



AGONY: Hatters players hold their heads after Steve Howard (19) had an easy chance saved against Wigan.

Picture: JANE SHERLOCK

Howard aims to sign up

HATTERS' top scorer Steve Howard has told Joe Kinnear that he wants to stay at Kenilworth Road and is ready to sign a new contract.

Howard's current deal expires at the end of the season when he would be free to leave the club under the Bosman ruling.

But the 26-year-old striker is ready to commit his future to the Hatters.

Kinnear said: "He's happy to stay. There's no question about that and I'm organising something now."

"I've spoken to the player and his agent about a new contract and everything's been done, more or less, with just one or two things to finalise, but hopefully they will be done early next week."

Howard was Division Three's top scorer with 24 goals last season and has already found the net eight times in Division Two.

Bogey boys keep it going!

WHAT have Wigan Athletic, Macclesfield Town and Boston United all got in common?

The answer is that they are the only clubs to boast unbeaten league records at Kenilworth Road from the 92 sides currently plying their trade in the Football League and the Premiership.

Arsenal (six times), Liverpool (six times) and Manchester United (three times) have all left Luton without a point in the past, but Saturday's 1-1 draw means the Hatters have now failed in five attempts to beat Wigan in a home league fixture.

And, with Macclesfield only providing the opposition at Kenilworth Road on two occasions and Boston yet to pay their first visit, Wigan can lay strong claims to being the Hatters' official bogey team.

Joe Kinnear's men did, however, come agonisingly close to ending the hoodoo before Latics captain Jason de Vos headed in an 88th-minute equaliser to keep his side top of the Division Two table.

Aaron Skelton had earlier given the Hatters a 24th-minute lead with his first goal in 13 months.

Joe view



"We dominated the early stages and if we'd taken our chances we could have been three up. The keeper was outstanding. They pushed us back in the second-half but I'm disappointed to give a goal away that late and in that manner."

And, when former Hatters favourite Matthew Jackson was sent off on 85 minutes, the home side looked on course to register the toughest of six successive league victories.

Jackson was given his marching orders on 85 minutes after being shown a second yellow card for the slightest of

brushes with Steve Howard on the half-way line.

But Wigan's 10 men grabbed the point their greater possession deserved when Russell Perrett was penalised and an unmarked de Vos headed in Steve McMillan's free-kick.

The manner and timing of the goal, however, were galling for a Hatters side that had displayed a tremendous work ethic and attitude to protect a one-goal lead against a visitors team boasting £4.75 million worth of playing talent.

In fact, if Australian keeper John Filan had not made two breathtaking saves to deny Hatters' top scorer Howard, de Vos' late goal would have been a mere consolation.

Instead, the Canadian international's effort extended his side's unbeaten run to 12 matches after he profited from a rare Hatters defensive lapse.

Nathan Ellington, at £1.2 million, is the costliest of Wigan's many big-money signings and his rather grandiose nickname is "The Duke".

But it was home defenders Perrett and Chris Coyne that enjoyed majestic performances to ensure that Wigan's Duke lost this particular battle.

Perrett again struggled manfully to ignore a groin

injury that saw him limping tentatively back on to the pitch at the start of the second-half.

The 29-year-old defender's handicap proved no hindrance, however, and he was the driving force, rather than a passenger, during a determined performance from the home defence.

Full-backs Emmerson Boyce and Sol Davis also played their parts in frustrating the high-flying visitors, as did Matthew Spring, who covered every blade of grass for his side's cause and appears to be relishing the responsibility of the captain's armband.

The Hatters pinned Wigan back during the early stages of the match, with Davis making several penetrating raids down the left flank.

But it was Cedric Berthelin who made the first save of the afternoon, instinctively keeping out Neil Roberts' volley from an acute angle.

Luton went ahead six minutes later when Peter Holmes' deep cross to the far post was headed down by Howard and Skelton stretched out a leg to force the ball into the bottom corner from four yards.

The visitors' response was swift with Ellington forcing a low save from Berthelin.

