

the floods, but run into a torrential downpour of shots from high-flying Gillingham

Luton are left high and dry!

97/98

Gillingham 2 Luton 1

Report by **BILL COLE**

THIS red-blooded encounter saw the end of Hatters' six-match unbeaten run at the Priestfield Stadium, where Gillingham have not been beaten this year.

Although Luton are still not sure of safety, three successive wins have relieved much of the pressure.

They certainly battled hard against a very physical home side but can have no complaints about the result.

The Gills missed a number of golden chances, Luton played the last 13 minutes with a man short through Darren Patterson's unlucky dismissal, but the home fans were still mightily relieved when the final whistle blew as the ten men threatened in injury time.

With Kent escaping most of the severe weather this week, the pitch was firm with a wet surface that enabled zippy passing and both teams took advantage of that early on.

Big Ade Akinbiyi was proving a

handful for a Town defence again lacking the confident presence of Steve Davis through injury.

Akinbiyi threatened several times without hitting the target properly before he put Gillingham in front after 28 minutes.

Julian James was flattened by a bad tackle from Nicky Southall but play was allowed to continue and Kelvin Davis had to save well to enable James to get treatment. With James missing, Steve Butler steamed down his wing, leaving the cover at right-back, Graham Alexander, in his wake and crossed low. Nigerian Akinbiyi tapped home for his 20th of the season from close range.

The goal preceded a row on the Town bench. Physio Clive Goodyear gave James the go-ahead to return, but manager Lawrence still put Sean Evers on as a substitute.

Goodyear, and especially James, were incensed, and the player hurled his shinpads into the dugout in frustration.

Suddenly, the tackles were flying in all over the pitch. Rory Allen in particular was having running battles with Gills' diminutive skipper Andy Hessenthaler and big central defenders Barry Ashby and Matt Bryant, and Allen was duly booked for a heavy challenge on Bryant in the 40th minute.



● **One-nil: Rory Allen shows the goalscoring style that has made him an instant hit with Luton.**

Three minutes into injury time, Allen got his own back in the best way possible.

Former Watford midfielder Hessenthaler was forced back towards his own goal, broadcast an impending back-pass and Allen was alert enough to nip in like lightning and tuck the ball under Vince Bartram from an acute angle.

The equaliser spurred on the Town who started the second half brightly. But, four minutes in, they conceded a soft goal to go behind once again.

Paul Smith got away down the Gills right and his cross should have been cut out by several Town defenders.

This didn't happen and Akinbiyi spun in front of goal and slammed the winner past the exposed Davis from six yards out.

Gillingham had brought Jim Corbett onto their left wing at half-time and he preceded to run Alexander ragged.

Corbett crossed for Hessenthaler to force Davis to save, then got away

again, only to be chopped down by Darren Patterson who was shown the yellow card.

Then, with Davis baulked by a home forward and no whistle forthcoming, Patterson had to launch a kick off his own line to clear Alexander's back-header and Alan White had to make a decisive intervention to cut out a dangerous cross that had 'goal' written all over it.

In the 75th minute, Mitchell Thomas, who was having a good game, flicked on a Town corner and Allen was only inches wide with a header.

It was becoming thrilling end-to-end stuff and Davis had to be alert to save from Corbett. Then Akinbiyi clumsily tripped over Patterson and the referee Mr Stretton sent off the Northern Ireland international for two bookable offences.

The ten men pushed forward, which gave Akinbiyi a glorious chance for his hat-trick on the break, but he

contrived to get the ball over the bar from literally two yards out. Luton certainly finished strongly, but injury time brought only a booking for Luton's star man Kelvin Davis for throwing the ball away.

After the game, Lennie Lawrence said: "Today we were second best and it's a long time since I've said that about my players away from home."

"We couldn't cope with Akinbiyi and were lucky to only concede two goals. Really, it was a bridge too far for some of them today and we needed fresh legs."

"Steve Davis will definitely, absolutely play on Tuesday. As for the referee, it would be hard to be more unimpressed by anybody."

Team: Davis, James (Evers 28), Thomas, Waddock (Doherty 79), Patterson, White, Marshall (Gray 59), McLaren, Oldfield, Allen, Alexander.

Attendance: 6,846. Man of the match: Kelvin Davis.



● **Going under? Gillingham put the pressure on with a fine goal.**