



IT'S THERE: Croatian midfielder Ahmet Brkovic fires into an empty net after rounding Luton-born keeper Kevin Dearden to clinch a 1-0 victory for the Hatters at Torquay United on Saturday. It was Brkovic's second goal for the club. **Picture:** GARETH OWEN

Town join hunt for Wolves ace

JOE KINNAR is hoping to sign Wolves forward Adam Proudlock on loan until the summer.

But a permanent deal for Sunderland's Michael Proctor is now unlikely after Kinnear and the Premiership club's manager Peter Reid could not agree on a transfer fee.

Reid wants £500,000 for Proctor, who is currently on loan at York City.

Kinnear is only willing to pay half that amount and may wait to try his luck at a transfer tribunal when the 21-year-old attacker's Stadium of Light contract expires this summer.

Proudlock's wages could be a stumbling block but Kinnear is hoping to finalise a deal with Wolves manager Dave Jones that will bring him

to Kenilworth Road. The Hatters boss said: "I'm waiting to see if we can get Proudlock until the end of the season. I'm hoping that Dave Jones will let us pay half his wages, while they pay the other half."

"Sunderland want half-a-million for Proctor. I bid a certain amount which I felt was ample but they wanted double it."

● **TOWN** On Tour will be running coaches to Rushden & Diamonds on Saturday, leaving Maple Road at 12noon.

The price is £10 for adult supporters club members, £9 for concessions and £11 for non-members.

Reserve your place at the club shop or by calling 07960 567465.

match facts

● **TORQUAY:** Kevin Dearden, Paul Holmes, Rueben Hazell, Sean Hankin, Lee Russell, Kevin Hill, Jason Rees (Jimmy Benefield, 79), Chris Brandon, Richard Logan (Marcus Richardson, 54), Greg Goodridge (David Graham, 76), Alex Russell. Subs not used: Ryan Northmore, Steve Tully.

● **HATTERS:** Carl Emberson, Alan Neilson, Chris Coyne, Russell Perrett, Marvin Johnson (Emmerson Boyce,

70), Ahmet Brkovic (Paul Hughes, 46), Matthew Spring, Kevin Nicholls, Matthew Taylor, Gary McSwegan (Jean-Louis Valois, 83), Dean Crowe. Subs not used: Mark Owendale, Ian Hillier.

● **Shots on target:** Torquay 3, Luton 4.

● **Off target:** Torquay 5 Luton 2.

● **Corners:** Torquay 4 Luton 5.

● **Referee:** David Crick.

● **Star man:** Chris Coyne – unflappable performance.

Sexy Hatters go Plain for Joe

THE HATTERS enjoyed back-to-back clean sheets for the first time this season – and for only the second time during Joe Kinnear's reign at the club – after Ahmet Brkovic's goal clinched a 1-0 victory at Torquay.

Kinnear's policy for most of his first full campaign in charge has been to outscore the opposition, but the Hatters boss announced after Saturday's shut-out that he is happy to temporarily sacrifice "sexy football" in the crucial quest for points as the club's promotion push enters its final furlong.

Luton last kept consecutive clean sheets exactly a year ago today when a 1-0 victory over Cambridge United followed a 0-0 stalemate against Bristol Rovers.

Both those matches were at Kenilworth Road and Kinnear will be particularly pleased that the club have completed 180 minutes in a season without conceding a league goal on away soil for the first time since December 1997.

The Hatters back-line has defended excellently in both 1-0 victories at Torquay and Lincoln, albeit against opposition with a dismal lack of firepower.

Chris Coyne was as cool as the coastal breeze blowing into

Joe view



It has sometimes cost us to go gung-ho away from home but now I'm deciding to set my stall out and work as a team at not giving away what we have got, while being bright enough to take anything else that comes our way at the other end.

Plainmoor on Saturday, while Russell Perrett defended with typical fortitude.

Reliable club skipper Marvin Johnson also soldiered through another game at left-back until a nasty clash of heads with powerful home substitute Marcus Richardson brought a premature end to his afternoon, while Alan Neilson's integration into the Hatters side continued without fuss and he enjoyed another solid performance at right-back.

