

Gnakpa defies pain to help slay Red Dragons

by Mark Wood

01582 798517 mark.wood@jpress.co.uk

Blue Square Bet Premier,
Play-Off Semi-Final First Leg
Wrexham 0 (0) Luton Town 3 (3)

FLASH French winger Claude Gnakpa revealed he played through the pain barrier to help the Hatters claim a superb 3-0 win at Wrexham on Thursday night.

Town were in irresistible form as fantastic strikes by Alex Lawless, Gnakpa and a first-ever goal from Ed Asafu-Adjaye put them in the driving seat ahead of last night's second leg.

Gnakpa praised Luton's medical staff for helping him play a starring role, saying: "I've been struggling a bit with my foot.

"I want to thank the medical staff and doctor Simon (Parsell). "My right foot I didn't feel anything, it was pain-free and I'm very happy."

Gnakpa showed no signs of his injury as he put in a fantastic performance and the winger was unsurprised with the emphatic victory.

He said: "To be honest yes (I can believe the result). I was happy to come here and win.

"We came here to win but to win that way is brilliant. We played a good first half. We did well, Alex scored a great goal and I followed him and Ed. That's the spirit of the team at the minute. We are doing well. We started well and it worked so well."

Gnakpa was delighted by his sweet strike, but felt it was just one of many this season, and was pleased their hard work on the 4-3 formation had paid off.

He said: "We worked a lot in training on this formation."

"Against Crawley we tried this formation and after 15 minutes we were all over. I'm more free. I'm just enjoying it. But we deserved to win the game. We worked more this week and it paid off."

The Frenchman also praised Town's travelling supporters who chanted his name on the night, saying: "I'm happy if they sing my name. It means I'm doing well and I'm pleased with that.

"I want to say thank you to



AWAY THE LADS: Luton celebrate another goal at the Racecourse Ground as they defeated Wrexham 3-0.

them. It gives me strength and more strength for the team."

The Hatters were phenomenal throughout against haphazard Wrexham as they surged into a three-goal lead inside 35 minutes.

Jake Howells' early snapshot was easily saved by Chris Maxwell and Robbie Willmott had a teasing free-kick clawed round the post before Luton did take the lead with a screamer from Welshman Lawless on 16 minutes.

He won the ball in the middle of the park, surged forward and drove home a majestic strike into the bottom corner from 30 yards.

With the hosts rocking the Hatters should have made it two three minutes later.

Jason Walker chased a lost cause and got the better of former Premier League defender Frank Sinclair on the byline.

His stabbed cross was flicked on to the far post by Willmott but Howells' volley crashed against the bar with Lawless firing the rebound over.

Wrexham were restricted to aerial balls into the box and Town almost doubled their lead on 26 minutes when Keith Keane superbly robbed his man and powered towards goal but his weak finish was too close to Maxwell and Walker was unable to force home the rebound.

Luton deservedly made it 2-0 two minutes later though with a wonderfully crafted goal.

Asafu-Adjaye, Keane, Walker and Howells' final great pass moved the ball from one side of the field to the other and Gnakpa drove an unstoppable rocket past the despairing Maxwell from the edge of the area.

With Town in the ascendancy the home crowd grew restless as Luton continued to play some wonderful football, threatening at regular intervals.

Dan Gleeson had a shot deflected behind and from the resulting corner Town made it 3-0 on 35 minutes to put their supporters in dreamland. Willmott swung the ball over to the unmarked Asafu-Adjaye on the edge of the area who took a touch before drilling a shot inside Maxwell's net post.

Captain Dean Keates curled a Wrexham free-kick well wide before Gnakpa rode several challenges on a marauding run but drove straight at Maxwell.

Wrexham pressed in the closing moments. Gareth Taylor flicking Keates' cross wide, Zdenek Kroca deflecting Andy Mangan's shot behind and Keane heading away Chris Blackburn's blast as the Welshmen trudged off to a murmur of boos.

