



FLOORED: Wycombe keeper Frank Talia and his defence are powerless to keep out Hatters midfielder Matthew Spring's match-winning goal.

Picture: JOANNA CROSS

Matt is the Earle of Luton

LUTON TOWN manager Joe Kinnear believes Matthew Spring can be his new Robbie Earle.

Kinnear, perhaps more predictably, also reckons captain Kevin Nicholls is a reincarnation of ex-Wimbledon enforcer Vinnie Jones.

Spring scored his eighth goal of the season to secure a 1-0 home win over Wycombe on Saturday.

The 23-year-old midfielder is now the Hatters' joint second top marksman with Tony Thorpe and Ahmet Brkovic and, on Saturday, Kinnear likened his free-scoring ability to that of ITV pundit Earle, who regularly found the net at Wimbledon during the 1990s.

The Hatters boss said: "Springy can finish like a striker and his work rate is good as well. He's an all-round player who puts his foot in and has a decent range of passing and shooting.

"We want him to support our front two as much as he possibly can and he's having a great season for us. I'm glad to see him progressing in the manner he is. He's got the same sort of ability to score 12 goals a season from midfield as Robbie Earle had for me at Wimbledon."

Spring's midfield partner Nicholls, meanwhile, was not likened to Vinnie Jones because of his Hollywood acting skills.

"I had a long chat with Nico at half-time because he got an early yellow



Joe's view

It was an ugly match at times. We should have punished them more and could have racked up two or three goals in the last 20 minutes. It was a stop-start game and they were bombarding us with throw-ins and lumping the ball in. They were living on a prayer. Football's about playing it on the ground, passing and scoring goals. The only thing they had to offer was long balls and long throws. If you cut Harris' arms off he would not get a game of football. He used his hands more than his feet.

card and I said 'don't cost us today', Kinnear revealed.

"His heart is so big and he's really involved in the club. We know his limitations but we also know what he can and does do.

"He's very popular with the lads during the week. He's Vinnie Jones mark two."

Spring and Nicholls are back in tandem in the Hatters midfield after missing four games over the Christmas and New Year period and Kinnear is hoping both players will now stay fit for the Division Two play-off run-in.

Saturday's victory over a Wycombe side managed and coached by former Crazy Gang members Lawrie Sanchez and Terry Gibson saw the

Hatters move just three points behind sixth-placed QPR with two games in hand.

Sanchez argued that his team matched the Hatters and were worth a point, but Kinnear was critical of his former player's tactics, joking that long-throw specialist Richard Harris would not get a game if you cut off his arms.

The Dons' former 1988 FA Cup final hero's claims were also undermined by a glance at the match statistics.

Carl Emberson surprisingly kept his place in goal after his sending off at Barnsley, but was a virtual spectator, only being required to make one routine save from Steve Brown's long-range volley.

But Wycombe were certainly more

robust and resolute than they had been during the Hatters' 2-1 victory at Adams Park a month earlier.

A mixture of foul play and fussy refereeing determined that very little football was played during a dire first-half during which there were more yellow cards than goalscoring opportunities.

Nicholls and Howard's names were both taken by Premiership referee Clive Wilkes along with Wycombe trio Harris, Brown and Michael Simpson.

Howard was cautioned for an elbow on Wycombe keeper Frank Talia and, as the atmosphere on the pitch approached incendiary level, Wilkes called on captain Nicholls, booked after just 11 minutes, to calm his players down!

A second yellow card for Nicholls would perhaps have surprised few people in Kenilworth Road, but the Hatters skipper turned in a disciplined performance and, at one point, appeared to compensate for any quelling of his fighting instinct by having a crafty kick at team-mate Ahmet Brkovic.

Emmerson Boyce went close to scoring his first goal since February 2001 after just two minutes of Saturday's match but his close-range effort was bundled wide by Talia.

Good work by Alan Kimble released Howard on 31 minutes, but the 14-goal striker's low shot was turned round the near post by Talia.

Howard's fierce 30-yard drive was then saved by the Australian keeper four minutes before the break.

Wycombe failed to make one noteworthy shot in the first 45 minutes with Alan Neilson enjoying a solid display at the heart of the Hatters defence.

Paul Hughes' spectacular volley was saved by Talia on 47 minutes and Howard headed just wide after a Boyce cross before Spring broke the deadlock. An overhead kick by Hughes was chased down by Thorpe in the penalty box.

He tried to trick his way into a shooting position but, when his route to goal was blocked, the ball broke loose for Spring.

The Hatters midfielder appeared to have carried the ball too wide but then fired into the roof of the net from an acute angle to score with his weaker left foot for the second successive week.

Emmerson made his only save on 61 minutes, collecting Brown's 25-yard volley, but Mark Rogers went closest to an equaliser for the visitors when he hooked a shot wide from six yards.

The Hatters could have added a second goal with substitute Brkovic crashing an 86th-minute shot into the sidenetting.

Howard then volleyed wide from 15 yards and Spring's long-range drive narrowly missed the target before Talia made a spectacular stoppage-time save.

The Wycombe keeper ensured that Howard's search for his first goal of 2003 will continue into February when he tipped the 6ft 3in striker's header over the bar.

matchfacts

LUTON 1 WYCOMBE 0

●HATTERS: Carl Emberson, Emmerson Boyce, Alan Neilson, Chris Coyme, Alan Kimble, Steve Robinson (Ahmet Brkovic, 67), Kevin Nicholls, Matthew Spring, Paul Hughes, Steve Howard, Tony Thorpe. Subs not used: Mark Ovendale, Andrew Fotiadis, Dean Crowe, Ian Hillier.

●WYCOMBE WANDERERS: Frank Talia, Andy Thomson (Darren Currie, 76), Mark Rogers, Roger Johnson, Danny Senda, Keith Ryan (Lewis Cook, 88), Dannie Bulman, Michael

Simpson, Steve Brown (Stuart Roberts, 76), Craig Faulconbridge, Richard Harris. Subs not used: Ian Simpema, Martyn Lee.
●Shots on target: Luton 9 Wycombe 1.
●Off target: Luton 6 Wycombe 4.
●Corners: Luton 11 Wycombe 5.
●Referee: Clive Wilkes (Gloucester).
●TOP HATTER: Alan Neilson - he enjoyed an unflappable display at the heart of the Hatters defence. His distribution was reliable and he read the game perfectly throughout the afternoon.



IMPRESSIVE: Hughes.

playerwatch

HATTERS MIDFIELDER PAUL HUGHES IN THE SPOTLIGHT...

●Time on pitch: 90 minutes
●Shots on target: 1
●Shots off target: 1
●Blocked shots: 0
●Passes to own player: 18
●Passes to opposition: 9
●Crosses to own player: 1
●Crosses to opposition: 1
●Pass completion rate: 65.5 per cent
●Dribble ball retained: 4
●Dribble ball lost: 5

Hughes impresses on left

●Dribble completion rate: 44.4 per cent
●Tackles: 5
●Headers: 10
●Clearances, blocks and interceptions: 4
●Offsides: 0
●Free-kicks won: 0
●Free-kicks conceded: 1
●Bookings: 0
●FINAL VERDICT: Paul Hughes

enjoyed a fine all-round performance for the Hatters on the left side of midfield. All aspects of his game were strong, although his distribution could have been better. His heading and tackling was particularly impressive during a typically whole-hearted display and he helped set up Spring's goal.