

Diamonds well set for the play-off challenge

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■ TALL AND SHORT OF IT – Mark Byrne is congratulated by Jefferson Louis after the former's equaliser against Luton



Mark Lea on

**Diamonds 1
Luton 1**

Nene Park, Saturday, April 24

THE final plans are in place for the play-offs.

Rushden & Diamonds look ready after securing fourth spot in the Blue Square Premier.

Now they face Oxford United over two legs in the semi-finals.

Of course, the U's were out in front and odds-on favourites to be crowned champions until Stevenage Borough took charge of the title race.

Diamonds will be full of confidence and rightly so, having proved they are capable of pushing for promotion to regain Football League status.

This was another example where Diamonds matched one of their rivals and a draw was probably the right result.

Diamonds boss Justin Edinburgh made seven changes but the line-up still featured eight first-choice players.

However they hardly managed to break outside the defensive third in the early exchanges as Luton Town earned control.

Kevin Gallen, who dropped behind the front two, fed Tom Craddock to slot low past Dale Roberts after only eight minutes for his 24th goal of the campaign.

But it didn't take long to get back on level terms.

Diamonds kept possession for the first time and patient build-up play allowed Paul Terry to knock the ball for Sam Smith who flicked it in with Mark Byrne volleying into the bottom corner.

The rest of the opening period was all about Craddock and Curtis Osano.

The Hatters striker fired wide, hit the post and flicked another attempt off target.

Osano's enterprise from an unfamiliar left-back role almost paid off with a hat-trick of storming runs which perhaps deserved further reward.

Second-half substitute Craig Farrell, who replaced Lee Tomlin, nearly scored with his first touch and then a 20-yard free-kick forced Mark Tyler into action.

Roberts was never tested in front of the AirWair Stand as Craddock wasted a clear-cut chance again and Matthew Barnes-Homer failed to take his opportunities.

It wasn't simply a case of preparing for the play-offs, though.

Both teams pushed forward to finish an entertaining match and, who knows, maybe they will meet at Wembley Stadium on May 16.

Diamonds fans were already looking ahead to the semi-finals by singing 'bring on Oxford' in stoppage-time.

Unfortunately hundreds of Luton supporters simply couldn't behave themselves properly at the end when the police and stewards failed to prevent a pitch invasion.

What a shame but, much more importantly, there's still plenty to play for – starting at Nene Park on Thursday night.

Stone: We're not finished yet



■ LOOKING AHEAD – Diamonds assistant boss Michael Stone

THIS is not over yet.

That's the message from Rushden & Diamonds going into the play-offs.

Justin Edinburgh's squad will face Oxford United in the semi-finals at Nene Park on Thursday night and the Kassam Stadium next Monday afternoon.

Assistant-boss Michael Stone said: "We want to win promotion now."

"Reaching the play-offs is not how we plan to finish the season.

"A couple of weeks ago the manager and myself sat down and agreed that we needed to go into the play-offs able to select from a fit squad.

"We've been careful over the last few games to ensure everyone is looking okay now.

"We always knew Lee Tomlin would play 45 to 60 minutes against Luton, depending on how

the game was going.

"It worked out exactly how we wanted because we had seen enough to keep him ticking along.

"He will be ready for Thursday's first leg.

"A few players needed this match to build momentum and others have been given a breather.

"I don't think we learned too much.

"But the most important thing was coming out of it unscathed.

"Thankfully we got through it injury-free.

"Credit to both teams who didn't want the season to fizzle out before the play-offs.

"We approached the game in the right way in front of a big crowd.

"It wasn't going to be a stroll in the park and we didn't take our

foot off the gas.

"We knew what was at stake only a few days before entering the play-offs which we have worked towards all year."

Kurt Robinson's illness saw Curtis Osano switch to left-back while midfielder Max Porter deputised in defence.

Shane Huke partnered skipper Jamie Stuart in the middle.

Stone added: "It was a chance to look at something and we have to be prepared.

"I thought it took Curtis a few minutes to find his feet.

"But as the game went on he looked more confident.

"He's a terrific asset and it was good to see him getting on to the front foot by driving forward."

The other play-off semi-final is between Luton and York with the first leg at Bootham Crescent on Thursday.