

Up for Brabs

Gary's boyos have one foot in final – now to finish the job off on green green grass of home

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WHAT a difference a year makes.

This time 12 months ago Luton Town had travelled up to York with hopes of promotion back to the Football League only to pepper their goal but still lose 1-0. It proved an insurmountable hurdle as the Minstermen came down to Bedfordshire and finished the Hatters off by the same score in the second leg, consigning them to a second season in the non-league.

That was Town's second failure in the end of season lottery that is the play-offs after getting dumped out of the 1997 League One shake-up, losing 2-1 at Crewe Alexandra and only drawing 2-2 at home.

Then, this season, Luton lost out to Mansfield in a two-legged FA Trophy semi-final, again after losing the first match.

The omens weren't good so, at the start of this week, with a two-legged tie against Wrexham staring Luton in the face it is safe to say that supporters' nerves were already beginning to twitch. But 35 minutes into Thursday night's first clash and everyone of the travelling Town faithful would have been in dreamland.

Three, it seems, is the magic number this time around. It's third

time lucky in play-off competition for both the club and manager Gary Brabin. And, at the third attempt to claim victory over Wrexham, it was three wonderful goals that did it.

But it was the manner of victory which will have Hatters' fans thinking of a return to the Football League is drawing ever closer. Yes, there is the important matter of the return tie at Kenilworth Road on Tuesday night (7.45pm) but surely a place in the Blue Square Bet Premier final on May 21 is theirs to throw away?

Last season and occasionally this, Luton have laid waste to the minnows of the Conference but barring this campaign's 4-0 and 5-0 routs at home to Darlington and York respectively they have consistently flattered to deceive against the division's elite of former Football League clubs – especially on the road.

Wonder strikes from Alex Lawless, Claude Gnaka and Ed Asafu-Adjaye – fit to grace a higher stage – laid waste to that matter in 45 exhilarating minutes at the Racecourse on Thursday night that confirmed the hunt for promotion is most certainly on.

Save for the woodwork being struck twice by Jake Howells and Zdenek Kroca, plus a few decent

saves from Red Dragons' stopper Chris Maxwell, this semi-final could well and truly have been put to bed after 90 minutes. Judging by the half time whistle which was greeted with Welsh boos while Elton John's 'Don't Go Breaking My Heart' blasted over the tannoy, the hosts thought it was.

In truth, the only thing that went wrong for Luton this time was that their coach broke down on the M54, 20 miles away from a ground that they had not won in since the 2-1 triumph back in 2005 that secured the League One title.

Nobody would have thought that six months after that, then in the heady heights of the

Championship, that the club would register its last victory in the Principality for six years with a 2-1 win at Cardiff.

Six times they had tried in the intervening years and six times they had failed to take more than a draw back across the River Severn (seven if you count the 2-2 draw at Chester City in 2009, as the Deva Stadium pitch straddled across the English-Welsh border, while last season's result was expunged when the Seals were wound up).

Then on Thursday, omens, fate and recent history were all blown away in a Blitzkrieg of brilliance from Brabin's men that no-one expected, except for the man at the helm. I'm a

very optimistic person," said the manager. "We've worked on a lot and I think most of that was channelled through the performance."

"It's no surprise to me because there is some real quality in the group of players that we've got here."

"I've got no doubt that we are good enough to win games."

"People have always known what we are capable of but one of the things we haven't sustained is consistency. We've got to carry it on game in, game out."

"I'm not surprised by that performance but we need to carry it into the next game."

Lawless, who opened the scoring



RACECOURSE RASPER: Alex Lawless fires Luton into the lead at Wrexham

on 15 minutes with an exocet missile and looked a class above all night, echoed his manager's assessment.

He said: "Everyone was pleased with the first half but Brabs has been in the position where his team have come back from defeat before."

"He gave us a quick reminder that things can soon turn. It was really pleasing that we kept the lead and we could have added to it, so that's encouraging for Tuesday."

Indeed, the job is only half done but in the cauldron atmosphere of Kenilworth Road in two days time Brabin expects the crowd to be the 12th man and spur his men on to a

final, potentially against Wimbledon after their 2-0 over Fleetwood in the other semi.

"They [fans] were fantastic and they're going to play a really important part for us," said the boss, who struggled to make himself heard in his post match interviews over the joyous din created by the Town fans kept back in the stadium for safety reasons.

"I keep going on about the connection between the supporters and the players. It gives them a real lift."

The message was clear – they must first complete Mission Manchester and once there, go all guns blazing in Project Promotion.