



KEANE TUSSELE:
Luton's Keith Keane tussles with Mansfield's Conor Higginson

PICTURE: Richard Parkes

GROF DENIES HATTERS

By John Lomas

MANSFIELD Town's depleted side dug deep into their reserves of strength and stamina to withstand long spells of pressure and steal this unexpected 0-0 draw at Field Mill.

With the injury and suspension-hit Stags having already played twice in the previous four days and down to the bare bones, the Hatters must have fancied their chances of gaining revenge for their FA Trophy semi-final defeat to Mansfield last month.

But, despite losing defensive lynchpin Tom Naylor to injury on 35 minutes, Stags clung on with on-loan keeper David Grof the hero, making a string of fine saves to frustrate dominant Luton.

Although they failed to muster a shot on target all game themselves, the Stags' defence stood firm with debut-making summer signing Mark Preece really catching the eye and boss Duncan Russell said: "That felt like a victory to be honest.

"Everyone today has done a job. We are missing our two first choice strikers, but the two young lads up there today worked their hearts out.

"On another day, if I could have

put my strongest team out we could have got a victory today. Now we have got to go again on Tuesday.

"I was pleased with a second clean sheet on the trot as you don't lose with clean sheets and we are always capable of nicking a goal which I thought we were going to do near the end today."

Mansfield will now wait anxiously on news of Naylor's tight hamstringing with an eye on Wembley in three weeks.

In a tight first half, Grof's legs denied Alex Lawless on 22 minutes while Justin Walker headed wide at the far post just before the break.

But after the break the all-action Grof was immense as his legs and arms blocked efforts from Matthew Barnes-Homer twice, once diving to his right and the other with his shins, as well as Claude Gnappka, who was hurt taking the shot as Steve Foster slid in.

Zdenek Kroc had a good chance over and when Grof

blocked another Lawless effort with an outstretched leg near the end, Luton knew they were not going to beat the Hungarian if they played until midnight.

Hatters boss Gary Brabin said: "You'd like to think certain things tell the story and the fact that their goalkeeper got man of the match shows a true reflection of the game.

"I was disappointed not to win it as we created enough chances. We worked hard and played some good football but it just wasn't to be.

"Amari (Morgan-Smith) got an early knock and then Claude (Gnappka) had to come off before half-time as well and he had been causing them a few problems.

"I was delighted that this group of players kept on trying to do the right things. Now I need to keep them firing on all cylinders.

"Jason Walker had chances but, if anything, he is trying too hard at the moment. I am more than confident it will come for him."

MATCH STATS

MANSFIELD v LUTON

0	SHOTS ON TARGET	7
2	SHOTS OFF TARGET	4
4	CORNERS	6
4	OFFSIDE	10
7	FOULS CONCEDED	12
2	YELLOW CARDS	2
0	RED CARDS	0

STAR MAN: David Grof (Mansfield)

ATT: 2,203

ENTERTAINMENT: ★★★★★

REF RATING: Seb Stockbridge 6/10

MANSFIELD: 4-4-2: Grof 9, Silk 8,

Foster 7, Naylor 6 (Preece 34, 8),

Stonehouse 7, Cain 6, Istead 6,

Nix 6, Briscoe 7, Mitchell 6 (Smith

58, 6), Higginson 6. Subs not

used: Collier, Thompson, Spence,

LUTON: 4-4-2: Tyler 7, Gleeson 7,

G Pilkington 8, Kroc 4, Murray 7;

Gnappka 7 (Willmott 53, 7), Lawless

8, Keane 8, Howells 7; Morgan-

Smith 6 (Barnes Homer 45, 7),

Walker 5. Subs not used: K. Pilkington, Newton, Carden.