

Hatters see victory snatched away by last-gasp West strike

BY MARC BAZELEY

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BLUE SQUARE BET PREMIER

EBBSFLEET UNITED 2
LUTON TOWN 2

A LATE double from Michael West secured struggling Ebbsfleet United a share of the spoils and denied a below-par Luton Town victory that would have taken them up to third in the Blue Square Bet Premier.

The sides may be at opposite ends of the table, but it was not evident last night. Nevertheless, the Hatters looked to have done enough to earn a hard-fought win thanks to goals either side of half time from Amari Morgan-Smith and James Dance.

But Ebbsfleet never gave up and their pressure in the second half paid off when West grabbed both of their goals inside the final quarter of an hour, first squeezing in a shot at the near post before punishing some slack defending in added time.

The visitors threatened as early as the third minute when goalkeeper Mark Tyler hit a long clearance down the left channel. Robbie

Willmott could not quite get to it, but Morgan-Smith could and curled a shot just wide, giving a glimpse of what was to come.

Ebbsfleet were creating plenty of opportunities of their own though, and four minutes later Tom Phipp showed some good skill before releasing Calum Willock. However, he was flagged for offside before he could get a shot away.

Luton quickly countered from the resulting free kick and James Dance shot over from 12 yards after Aaron O'Connor had cut in from the right wing and put in a low cross for him.

At the other end, Tyler was forced into action on the quarter hour, parrying away a Joe Howe shot from an angle after he had been teed up by Willock. Then in the 21st minute Ebbsfleet were awarded a free kick 20 yards out after Phipp had gone down under a tackle from Paul Carden, only for Michael West to curl it high and wide.

O'Connor was looking lively for Luton and on the half hour forced Preston Edwards into a good save after he had again come in from the right and tried his luck. Edwards then did well to bundle away a close

range header from Jamie Hand from a corner moments later.

West then curled a shot wide of the mark for the home side, with Willock also heading over from six yards out after Ram Marwa had crossed for him.

It was the Hatters that made the breakthrough just four minutes before the break though, with Morgan-Smith curling in a breath-taking strike from 18 yards after coming inside Fleet full back Craig Stone and unleashing his effort.

But United could well have gone into the break level had skipper Paul Lorraine taken the chances that came his way. A free kick was floated into the Luton box and the defender had a shot saved by Tyler before he drilled the rebound over the bar.

The home side came out with a renewed sense of purpose, only to find themselves twice thwarted by the Hatters offside trap inside the first ten minutes, while Jamie Darvill was also unable to get to Willock's flick on before Tyler could smother it.

Errors were starting to creep into Luton's game as they found themselves under pressure from

FLEETING: James Dance's joy was short-lived

by Gareth Owen



Ebbsfleet, but Dance doubled the away team's advantage with 19 minutes to go. He received the ball from a Curtis Osano throw-in and burst through the defence before slotting past the sprawling Edwards.

Fleet deservedly pulled a goal back on 76 minutes when Tyler was unable to keep out a fierce strike from the impressive West after he had latched onto a clearance from a corner. Substitute Scott Ginty then dragged a shot wide after he had found himself unmarked in the box three minutes later.

It set up a grandstand finish and with four minutes of added time it would be a nervous end for Luton. They could not hold on though, and when West crashed in his second off the underside of the bar in the dying seconds he secured his side a much deserved point.

Luton – Tyler; Osano, Kovacs, G. Pilkington (captain), Blackett; Carden, Hand, Willmott; O'Connor (Fleetwood 66), Morgan-Smith (Watkins 84), Dance Subs Not Used – K. Pilkington, Antwi, Kissock, Watkins
Referee – Mr. John Hopkins (Essex)
Attendance – 1,651