



MATT FINIS



PITCH BATTLE: Stevenage's David Bridges hussles with Keith Keane of Luton



By Stuart Hammonds

THE NLP
STAR
MATCH

MATTHEW BARNES-HOMER put personal misery behind him to give Luton Town renewed hope in the race for the Blue Square Premier title.

The 24-year-old striker has had a troubled time since his £18,000 November move from Kidderminster, with just three goals in 18 appearances coming against the domestic backdrop of his step-father's death.

But the England C international put it all behind him to net just a minute after coming off the bench, sealing an eighth successive win for Hatters and ruining the leaders' 16-month unbeaten home record.

It was a victory Luton scarcely deserved on territory and chances, but with the finishing post in sight, manager Richard Money was more concerned with the result taking them to within two points of Boro, than the match.

"I'm pleased, but we know that we've still got a big job to do," said Money. "It's a great result for us, but one that puts us a little bit closer - that's all."

Town had scored 18 goals in their previous three games, but with Stevenage's rock-like defence, handling Claude Craddock, Kevin Galen and Tom Craddock - who had bagged 15 of them - with relative ease, it was left to the substitute to rip in to capitalise on a rare Michael Boatrick mistake in the 56th minute. It was Luton's only attempt on goal until Liam Hatch forced Chris Day into his first save with 90 minutes

MATCH STATS

STEVENAGE v LUTON

5 SHOTS ON TARGET	2
7 SHOTS OFF TARGET	0
3 CORNERS	3
2 OFFSIDE	4
12 FOULS COMMITTED	14
6 YELLOW CARDS	1
0 RED CARDS	0

STAR MAN: Mark Roberts (Stevenage)
ATT: 7,004

ENTERTAINMENT

REF: Michael Taylor 7/10

STEVENAGE: 4-3-3: Day 7; Henry 7; Ashton 7; Roberts 8; Lane 7; Ours 7; Boatrick 7; Bridges 7; Craddock 8 (Boatrick 77, 85); Carter 66, 85. Subs not used: Bayes, Burton.

LUTON: 4-4-2: Tyler 7; Ashton 7; Pickett 7; Boatrick 7; Murray 7; Craddock 8; Keane 8; Howells 8; Pearson 8; Craddock 8 (Boatrick 85, 86); Galen 8; Hatch 86, 89. Subs not used: Gore, Kinnear.

PICTURES: Kevin Coleman



KEEPS LUTON IN THE HUNT

Hatters close gap at the top



KNEESY DOES IT: Luton's Matthew Barnes-Homer celebrates his winning goal

almost up, but Money was happy to win ugly.

"There are all sorts of things that determine a performance," he said. "Sometimes it's about free-flowing football and lots of goals. Other times it's about making sure you defend well, win a tackle, a header or make a block. It was one of those games today."

"The pitch was very heavy and we've done what we needed to do. It's by no means the best we've played in recent weeks, but a different type of performance which is equally important."

Once they settled, Graham West-

ley's Boro dominated the first half and looked to have gained the advantage when Tim Sills netted on 20 minutes. An assistant referee's flag, however, said otherwise.

Andy Drury and Ronnie Henry were combining well down the right, but after a Chris Boatrick header found only the side-netting, Scott Lund, Odubade and Boatrick were restricted to efforts from distance.

Boatrick spurned a golden opportunity five minutes after half-time, Tyler racing out to save at his feet, before Barnes-Homer struck after Boatrick had missed his clearance on the bobbly surface.

David Bridges went close with quarter-of-an-hour left after a spell of intense Boro pressure, and sub Lee Boylan snatched at a stoppage time opening.

"We had some good chances, but the game was won by them, they've had a good day," said Westley, who saw his coach Dino Maamria sent off after one of several disputes between the home and away disputes.

The two managers shook hands for several seconds at the end, in deep conversation as they made their way onto the pitch. "I said to Richard Money at the end, 'I think the best side just' - and he agreed," said Westley.

THE VERDICT

JUST when we thought Stevenage had the championship in their grasp, along come the other side who have been steaming along in recent weeks.

After extending their unbeaten home league record to 33 games with success in their opening first-versus-second game of the week against Oxford, Boro were brimming with confidence.

That showed as their strength and purpose forced Luton boss Richard Money to abandon strikers who thrive on balls into feet. On came Liam Hatch at half-time - "his type of game", said Money - and the fight was taken to Stevenage.

After a cushy run of fixtures, Luton showed they too have the focus to grind out results, this being their third clean sheet in a row.

Stevenage still have the upper hand. With a game in hand and a two-point advantage, the title remains theirs to throw away.

Manager Graham Westley says they have been playing under pressure all season. But with a Bank Holiday trip to AFC Wimbledon, knowing Luton have the chance to go top at home to relegated Grays, the gauge is as high as it's ever been.