

Hatters see out nervy end to book final spot

by Mark Wood

01582 798517 mark.wood@jpress.co.uk

Blue Square Bet Premier, Play-Off Semi-Finals, Second Leg: Wrexham 2 (0) Luton Town 1 (1) Luton win 3-2 on aggregate

THE final minutes at Wrexham felt like an eternity to skipper George Pilkington as Luton Town hung on at Wrexham to book their place in the Conference play-off final against York City on Sunday, May 20.

Hardy Hatters had to withstand late Wrexham barrage as the Dragons triumphed 2-1 on the day, but Town's 2-0 lead from the first leg on Thursday proved decisive.

Pilkington's cool first half penalty had put Luton ahead, but the Dragons came roaring back substitutes Adrian Cieslewicz and Andy Morrell netted in the second half to set up a grand-and finish as manager Paul Tisdale suffered his first defeat in eight games since taking charge.

Having withstood Wrexham's relentless pressure as eight minutes of stoppage time was played, the captain said: "It felt like forever to be honest, I don't know what the ref was playing at."

"He sort of said 10 minutes and played six minutes which felt like minutes."

"We got there in the end and that's all that matters. It was a hard-fought victory or loss or whatever, we won the tie."

"We've come under pressure, a bit of pressure towards the end and we stood firm."

"We conceded a couple of scrappy goals, but with the pressure and the amount of attacks they had we were always vulnerable."

"But it doesn't matter. It's a knockout tie and we've got to rough and start preparing for the replay now."

"I don't think any of us have played in a game where they pump the ball as much forward."

"They are very effective and good at it and that's why they've been successful in the league and counted more points than us."

"But obviously with play-offs being the play-offs it doesn't quite work that way."

"I think we did the damage at Millinor Road and to score the penalty in the first half, it was wise of us to stick or twist a bit with a three-goal cushion."

"We always knew we would come under pressure but held out to the end."

Having been in control the game turned in Wrexham's favour as they threw centre-half Mark Creighton forward in the second half.

Pilkington said: "They took (Athias) Pogba and (Danny) Wright off, the two big centre forwards and brought two more mobile centre forwards on and put

Pictures by Gareth Owen



COMPOSED: George Pilkington keeps his cool to send Joslain Mayebi the wrong way as he's then mobbed by his team-mates



Creighton up there to fill the two big 'uns' boots and he's a handful."

"We set our stall out for Janos (Kovacs) to stay with him and me to sweep round."

"We got away with it towards the end and I think we were comfortable with it up to the point they made their substitutions."

"It got a bit hairy, but like I say, the rest is history."

"This game will soon be forgotten and we are through to Wembley so let's go and win it."

With their lead from the first leg Luton were happy to play on the counter in the knowledge they couldn't give Wrexham any early glimmers of hope.

Pilkington continued: "We knew they would come out at us first 15, 20 minutes and we said to ourselves we need to weather the storm and try and play our football, although we probably didn't play as much as we would have liked."

"But we were working that hard to keep them at bay and breaking down their attacks sometimes the legs get a little bit tired, especially towards the end of the game the lads were out on their feet."

Town's only alteration came on the bench where full-back Dan Gleeson replaced John Paul Kissock, while Wrexham made four changes from Thursday night.

The hosts targeted Jake Howells from the off with a series of long balls as Luton coped comfortably at a packed Racecourse Ground.

A poor lunging challenge by Adam Watkins on Danny Alfei rightly earned him a yellow card on 13 minutes as his effectiveness was curtailed.

Kovacs did well to block out

Wright's drive from inside the box moments later, while Robbie Willmott fired a well-placed free-kick into the wall at the other end.

Having weathered the early storm Luton came back into the game and won a 23rd-minute penalty when Alex Lawless battled his way into the box and grizzily centre-half Creighton caught him with a terrible lunging challenge as referee Steve Bratt pointed to the spot.

After a long wait, Pilkington stepped up and calmly sent keeper Joslain Mayebi the wrong way to put Luton ahead.

With Wrexham restricted to long balls forward Luton almost doubled their lead on 32 minutes when the lively Andre Gray led the charge and his crossfield pass found Stuart Fleetwood but Mayebi nicked the ball off the striker's chest as he tried to round him.

Mark Tyler was at his best to tip Glen Little's fizzing 25-yarder over the bar on 39 minutes, while Gray, Howells and Watkins all threatened on the cusp of half time.

Little's wayward pass was intercepted by Fleetwood two minutes into the second half but having raced half the length of the field he could only drive tamely at Mayebi.

Luton went close to a second on 52 minutes when Jay Harris and Dean Keates got in each other's way and Lawless was quickly on to the loose ball to release Gray, but his cheeky chip drifted agonisingly wide.

Gray burst through seconds later but blasted over before Cieslewicz and Morrell were introduced for the hosts

A Creighton knockdown was poked at Tyler by Morrell, before

Jake Speight's sharp effort was deflected over the bar by Lawless and Wrexham equalised from the resulting corner as Cieslewicz's near-post header looped in at the far post as the Racecourse erupted.

Another Creighton header fell nicely for Little as Tyler saved before he did fantastically well to get a hand to Cieslewicz's low effort and keep it out on 66 minutes.

More changes were made by Luton but they couldn't stem the flow of crosses and Wrexham netted a second on 77 minutes to set up a grandstand finish.

A ball into the box was headed against the post by player/manager Morrell and he was quickest to react as he slammed the ball into the unguarded net, despite Tyler being impeded.

Craig McAllister's dangerous cross was superbly headed away by Harris on a rare foray forward from Luton, while a free-kick in a good position was wasted after substitute Amari Morgan-Smith was fouled on the edge of the box.

Substitutes Morgan-Smith and Greg Taylor combined as five minutes of injury time were added, but the latter's bouncing bomb was easily fielded by Mayebi.

Keates' rasping drive was well blocked before Nat Knight-Perceval and Morgan-Smith tangled late on and the Luton striker received a yellow card as he reacted with an angry push.

Town held on to book their place in the final as ugly scenes followed the final whistle with Wrexham fans invading the pitch and baiting Town's supporters, before riot police shooed them away.