The Red Dragons showed more resolve in the second half as four players were booked but they still struggled to create anything.

Keates curled a free-kick miles over, while Gnakpa had a shot blocked following Kroca's knock-

down at the other end.

A series of Wrexham crosses caused some danger as the decibel levels rose, but not even a raft of substitutions made any difference as the game became stretched.

Luton went close again on 70 minutes when Walker thundered in a cross and Willmott stretched to direct the ball into Lawless' path, but the classy midfielder could only volley over.

Gnakpa was ludicrously booked for foul on Keates, despite the Wrexham midfielder having his hand round the former Peterborough man's throat, with Gnakpa lamenting: "He just got me by the neck and the referee said I was pulling his shirt and gave me a yellow card. It's a shame."

Wrexham finally had their first shot on target on 81 minutes but the well-placed Curtis Obeng's tame effort was easily saved by Mark Tyler.

Town went close again seconds later when Keane drove an effort into the box and Kroca had one shot cleared off the line and on to a post by a defender before being denied by Maxwell.

Some comedic defending by Sinclair almost let Willmott nip in as Maxwell blasted his kick into the pair and the ball just bounced to safety.

Keane's effort in the fourth minute of injury-time was tipped over by Maxwell, but the damage had already been done.

Red Dragons Hatters

Shots on	1	9
Shots off	4	2
Woodwork	0	2
Corners	2	4
Free-kicks	15	21
Offsides	7	4

Red Dragons (4-3-3): Chris Maxwell, Curtis Obeng, Neil Ashton, Chris Blackburn (Lee Fowler 66), Jay Harris, Gareth Taylor (Jamie Tolley 78), Andy Mangan, Dean Keates (C), Frank Sinclair, Nat Knight-Perceval (Obi Anoruo 64), Mark Creighton.

Substitutes not used: Joslain Mayeti, Marvin Andrews.

Hatters (4-3-3): Mark Tyler, Dan Gleeson, Keith Keane, George Pilkington (C), Robbie Willmott, Zdenek Kroca, Alex Lawless, Jake Howells, Ed Asafu-Adjaye, Claude Gnakpa (Matthew Barnes-Homer 83), Jason Walker. **Substitutes not used:** Kevin Pilkington, Luke Graham, Adam Newton, Lloyd Owusu.

Bookings: Blackburn 49; Harris 50; Keates 61; Creighton 75; Gnakpa 76.

Referee: SJ Martin.

Assistant referees: J Clark and J Brooks.

Fourth Official: J Simpson.

Attendance: 7,211.

Star Hatter: Alex Lawless. Great opening goal spurred Luton on their way and he was a class act all night.

Hatters rated

Mark Tyler: 7 – Hardly tested, made one routine save, but looked solid and alert all night.

Dan Gleeson: 8 – Timed his challenges brilliantly and really added to Town's rock solid look.

Keith Keane: 8.5 – Bundles of Football League experience. Brought it all to the fore with a tenacious performance.

George Pilkington: 8 – Marshallled the back four well and stood tall against the Wrexham bombardment.

Robbie Willmott: 8.5 – Pace is a great asset and his speed gave Wrexham kittens all evening.

Zdenek Kroca: 8.5 – Used his giant frame to great effect and somehow was denied a fourth late on.

Alex Lawless: 9 – Brilliant strike set Luton on their way and the Welshman was tremendous all night.

Jake Howells: 8 – Composure and class complemented his midfield comrades to produce a defecatable performance.

Ed Asafu-Adjaye: 8.5 – From zero to hero in less than a month, the full-back was in dreamland after netting his first-ever senior goal.

Claude Gnakpa: 8.5 – Wrexham couldn't handle the thrilling Frenchman who ran them ragged until he was withdrawn late on after picking up a nonsense booking.

Jason Walker: 8 – Should have netted a rebound, but led the line superbly and linked play whenever possible.

Matthew Barnes-Homer (sub): 7 – Looked hungry and chased everything during his brief spell.

Ratings by Mark Wood.