Neilson later illustrated his versatility by switching to left-

back after Emmerson Boyce's replacement of the unfortunate Johnson.

"Marvin had an enormous egg on his head and was feeling very groggy so I told him we lost 3-1 and all three goals were down to him," Kinnear later joked.

But the Hatters manager's defensive options suddenly look luxurious with David Bayliss available again after a three-match suspension, but probably ruining his one aberration in a Hatters shirt – the red card at Rochdale which could leave him with a fight to reclaim his starting place.

Suspended striker Steve Howard and Adrian Forbes, available for last night's home match with Leyton Orient after serving a one-match ban, have less to fear with Dean Crowe lacking confidence and Gary McSwegan match fitness at Plainmoor.

Crowe missed an excellent 67th-minute chance to secure the points, but still showed sufficient signs that he is worth perseverance and capable of rediscovering the form that brought him 10 goals before the New Year.

Ex-Scotland international McSwegan also offered glimpses of his ability on Saturday, but his acquisition has demonstrated the problems of bringing in loan signings who have not played recent

first-team football. It was left to Croatian midfielder Brkovic to find the net on 21 minutes after Hatters keeper Carl Emberson had turned Alex Russell's low free-kick behind for a corner.

Brkovic collected Kevin Nicholls' pass into the penalty box before skipping around Luton-born keeper Kevin Dearden and coolly shooting into an empty net.

The diminutive midfielder was only denied a second goal on 40 minutes by Dearden's fine save after Matthew Taylor had received a first-time crossfield pass by McSwegan and crossed low into the penalty box.

Brkovic received a kick on his ankle shortly afterwards and did not reappear for the second-half, with Paul Hughes replacing him.

Taylor's header carried insufficient power to beat Dearden on the hour mark after good work by Crowe on the right flank.

Crowe then failed to end his frustrating goal drought, fluffing his shot wide after Taylor's great cross had found him unmarked in the penalty box.

Perrett headed inches wide from three yards out after a 77th-minute corner, but his presence at the other end helped restrict Torquay to hopeful long-range efforts from Greg Goodridge.

The home side's clearest

sight of goal came on 84 minutes, but Jimmy Benefield never looked confident and dragged his shot wide of Emberson's goal just moments after replacing ex-Hatters midfielder Jason Rees, whose removal from the action was applauded by an unimpressed home crowd.

Jean-Louis Valois, a sub for the tiring McSwegan, then found Crowe with a searching pass in injury time, but the striker's heavy touch allowed Rueben Hazell to make a perfect covering tackle.

The victory was the Hatters' 11th away success of the season and broke a club record set by Alec Stock's 1969/70 Division Three promotion-winning side.

Kinnear's men also chalked

up a fourth consecutive league win for only the second time in the last 15 years. The previous occasion was under Lennie Lawrence in December 1996.

Luton's latest four-match run may have come against sides in the bottom seven of the Football League's basement division but the Hatters have shown a necessary propensity to avoid slipping up against teams they should beat throughout the season.

The Kenilworth Road club had won 14 out of 20 matches against teams in the lower half of the Division Three table after Saturday's victory, including six wins out of six against the bottom four sides before last night's home clash with lowly Leyton Orient.

playerwatch

THIS WEEK IT'S SCOTSMAN GARY MCSWEGAN

● **Time on pitch:** 83 minutes

● **Shots:** 0

● **Passes to own player:** 12

● **Passes to opposition:** 7

● **Crosses to own player:** 2

● **Crosses to opposition:** 1

● **Pass completion rate:** 63.6 per cent

● **Dribbles ball retained:** 2

● **Dribbles ball lost:** 0

● **Dribble completion rate:** 100 per cent

● **Headers:** 10

● **Clearances, blocks, interceptions:** 0

● **Tackles:** 0

● **Free-kicks won:** 1

● **Free-kicks conceded:** 1

● **Offsides:** 0

● **FINAL VERDICT:** Gary McSwegan's lack of a goal threat is illustrated by his failure to muster one shot during Saturday's match, but the Scottish striker was involved in the build-up to Ahmet Brkovic's goal and, at times, displayed a vision and awareness that suggests he would be performing better at full fitness. His passing became more erratic and his contributions less telling as he tired in the second-half.