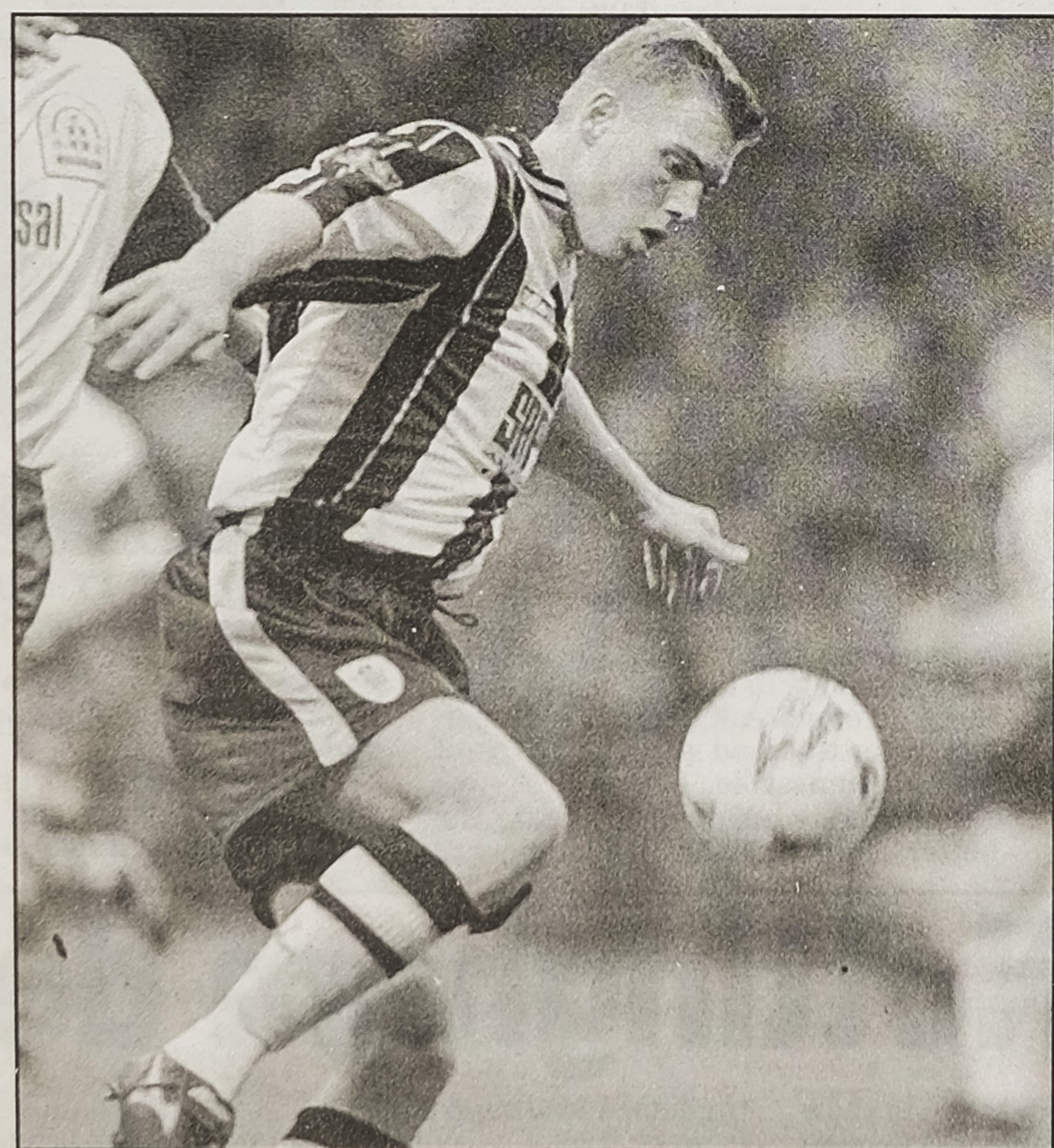


Time and luck

96/97



EYES ON THE BALL: Notts' Shaun Derry keeps a close watch on Des Linton



IN POSSESSION: Tony Battersby keeps control

NOTTS VERDICT

By IAN LADYMAN



A YOUNG Brighton and Hove Albion fan walked rather wearily through Nottingham station at 6.30pm on Saturday night. With his scarf draped only half-defiantly across his shoulder and his team shirt looking worse for wear after a day's travelling to Mansfield, he had the look of a lad who was growing tired of life at the foot of Division Three.

