

Thrilling draw, but too few watch it

Craig Stoddart



DEPUTY SPORTS EDITOR
craig.stoddart@nne.co.uk
twitter.com/cstoddartecho

Darlington 1
Luton Town 1

in association with

DYNO-ROD
Plumbing & Drains

THE lowest gate of Darlington's season turned up for last night's game with Luton Town, but those that stayed away missed out the most thrilling game that ended in high drama and a penalty save that denied Quakers an injury time win.

Inside a frantic last ten minutes there were two penalties, two goals, a red card and a controversial refereeing decision that baffled everyone at The Northern Echo Arena.

Quakers' patched up team were leading 1-0 thanks to Ryan Bowman's 86th minute penalty when referee Richard Wrigglesworth should have awarded a second spot-kick after Ed Asafu-Adjaye kicked John McReady to the ground.

So poor was the challenge that McReady left the ground with stud marks on his ribs, yet Wrigglesworth played on and, typically, within ten seconds Luton levelled.

And there was still time for Bowman to see a last-gasp spot kick saved.

It was extremely harsh on patched-up Darlington who could name only three substitutes, but put in a determination showing full of fight.

Injuries to Scott Harrison and Marc Bridge-Wilkinson, meant they started with a makeshift side with Paul Arnison and Neil Wainwright used in unorthodox roles.

Arnison was at centre-back while Wainwright filled in at right-back.

From the off, third-placed Luton were quick to take a stranglehold, winning three early corners with Craig McAllister's off-target header being the closest they came to a goal.

Alex Lawless had a shot blocked inside the penalty area as Gary Brabin's visitors kept up the pace in a lively beginning as Darlington struggled to get close to Mark Tyler's goal.

Bowman charged down a George Pilkington clearance, but couldn't find Drewe Broughton with his centre, but the Hatters' strong start continued.

They won seven corners in the first 20 minutes, from the last of which McAllister headed over again.

But a set-piece sparked Dar-



WATCHING BRIEF: Liddle looks on as Hopson takes on Watkins

Picture: TOM BANKS

MATCHFACTS

Goals: Bowman (86, 1-0), Fleetwood (90, 1-1)
Bookings: Broughton (15, dissent); Wainwright (15, foul), Poku (45, foul)
Referee: Richard Wrigglesworth (Doncaster) 4
Attendance: 1,382
Entertainment: ★★★★★
DARLINGTON (4-4-2): PICKFORD 8; Wainwright 6, Arnison 7, Taylor 8, Brown 7; Rundle 7, Keltie 6, McReady 7, Hopson 6 (Lambert 65, 7), Broughton 6, Bowman 7. Subs (not used): Nixon (gk), Ferguson
LUTON TOWN (4-4-2): TYLER 8; Asafu-Adjaye 5, Kovacs 4, Pilkington 6, Taylor 7; Wilmott 6, Lawless 7, Poku 6, Watkins 7 (Henry 73); McAllister 6 (Woodley 89), Crow 5 (Fleetwood 46). Subs (not used): Osano, Boucaud

MAN OF THE MATCH

JORDAN Pickford – The teenager made a number of eye-catching saves

lington into life.

Aaron Brown's free-kick around the wall was beaten away by Tyler and from the corner Wainwright's shot was blocked on the line as Quakers began to gain in confidence.

They gradually put more pressure on the Luton back four, which featured former Quakers defender Greg Taylor, and some lovely football had the 1,382 crowd cheering.

Clark Keltie initiated an attack, exchanged passes with Rundle and although Bowman was offside it as an indication of what was to come as Darlington ended the half strongly.

Their only real chance fell to Broughton who lashed over after an Adam Rundle cross was insufficiently cleared.

But Jordan Pickford was to thank for keeping it scoreless. The keeper, on loan from Sunderland, showed composure to calmly take the ball off the onrushing McAllister's toes after Danny Crowe had flicked the ball on.

He was at it again after the break, making more eye-catching saves.

He had people on their feet applauding after two stops from close-range inside ten seconds, the first from Janos Kovacs and the second from Adam Watkins and Watkins soon curled an effort that the keeper tipped wide.

In a repeat of the first half, Luton started the second period powerfully, but dogged Darlington showed determination to hang on.

Taylor diving in at the feet of Kovacs just as the defender was about to shoot was typical of Quakers' spirit.

Strong Darlington penalty appeals were turned down just after the hour. Broughton flicked on Taylor's free-kick and Tyler clattered into Bowman, but Wrigglesworth was not interested.

The team and the crowd were growing in belief and when substitute Danny Lambert was sent on, the winger twisted and turned, firing in a near-post shot that Tyler held.

A red card for Kovacs on 82 minutes signalled an explosive finish.

The defender hauled down Bowman on the edge of the area and, as it was a goalscoring opportunity, he saw red and soon after Bowman made it 1-0 when scored from the spot after being tripped by Godfrey Poku.

Darlington were not done yet, charged forward for a sec-

Continued from back page

Liddle added: "For him to then give the next penalty sums everything up because that shouldn't have been given."

"He was just trying to get himself out of jail, but if he'd made the correct decision first time it would've been 2-0 and not 1-1."

Darlington's winless run now stands at 11 games, but the performance was a huge improvement on the 1-0 home defeat last time out against Stockport.

Liddle added: "My team talk was five seconds long. I said I wanted pride, work-rate and belief and they had all three of those things."

ond goal, and this time Ed Asafu-Adjaye scythed down McReady in the 18-yard box.

But somehow Wrigglesworth did not award a penalty and within ten seconds Luton swept up the other end and levelled with Stuart Fleetwood tapping home.

Wrigglesworth, however, presumably atoning for his first error, made a another mistake when he awarded a penalty for Poku's harmless challenge on Bowman.

But the striker aimed for the same spot as his first effort and Tyler saved.

It was a performance to be proud of, but it's points that Darlington need and after last night's showing they will be confident of saving their Conference status despite sitting four points adrift of fifth-bottom Lincoln.