

Mansell's drive impresses Joe

HATTERS forgotten man Lee Mansell was praised for his commitment and passion after making a rare first-team appearance at Wycombe on Saturday.

But Hatters boss Joe Kinnear also told Mansell, now 20, that he needs to improve his passing and vision.

Mansell has spent 14-and-a-half months in the reserve wilderness at Kenilworth Road since his last Football League appearance.

That came in the 2-0 win at Scunthorpe in October 2001 when he was replaced by Adrian Forbes at half-time after struggling to combat Peter Beagrie.

The recent injury crisis has seen Mansell back on the first-team bench and on Saturday he replaced Dean Crowe when the striker felt a twinge in his hamstring muscle.

Kinnear said afterwards: "He's got a big engine and a big heart but needs to improve his passing and have more composure."

"He's very hyperactive and a 100 miles per hour type of player."

"You can't take anything away from him in terms of commitment and he can run all day."

"I've never doubted that and his energy levels but it's just his passing and vision he needs to work on."

"They normally say that comes with experience and he's a brave lad who sticks his foot in."

"You know you will get 100 per cent from him but you do not always know what kind of quality you will get."

Mansell is on stand by to start for the Hatters today at Chesterfield because of the injuries to Ahmet Brkovic and Dean Crowe.



GETTING SHIRTY: Wycombe captain Paul McCarthy tries to stop goal ace Steve Howard. Picture: GARETH OWEN

It's a goal feast for Steven

CHRISTMAS, like 2002, has appropriately been a real feast for Luton's very own Steven.

Hatters striker Steven Howard, unlike his biblical namesake, may be no saint, as his recent three-match ban paid testament to, but there would be few objectors to his canonisation at Kenilworth Road right now.

Howard's match-winning brace at Wycombe Wanderers made it a heaven-sent four goals for the Hatters in three fixtures over the festive period from the goal-hungry striker.

Even more impressively, it took his tally for the year 2002 to a mouth-watering 33 goals.

Only Hatters legends Joe Payne (twice), Andy Rennie and Gordon Turner have bettered that record in a calendar year.

The 6ft 3in striker's two-goal blast at Adams Park also saw him overtake another Kenilworth Road superstar Malcolm MacDonald on his way to fifth place in the club's all-time list.

Howard's haul is the best in a single year since the Hatters' record scorer Turner plundered 34 goals in 1957, eclipsing the prolific achievements of any other striker at the club in the last 45 years.

The 26-year-old forward finished last season as Division Three's leading marksman and has already netted 14 goals this campaign despite stepping up a level.

His form away from home has been particularly crucial in the Hatters' play-off push.

He has scored nine times this sea-



Joe's view

We started like a house on fire but put ourselves under pressure by giving away a stupid goal. It was another goalkeeping error. We did not pass the ball as well in the second half but Chris Coyne was magnificent. They were doing anything to force an equaliser and we've never headed as many balls all season. It was real route one stuff.

son away from Kenilworth Road and, without his goals, the Hatters would have collected eight fewer points on their travels and now be just one position above Saturday's opponents Wycombe in 13th spot.

The wonderful Worthington Cup win at Vicarage Road would also not have been achieved without his name on the scoresheet.

Hatters boss Joe Kinnear has no doubts about his value to the team during 2002 and the Christmas period and expects him to carry on in the same vein in the New Year.

Kinnear said: "We are not the same side when Steve Howard does not play which showed in the period he was out. He's stuck 14 in this season and got four in the last three games, which were all crucial goals."

"He's playing out of his skin and I'm glad we've got his services for another two-and-a-half years. There's no question he'll get 20 goals again this season."

"He works hard and is improving all the time. He's got a real appetite for the game and was far ahead of any of the other strikers on show at Wycombe."

"To get 33 goals in a year is absolutely brilliant because he's also missed games."

The variety of Howard's goals has been almost as impressive as the quantity and his first strike on Saturday was another effort that bolstered his spectacular 2002 collection of greatest hits.

Dean Crowe and Tony Thorpe, playing alongside Howard again in a three-man strikeforce, both won headers before the ex-Hartlepool and Northampton forward unleashed a 25-yard thunderbolt that crashed into the bottom corner of home keeper Frank Talia's net on 21 minutes.

Talia had earlier made a fine save to prevent Howard opening the scoring after just two minutes.

The Australian reacted brilliantly

to keep out Howard's close-range header after an Emmerson Boyce cross.

Crowe then sent an overhead kick whistling over Talia's bar seconds later as the Hatters made an attacking start to the game in front of a travelling army of more than 2,000 supporters.