Just across the road, in the nearest pub, were another group of fans who looked little happier. They sported the colours of Notts County and, had the opposing fans met, they may well have had cause to stop and exchange sympathies. There is, after all, nothing that unites football fans as much as abject desperation.

One of the last times the two clubs met was six years ago in a play-off final that saw Notts promoted to the old Division One.

Air of gloom

Brighton have fallen a long way since then. As for Notts —well it's hardly been a picnic has it?

And now here they are again. Eighteen games to go and still up to their necks in lumber. Another defeat, another injustice and another indication that, perhaps right from the start, this season just had "trouble" written all over it.

More often than not these days, Notts County fans must leave matches at Meadow Lane wondering just how they can reconcile the scoreline with the 90 minutes they have just seen. After all, isn't it supposed to be the case in football that the team that has played the better stuff, created the most chances and defended the better usually goes on to win the game?

It is indeed becoming hard to swallow and, as more than one pundit observed, there was a tangible air of gloom that hung over Meadow Lane on Saturday night.

Thankfully, manager Sam Allardyce seemed to be one man who

MATCH FACTS



NOTTS 1, LUTON 2

Saturday, February 1
Meadow Lane

NOTTS: Ward, Wilder, Baraclough, Redmile, Strodder, Hogg (Finnan 64), Derry, Robinson, Jones (Ridgway 64), Battersby, Richardson (Martindale 82).

LUTON: Feuer, James, Thomas, Linton (Marshall 68), Davis, Johnson, Hughes, Alexander, Oldfield, Thorpe (Grant 77), Guentchev. Not used: Patterson.

BOOKINGS: James (24), Alexander (42), Linton (51) all fouls

SCORERS: Richardson 61, Hughes 65, Alexander 87.

CORNERS: Notts 3, Luton 9.

SHOTS ON TARGET: Notts 2, Luton 3.

SHOTS OFF TARGET: Notts 10, Luton 9.

REFEREE: T West (Hull)

ATTENDANCE: 5,025

WEATHER: Cold **PITCH:** Fair

MAN OF THE MATCH: Phil Robinson

QUOTES OF THE DAY

SAM ALLARDYCE

“OUR goal came when Luton were having a particularly good spell.

“Lennie Lawrence had changed his system and had pushed his right-back on which was beginning to overload Ian Baraclough.

“He was being left with two on one too often to be comfortable and that's why I made

the change and that would have worked in our favour had we not then conceded a sloppy goal almost immediately.

“Our system was not working any more and I would have changed it round had we scored or not.

“We put two quality, skilful players on and it was certainly not a negative move.

“If I had changed the

system and that had resulted in us losing the game then I would hold my hands up and admit it, but I don't think it was the case.

LENNIE LAWRENCE

“QUITE simply, the result was harsh on Notts County as they played the better football for much of the game.

“We started off reasonably well, but County came into the game more as the first half wore on.

“It took until the last 20 minutes to show that we are a good team and justify our position near the top of the table.

“We need to do that every time. We have come here and not really done ourselves justice.

running out for Magpies



EARLY CHEER: Ian Richardson slides the ball past Luton ‘keeper Ian Feuer to put Notts ahead, but his first goal in Notts colours proved to be in vain as Luton hit back to win

was remaining upbeat as he too tried to work out how his side had thrown-away a second-half lead for the third time in 1997.

