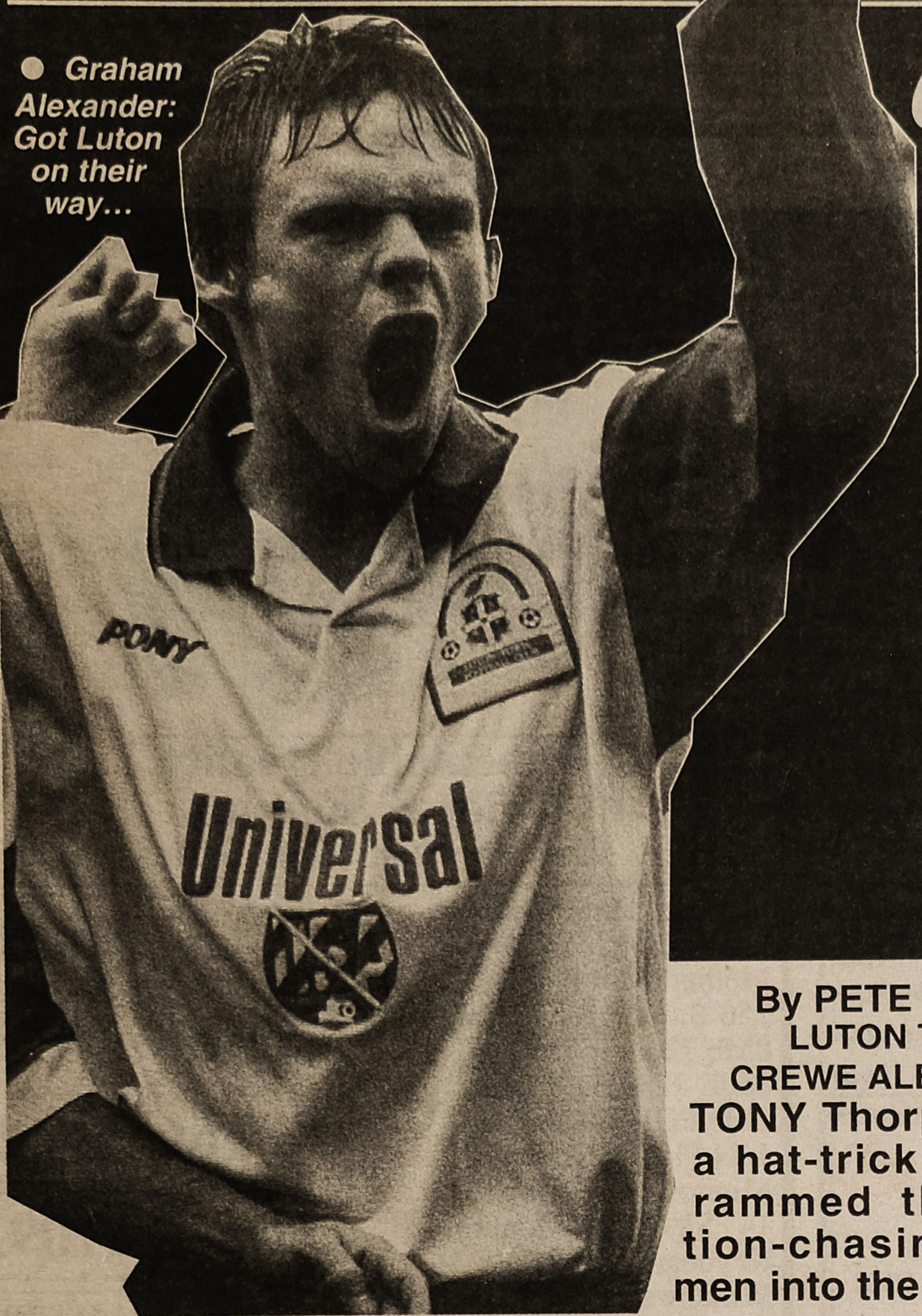


Six-hit shocker:

Hatters smash nine-men guests

● Graham Alexander: Got Luton on their way...



