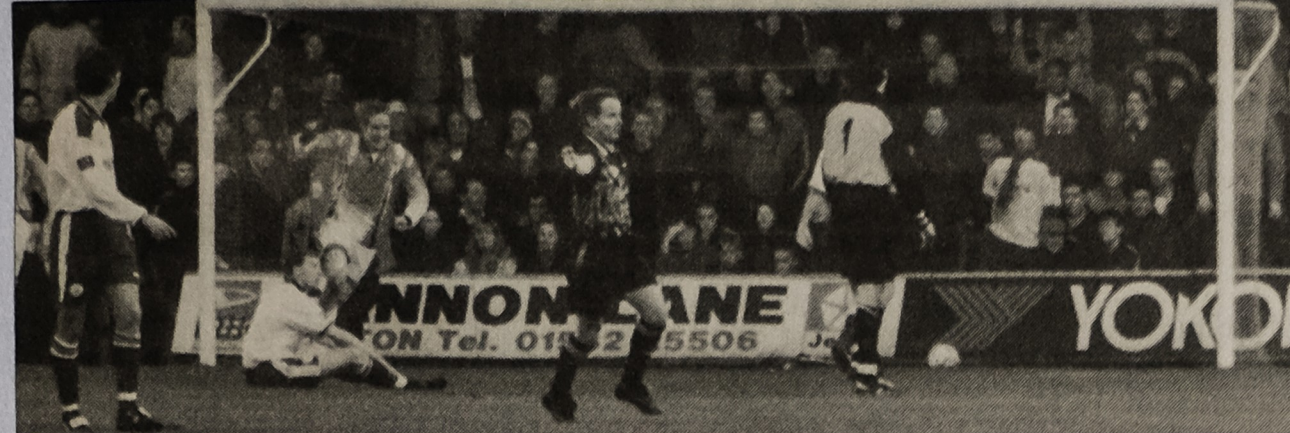


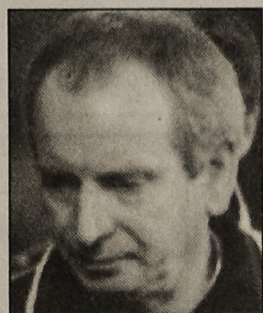


● **COMEDY OF ERRORS:** Alan White (left, sitting) looks on helplessly after watching his own-goal go in before getting a Peter Schmeicelien roasting off his keeper Ian Feuer.



■ **Saving Claus:** Thorpe plays Santa to save boss on Death Row – for the time being

Merry Christmas, Mister Lawrence!



Luton Town 2 Northampton Town 2

97/98

Words: PETER KENYON Pictures: ANDY HANDLEY

SANTA Claus arrived in the nick of time to give Lennie Lawrence a job-saving Christmas present.

With just five minutes left top scorer Tony Thorpe rammed home from eight yards to complete a rousing comeback.

If ever there was a game of two halves this was it.

With Hatters leaving the field 2-0 down at half time, and the crowd baying for Lawrence's head, they got the worst possible start. Only six minutes had been

played when the Cobblers played a high cross into Luton's box, Mitchell Thomas muscled it out with on-loan Jason Dozzell at the far post, and when the Tottenham man fell theatrically to the floor referee Mr Gilkes hesitated for dramatic effect, then pointed to the spot so emphatically one got the impression he enjoyed making the decision.

The fact that Dozzell had been all over Thomas for most of the incident seemed to escape his eye. The Luton defender led a charge of protests and was promptly booked for his pains.

Dozzell sent Ian Feuer the wrong way and Luton found themselves at the foot of yet another mountain.

Ten minutes later the mountain took on Everest proportions, courtesy of a comic own goal which was an exact copy of Steve Davis' only the week



● **CHRISTMAS CHEER:** David Oldfield fires in Luton's first goal on Friday.

before against Bristol Rovers.

This time it was Alan White who nodded past his own keeper from the edge of the box as Feuer once again failed to take charge of the situation.

White and Feuer exchanged a few angry

words, but were both singled out for an after-match ear-bashing by Lawrence, who is beginning to tire of defensive blunders.

"What I said is between me and the players concerned," said the Luton boss. "I won't criticise my

players publicly, but what I will say is that our forwards must feel sick when they look down the pitch and see defenders giving away goals at the other end.

"By the time Northampton were two-up neither Oldfield or Thorpe had had a shot on goal,"

said Lawrence, who reiterated his intention to see Luton through the current crisis.

"The fans can say what they want," said Lawrence, who was forced to endure long periods of the Boxing Day fixture with taunts that former Hatter Mick Harford, who has been linked to the Luton job, would make a better manager.

Certainly, he might inspire more fight and desire in the players, who lifted themselves for the second half.

Not once did I see Lawrence get off his bench to shout at his players, or even celebrate when the equaliser went in.

For a man who often speaks of passion, he seems to lack it himself.

Look at Martin O'Neill at Leicester City.

The players might not be able to hear him, but I'm sure the sight of a boss jumping up and down gets

some sort of message across.

The fans should also take note. During Friday's second half they really got behind the team and that filtered through to the pitch, where players whose heads normally sink at the first hint of adversity suddenly found some fighting spirit.

If they did that every week I'm sure more of the losses would be turned into draws and more of the draws into wins. To be fair, it was clear that Luton's second-half endeavour alone might reap its rewards – and just after the hour David Oldfield slammed home from close range after a frantic goalmouth scramble.

Gary Waddock then watched his deflected volley loop over the keeper, but agonisingly over the crossbar too, Oldfield's volley was cleanly taken by the guests' keeper, then Waddock's fearsome drive

was parried to safety – just.

Five minutes from time Thorpe saved the day. Sub Andrew Fotiadis lost the ball on the by-line, but as the left back dribbled the ball out of defence, never-say-die Fotiadis threw himself into the tackle from behind and the ball ran to Waddock outside the box.

He played an inch-perfect pass for Thorpe who smashed into the corner, and a bumper home crowd went wild. True, Northampton cut their own throats by sitting back in the second half, and Friday's result was probably a case of wallpaper over cracks but at least the fans saw some pride and fighting spirit.

Team: Feuer, Patterson, Thomas, Waddock, Davis, White, Allen, McLaren, Oldfield, Thorpe, Alexander (Fotiadis, 60). Subs not used: Davies, Spring. Man of the match: Fotiadis (despite only playing half an hour).

● **BUT I FORGOT THE MISTLETOE!** Tony Thorpe is smothered by Oldfield and McLaren after his equaliser.