

Keeper gamble is hard choice

AS ALL the off-field arguing went quiet, we were treated to some fine Luton passing in their 5-0 dismantling of York on Tuesday – and the kind of scenario every neutral fan loves.

Just 15 minutes were on the clock when visiting keeper Michael Ingham was red carded for bringing down Claude Gnaka in an outstretched foot 19 yards from his goal.

The game was gone for the Minstermen from that moment on, mainly because centre-half substitute Greg Young didn't reply convincingly enough when asked by boss Gary Mills if he felt ready to go in goal.

Defender and captain Chris Smith did, but that move had a double downside.

First, it disrupted his imperious partnership with Dave McGurk – they'd kept nine clean sheets in the 11 games they'd started together, when you take into account that Boston's goal in the 1-0 FA Trophy loss came after Smith had gone off injured.

There was also the 56 minutes they kept Luton out in the original abandoned game on December 18 abandoned due to the heavy forecasted snow, but let's not even go there!

The other downer was that he left in four goals – including one straightaway from the free-kick that came from the sending-off – before Young did belatedly don the gloves at half-time.

What made the situation fascinating, of course, was to see whether the outfield player was more Scott Bevan, or Bob 'The Cat' Bevan!

It was a job I had to do on five occasions for Bracknell and Ware, and I have some sympathy for Smith. I was shaking like a leaf – and that was in front of crowds of around 100. Three short of 6,000 were inside Kenilworth Road on Tuesday, and all bar 128 of them were

watching Smith's every move with an ironic cheer breaking at the back of their throat.

Only problem was that he didn't move too often as Drury's deflected free-kick and then efforts from Gnaka and Lloyd Owusu flew in with him rooted. Smith did attempt to save the fourth, but Zdenek Kroc's volley was too powerful.

As an aside, Owusu's debut goal came about after a piece of comedy defending by Young, whose attempt to put the ball out for a throw rebounded off right-back Daniel Parslow's backside and put the striker clean through.

The 34-year-old former

Slough, Brentford, Yeovil and Adelaide United man turned in an excellent hour's performance, but his lack of action in the last 18 months probably played a part in the defenders catching him.

His initial shot was deflected, but from the resulting Drury corner – "Beckham-esque" – according to Luton boss Richard Money – Owusu directed a bullet header past to rooted Smith.

York would have fared better if Young hadn't dithered in the dugout. He was a better keeper than Smith, who is superior at the heart of defence.

Mills had to go with a captain

FLOORED: Luton's Claude Gnaka is tripped by Michael Ingham, which resulted in the York keeper being sent off. Inset: Lloyd Owusu celebrates his debut goal

PICTURES: Gareth Owen



showing leadership, but the fact neither he nor Money named a second keeper opens another classic debate on whether it's essential to have that insurance policy.

Mills accepts the blame, but it is his policy to have five options available to prove flexible in attack or stubborn in defence, depending on what a game requires.

As York hadn't had a keeper go off injured since Artur Krysiak against Wrexham in August 2008, an impact on one game in 141 is probably a risk worth taking.

Money believes the gamble worthwhile depending on

circumstance. Currently, he thinks second-choice keeper Kevin Pilkington getting match sharpness on loan at Mansfield will be more benefit if he has to replace No.1 Mark Tyler during the run-in.

Every manager will have his thoughts. At some clubs it could be determined by how much a man who could be inactive for the entire season is paid.

It was just that on a night when 'cost' was a central theme to everything from tickets to transport, Mills' choice – and Ingham's decision-making – cost York the chance of holding out against the best side in the league at making teams pay.