

Bulman heroics earn Rovers a score draw

Blues Square Bet Premier

Luton Town 1 (0)
Forest Green Rovers 1 (0)

AN inspired display from Forest Green Rovers goalkeeper Matt Bulman saw Luton Town held to a frustrating draw in their opening game of the Blue Square Bet Premier season last night.

The Rovers stopper produced a number of quality saves, most notably in the second half from substitute Robbie Willmott, who had been surprisingly left on the bench by Hatters boss Gary Brabin.

With Mark Tyler suffering a back strain, Kevin Pilkington took the gloves, while Town handed debuts to summer signings Curtis Osano, Will Antwi, Dean Beckwith, James Dance and Aaron O'Connor as Hatters had only four of the starting XI that began the play-off final defeat to AFC Wimbledon on show.

Town looked to dominate possession from the start and Ed Asafu-Adjaye tried his luck from distance, sending an opportunistic volley over.

With 14 minutes on the clock, Hatters spurned a glorious chance to take the lead as Dance sent over a marvellous cross that the unmarked O'Connor somehow directed wide from a matter of yards.

Dance's deliveries were the highlights of the opening period and from one such ball, Jake Howells put his volley high and wide.

Town came close again from a corner on 19 minutes when Alex Lawless' cross deflected off the body of Antwi but fell just wide, while O'Connor cut in from the left flank and sent a low drive straight at Bulman.

Hatters target Reece Styche sent a dipping shot into the body of Pilkington, while an almighty scramble on 24 minutes in the

by Mike Simmonds

01582 798511 mike.simmonds@jpress.co.uk

Rovers area saw Beckwith's header cleared off the line.

Green winger James Norwood, who impressed on both flanks, set off on a driving run through the heart of the backpeddling Town defence, but saw his low drive brush the outside of the post.

Hatters went straight up the other end and almost took the lead in stunning fashion when Lawless' half volley drew a fantastic full-length save from the unsighted Bulman.

A few late tackles from either side spiced up the occasion and Norwood was the first to see yellow after a lunging challenge on Dance.

With the half drawing to a close, Keith Keane tried his luck from 30 yards and Bulman managed to clutch hold at the second attempt.

Hatters had claims for a penalty just before the interval when O'Connor was obstructed by Jared Hodgkiss, but nothing was given.

Luton looked to have upped their game immediately after the restart as Rovers' defence completely switched off, allowing O'Connor to set up Matthew Barnes-Homer, but he missed his kick.

The visitors stunned the home faithful on 52 minutes though when Norwood's free-kick was headed in at the far post by Charlie Griffin, who easily brushed aside the weak challenge of Osano.

In a decidedly edgy atmosphere, it took Hatters time to find their feet after going behind, as Lawless fired in a drive from long range that Bulman showed good hands to claim.

Willmott was finally introduced on 63 minutes and he helped pep up the home side's attack instant-

BECKS APPEAL: New boys Dean Beckwith heads home Luton's equaliser last night

Picture by Jane Russell



ly as Hatters levelled soon afterwards.

A long corner was swung to the back post and Dance headed it back across goal for Beckwith to nod in a debut strike from close range, easing the tension among the home fans.

Eager to make an impression, Willmott beat his man and slammed a shot that rose over the bar, before his deep free-kick was met by Dance, but eventually bundled off the line.

Luton still looked shaky in defence and it took a good block from Keane to deny Styche a sight of goal on a rare foray forward.

Substitute Willmott continued his one man crusade picking up a rushed clearance from Rovers and arrowing a shot that Bulman

reacted well to claw away before Dance almost netted, pulling his shot inches wide.

Rovers keeper Bulman was forming a human barricade at times, producing another instinctive tip over to save Willmott's ferocious piledriver and then coming off his line quickly to deny O'Connor.

With time running out, Forest Green came within inches of snatching the lead once more as Kieron Forbes' wonderful curling effort beat Pilkington all ends up, but cannoned off the bar and out again.

Styche also tested Pilkington, but the keeper had his angles correct as, although Hatters huffed and puffed late on, they never seriously looked like snatching an opening day triumph.

Brabin would like a piece of Reece

HATTERS boss Gary Brabin confirmed the club have made a bid for Forest Green Rovers striker Reece Styche, writes Mike Simmonds.

The 22-year-old played 90 minutes at Kenilworth Road last night as Town were held to a 1-1 draw and after the match, Brabin admitted he had tried to sign the forward.

He said: "We've had a few targets and Styche is one. I think its come out now, and it's no secret that Styche is one of them. He's a young, hungry forward who was playing up front on his own, he works his socks off and chips in with goals. I watched him Friday night and he scored a good header against Stockport and he's certainly one that we're interested in, but I don't want to get held to ransom.

"People are putting a little bit extra on players and think we're going to pay over the odds. I certainly don't want to do that. I know I've got the full backing of the board to sign players, but it's got to be realistic."

Hatters: (4-3-3): Kevin Pilkington, Keith Keane (C), Dean Beckwith, Alex Lawless, Matthew Barnes-Homer (Robbie Willmott 63), Aaron O'Connor, Jake Howells, Ed Asafu-Adjaye, Will Antwi, Curtis Osano, James Dance. **Subs not used:** Amari Morgan-Smith, Danny Crow, Adam Watkins, Lewis Kidd.

Rovers: Matt Bulman, Jared Hodgkiss (C), Chris Stokes, Jamie Turley, James Norwood, Reece Styche, Charlie Griffin, Kieron Forbes, Luke Graham, Chris Allen (Wayne Turk 90), James Rowe (Yan Klukowski 59). **Subs not used:** James Bittner, Jeffrey Imudia, Callum Henry.

Referee: N Kinseley. **Assistants Referees:** L Venamore, T Goddard.

Fourth Official: L Wood.

Booked: Norwood 35, Allen 56, Graham 69, Griffin 76, Lawless 78.

Attendance: 6,061.

Star Hatter: Robbie Willmott. Injected some real desire and purpose to the Hatters frontline.