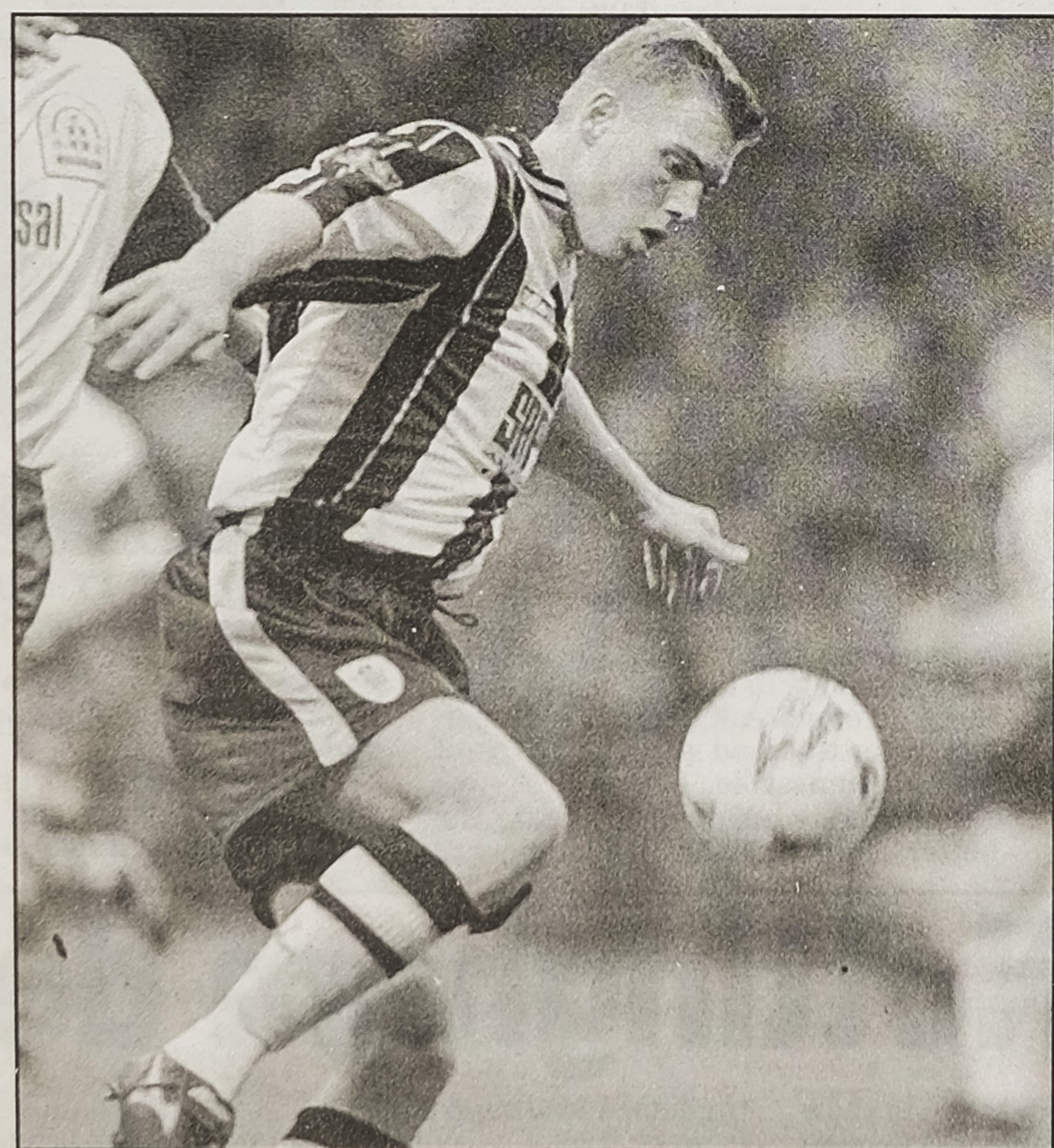


Time and luck

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.