

Yes, 45 points would do me!

HATTERS boss Joe Kinnear has already told his players what he wants for Christmas and it won't cost them a penny!

Kinnear would like to wake up on December 25 with his team on 45 points at the season's half-way mark and asked for his perfect Yuletide present after Saturday's satisfying 2-1 victory at Hartlepool.

He has set a target of back-to-back victories in the club's next two games. Both are at home, with Rushden and Diamonds the first visitors before Hartlepool arrive for an unusually quick return fixture three days before Christmas.

Goals from Dean Crowe and Matthew Taylor earned the Hatters three points at the Victoria Ground, although Ian Hillier's 57th-minute sending off for a second bookable offence ensured a nail-biting second-half for the visitors.

Hartlepool, who were trailing 2-0 before Hillier received his marching orders, pulled a goal back six minutes later through former Sheffield Wednesday striker Ritchie Humphreys and then spent the remainder of the game camped in the Hatters' half.

But the visitors' defence held firm with Chris Coyne outstanding alongside new signing David Bayliss, who made a very accomplished debut, looking quick, strong and excellent in the air.

And when the Hatters' back four were breached recalled keeper Mark Ovendale demonstrated that his shot-stopping ability remains impressive.

Hartlepool had four times as many goal attempts as the visitors and Ovendale's superb one-handed reflex save from Mark Tinkler's close-range header on 86 minutes secured victory and prevented his side losing two crucial points.

The victory was the Hatters' sixth on their travels this season and only leaders Plymouth and fifth-placed Rochdale have won as many away games in the division.

Kinnear's men also crucially bounced back after a depressing run of three successive defeats and there were encouraging signs for future improvement, including better performances from Kevin Nicholls, Taylor and Emmerson Boyce.

Taylor, who played on the left side of midfield before Hillier's red card, should have given Luton the lead on 12 minutes.

A misjudgement by home keeper Anthony Williams after Hillier's long throw gifted Taylor the early chance but he headed over a gaping goal.

Humphreys had earlier fired over for the home side and also shot wide on 26 minutes.

The Hatters went ahead three minutes later when Spring fed Ahmet Brkovic, whose right-wing cross was dropped by a shaky Williams

Joe verdict



We made things difficult for ourselves. It was backs to the wall stuff after Ian Hillier's sending off and Steve Howard did not make the right decision when he should have given Matthew Spring the ball to walk it into the net. But we are battling away and got three important points to put us back in the top four

under pressure from former Hartlepool favourite Steve Howard. Dean Crowe then swept the ball into the net from close range and Hartlepool's complaints about Howard's challenge fell on deaf ears.

The goal was Crowe's seventh of the season and moved him level with crooked top scorer Carl Griffiths.

Spring was again involved in the visitors' second goal on the stroke of half-time, providing an excellent low cross from the right-wing that found Taylor charging in at the far post.

Williams could not keep out the Hatters midfielder's close-range effort and Kinnear's men led with two goals from their only two on-target efforts of the half. The Hartlepool half-

time tea no doubt tasted sweet although the first 45 minutes had been the subject of over-zealous refereeing which is proving a blight on Division Three football this season.

A fussy Tony Leake unnecessarily booked five Hatters players with Nicholls, inevitably, Howard, Brkovic, Hillier and Bayliss all having their names taken. Hillier's yellow card, which later proved so costly, was the harshest.

The Hatters left-back's strong challenge went unpunished by Leake, who failed to award a foul, but Hillier was then inexplicably cautioned when his only misdemeanour was being shoved away by Hartlepool's Darrell Clarke in retaliation.

Spring shot wide from 25 yards early in the second-half before Ovendale saved well from Clarke. Tony Lormor then headed over from five yards before Hillier was sent for an early bath after a clumsy lunge at tricky Paul Smith.

Tinkler fired over from 30 yards moments later and Humphreys reduced the deficit on 63 minutes after Ovendale could only parry Clarke's low drive. It was then a question of whether the Hatters' 10 men could hang on for victory under incessant pressure.

An opportunity for relief was also woefully wasted when a rare counter-attack saw Howard shoot selfishly at Williams when an unmarked Spring was screaming for a pass inside the penalty box.

At the other end, substitute Paul Arnison fired wide from 20 yards and a low drive by Adam Boyd was beaten out by Ovendale with Nicholls quickest to react in the penalty box.

Ovendale's terrific save from Tinkler followed and the keeper could be forgiven for indulging in a spot of dramatic exaggeration when he kept out Boyd's last-minute header.



COME ON! Matthew Taylor shows his joy after scoring Luton's winning goal at Hartlepool. And no wonder. The goal brought Hatters three much-needed points after a poor run and put them back in fourth place.

Picture: GARETH OWEN

playerwatch

CENTRAL DEFENDER CHRIS COYNE

- Time on pitch: 90 mins
- Shots: 0
- Passes to own player: 4
- Passes to opposition: 2
- Crosses: 0
- Pass completion rate: 67 per cent
- Headers: 14
- Clearances, blocks and interceptions: 23
- Tackles: 5
- Dribble ball retained: 1
- Dribble ball lost: 0
- Dribble completion rate: 100 per cent
- Fouls conceded: 2
- Fouls won: 0
- Offside: 0

FINAL ANALYSIS: Chris Coyne enjoyed a masterful performance at Hartlepool with the Hatters' defensive resolve tested severely in the second-half. He displayed what a fine reader of a game he can be with his high tally of clearances, blocks and interceptions and forged a fine partnership with debutant David Bayliss.

LOOK OUT for another Player Watch in next week's *News-Gazette* – the best papers around for all the latest news from Kenilworth Road.

matchfacts

● **HARTLEPOOL:** Anthony Williams, Jonathon Bass (Paul Arnison, 64), Micky Barron, Gordon Simms (Mark Robinson, 69), Chris Westwood, Tommy Widdrington, Mark Tinkler, Paul Smith, Darrell Clarke, Ritchie Humphreys, Tony Lormor (Adam Boyd, 61). Substitutes not used: Martin Hollund, Jonathon Parkin.

● **HATTERS:** Mark Ovendale, Emmerson Boyce, David Bayliss, Chris Coyne, Ian Hillier, Ahmet Brkovic, Matthew Spring,

Kevin Nicholls, Matthew Taylor, Steve Howard, Dean Crowe (Adrian Forbes, 80). Substitutes not used: Carl Emberson, Stuart Douglas, Stuart Fraser, Peter Holmes.

● **Shots on target:** Hartlepool 12 Luton 3.

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● **Corners:** Hartlepool 7 Luton 2.

● **Top Hatter:** Chris Coyne – determined rearguard action.

● **Attendance:** 3,585.



IT'S NICE TO SEE YOU: Luton new boy David Bayliss in action at Hartlepool on Saturday. He made an impressive start for the Hatters.