



CLOSE CALL: Hatters striker Steve Howard gets above the Brentford defence but his header rattled the Griffin Park woodwork. Picture: GARETH OWEN

Kinnear's boys clean up!

JOE KINNEAR'S Hatters team will be bidding to become the club's first side to enjoy four consecutive clean sheets in the league since April 1997 when they entertain Notts County on Saturday.

A hard-fought 0-0 draw against table-topping Brentford on Saturday was the third successive game on-loan goalkeeper Ben Roberts has not been beaten.

The run marks a remarkable transformation for a team that conceded 13 goals in its first four fixtures and still has the country's third-worst defensive record.

Only Mansfield and Swansea have let in more goals in all four professional divisions, but the Hatters' new-found defensive resilience means another shut-out will complete the best sequence of clean sheets since Lennie Lawrence's 1996-97 play-off team.

That side, boasting a back five of Ian Feuer, Julian James, Steve Davis, Marvin Johnson and Mitchell Thomas, prevented Blackpool, Shrewsbury, Bury and Peterborough from finding the net.

The Hatters earned a share of the spoils at Griffin Park after enduring an aerial bombardment that caused an impudent Kinnear to suggest the ball had been taken away for treatment and a packet of aspirins at the final whistle.

But it was probably Hatters cen-

Joe view



We were good defensively but could have hurt them on the break with more guile and know-how. Steve Howard would have buried that header nine times out of 10 and his chance was the best move of the game. It was the only real time four or five passes were put together but Howie headed it on to the bar.

tre-backs Russell Perrett and David Bayliss that were suffering headaches at the end of an unattractive encounter. Both coped brilliantly with a succession of long throws and 15 corners, including 11 in the first-half alone.

Concentration and organisation in the visitors defence saw the Bees fail to capitalise on any of their flag-kicks and it was the Hatters who went closest to winning maximum points when a 38th-

minute header by Steve Howard crashed back off the crossbar.

Brentford signalled their intentions from the start of the match with regular long balls aimed at towering striker Mark McCammon who, with a significant height advantage, caused Bayliss early problems in the air.

But the 26-year-old Hatters defender soon got the measure of McCammon and justified Kinnear's decision to select him ahead of Chris Coyne by having a solid, brave and faultless afternoon.

Dean Crowe, whose inclusion once more saw Tony Thorpe warm the bench, could have fired the visitors in front on five minutes. Matthew Spring, playing in a less advanced midfield role than in recent games, released Crowe with a quick free-kick but the diminutive striker shot wide across goal.

Howard headed against the bar on 38 minutes when he met a fine cross from the impressive Emmerston Boyce, who had exchanged passes with Crowe to carve open Brentford down the right-wing.

Ibrahimi Sonko's 10th-minute header, caught at the second attempt by Roberts, was the best effort Brentford managed from their 15 corners, but Eddie Hutchinson's volley flashed just over in first-half injury-time.

A poor second-half saw Hutchinson continue to be the main goal threat, heading over on 67 minutes from Ijah Anderson's cross and driving wide from 30

yards after a strong 81st-minute run. Home captain Michael Dobson also waltzed past an ineffectual challenge from Hatters sub Alan Neilson, an 85th-minute replacement for the hard-working Paul Hughes, but his stoppage-time shot was deflected behind for the Bees' final corner.

The Hatters created very little after the break, although Steve Robinson staked his claim for a starting place with a busy display as a 64th-minute substitute for the quiet Ahmet Brkovic.

Kinnear certainly preferred the Northern Ireland international's performance, saying: "The substitution was tactical because I thought Brkovic had a dreadful match. He's normally inspirational but he did not play well."

"Robinson gave us more spark and pace. Brkovic was under the weather a bit. I think he was running a temperature and was disappointed with his performance."

The Hatters boss was equally as unimpressed with the quality of football at Griffin Park. "It was a bit of an ugly game with a million set plays, throw-ins and corners," he said. "I think the ball has been taken away for treatment and given a packet of aspirins."

"It spent more of the 90 minutes in the air than it did on the ground. The referee also had the whistle stuck in his mouth and I think that's gone for treatment as well. If he'd have spat it out we could have got on with the game."



BEE IN HIS BONNET: Steve Howard gets aggressive during the 0-0 draw at Brentford.

matchfacts

BRENTFORD 0 LUTON 0

●BRENTFORD: Paul Smith, Michael Dobson, Ibrahimi Sonko, Matt Somner, Ijah Anderson, Kevin O'Connor (Mark Williams, 78), Jay Smith (Jamie Fullarton, 78), Eddie Hutchinson, Stephen Hunt (Stephen Hughes, 87), Mark McCammon, Rowan Vine. Subs not used: Alan Jullan, Ben Chorley.

●HATTERS: Ben Roberts, Emmerston Boyce, Russell Perrett, David Bayliss, Sol Davis, Ahmet Brkovic (Steve Robinson, 64), Kevin Nicholls, Matthew Spring, Paul Hughes (Alan Neilson, 85), Steve Howard, Dean Crowe. Subs not used: Carl Emberson,

Tony Thorpe, Chris Coyne.

●Shots on target: Brentford 3 Luton 3
●Off target: Brentford 11 Luton 7
●Corners: Brentford 15 Luton 5
●Referee: David Pugh (Wirral).

●STAR MAN: David Bayliss - repaid manager Joe Kinnear's faith in selecting him ahead of Chris Coyne with a disciplined and reliable display. He defended brilliantly at set-pieces alongside centre-back partner Russell Perrett to continue his improvement since a nightmare performance during the 5-2 away defeat at Blackpool's Bloomfield Road ground.



TOP MAN: David Bayliss.

playerwatch

IT'S MIDFIELD PLAYER PAUL HUGHES TODAY...

●Time on pitch: 85 minutes
●Shots on target: 0
●Shots off target: 1
●Blocked shots: 1
●Passes to own player: 11
●Passes to opposition: 7
●Crosses to own player: 1
●Crosses to opposition: 0
●Pass completion rate: 63.2 per cent
●Dribbles ball retained: 2
●Dribbles ball lost: 9
●Dribble completion rate: 18.2 per cent

Hard-working Hughesie

●Headers: 3
●Tackles: 8
●Clearances, blocks and interceptions: 3
●Free-kicks won: 2
●Free-kicks conceded: 3
●Offsides: 0
●Bookings: 0
●FINAL VERDICT: Paul Hughes put in a hard-working display in the inside-left position for the Hatters before tiring and suffering from cramp in the game's

later stages and hobbling out of the action. The ex-Chelsea and Southampton midfielder allowed Brentford very little time on the ball in midfield and enjoyed a high tackle tally, especially in the first half. But his low cross count and dribble success rate, especially apparent later on, indicated the lack of a yard of pace to go past his marker that will probably return when he becomes fully match fit.