Tony Dinning then fired an excellent chance wide and Lee McCulloch's volley cleared a beaten Berthelin's bar by a matter of inches.

The Hatters' French keeper produced a fine save to prevent Roberts netting from 15 yards on 41 minutes before Howard was denied by an even better stop at the other end.

Howard's stabbed shot from six yards seemed certain to double the lead before ex-Blackburn keeper Filan dived low to his right to turn the ball behind for a corner.

Berthelin then flapped at a Gary Teale cross but McCulloch hit a post instead of the unguarded goal and Filan saved a weaker Howard effort when the Hatters' forward should have done better from eight yards.

Ellington's mishit cross nearly handed Wigan a freakish equaliser on 51 minutes when the ball bounced off Berthelin's crossbar.

Seconds later, Filan pushed Spring's bouncing shot around a post after Boyce had skipped past two challenges during a great run down the right.

Wigan continued to press for an equaliser but the Hatters defence held firm, although Dinning's 76th-minute header

bounced narrowly wide after Berthelin's punch only reached the edge of the box.

Jackson, who had been cautioned on seven minutes for a foul on Howard, was then harshly ordered off after a second incident involving the two players. Howard almost won the match moments later but his close-range header forced an acrobatic finger-tip save from Filan.

Berthelin could not produce the same heroics two minutes later when McMillan's quickly-taken free-kick was met by an unmarked de Vos and his downward header found the net. Howard, normally a crucial component in the Hatters' defensive arm, was out at set-pieces, was nowhere to be seen as de Vos stole in between Boyce and Holmes to earn his side a point.

Victory against a side Kinnear correctly identified as the best in the division before the match would have taken the Hatters to within three points of a play-off spot.

But a draw still meant Kinnear's men had only lost one of their last 11 league games and the result should end any trepidation the Hatters might have about meeting any other team in the division.

match facts

LUTON TOWN 1 WIGAN 1

●HATTERS: Cedric Berthelin, Emmerson Boyce, Russell Perrett, Chris Coyne, Sol Davis, Steve Robinson, Aaron Skelton, Matthew Spring, Peter Holmes, Andrew Fotiadis, Steve Howard. Subs not used: Tony Thorpe, Carl Emberson, Ahmet Brkovic, Ian Hillier, Alan Kimble.

●WIGAN: John Filan, Steve McMillan, Matt Jackson, Jason de Vos, Neil Roberts, Nathan Ellington, Lee McCulloch, Tony Dinning, Jason Jarrett, Nicky Eaden, Gary Teale (Andy

Liddell, 54). Subs not used: Paul Mitchell, Peter Kennedy, Dave Beasant, Scott Green.

●Shots on target: Luton 6 Wigan 9.

●Off target: Luton 2 Wigan 12.

●Corners: Luton 5 Wigan 8.

●Referee: Steve Tomlin (Lewes).

●TOP HATTER: Russell Perrett - he played through the pain barrier again to fight a tremendous rear-guard action with impressive central-defensive partner Chris Coyne. Made several crucial headers in the penalty box during a brave display.



SPOTLIGHT: Fotiadis.

playerwatch

HATTERS STRIKER ANDREW FOTIADIS...

●Time on pitch: 90 minutes
●Shots on target: 0
●Shots off target: 0
●Blocked shots: 0
●Passes to own player: 9
●Passes to opposition: 4
●Crosses to own player: 0
●Crosses to opposition: 1
●Pass completion rate: 64.3 per cent
●Dribble ball retained: 2

Foty fails to make 5 in a row

●Dribble ball lost: 7
●Dribble completion rate: 22.2 per cent
●Tackles: 1
●Headers: 9
●Clearances, blocks and interceptions: 3
●Offsides: 1
●Free-kicks won: 1
●Free-kicks conceded: 4
●FINAL VERDICT: Andrew

Fotiadis failed to extend his run of scoring in successive league matches to five and did not manage a single shot in 90 minutes. The 25-year-old striker was full of early running but faded as Wigan began to dominate in the second period. The strength of Wigan's defence is illustrated by his poor dribbling success.