The answers are, I suppose, simple. Managers cannot legislate for the type of error that saw Darren Ward let a speculative 30-yard drive from Ceri Hughes slip under his body or the defensive disorganisation that allowed Graham Alexander to volley the winner unmarked two minutes from time.

But even the harshest critic must stop and wonder why that never happens at the other end. People say that it only happens to teams who are struggling. But to to place faith in that type of mythical hogwash will help nobody. Allardyce knows that human error can beset any team and he must make sure it doesn't happen to his again.

It was hard not to feel sorry for the manager, and the team, on Saturday. Taking on board the signs from Walsall and Scunthorpe, he chose to gamble on a three-man defensive system – with the excellent Chris Wilder and Ian Baraclough pushing up the flanks – and recalled Ian Richardson to play alongside Phil Robinson and Shaun Derry in midfield.

DIVISION TWO

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Brentford	29	15	10	4	47	28	55
Luton	27	15	6	6	45	27	51
Bristol City	29	13	8	8	47	30	47
Crewe	28	15	2	11	41	31	47
Burnley	30	13	6	11	44	34	45
Bury	26	12	9	5	39	26	45
Chesterfield	27	13	6	8	25	20	45
Stockport	27	12	8	7	38	30	44
Millwall	29	12	8	9	37	38	44
Watford	27	10	14	3	28	20	44
Wrexham	26	10	11	5	35	31	41
Walsall	27	11	6	10	32	30	39
Shrewsbury	30	9	9	12	39	47	36
Blackpool	28	8	11	9	32	30	35
Bournemouth	30	9	8	13	26	34	35
Bristol R	29	8	10	11	29	31	34
Preston	29	9	6	14	29	35	33
Gillingham	29	8	8	13	31	39	32
Plymouth	29	7	11	11	31	42	32
York	28	8	6	14	28	44	30
Peterboro	28	6	11	11	39	46	29
Wycombe	28	7	6	15	26	41	27
NOTTS CO	28	5	9	14	21	35	24
Rotherham	28	4	9	15	24	44	21

It was an idea he had been toying with all week and it worked almost from the off. Luton, despite their lofty Division Two perch, are not the best of travellers and their back four looked painfully square throughout the first period as Notts played some

of their best football of the season.

With a passer of the ability of Robinson in the side, Notts were perfectly equipped to exploit this and Baraclough in particular must have asked a few questions of his choice of aftershave as he advanced almost at will into the wide open spaces in the first period.

Again, chances came and chances went. Gary Jones again fluffed his lines when put clear by Robinson while Gary Strodder twice powered headers over the bar from set-pieces and the capable Tony Battersby was out of luck from distance.

Immediate change

The second half was not quite so encouraging but Notts struggled into what looked like being a vital lead just after the hour. And a super goal it was too as the impressive Richardson ran on to Robinson's beautiful angled chip to control the ball with his left foot and slide it under Ian Feuer for his first Notts County goal.

A double substitution almost immediately saw Allardyce replace Graeme Hogg and Jones with Steve Finnan and Ian Ridgway as Notts went 4-5-1 and the sudden, almost immediate change in the side's fortunes led to inevitable questions being asked of the manager's wisdom.

Allardyce claimed the move was to counter a change Luton boss Lennie Lawrence had made to his system and that it was something he had been planning BEFORE his side took the lead.

He was also adamant that it had NOT cost Notts the game.

That would appear to be a matter for some conjecture but, when you look at the league table, it doesn't really matter.

Notts have once again played well – very well in fact – and lost.

But they are second-from-bottom of Division Two and still in deep trouble. That is what matters.

IAN RICHARDSON

“IT was an injustice really. We have had all the play, played ever so well at times and yet we have lost again. It is very disappointing.

“I was standing behind the lad who scored the equaliser and it really swerved in front of Wardy.

“From my point of view, I was delighted to be in the team and that's the first goal I have scored for ages. “Under Colin Murphy I was restricted to playing deep which isn't really my game. “But since the new boss has come, things have changed and he told me today to go forward when I could.



UNJUST: Richardson