

Hatters sunk by Fleet

Luton Town 2 (1) Ebbsfleet 3 (2)

HOPELESS Hatters blew the chance to force their way back into the play-offs as they lost a frustrating game 3-2 at home to Ebbsfleet, writes Mark Wood.

Big Liam Hatch led the line superbly for Luton on his first start after a second ankle operation, scoring one and having another harshly ruled out for offside, but not even his impressive performance could stop Town from being sunk by the Blue Square Premier strugglers.

Fleet were fantastic throughout and, if either side deserved to win, it was the energetic visitors who warranted the three points.

Tom Craddock netted Town's equaliser to make it 2-2, but Luton quickly conceded a third as the boos rang out loudly around Kenilworth Road at the final whistle, after the Hatters had put in another unacceptable home performance.

It was Fleet, captained by former Hatter Peter Holmes, who took command of the game from the start and Town were only saved by the early heroics of on-loan Notts County keeper Kevin Pilkington.

A route one attack by the visitors completely exposed Hatters' back line on eight minutes.

Moses Ashikodi's flick-on was inch-perfect for Ricky Shakes, but Kevin Pilkington saved bravely at the winger's feet.

And only a combination of Kevin Pilkington and the woodwork denied Ebbsfleet from taking the lead on 11 minutes.

A defensive header fell perfectly for Holmes on the edge of the box and his venomous half-volley was turned on to the post and behind by the flying Kevin Pilkington.

Buoyed by their early chances Fleet continued to push and, when Luton failed to clear their times following a corner, Ashikodi



CONTROVERSIAL: Liam Hatch protests after his equaliser is ruled out

thrashed inches wide.

With the Kenilworth Road crowd growing increasingly frustrated, things went from bad to worse when Kevin Pilkington's earlier bravery caught up with him and he was forced off on 14 minutes to be replaced by Shane Gore, making his first league appearance for the Hatters.

Gradually, Town worked their way into the game with Hatch heading at Lance Cronin and Tom Craddock having a powerful effort spilled by the visiting keeper, but no-one was on hand to seize on the rebound.

Hatch then broke the deadlock with his first Luton goal on 28 minutes. The big striker showed great skill to turn his man, before driving towards goal.

Feigning to shoot, Fleet's defence backed off and, after powering into the box, he produced a great left-footed strike to net a wonderful individual goal.

Playing with more fluency, the

Hatters should have made it two seven minutes before the break.

Captain Kevin Nicholls' clever through ball put Matthew Barnes-Homer away, but after fending off Will Salmon, he could only fire straight at Cronin.

Fleet, though, equalised three minutes before the interval when Alex Stavrinou strode through the middle and fed Magno Vieira, who made the most of some slipshod defending to side-foot home past the exposed Gore.

And in stoppage time the visitors grabbed the lead out of nowhere. A long crossfield ball found the on-rushing Shakes, who beat Gore to a 50-50 ball and slid the ball across the box for Vieira to prod home into an empty net.

Town had a chance to level before the break when a flick header fell kindly for Craddock in the box, but his low effort was well saved by Cronin.

Having changed to a 4-3-3 formation at the break, Town seemed

more determined to battle for every ball, but still struggled to create chances.

Holmes could have had a penalty when he was checked by George Pilkington in the box, while Ashikodi lashed over the bar as Fleet continued to look dangerous. Town, though, defied the boo boys with an equaliser on 65 minutes. Substitute Ed Asafu-Ajayi's long throw was flicked on at the near post by Asa Hall and, although Craddock's first attempt was repelled, he was on hand to scoop the rebound into the top corner.

Parity, though, lasted just two minutes as more shoddy Luton defending cost them dear. Still lying deep after a corner, Fleet lobbed the ball back into the area where Janos Kovacs and George Pilkington both went for the same ball, which fell nicely for Ashikodi at the far post to smash home.

The visitors always looked dangerous on the break, but were forced to defend doggedly as Town pressed for an equaliser.

With 16 minutes left Craddock saw a thunderbolt well saved by Cronin before controversy ensued.

The young striker delivered a tantalising cross back into the box for the unmarked Hatch to head home from inside six yards, but having celebrated for several seconds, the linesman finally raised his flag for offside.

The referee then consulted with his assistant, but the offside decision was upheld.

Town turned the screw in the closing stages but found Cronin in fine form as first he turned Hatch's 20-yard effort round the post before brilliantly tipping George Pilkington's drive over the bar as the home side trudged off to a chorus of boos.