But wily campaigner Steve Brown could have put Wycombe in front on 12 minutes when his curling free kick hit Carl Emberson's crossbar.

Howard then broke the deadlock and, when unmarked teenage home striker Jonny Dixon volleyed wastefully over from just six yards, the Hatters striker grabbed his second of the afternoon a minute later in almost effortless fashion.

A long 34th-minute throw into the penalty box by Ian Hillier was met with a flick of Howard's head which guided the ball past Talia and into the bottom corner of his net.

Emberson saved a Paul McCarthy header at the other end to ensure the Hatters went into the interval with a commanding lead.

Injuries to wide men Crowe and Ahmet Brkovic either side of half-time did, however, disrupt the Hatters' progress.

Lee Mansell was given his first taste of Football League action since October 2001 and acquitted himself well, reminding Hatters fans of the exuberance and surging forward runs from midfield that brought him seven goals in his first season and an extra dimension to a struggling side.

But, on the other side, the Hatters

missed Brkovic's midfield qualities with full-back Alan Kimble asked to operate in front of Sol Davis.

Mansell provided Thorpe with an excellent opportunity to score a third goal on 52 minutes but he lost control and the ball bounced wide.

Howard then went close to scoring the second hat-trick of his career but his powerful shot on the turn flashed wide from 20 yards. Wycombe pulled a goal back on 65 minutes when Michael Simpson's free kick from the left was headed into the air by Paul Hughes and a back-tracking Emberson failed to make a telling connection with his attempted punch on the goal-line, leaving Dixon to pounce and force the ball in from close range.

Emberson made amends on 80 minutes by turning behind Dannie Bulman's powerful 35-yard free kick and was, no doubt, relieved when Mark Rogers' later header went narrowly wide.

But that would have, unfairly, deprived Howard of the perfect finale to an excellent 2002.

And the Hatters' goal king is already looking forward to the next 12 months, saying: "It's been a brilliant year, a fantastic one and probably the best of my career."

"33 goals is not bad and I would have been delighted with that at the start of the year."

"Now we're looking ahead to next year."

"The lads are aiming for a play-off spot and I think we are good enough to get there and do something in the play-offs."

matchfacts

WYCOMBE 1 LUTON 2
WYCOMBE WANDERERS: Frank Talia, Danny Senda, Paul McCarthy, Mark Rogers, Michael Simpson, Ijah Anderson, Stuart Roberts (Lewis Cook, 77), Steve Brown, Dannie Bulman, Jonny Dixon, Andy Rammell (Craig Faulconbridge, 72). Subs not used: Darren Currie, Keith Ryan, Roger Johnson.
HATTERS: Carl Emberson, Emmerson Boyce, Ian Hillier, Chris Coyne, Sol Davis, Steve Robinson, Paul Hughes, Ahmet Brkovic (Alan Kimble, 52).

Dean Crowe (Lee Mansell, 43), Steve Howard, Tony Thorpe (Andrew Fotiadis, 90). Subs not used: Mark Owendale, Joe Deeney.
Shots on target: Wycombe 6 Luton 6.
Off target: Wycombe 5 Luton 6.
Comers: Wycombe 4 Luton 5.
Referee: Paul Walton (Northants).
TOP HATTER: Steve Howard - capped an excellent 2002 with a match-winning brace. Wycombe struggled to cope with his height and power during a dominant first-half display.



ASSIST: Ian Hillier.

playerwatch

HATTERS DEFENDER IAN HILLIER IN THE SPOTLIGHT...

- Time on pitch: 90 minutes
- Shots on target: 0
- Shots off target: 0
- Blocked shots: 0
- Passes to own player: 6
- Passes to opposition: 5
- Crosses to own player: 0
- Crosses to opposition: 2
- Pass completion rate: 46.2 per cent
- Dribble ball retained: 1
- Dribble ball lost: 0

Hillier claims a goal assist

- Dribble completion rate: 100 per cent
- Tackles: 1
- Headers: 14
- Clearances, blocks and interceptions: 11
- Offsides: 0
- Free-kicks won: 1
- Free-kicks conceded: 2
- Bookings: 1
- FINAL VERDICT: Ian Hillier

again proved an able defensive partner for Chris Coyne in the absence of Russell Perrett, David Bayliss and Alan Neilson. He claimed an assist with his long throw for Steve Howard's second goal and coped well with Wycombe's aerial bombardment. Hillier also cleared his lines in a no-nonsense manner.