

It's another Vine victory

BRADFORD 0 HATTERS 1

ROWAN Vine's first Luton goal of 2005 and his first strike in nearly two months kept Hatters flying high at the top of League One.

The Portsmouth loan man pounced in the 10th minute to slam a sweet right-footed strike in off the post from the edge of the penalty area after earlier seeing skipper Kevin Nicholls have his sixth-minute spot-kick saved.

But Luton were forced into a strong rearguard action in the second period as they kept Bradford – and special guest Jake the Performing Dog – at bay.

Without a home win for four months, the Bantams had somewhat desperately invited Jake to Valley Parade from Devon after the pooch's presence at Reading, Swindon, Yeovil and Torquay had inspired home victories already this season. But resolute Hatters confined Jake to the doghouse and ensured they held on to the coveted 'Winalot' tag.

The win made it nine points in eight days for Mike Newell after successes at Hartlepool in midweek and against Hull the weekend before. And the result maintained Luton's nine point lead over Hull and stretched their advantage over third-placed Tranmere to 11 points.

But the big decision of the day centred around Luton's striking options as top scorer Steve Howard returned in place of Enoch Showunmi after a two-match ban.

Newell admitted: "We've won all five games without Howie now this season and yet he's our leading goalscorer and gives you something attacking wise and defensively at both ends of the pitch.

"It was probably the hardest decision I've had to make all season, but I decided that rather than having Steve on the bench, I'd prefer to have Enoch to bring on and try and change things. He almost

Rowan winner keeps Hatters on track at top

got in a couple of times when he came on and he's definitely getting better.

"He's not even been in the professional game for a year because he was playing on expenses for six months when he first came here and people forget that.

"But he's progressed really well and has got three winners for us now if you count his goal at Hartlepool as well as the ones at Bristol City and Chesterfield."

On match-winner Vine, Newell added: "I'm not worried about Rowan at all, we all know his ability and how hard he works for us. It was a great strike for the goal and we're really pleased for him because he hasn't been getting the rewards he deserves in terms of goals."

Bradford threatened with an early third-minute chance for Owen Morrison, but Hatters countered with Vine playing in Ahmet Brkovic who was tripped by goalkeeper Paul Henderson in the box.

But, after somehow escaping at least a booking after sparking a player melee, Henderson made amends by diving low to his right to keep out Nicholl's penalty.

Henderson superbly saved Vine's 20-yard snapshot in the ninth minute after a delightful Nicholls run and pass, but couldn't stop the striker's next effort a minute later after Chris Coyne's pass.

Bradford dictated after the break and came close to an equaliser when Steven Schumacher's 20-yard shot cannoned back off the post with three minutes left.



ON THE RUN: Hatters' match winner Rowan Vine takes on Mark Bower.

MIKE NEWELL'S VERDICT



"WE'RE delighted with the result of course, but we're not happy with the performance.

"We've gone from one extreme to the other in a few days. We were really pleased with the way we played at Hartlepool.

"But we looked leggy here and rode our luck at times especially in the second-half when they had a shot that came back off the post.

"We started off well enough and took it to them for the first 15 minutes, but lost it after that.

"We didn't get the ball down or keep possession anywhere near as well as we did the other night.

"We couldn't pass it or get close to anybody and I thought it was a poor game. But it's all about the results at the end of the day and we're delighted with the result."

STAR HATTER



MARLON BERESFORD: Hatters' experienced goalkeeper marshalled his defence superbly on his return to Valley Parade.

Bez was called into action as early as the third minute when he punched away Nicky Summerbee's cross and then saved from Owen Morrison's follow up.

He then produced more important blocks after the break to secure his 11th clean sheet of the season for Hatters.

Harford return with Robins

FORMER Luton Town Director of Football Mick Harford will return to Kenilworth Road next month – with new club Swindon Town.

After weeks of speculation, Harford joined up with old pal Andy King at Swindon on Monday this week.

And he will be part of the

Robins management set-up that travels to Luton on March 12.

Harford told Swindon's official website: "The situation is that Andy is a good friend of mine and this is an opportunity to work with him until the end of the season.

"I will do the coaching and just assist in any way I can. I will give it my best shot and

hopefully we can have a bit of success."

He added: "Luton are doing well at the moment as are Hull and I honestly believe they are home and dry now.

"It's now a fight for play-off places and as most of the teams are very similar in capability it should prove to be very interesting."