

Hatters slay Stags

by Mark Wood

RAMPANT Hatters came from behind in scintillating fashion at Kenilworth Road last night to claim a 4-1 victory in a game that ended with both teams reduced to 10 men.

Right-back Scott Garner had stroked the visitors into the lead against the run of play on 18 minutes, but not even that could stop the Luton Town juggernaut that took time to find its stride.

Town wrestled the lead back from the Stags through the unlikely source of George Pilkington, who scored a maiden brace of goals for the club.

Luton then rammed home their advantage with an own goal from Kyle Perry and a late Tom Craddock penalty. Sandwiched in-between of that were the sendings off of Callum Reynolds, for a second bookable offence, and a straight red card for Scott Gardner for a terrible challenge on debutant Freddie Murray.

Town were forced into two changes from the team that drew 1-1 at AFC Wimbledon on Saturday. With Shane Blackett suspended, alongside the already sanctioned Alan White and Kevin Nicholls, Luton also had to contend with the loss of Lewis Emanuel, out for up to three months with a broken toe.

As a result, in came left-back Murray, signed on a six-month loan deal from fellow Blue Square Premier side Grays Athletic, and Rossi Jarvis.

The Hatters started brightly, crafting three decent efforts inside the first seven minutes. Craddock's flick header was straight at Alan Marriott, Murray's low effort was easily saved and Kevin's Gallen's snapshot fizzled wide.

Adam Newton and Gallen then combined to set up goalscoring midfielder Asa Hall on 11 minutes, but his fierce effort flew just wide as Town continued to dominate.

A bullet header from Gallen shot wide from the impressive Andy Burgess' cross on 16 minutes as, for all their pressure, Luton struggled to create any clear cut chance.

And, almost all too predictably, the Hatters got caught with a sucker punch two minutes later. A deep free-kick into a packed Luton penalty area eventually dropped to the unmarked Garner who gleefully side-footed home past the exposed Mark Tyler.

Strong Town claims for a penalty were then waved away on 20 minutes when Hall's



FLYING IN: Fred Murray is upended during his debut for the Hatters against Mansfield at Kenilworth Road

Picture by Gareth Owen

Luton Town 4 Mansfield Town 1

header in the box appeared to strike a Mansfield hand, while a crisp Jarvis volley streaked wide three minutes later.

Mansfield looked dangerous every time they broke and Ryan Williams' tasty drive soared over the bar on 33 minutes.

However, constant Luton pressure finally got its reward six minutes before the break. Jarvis whipped in Town's sixth corner of the night and Reynolds' flick found Pilkington sliding in at the far as he rammed home his first Hatters goal.

With Luton all over the Stags they were denied another penalty on the stroke of half time when Pilkington seemed to be pulled back at the far post as he tried to reach another Jarvis corner.

The tackles began to fly in the second half and the Hatters faithful grew increasingly restless as a string of decisions went

against the hosts.

Gallen had a glorious chance to seize the lead for Luton on 61 minutes when Burgess' cross picked him out in his box, but his flick header didn't have the purchase required and Craig Armstrong cleared.

Murray's low cross was almost turned into his own net by Marriott on 65 minutes, but Town grasped the lead from the resulting corner. Again the ball fell to Pilkington and he unleashed a first-time left-foot drive through a packed box that left the Mansfield stopper with no chance.

Mansfield, though, all but handed Luton victory with nine minutes left. Hall angled a great ball into the box and, with Newton lurking at the far post, Perry powered a header into his own net from just a few yards out.

The plethora of yellow cards finally took its toll one minute later when Reynolds launched an impetuous challenge on Robert Duffy. The referee had little choice but to hand Reynolds a second yellow card, but strangely chose not to punish the Mans-

STAR HATTER: George Pilkington. Two welcome goals and a terrific defensive display.



Subs not used: Gore, Beavan



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Bookings: Murray, 40; Reynolds, 47; Jarvis, 50; Armstrong, 62; Istead, 64

Sent off: Reynolds, 62; Gardner, 87.

Referee: K Johnson.

Linesmen: A Coggins; P Redmond.

Fourth official: P Redmond.

Attendance: 7,295.

field striker as he pushed a hand into the face of the grounded full-back.

Seconds later Town were denied a fourth when Craddock and Hall combined superbly, with the midfielder rifling home, only to have it ruled out by the linesman's flag.

With the referee struggling to retain a grip on the game, Mansfield were reduced to 10 men with three minutes left when Gardner launch a terrible two-footed lunge on Murray.

And Perry's miserable night was compounded on 94 minutes when he brought down substitute Claude Gnagna in the box.

Craddock pulled rank to take the penalty, despite a chance of a rare hat-trick for Pilkington, and the young striker made no mistake, cracking his second penalty in two games into the top right-hand corner to cap a great night for the Hatters.