LUTON TOWN 3 RUSHDEN & D 0

Barnes-Homer 44, 51, Gnakpa 75

LUTON ON THE MONEY IN DEFENCE

DEAD AHEAD: Matthew Barnes-Homer scores Luton's first goal PICTURES: Joseph Owen

By Stuart Hammonds

THE NLP STAR MATCH

LUTON started 2011 with a bit of New Year's resolution. An abundance of goals rained at Kenilworth Road as they had throughout 2010, but the resolve to keep a rare clean sheet proved most pleasing for boss Richard Money.

The Hatters moved back up to third spot, with a Matthew Barnes-Homer double and one from Claude Gnakpa proving too much for a Rushden side playing their first game since the tragic loss of goalkeeper Dale Roberts.

Before kick-off the visiting fans unveiled a banner that read: "RIP Dale Roberts - 1986-2010 - Never Forgotten". A minute's silence was impeccably observed.

Unfortunately for them, Diamonds were just as quiet in attack as their run without a league win stretched into a third month since Justin Edinburgh picked up the manager award for October.

In fairness, they hadn't played a league game in five weeks. Luton hadn't completed one in six weeks - their last attempt against York abandoned due to snow - but comfortably wrapped up their sixth win in seven Blue Square Bet Premier matches.

It was only their second shut-out since October 2, however, and Money said: "The attitude to get the clean sheet was the most pleasing thing. At times we defended well in what I call crisis. You're under the pump a little bit and someone comes up with a block, a tackle or an important interception.

"I thought we did that all afternoon. It was as important to us to get the clean sheet as it was to score the three goals."

For long spells of the first half Money's men struggled to find their rhythm, the flow of the game not helped by whistle-happy referee Tim Robinson awarding 26 free kicks in 45 minutes.

They thought they had the lead with an exquisite curling shot into the top corner by Gnakpa on 12 minutes, after Andy Drury had set him up with a driving run, only for an assistant's flag to rule it offside.

Roberts' replacement in the Rushden team, Joe Day, foiled Danny Crow in a one-on-one, and then Barnes-Homer low at his near post after the striker had nutmegged Shane Huke.

But the young stopper had no answer to Barnes-Homer's beautifully cushioned header a minute before the break. Gnakpa delivered a peach of a cross from the right and the England C man pulled off his marker to guide his header, as if in slow-motion, back across Day and in off the post.

Barnes-Homer had his 13th of the season six minutes after the restart when he latched onto Drury's arced ball over the top, held off Justin Miller and Huke before firing left-footed past Day.

Gnakpa's low shot confirmed the three points with 15 minutes to go, although Diamonds might have pulled one back through Jamie Stuart and Alan Power late on, but Amari'Morgan-Smith cleared off the line and Power's 25-yarder fizzed inches wide.

Diamonds assistant-manager Paul Driver said: "I'm not sure the second and third goals weren't offside. We need to look at the video.

"But we are disappointed in ourselves. We spoke beforehand about being a little more composed and making better use of the ball, but throughout the game we didn't think we were good enough.

"It's not all doom and gloom though. We had several corners and got some good balls into the box. I don't think we were three goals worse than they were."

EYE TO EYE: Andy Drury congratulates scorer Matthew Barnes-Homer

MATCH STATS

LUTON v RUSHDEN	
9	SHOTS ON TARGET 2
3	SHOTS OFF TARGET 4
6	CORNERS 6
8	OFFSIDE 4
14	FOULS CONCEDED 16
0	YELLOW CARDS 2
0	RED CARDS 0

STAR MAN: George Pilkington (Luton)

ATT: 8,928

ENTERTAINMENT: ★★★★

REF RATING: Tim Robinson 6/10

LUTON: 4-4-2: Tyler 7, Gleeson 7, Knoca 7, Pilkington 8, Howells 7, Gnakpa 7 (Lawless 90), 5), Drury 7, Keane 6, Morgan-Smith 7 (Poke 90+2, 5), Crow 6 (J Walker 89, 5), Barnes-Homer 8. **Subs not used:** Hinton, Asafu-Adjaye.

RUSHDEN: 4-4-2: Joe Day 6; Miller 6, Huke 7 (Corcoran 60, 6), Stuart 6, Osano 7; Smith 6 (Howe 58, 5), Power 7, Johnson 6 (King 75), Charles 5, O'Connor 6, Gash 6. **Subs not used:** Farrell, Kay.

Fit Hatters beat the Christmas bulge

RICHARD MONEY gave his men Christmas week off, so was understandably delighted to see the proof that they hadn't neglected their fitness for too much pudding.

Money's side had won 27 of their 43 regular league fixtures in 2010, and after registering number one of 2011 he said: "It was a thoroughly professional performance by the team having been out of action for so long.

"We hadn't played a league game since November 20, or even been able to get on a pitch to train for two or three weeks. So to come back and play like we did in spells was full credit to the players."

Diamonds assistant Paul Driver took positives from on-loan York striker Michael Gash's debut — and suggested more players would be coming in during the transfer window.

"Michael has held it up for us as well as anyone has this season," said Driver.

He added: "Justin (Edinburgh) is very close to bringing in a midfielder, and is looking at a couple defensively too."

What they said...