

Howard 'faster than Shearer' says Kinnear

GOAL machine Steve Howard has won this season's *Luton News* Player of the Year award and Hatters boss Joe Kinnear has few arguments with our choice.

Kinnear believes 23-goal Howard is the most improved player at Kenilworth Road and this week claimed he is as quick as former England captain Alan Shearer.

Howard is a life-long Newcastle United supporter and will be pleased with his manager's compliment.

The Hatters boss said: "Steve Howard has worked like a trojan and finished the season like a runaway juggernaut. He's been playing at the height of his profession and is desperate to finish top scorer in the league."

"Hopefully, we can provide him with the extra goals he may need to achieve that accolade. He's a great lad but came in for criticism when I bought him."

"He did not do himself any favours because he saw himself as a deep-lying midfielder. I did not think he had the confidence to score the goals he has but he's a decent finisher and has reaped the dividends since he's started getting on the end of things."

"I don't think there's another player in the club that's in the same shape as him. He's gone through the season very fit and sharp and done tremendously well in both boxes."

"He's also got pace and is as quick as Alan Shearer."

playerwatch

- Shots on target: 0
- Shots off target: 1
- Blocked shots: 0
- Passes to own player: 12
- Passes to opposition: 0
- Crosses to own player: 0
- Crosses to opposition: 0
- Pass completion rate: 100 per cent
- Dribble ball retained: 0
- Dribble ball lost: 0
- Dribble completion rate: 0 per cent
- Tackles: 7
- Headers: 11
- Clearances, blocks and interceptions: 9

RUSSELL PERRETT

- Free-kicks won: 0
- Free-kicks conceded: 3
- Offside: 0
- Bookings: 0
- FINAL VERDICT: Perrett's display on Saturday was typical of his season – determined and reliable. The centre-back's heading, tackling, clearances, blocks and interceptions totals were predictably good but his distribution was also faultless. He made one brilliant block to prevent a likely goal but also ballooned over a late chance at the other end.



HAT'S OUR BOY: News-Gazette sports writer Dave Flett gets into the party mood by sporting a hat kindly donated by the Luton News

Player of the Year Steve Howard. Super striker Steve was looking for the last laugh after our sister paper the *Herald & Post* and its

team of expert artists gave the 23-goal hero an Ascot-like look on the front page to promote the club's hat extravaganza for the

final home game of the season. The trophy, supplied by A&B Sports, was presented by Dave to Steve on Saturday.

Unlucky 13 for Joe's boys

SUPERSTITION will be an obsession synonymous with football long after the sport's current fascination with metatarsal stress fractures.

Ask most players and they will have a pre-match ritual, designed to bring their side good fortune.

Many are pretty mundane such as putting the right sock on before the left or being the fifth player to follow the captain out of the tunnel.

At Kenilworth Road, Marvin Johnson's lucky, luminous hat has even taken some credit for the Hatters' record-breaking march towards promotion.

But even the club captain's questionable choice of headgear appeared to meet a greater force on Saturday when the Hatters missed out on a 13th straight victory against Division Three's 13th-placed team on April 13.

If that is not eerie enough then what about a goalkeeper, who wore the number 13 shirt, becoming the first in the visitors goal to keep a clean sheet at Kenilworth Road in 13 matches.

Steve Wilson's shut-out, however, seemed more reliant on wayward Hatters shooting than any abnormal assistance, with the home side missing the target on, you've guessed it, 13 separate occasions!

Matthew Spring's tame 42nd-minute header was the home side's



Kinnear view

I suppose that it was Sod's Law not getting maximum points for the 13th successive game. We had five good chances with headers but they were a spoiling side that just got ten behind the ball. They came to get a point and got it. We were forcing things a bit but that's natural when you are trying to get a result.

only on-target effort of the afternoon as the Hatters were held to a goal-less draw for the first time in 54 league and cup matches.

And, exactly 32 years after an Apollo 13 oxygen tank famously exploded on April 13, the Hatters' hopes of winning the Division Three title race went up in smoke with Plymouth crowned champions at Darlington on Monday night.

Dean Crowe wasted the Hatters' first opportunity on Saturday, volleying wastefully over on 10 minutes after Russell Perrett had headed across goal.

Luton News Player of the Year Steve Howard did find the net 10 minutes later but his headed effort from Kevin Nicholls' corner was ruled out because of an off-the-ball foul by

Crowe. Spring's weak header was comfortably caught by Wilson before Jean-Louis Valois' dazzling footwork deserved better than his harmless lob that sailed over the Macclesfield crossbar on the stroke of half-time.

Ex-Hatters playing favourite David Moss still has a genuine affection for his old club but, as Macclesfield manager on Saturday, he was determined to be a party pooper and keeper Carl Emberson had to be alert to keep out two long-range Rickie Lambert strikes in the first-half.

Valois, who was switched to the right flank after half-time with Johnson replacing Paul Hughes, volleyed over from 15 yards seconds after the restart and Howard's chip from twice the distance also missed the target after Wilson had charged off his line

to clear. Matthew Taylor blazed wildly over on 66 minutes from an acute angle after winning a challenge on Wilson before Karl Munroe wasted a good chance with a weak contact at the other end and Perrett produced an excellent block to stop Matthew Tipton's goal-bound shot.

Another Valois volley and Johnson's close-range header were then too high to trouble Wilson before on-loan Crystal Palace striker Steve Kabba squandered an excellent opportunity to make an important contribution just seven minutes after coming off the bench.

Kabba headed over from three yards on 78 minutes and it was the visitors who came closest to claiming maximum points in the closing stages.

Only Emberson's outstretched right arm saved the Hatters from

defeat when he managed to turn Michael Welch's firmly-driven free-kick behind for a corner on 89 minutes.

The result means Macclesfield are still unbeaten in the four fixtures between the two sides since their promotion into the Football League and, aside from Saturday's unlucky omens, the Moss Rose club are fast becoming the Hatters' bogey team.

Kinnear lamented the 0-0 draw at the final whistle, but refused to be too harsh on his players in light of their monumental effort during a record-breaking run.

He said: "We've played better than that all season but I can't be too critical because of the pressure that has been put on the players to win every game recently and the expectation levels that they have been working under."

matchfacts

● **HATTERS:** Carl Emberson, Emmerson Boyce, Russell Perrett, Chris Coyne, Matthew Taylor, Paul Hughes (Marvin Johnson, 46), Kevin Nicholls, Matthew Spring, Jean-Louis Valois (Adrian Forbes 71), Steve Howard, Dean Crowe (Steve Kabba, 71). Subs not used: Mark Ovendale, Alan Neilson.
● **MACCLESFIELD:** Steve Wilson, Steve Hitchen, Danny Adams, Darren Tinson, Dave Ridler, Lee Glover, Rickie Lambert (John Askey, 78), Danny Whitaker, Karl

Munroe, Michael Welch, Matthew Tipton. Subs not used: Lee Martin, George Abbey, Matt Woolley, Paul Aldridge.
● Shots on target: Luton Town 1 Macclesfield Town 5.
● Shots off target: Luton Town 13 Macclesfield Town 6.
● Corners: Luton 7 Macclesfield 6.
● Referee: Michael Ryan (Lancs).
● Star man: Chris Coyne – dependable defensive rock.