



FAN-TASTIC: Another tremendous travelling army of Hatters supporters celebrate the club's 14th away league win of the season at Hull City.

Pictures: GARETH OWEN

Howard's way to the top

HAT-TRICK hero Steve Howard shot himself to the top of the Division Three scoring charts during Saturday's 4-0 victory at Hull City.

Howard's first Football League treble also fired the Hatters to the top of the table for the first time since October.

Only Brighton's Bobby Zamora (28) and Shaun Goater (26), of Manchester City, have now scored more league goals in English football than Hatters hit-man Howard this season.

Saturday's three-goal haul took his tally to 23 which saw him draw level with Chelsea's Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink and Dean Sturridge, of Wolves, and move one ahead of his nearest rival for the Division Three golden boot Luke Rodgers.

Both players, of course, will go head to head in the Hatters' last game of the season at Rodgers' Shrewsbury Town ground.

What makes Howard's achievements all the more impressive, however, is the spectacular transformation in his fortunes in front of goal.

The 6ft 3in striker only scored seven goals from open play in his first 36 games for the Hatters but, since the turn of this year, has rattled in an incredible 18 from just 17 matches.

He was always a maker rather than taker of goals at previous clubs Hartlepool and Northampton.

In fact, 12 goals was the most he had managed in a season before this extraordinary campaign.

Howard's striking partner Dean Crowe also netted his 15th goal of the season at Boothferry Park, taking the Hatters' little-



Joe view

I would not have thought we could have come to Hull and won 4-0. We're about 40 points ahead of them now and they started clear favourites to win the league so that's a great achievement. We won the battles in areas we had to and the goals were superb. I'm delighted for Steve Howard. They were three great finishes.

and-large partnership to 38 goals for the season, which is the best since Brian Stein and Steve White plundered 39 between them in 1981-82.

The 4-0 win was the biggest margin of victory in an away game since goals from Mick Harford (2), Emeka Nwajiobi and David Moss ensured the same scoreline in a 1985 top-flight clash at Stoke City's Victoria Ground.

Saturday's three points also saw Joe Kinnear's men become the first side in the club's history to enjoy five successive away wins in a season.

And a Football League record of 14 straight wins, shared by Manchester United (1904-05), Bristol City (1905-06) and Preston (1950-51), will be equalled with victories in the club's last two games.

If that happens, Plymouth will need to take at least seven points from their last three games at Carlisle, Darlington and at home to Cheltenham to win the title with the Hatters boasting a far superior goal difference.

Kinnear has also set his 94-goal team the target of reaching a century after the Macclesfield and Shrewsbury games.

Former Liverpool legend Jan Molby took charge of Hull on Saturday but was in the losing dugout against the Hatters for the third time this season after two defeats at previous club Kidderminster.

Ex-Bolton midfielder Richard Sneekes tested Carl Emberson after five minutes with a firmly-driven free-kick but that was the only save the Hatters keeper would be called on to make all afternoon.

Home keeper Paul Musselwhite saved from Jean-Louis Valois at the other end after nimble footwork by the Frenchman had created the chance.

Hull's last on-target effort of the match came on 21 minutes when Nicky Mohan's header was cleared off the line by Emmerson Boyce.

Kyle Lightbourne headed over from the rebound.

The Hatters went ahead on 23 minutes when Matthew Taylor's perfect cross into the six-yard box found the head of Howard, who made no mistake from close range.

An audacious Valois chip from 25 yards sailed wide moments later before Crowe doubled the visitors' advantage on 38 minutes.

Jason van Blerk's terrible attempt at a clearance gifted the alert Crowe an opportunity to steal in between the Tigers defender and Musselwhite before poking the ball over the line.

Musselwhite turned behind a powerful Taylor drive early in the second half and substitute Marvin Johnson fired over with a fierce drive on 73 minutes.

Howard got his second goal on 79 minutes after feeding Taylor down the left and then charging into the penalty box to meet the talented 20-year-old's precise cross with a close-range side-footed finish.

Watching Newcastle United boss Bobby Robson was, no doubt, impressed by Taylor's contribution in both of Howard's first two goals.

But it was captain Kevin Nicholls who turned provider for Howard's hat-trick effort a minute from time.

The 25-year-old forward collected Nicholls' accurate pass into the penalty box before coolly rounding Musselwhite and finding the net.

Howard raced over to the dugout to celebrate with Hatters boss Kinnear and was mobbed by ecstatic team-mates at the final whistle as he left the pitch beaming with the match ball.

matchfacts

● **HULL:** Paul Musselwhite, Mike Edwards, Mark Greaves, Ryan Williams (Theo Whitmore, 51), Gary Alexander, Ben Petty, Nicky Mohan, Jason Van Blerk, Richard Sneekes, Kyle Lightbourne (David Norris, 65), Gary Bradshaw (Andy Holt, 51). Subs not used: Matt Glennon, Lee Philpott.

● **HATTERS:** Carl Emberson, Emmerson Boyce, Russell Perrett, Chris Coyne, Matthew Taylor, Peter Holmes (Paul Hughes, 46), Kevin Nicholls, Matthew

Spring, Jean-Louis Valois (Marvin Johnson, 70), Steve Howard, Dean Crowe (Adrian Forbes, 83). Subs not used: Mark Ovendale, Steve Kabba.
● Shots on target: Hull 2 Luton 7.
● Shots off target: Hull 5 Luton 6.
● Corners: Hull 4 Luton 3.
● Referee: Phil Dowd (Stoke).
● Star man: Steve Howard – hat-trick hero who cannot get out of the goalscoring habit.



HOW-DY PARTNER: Hatters goal aces Crowe and Howard celebrate at Hull.

PlayerWatch

The stats behind Stevo's hat-trick

- Minutes on pitch: 90
- Shots on target: 3
- Shots off target: 0
- Blocked shots: 2
- Passes to own player: 5
- Passes to the opposition: 6
- Crosses to the opposition: 0
- Pass completion rate: 45.4 per cent
- Dribble ball retained: 1
- Dribble ball lost: 1
- Dribble completion rate: 50 per cent
- Tackles: 1
- Headers: 20
- Clearances, blocks and interceptions: 1
- Free-kicks won: 0
- The free-kicks conceded: 3
- Offside: 6
- Bookings: 0
- **FINAL VERDICT:** Steve Howard's confidence in goal is illustrated by the fact that it took him just three on-target shots to claim his first Football League hat-trick. He was as dominant in the air as ever and the only minor problem with his display was the six offside decisions.