Shots' daylight robbery

ALDERSHOT TOWN 2
Davies 15, Hudson 49

LUTON TOWN 1
Craddock 35

League Two
The Recreation Ground

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IF possession was nine-tenths of football law Luton Town would be home and dry by now.

Instead, defeat to Aldershot in a match the Hatters dominated, was one more nail in the relegation coffin.

The game was moved forward to a 1pm kick off 'on police advice' yet the only thing criminal on show was Luton's inability to convert their superior possession into goals.

It was one-way traffic from the off on Saturday until the Shots were given a headstart 15 minutes in courtesy of Sol Davis' rash challenge on John Grant in the penalty area.

Scott Davies took the spot kick but needed two attempts to beat Dean Brill who saved the initial shot and even got an outstretched foot to the rebound that looped into the roof of the net.

To their credit, Luton continued to pass their way around a limited Aldershot side and levelled before the break through Tom Craddock's ninth of the season.

If the game was a boxing match Aldershot wouldn't have come out for the second half, such was Luton's dominance over the Hampshire side.

Instead it was the rejuvenated Shots – and Kirk Hudson – who landed the sucker punch just four minutes after the restart, with a long range snap shot that Luton had no



FED UP: Hatters boss Mick Harford has frustration written all over his face. Below: Keith Keane in a determined race

answer to. It left manager Mick Harford scratching his head: "We shouldn't have lost to Aldershot in terms of the way we played in the first half," he said.

"We should have been out of sight but we weren't. Aldershot came back into the game, got a goal and hung on to it.

"We're very disappointed in the dressing room.

"It was a stupid penalty to give away. Brilly made a brilliant save and the lad was fortunate to get the rebound. We showed good spirit to come back.

"We got the goal we deserved just before half time, but we never got started again. Whether or not there was a little bit of complacency in the second half I don't know."

There was a feeling at Aldershot's rustic ground of 'welcome to next season' and the result just added to the sense of the inevitable drop to the Conference.

Luton are still to chalk up successive wins in the league and could have done without their left-back's temper getting the better of him early on.

Shots striker Grant had shrugged off the attention of Michael Spillane in the corner before playing the ball around Davis.

His piece of skill was brought to a sudden halt by Davis' cynical challenge that left the referee no choice but to point to the spot.

Even when Davies finally put the home side in front, you still sensed the belief in the players and the vocal away support was encouraged by the Hatters' neat football.

They had to wait until the 35th minute for the breakthrough though. A fortunate knock from a covering Shots defender played through Ian Henderson who ran straight in on goal.

The winger chipped it over goal-keeper Mikhael Jaimez-Ruiz, leaving it for Asa Hall to salvage the move at the far post. He cut the ball back for Craddock who made no mistake from six yards.

Aldershot, managed by ex-Hatter Gary Waddock, must have had the riot act read to them at half time as they regained the lead with alarming ease.

A simple long ball over the top from Lewis Chalmers reached Hudson who surprised the slow-to-act Hatters defence with an instant

shot from the edge of the box. It somehow arrowed past Brill, nestled in the bottom corner and left it all to do for Luton again.

Whereas the Shots' first half strike had spurred Harford's men on, this seemed to leave them flat. The lack of ideas suggested the recent schedule of Tuesday-Saturday games had taken its toll.

Aldershot's goalscorer Davies hit the woodwork with a thumping long range effort before Harford was forced to act.

On came Lewis Emanuel and captain Kevin Nicholls – both back from injury and both big players for the Hatters.

No more so than Nicholls who, although heavily strapped to protect those delicate hamstrings, showed his class with an incisive ball through for Chris Martin that split the Shots' defence in half.

Then, on 76 minutes, came the game's controversial incident that should have given Luton something from a game their first half performance merited.

Defender Anthony Straker struggled to contain Henderson and hauled him down quite clearly in the box. Referee Grant Hegley wasn't convinced but had to act when the linesman's flag went up. Rather than point to the spot the Hertfordshire official gave a free kick on the line despite Luton protests.

Harford, who had already remonstrated with the referee at half time, struggled to understand the odd compromise.

"He never gave the free kick, the linesman did and he said it was outside the box because they didn't want to undermine each other," he said.

Emanuel and Nicholls' return along with the sight of long-term

CAPTAIN Kevin Nicholls urged Hatters fans to stay positive after the latest setback.

"The players have stuck together all season," he said. "I take my hat off to all the lads – they're like family to me and I want to look after them.

"I think they've been magnificent and the message is we have to keep strong, stay positive and try and win as many football matches between now and the end of the season.

"No disrespect to the other teams but Luton have got one of the strongest squads in the league. It sounds strange when you look at the league but obviously we started on minus 30.

"Once again we've controlled large parts of the game but given two sloppy goals away and got what we deserved because at the end of the day if you don't take your chances you're not going to get three points. No-one's got a divine right.

"One ball in behind did us and then it's an uphill struggle. It seems at the moment if we don't score two or three we won't take the three points unfortunately. A draw wasn't good enough for us and (Aldershot's second goal) knocked the stuffing out of us."

The midfielder was bemused by the decision not to give Luton a penalty when Ian Henderson clearly went down inside the box.

He said: "It was strange because the ref was saying 'play on' and the linesman's given a foul.

"I asked him to go and have a chat with him but he said he didn't think it was a foul. Then when I said it was inside he said 'yeah it might have been'. I've got to be careful because I've already got an FA charge as it is.

"We've got to be man enough to not keep blaming the referee's performance though because we were in control of a game that we came into with a lot of confidence and thought we were going to win."

injured George Pilkington on the bench were the only positives and the boss is pleased to welcome his more experienced players back into the fold

"These are players who have been injured the majority of the season and we'd like to introduce them back into the team," he said. "You don't feel sorry for yourself, at the end of the day it was a football match.

"We've handed too many games to too many teams this season. Today was one of those."

LUTON: Brill; Asafu-Adjaye (Nicholls 73), Spillane, Bower, Davis; Henderson (Parkin 80), Keane, Hall (Emanuel 61); Martin, Gallen, Craddock
Subs not used: Button, Pilkington
Referee: Grant Hegley (Hertfordshire)
Attendance: 3,098

