

Boro' flatten Town

by Mark Wood

ORDINARY Luton paid the ultimate price for a lacklustre performance as they crashed to a late derby defeat against Stevenage Borough at Kenilworth Road last night.

Scott Laird's fierce drive five minutes from time proved to be decisive on a dire night for the Hatters.

Luton were outplayed for much of the evening by Boro, but possibly deserved a share of the spoils with George Pilkington hitting a post and substitute Claude Gnaka being denied by a great late save by Chris Day.

Town manager Mick Harford was forced into two changes for the visit of high-flying Stevenage Borough last night, but made three changes in total.

With target man Liam Hatch suspended and striker Kevin Gallen out with a shoulder injury, Tom Craddock came in to lead the line and was partnered by lanky midfielder Asa Hall.

Captain Kevin Nicholls came straight back into the midfield after serving his three-match ban and fit-again Ed Asafu-Adjaye was preferred at right-back to Claude Gnaka.

There was also a place on the bench for Ben Wright, freshly signed by the Hatters on a one-month loan deal from Peterborough United.

Crowd congestion meant that the kick off was delayed by 15 minutes for the first-ever league meeting between the two clubs and it was the visitors who made the brighter start without really creating anything of note.

Some shoddy defending almost let Boro in on 12 minutes when Andy Drury shrugged Alan White off the ball in the box, but a timely George Pilkington challenge turned the ball behind.

Hall looked lost in his more advanced position and Town struggled to get their foot on the ball in the opening exchanges.

A great challenge by Adam Newton prevented Laird from getting in behind Town's defence on 19 minutes as Stevenage continued to boss proceedings.

Drury was at the heart of everything for Stevenage but Charlie Griffin could only direct his header from the winger's cross softly at Mark Tyler on 22 minutes.

Laird fizzed well wide on the half-hour mark, but seconds later Luton could quite easily have taken the lead. Newton's forceful run created the opening and his powderpuff shot ran nicely for Hall who got there before Day, but the Stevenage stopper recovered to turn his close-range shot round the post.

And Luton got a huge let off with six min-



LETS GET PHYSICAL: Jake Howells attempts to win possession from Michael Brough

Luton Town 0 (0) Stevenage Borough 1 (0)

utes of the half left when it looked like Stevenage should have been awarded a penalty.

Mitchell Cole appeared to be upended by Asafu-Adjaye on the edge of the box, but referee I Smedley waved away Stevenage's appeals.

Boro's players proceeded to chase the official around the pitch with Cole eventually being booked for dissent, just like Craddock had been four minutes earlier.

An ugly incident followed on the stroke of half time when Nicholls was fouled by Darren Murphy. Luton's captain retaliated and received a yellow card for his indiscipline.

Mute applause and some boos greeted the half time whistle as Luton went in at the break having been completely outplayed by their Hertfordshire neighbours.

STAR HATTER: George Pilkington. Should've scored and was always aware and alert



Subs not used: Gore, Blackett



Subs not used: Bayes, Albrighton

Luton's defence at sixes and sevens.

However, the ball went straight back to Beardsley and Tyler produced a fabulous stop to repel the striker's powerful effort and the ball was hack behind.

The game had suddenly burst into life and Luton were inches away from taking the lead on 68 minutes.

Craddock won a header in the box and Michael Bostwick's mis-kick left Pilkington in space just yards out, but his low shot smacked the right-hand upright when he should have found the back of the net.

And Boro made the breakthrough with just five minutes left. Gnaka failed to track back and Town were caught short.

Laird overlapped on to Eddie Odhiambbos through ball and the left-back lashed an unstoppable shot across the face of goal and into the far corner.

Craddock fly-kicked while Wright took too heavy a touch as he looked to race through late on. Day then pulled off a superb low stop to his right to deny Gnaka in the fourth minute of injury time as Luton lost their first home game and trudged off the pitch to a chorus of boos.

There followed some angry scenes after the final whistle with a number of supporters confronting the board and calling for Harford's head.

Picture by Joanna Cross