

Victory snatched in final minutes

Luton Town 2 (1) Forest Green Rovers 1 (0)

by Mark Wood

01582 798517 mark.wood@jpress.co.uk

LAST-GASP Luton snatched victory in the very last minute as they struggled to see off struggling Forest Green Rovers last night.

It looked like it would be a story of two penalties as Tom Craddock's opener was cancelled out by Conal Platt's spot-kick with just nine minutes to go.

But, with the Kenilworth Road crowd airing their frustrations, Craddock swooped in the 90th-minute to secure a potentially invaluable win as all of Luton's promotion rivals, bar Stevenage, slipped up.

Town made three changes from the team that claimed a 3-2 win at Hayes & Yeading on Saturday.

With Liam Hatch having failed to recover from a hamstring niggle he was replaced in attack by veteran striker Kevin Gallen.

Craddock was preferred to Jake Howells on the left of midfield, with the youngster dropping to the bench, while Adam Newton missed out on the squad entirely and was replaced by the fit-again Ed Asafu-Adjaye.

The game took a while to get going on the heavily-sanded Kenilworth Road pitch, but the Hatters were inches away from taking the lead on nine minutes.

Asa Hall's pass found Gallen in the box and he turned beautifully to create room, before dragging his shot just wide of the far post.

Having struggled to impose themselves on Rovers a route one move almost undid the visitors. A long ball forward was flicked on perfectly by Claude Gnaka for the onrushing Gallen, but he could only blaze his shot on-the-run just over.

Buoyed by the chance Town

went close again on 19 minutes. Craddock and Gallen combined superbly on the edge of the box and makeshift winger Craddock curled just wide.

Rovers' best chance of a breakthrough seemed to come from a Luton mistake, but thankfully the dicey moments were few and far between.

Luton broke at pace from a rare Forest foray forward midway through the half and it was Gnaka who led the charge with a lightning counter from his own box. Having raced two-thirds of the field he exchange passes with Gallen, but could only lash over from just outside the box.

Rovers mustered their first effort of the game on 27 minutes with an intricate move. Platt and former Arsenal striker Isaiah Rankin switched the ball well on the edge of the area to tee up David Brown, but his low drive was straight at Mark Tyler.

Having struggled to break Forest Green down, the visitors hit the self-destruct button on 37 minutes.

Craddock and Gallen again exchanged passes on the edge of the area and, as Craddock powered into the box Jared Hodgkiss foolishly tripped the former Middlesbrough man as he struggled to reach the ball. Referee R Fletcher pointed the spot and Craddock kept his cool to stroke down the middle as Danny Ireland dived the wrong way.

Rovers' wingers really pushed on at the start of the second half as they looked to take the game to



IN ACTION: Hatters on the ball as they kept Forest Green at bay last night

Luton.

Town seemed happy to take on a counter-attacking role and had a great chance to double their lead on 57 minutes. Substitute Rossi Jarvis' header escaped under the boot of Craig Armstrong to let Matthew Barnes-Homer in one-on-one, but Ireland saved well at his feet.

After a long lull Town threatened again with 15 minutes to go. Great work by substitute Howells created the opening but some desperate Forest Green defending

managed to turn Craddock's venomous effort behind.

A driving run by Craddock earned Town a free-kick on the edge of the box soon after but Gallen's piledriver flew into the crowd.

But disaster struck with nine minutes left. A Jonathan Smith through ball cut Town's defence in two and Janos Kovacs was harshly penalised for handball as he slid in Platt then calmly planted the penalty into the bottom left-hand corner.

Hatters (4-4-2): Mark Tyler, Ed Asafu-Adjaye, Keith Kearne, Janos Kovacs, George Pilkington (C), Tom Craddock, Asa Hall (Rossi Jarvis 46), Claude Gnaka, Kevin Gallen, Freddie Murray, Matthew Barnes-Homer (Jake Howells 62). **Substitutes not used:** Shane Blackett, Shane Gore, Mark Nwokeji.

Rovers (4-4-2): Danny Ireland, Paul Stonehouse (C), David Brown (Mike Fowler 69), Conal Platt, Jonathan Smith, Danny Powell, Tomi Ameobi, Craig Armstrong, Ollie Thorne, Jared Hodgkiss, Isaiah Rankin (Reece Styche 69). **Substitutes not used:** John Elise, Callum Henry, David Wilkinson.

Referee: R Fletcher.
Assistant Referees: J Mellor and P Redmond.
Fourth Official: R Jape.

Attendance: 5,884 (Forest Green 42).

Bookings: George Pilkington 83; Tom Craddock 87, Danny Powell 88.

Star Hatter: Tom Craddock. Two-goal salvo saved the Hatters.

Chants of "this is embarrassing" and "what a load of rubbish" rang out with five minutes left as Luton looked rudderless going forward.

But in the very last minute Luton grabbed a potentially invaluable winner. Pilkington lobbed a deep ball into the box and Gnaka headed back across goal towards the onrushing Craddock. Ireland saved his first effort, but he managed to bundle the ball past the keeper before lashing gleefully into the empty net.