

Strikers are a Hand-ful

by Mark Wood

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Blue Square Bet Premier

Luton Town 1 (0) Lincoln City 0 (0)
STAND-IN centre-half Jamie Hand was always certain 10-man Town had the arsenal to destroy Lincoln City if they could keep it tight at the back.

Luton battled valiantly for more than 70 minutes following Dean Beckwith's sending off midway through the first half on Saturday for a stupid off-the-ball elbow.

Midfielder Hand plugged the hole admirably and had faith that Town's attackers could do the business with Stuart Fleetwood, who had missed several chances, netting a well-deserved winner in the dying moments.

Hand said: "I'm delighted with the three points and clean sheet.

"We know we've got the players at the other end who will get us goals. I knew if we could keep organised and tight at the back and a clean sheet, with players like Fleets they are natural goalscorers.

"It's an exciting afternoon and one for the fans to watch. I think there were a few chances at both ends. Even with 10 men I thought we deserved to win the game and the boys are delighted to get the three points."

Hand made one particularly important intervention when he threw himself in the way of a goalbound shot in the second half, and said: "I think it was Nicky Nicolau and I played with him at Woking.

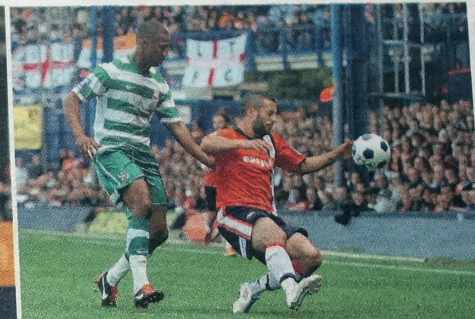
"I know he has a great left foot and fancied him to go across the keeper and threw myself in front of it.

"I got a pat on the back from Tyles and it's part of being a defender putting your body on the line."

On Beckwith's red card, he added: "I don't know whether he has done it or not. I only know when the big man was on the floor he wasn't hurt."

Town were forced into two changes from the side that won 2-0 at AFC Telford on Tuesday

Pictures by Jane Russell



BATTLING ALL OVER THE PITCH: Alex Lawless tussles for possession, left, and livewire striker Stuart Fleetwood does well to hold on to the ball, above

night. With Ed Asafu-Adjaye suspended following his midweek sending off and Keith Keane ruled out by a hip injury, into the midfield came Hand, following his one-match ban, while James Dance started at right-back.

In the absence of George Pilkington and Keane, Alex Lawless took over the captain's armband but, despite two clean sheets in their last two games, Luton started uncertainly at the back.

Yet it was the Hatters who created the first clear-cut chance on five minutes when Lawless' clever header eluded Adam Watts as Fleetwood raced clear, but he stroked tamely into keeper Joe Anyon's midriff.

A silly push by Beckwith resulted in Gavin McCallum's free-kick being well blocked by Lawless, while the same player went over in the box under some heavy-handed defending from Beckwith but nothing was doing.

Robbie Willmott thumped a well-placed free-kick into the Imps' wall, before Danny Crow flicked a Willmott cross wide on 17 minutes. But the game swung in City's favour on 23 minutes when Beckwith elbowed Kyle Perry off the ball and was duly dismissed, before then pushing the prostrate Perry in anger.

It was Luton that pressed for the lead though, Anyon clawing away Lawless' 25-yarder and Willmott's flashing effort from the re-

bound deflected behind.

Another gilt-edged chance for the Hatters went begging on 35 minutes when a defender misjudged a long ball over the top and Fleetwood was quickly on to it, but his drive from a narrow angle clipped the top of the bar on its way over.

Despite their reduced numbers tenacious Town continued to cause the Imps problems as Fleetwood again beat the offside trap but his driven cross was was catapulted over by Crow from point-blank range.

Hand looked assured at the back, but twice let McCallum in, thankfully for him to fire wide when he should have done better.

Lawless forced a good save from Anyon early in the second half, while Bradley Barraclough spurned a decent chance on 52 minutes.

Fleetwood again got in behind but this time was crowded out while Mark Tyler got down well to palm Simon Russell's deflected shot round the post.

Some lovely play from substitutes John Paul Kissock and Adam Watkins almost slipped Fleetwood through on 70 minutes but Mitchell Nelson's perfectly-timed tackled denied him.

Perry sent another good header just wide of the mark and then thought he had finally broken Luton hearts when his close-range strike squirmed past Tyler, only

for the linesman's flag to rescue the Hatters.

At the other end the fleet-footed Fleetwood broke the offside trap, but yet again his low drive drew a fine save from Anyon.

Lincoln threatened with nine minutes to go but Hand did brilliantly to put his body in the way of substitute Nicolau's blast that seemed destined for the net.

The hosts were playing with plenty of passion and energy and won it thanks to a wonderfully inventive goal with six minutes to go.

A quickly-taken short corner saw Kissock jink his way along the byline before laying it on a plate for Fleetwood to stroke home from a matter of yards.

It should have been two on 87 minutes when Watkins and Fleetwood combined brilliantly on the halfway line as Fleetwood raced clean through, but again Anyon came to the Imps' rescue with another brilliant one-on-one save.

Still there was time for more drama as the referee added four minutes of injury time.

Luton continued to work tirelessly and, as Fleetwood chased a lost cause towards the corner, Nelson came charging in and planted him into the hoardings.

The referee was quickly across again and rightly handed the defender his second booking and a red card as Town held on for a fabulous victory.