

■ Alexander strikes twice to give Luton Town the perfect start to the New Year

Southend all at sea as Hatters coast to victory

97/98

Southend 1 Luton 2
Report by Pete Kenyon

GRAHAM Alexander pounced twice to give Hatters a winning start to 1998 and wipe away memories of last years 'annus horibilus'.

Despite torrential rain and a howling gale, Hatters braved the elements and a badly cut-up pitch to pull off a second consecutive win away from home.

With just two minutes played, David Oldfield passed inside to Alexander who was left in acres of space to smash past Southend's on-loan keeper Neville Southall from a tight angle.

But if Hatters thought the job was done, they were badly mistaken. The hazy sunshine vanished to be replaced by wind and rain and Southend pegged Luton back. On 19 minutes they were deservedly level.

Just moments after, a hurricane-like storm blew up and the rain started coming down in swirling sheets, the home side won a corner.

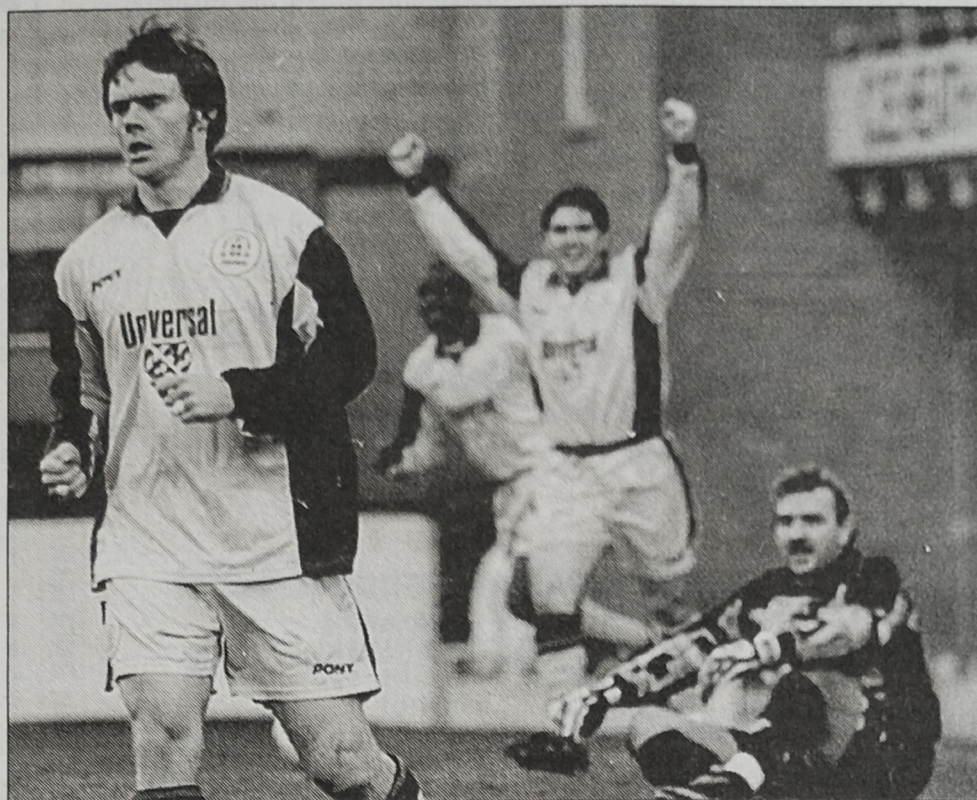
The ball hung in the air, swirling as if with a mind of it's own, centre-back Keith Dublin headed back across goal, and an unmarked Andy Thomson had time to let the ball bounce in the six-yard box before volleying home clinically past the helpless Ian Feuer.

Oldfield should have restored Luton's lead two minutes later, but after finding himself in the clear from Tony Thorpe's cross-field pass, he could only smash against the legs of the advancing Southall.

Thompson's header had Feuer beaten, but flew inches too high, and just before the break, Adrian Clarke smashed a 20-yard curling left-footer against the angle of post and crossbar, as Luton continued to live dangerously.

But if Hatters were guilty of prematurely slipping into cruise-control after their early opener, it was a mistake they did not repeat in the second half.

At the heart of a gutsy team



● Alexander turns in triumph after putting Luton ahead - Tony Thorpe shows his appreciation while beaten keeper Neville Southall can only sit and watch with a wry smile

performance were Paul McLaren, Gary Waddock and Oldfield who all tackled like demons.

Thorpe rounded Southall seven minutes after the break after latching onto Waddock's through ball, but after doing all the hard work on a slippery pitch, somehow let the ball

the heart of Luton's defence. Above all, this was a triumph for guts and determination, never more clearly illustrated than when Waddock entered the tunnel at the end of 90 minutes with fists clenched, face contorted, and bellowing out what I can only assume was a victorious war cry.

A goal just after the hour decided the contest which could have gone either way.

Chris Allen burst through the middle, but as Southall came to face him, the on-loan midfielder froze in panic and didn't seem to know whether to pass or shoot his way around the giant scouser.

In the end he did neither and his weak effort looked to be going harmlessly out for a goal-kick until Thorpe came

charging out of nowhere to stop the ball just inside the dead ball line with a desperate sliding lunge.

After picking himself up off the dirt he rolled the ball back to Alexander who placed an unstoppable first-time drive into the far corner for his sixth goal of the season.

Feuer had to be at his best to deny Thomson with a sprawling save low to his right, Julian Hails crashed a half-decent chance high over the bar, and a desperate Alan White tackle

This was a superb battling performance and it needed to be ... we needed all our resilience and commitment to come out on top
- Hatters' boss Lennie Lawrence

out of his control at the last allowing a grateful Andy Harris to hack to safety.

At the other end, Mitchell Thomas put in a tackle in the nick of time to deny Thomson a clear shot at goal.

At the back Darren Patterson showed signs that he is looking more comfortable at right-back - although he still has a worrying tendency to get sucked into a more familiar central position - and apart from a couple of inevitable slips in the mud, Steve Davis and Alan White looked solid at



● The celebrations continue after Alexander hits the winner

was needed to deny Regis Coulbault as he prepared to pounce, but after that there were few scares as Hatters played out the clock.

A delighted Lennie Lawrence said afterwards: "This was a superb battling performance and it needed to be. On today's show Southend are a much better side than their position suggests, and we needed all our resilience and commitment to come out on top."

"That we managed to do so was a tremendous credit to all the players. Alexander was undoubtedly the star of the show, he took both his goals extremely well."

Team: Feuer, Patterson, Thomas, Waddock, Davis, White, Allen, McLaren, Oldfield, Thorpe, Alexander. Subs not used: Davies, Fotiadis, Spring.

Attendance: 5,056.
Man-of-the-match: Alexander.