

Diamonds outshine the Hatters

Luton Town 0 (0)
Rushden & Diamonds 2 (0)

A FRIGHTFUL second half performance from the Hatters and an horrific mistake from captain Kevin Nicholls spelled disaster for Town on Hallowe'en as they succumbed to a 2-0 home defeat against play-off hopefuls Rushden & Diamonds, writes Mark Wood.

Tom Craddock endured a horrible time in front of goal in the first half, having two goals ruled out by the linesman's flag, and twice wasting glorious opportunities as manager Richard Money's Kenilworth Road reign got off to the worst possible start.

Two late goals ultimately did for the Hatters and combative defender George Pilkington had no qualms with the result.

He said: "We performed well first half and created a lot of chances.

"Second half, full credit to them, they upped the pace and we didn't match them and on the second half performance they were deserved winners.

"We didn't pass the ball second half like we did first half although they didn't create too many chances.

"It was a game of two halves today and very disappointing."

Both of Diamonds' goals came after Pilkington's centre-half partner Alan White was forced from the field with a calf injury, but he didn't feel that affected the outcome.

He said: "If you look at the goals I don't think it would have affected it a great deal. In that case it was just one of those things and the lad took the first goal well.

"It's what we failed to do in the first half, put the ball in the back of the net."

On Rushden's first goal from Lee Tomlin, Pilkington said: "It's come from one of our set pieces, they broke and their lad has taken it well."

Town made four changes from the team that beat Grays Athletic 3-0 in the FA Cup and dominated the first half.

Pilkington sent a tame effort straight at former Luton keeper Nathan Abbey on six minutes and Craddock then wasted Town's best chance of the game seconds later.

Nicholls' first-time pass was perfect for Craddock's angled run but, with just Abbey left to beat, the out-of-form striker could only fire against the near post when he should have scored.

Adam Newton again sent Craddock clear six minutes later, but he fired straight at Abbey who was just about able to beat his effort away.

Ironically, Craddock did finally find the net on 16 minutes with a wonder goal only to see it cruelly ruled out by the linesman's flag.

Ed Asafu-Adjaye started a lovely move from the back, which saw Newton and Kevin Gallen involved, before Craddock unleashed a delicious half-volley that dipped viciously over Abbey, only to see it ruled out for offside against Gallen.

Diamonds briefly threatened at the other end, Asafu-Adjaye doing well to head away Aaron O'Connor's dangerous cross and Craig Farrell hitting a weak shot on the turn straight at Mark Tyler.

STAR HATTER: Ed Asafu-Adjaye. Performed well throughout, better than most.



BEATEN IN BATTLE:
George Pilkington in
the thick of the
action for the Hatters

The hosts then missed another glorious opportunity when Abbey's clearance was charged down by Craddock, but Gallen's lob from 30 yards out drifted just over the bar of the unguarded net.

The visitors caused Luton problems when they decided to attack rather than time waste, with former Town triallist Paul Terry heading at Tyler and Lee Tomlin blazing wastefully over.

With half time drawing near, Luton began to turn the screw.

White had a header cleared off the line by Terry before his bulldozing run forward created space for Craddock, whose low shot was pushed away by Abbey.

Diamonds' time wasting and the referee's constant whistling frustrated Luton throughout the first half, before Craddock looked to have given Town the lead on the stroke of half time.

Abbey pulled off a blinding save low to his right to repel Asafu-Adjaye's venomous effort and, although Craddock was on hand to net the rebound, the linesman ruled it out, albeit wrongly, as Craddock celebrated at the Kenilworth Road end.

Town offered virtually nothing

after the break as Diamonds dominated.

O'Connor twice tested Tyler before the hour mark while Mark Porter curled well over.

The introductions of Andy Burgess, against his former club, and Claude Gnackpa gave Luton a greater threat, and the Frenchman almost made an instant impact but his heavily-deflected effort was scrambled round the post by Abbey.

Pilkington had to hack the ball away with 12 minutes left after Tyler couldn't hold substitute Mark Byrne's effort, with Tomlin thumping his follow-up just wide.

But Tomlin made no mistake with six minutes left when he took full advantage of Nicholls' catastrophic slip on the halfway line, outpacing Town's defence before slotting home.

Burgess missed a great chance to equalise with a minute left when Gnackpa's deep cross was headed back across goal by Craddock, but the midfielder's stooping header flashed wide.

And Rushden rubbed salt in the wound in the fourth minute of stoppage time when Porter's long ball over the top released Byrne and he coolly lobbed home past the stranded Tyler.