Thorpe derails Crewe!

By PETE KENYON
LUTON TOWN 6 ^{96/97}

CREWE ALEXANDER 0
TONY Thorpe grabbed a hat-trick as Hatters rammed the promotion-chasing railway-men into the buffers.

By the time substitute David Oldfield nutmegged number six through Jason Kearton's legs in injury-time beleaguered Crewe were down to nine men.

But you got the impression that the visitors could have played 11 men and all three substitutes and free-flowing Hatters would still have romped home.

With barely two minutes played Graham Alexander volleyed home his maiden goal of the season after a breathtaking piece of skill from Thorpe on the edge of the box.

As the ball came into his feet, and with his back to goal, Thorpe bamboozled Shaun Smith with a delicate flick, then turned heel and smashed a low shot which Kearton could only parry.

Alexander did the rest. Twenty minutes later it was 2-0 with a copybook goal.

Gary Waddock – back to his superb best – fed Alexander on the overlap and when the cross came in an unmarked Thorpe lashed home on the volley from close range.

Steve Davis thought he had made it 3-0 seconds later but his looping header was miraculously saved at full stretch by Crewe man-of-the-match Kearton.

Just before the half hour referee Steve Bennett sealed the visitors fate after adjudging Smith to have hauled down Dwight Marshall in the box as he chased an inch-perfect Thorpe through ball.

It looked harsh, and even harsher when he pulled out a red card, but Crewe boss Dario Gradi had no complaints.

Thorpe slotted home the spot kick and effectively the game was over.

Just after the hour Thorpe completed his second hat-trick of the season after reacting first to a somewhat fortuitous ricochet from Alexander's shot.



● Tony Thorpe: Back in the goals once more

And three minutes later Paul Showler rose high to power home a header at the far post after Alexander had dispossessed Danny Murphy on the Crewe man's own byline.

With 15 minutes to play manager Lennie Lawrence had Thorpe's number in his hand ready to pull him off at the earliest opportunity – but ended up watching his star man carried off on a stretcher after a vicious kick from Ashley Westwood led the hat-trick hero a cropper.

Westwood became the second man to succumb to EBS (Early Bath Syndrome) – he had been booked earlier on for a nasty tackle from behind on Marshall – and Crewe fell apart.

Davis had the ball in the net 12 minutes from time – only to have the effort ruled out for pushing – and for five minutes the electronic scoreboard registered 6-0.

Mystic Meg must have been operating it because right on the referee's whistle David Oldfield fulfilled the prophecy. There was more joy for Hatters after the match when it was revealed that Thorpe's injury was not serious, just bruising.

Team: Feuer, James, Thomas, Waddock, Davis, Johnson, McLaren, Alexander, Showler, Thorpe (Oldfield, 76), Marshall (Grant, 72). Sub not used: Linton. Att: 5,455.

Lennie lashes ref on Thorpe

A DELIGHTED Lennie Lawrence lashed out at Mr Bennett and his assistant referees for failing to give him the chance to pull Thorpe off.

"Had the officials been sharper they would have spotted I was trying to pull Thorpe off earlier. I had a go at the linesman, not least because had he been sharper, both the injury and the sending off would have been avoided.

"Crewe caught us in irresistible form today.

"Before the match I told the players they needed to improve, especially in closing down and they must have listened. That was best game Paul McLaren has played in midfield. He closed the gaps in our own midfield and has taken a big step forward today.

"I had a few words with Alexander and today he looked like a new player and even got a goal, which was long overdue."

Of the first sending off he said: "It was harsh but to be

fair to the referee he applied the letter of the law rigorously but consistently."

Hatters now move into third place but Mr Lawrence says it is not realistic to look at the table until after Boxing Day's game away at Gillingham.

"We have played two more home games than anyone else at the top and it won't be a realistic position until after the Millwall and Gillingham games that are coming up.

"We need to win at least one of those."