

Town reach Eastlands after a nervy evening

by Mark Wood

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**Blue Square Bet Premier
Play-Off Semi-Final Second Leg
Luton Town 2 (1) 1 Wrexham 1 (1)
(5-1 on aggregate)**

A BRILLIANT penalty save from terrific Town keeper Mark Tyler prevented Luton's play-off dream from turning into a nightmare last night.

Trailing 1-0 to Andy Mangan's eighth-minute strike, Tyler's save from Gareth Taylor's spot-kick midway through the first half turned the tide in this encounter.

From there nervous Luton regrouped, levelling through Zdenek Kroca's looping header before making sure of victory with Jason Walker's late strike as the Hatters booked their place at Eastlands for the play-off final on May 21.

Having played so well in the first leg at the Racecourse Ground on Thursday night, manager Gary Brabin named an unchanged side for the return leg.

Wrexham, meanwhile, made two changes Craig Blackburn being left out of the side and Nathaniel Knight-Percival dropping to the bench with Lee Fowler and the impressive Adrian Cieslewicz coming into the starting XI.

Kroca had a nervy start with the offside Mangan pulling a shot wide in the opening minute after a mistake by the Czech defender.

Lee Fowler then drilled a long range effort wide of the post as the Welsh side started the better of the two teams.

Some nice interplay between Claude Gnaka and Alex Lawless saw the latter fire wide on seven minutes before Wrexham got the lifeline they needed tie seconds later.

Cieslewicz skinned Ed Asafa-



DELIGHT: Zdenek Kroca celebrates his equaliser against Wrexham

Adjaye and curled in an inviting low cross where Mangan was lurking at the far post to tap home from point-blank range.

Captain George Pilkington was forced into some desperate defending before he looked like he was pulled over in the box by Frank Sinclair on 11 minutes, only for referee C Berry to wave away Town's appeals.

Curtis Obeng and Cieslewicz both fired in dangerous crosses as tentative Luton struggled to get into the game, with Dan Gleeson on hand both times to clear.

A swerving Jake Howells effort flew just wide on 18 minutes before things went from bad to worse for the Hatters two minutes later when the Red Dragons were awarded a penalty.

Jay Harris' delightful through

ball was superbly controlled by Mangan and, as he looked to beat Gleeson, the ball hit the right-back's hand and the referee promptly pointed to the spot, booking Gleeson in the process.

But once again Mark Tyler was Town's hero, flinging himself down to his left to turn Gareth Taylor tame spot-kick on to the post before grasping the ball at the second attempt as Kenilworth Road erupted with relief.

A terrible Pilkington clearance landed on the roof of Tyler's net before Town levelled out of nothing on 29 minutes.

Asafa-Adjaye's free-kick picked out colossus Kroca in the box and with Chris Maxwell straying off his line, the big defender's header looped into the unguarded net.

With the adrenaline pumping Town finally started to play some football with Willmott and Gleeson angling in some dangerous crosses.

In-between the Hatters were denied a second when Keith Keane's volley from a half-cleared corner was ruled out for push in the box.

Cieslewicz threatened again before the break but Pilkington did well to thwart him, although both players needed treatment after the collision as the two sides went in all-square at the break.

Wrexham had a well-placed Dean Keates free-kick parried away by Tyler six minutes in before the Welshmen almost committed suicide at the back.

Mark Cressington's backpass put Maxwell in all kinds of trouble and he was well tackled by Willmott.

The winger teed up Walker who failed to get a shot away but lined up Gnaka whose effort was tipped over the bar.

A push on Gnaka in the box went ununished, Pilkington had a firm header well blocked and Willmott saw a curling free-kick

clawed away by Maxwell as Town looked to finally kill off the Red Dragons.

Mangan fizzed an effort just wide on 59 minutes and Luton put the pressure on themselves with some at times haphazard defending.

A hopeful Gleeson pass almost put Lawless in on 64 minutes, Willmott had a deflected effort turned behind and Walker had a header ruled out at a corner for another push.

Willmott sent a daisycutter straight at Maxwell on 73 minutes before clipping a sublime ball over the top to send Walker clean through but he could only drill straight at the keeper.

Lively winger Willmott fired a volley straight down Maxwell's throat before the Wrexham stopper pulled off a breathtaking full-stretch save to turn Howells' volley, destined for the top right-hand corner from Gnaka cross, over the bar with 12 minutes to go.

The decibel level began to rise with Eastlands beckoning and Luton finally ended Wrexham's dream of a comeback with nine minutes left.

Howells' crossfield pass released the galloping Gnaka and with Town's players queueing up in the box it fell to Walker at the far post who smashed home despite the best efforts of Maxwell.

With Wrexham rocking Lawless curled wide, but Town were almost caught out by substitute Jamie Tolley whose effort was deflected just wide.

A stretched finale saw Cieslewicz fire over but Town held on to book their place in the play-off final at Eastlands on May 21.

A good natured pitch invasion greeted the final whistle, but there was still time for the Hatters players to return and show the crowd their appreciation.