

Resurgent Luton keep Stevenage on edge

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In-form Hatters add to the leaders' anxieties, writes John Ashdown at the Lamex Stadium

The champagne remains on ice for Stevenage Borough. The Blue Square Premier leaders remain just that after this 1-0 home defeat to second-placed Luton, but the chance to take a decisive step towards the Football League was passed up in front of a sell-out crowd of 7,000, with Matthew Barnes-Homer's second-half goal cutting their lead at the summit to two points.

Borough have a game in hand and they should still end their 16-year wait in the Conference come May. They will certainly have few tougher challenges than this before the end of the season. At times it was a pitched battle, Luton's backline superb in defending their lead. The result ends Stevenage's eight-match winning streak, and means the Hatters have established one of their own.

Borough are a strange blend: undoubtedly one of the Conference's big beasts yet perennial nearly men punching above their weight. In the past six seasons they have never finished lower than eighth, have twice lost in the play-offs and won the league in 1995-96 but were denied promotion by the failure of the ground to meet League standards. The stadium is now more than adequate, but the division is this season awash with former league sides and Borough are only eighth in the average attendance charts.

Optimists point to a town population similar to that of Burnley and there were certainly plenty of fans in red and white at Stevenage station yesterday lunchtime, but the vast majority were preparing to take the 20-minute journey to the Emirates Stadium rather than the 20-minute walk to the Lamex Stadium.

Conference Top 10	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Stevenage	28	28	4	5	89	24	65	81
Luton	29	24	7	8	70	35	35	79
Oxford Utd	30	22	10	7	89	30	59	76
Rushden	31	20	11	8	70	34	36	71
York	32	20	11	8	90	29	61	68
Widenedon	33	17	10	11	60	35	25	61
Kettering	34	17	10	13	49	37	12	60
Manfield	35	14	10	13	61	49	12	58
Grays	36	14	8	14	44	31	13	56
Aldersham	38	13	14	11	31	41	10	53

League football would help, and under the guidance of Graham Westley it remains likely, despite this result. The Borough manager was last in the spotlight when, as owner and manager of Farnborough in 2003, he was instrumental in the club switching their home FA Cup tie with Arsenal to Highbury, swelling the club coffers by as much as £500,000, and then leaving for Stevenage three days later. Few Farnborough fans remember him with fondness – the club was liquidated in 2007 – and his second coming at Stevenage was met with dismay by Borough fans, following a frustrating three seasons in charge between 2003 and 2006.

Westley and his staff do still seem to have the ability to get up the noses of opponents. Here an impromptu Stevenage team meeting by the dugout had the Luton manager Richard Money making mocking "time-out" gestures, while the visiting physio was spoken to by the referee following an exchange with the home bench. In the second half Stevenage's first-team coach Dino Maamria was sent to the stands after shoving his opposite number Kevin Watson.

Stevenage were excellent in the first half, looking to play zippy, incisive football on a pitch hardly conducive to it. Andy Drury was impressive in midfield. Luton, a Championship side as recently as 2006-07, flickered into life only briefly but struck the decisive blow 10 minutes into the second half, Barnes-Homer hooking in from 15 yards.

The Hatters now breathe down their opponents' necks, and Westley and his men will certainly now be feeling the pressure. Time will tell if they can cope.