■ DAVE FLETT REPORTS: HATTERS ROAD TO SAFETY IS BLOCKED BY PROMOTION CHASING GILLINGHAM AND THEIR STAR STRIKER ADE AKINBIYI

● ON THE BOBBY TRAIL: Gillingham defenders remonstrate with Bobby Ahinbiyi (left) after challenge but earn only book-ing (right) as he grabs the Hatters winner

You've been 'Ad Akinbiyi and ref sink Hatters

● THROWING THE GAME AWAY: An ankle injury to Julian James indirectly led to Gillingham's first goal and left the under-pressure Hatters without a recognised right back for more than an hour of Saturday's game.

A DOUBLE defensive blow typified a miserable afternoon for the Hatters as their march towards Division 2 safety was prolonged for at least another game by play-off hopefuls Gillingham.

Julian James limped off with suspected ankle ligament damage in an incident that led to the home team's first goal and Darren Patterson made his exit from the action on 81 minutes after being red carded for two bookable offences.

Both incidents attracted controversy afterwards with critics cross from both managers directed at some dubious refereeing.

After three successive victories had created some daylight between themselves and the relegation trapdoor, the stakes on Saturday were not as high as in previous matches and the Hatters played a poor hand, but the real joker of the pack was referee Fraser Stretton.

The referee couldn't even get the minute's silence right, so I can't see how he worked out the stoppage time,' Gillingham boss Tony Pulis said afterwards in reference to Stretton's embarrassing handling of the silence for Fulham fan Matthew Fox and his baffling decision to play ten extra minutes.

Leanne Lawrance was equally forthright in his assessment of the Nottingham official's performance, saying, "It would be hard for me to be more unimpressed with anybody," although the Hatters manager went on to admit that he couldn't be used as an excuse for his side's low-key performance. That Ally Shrivell had an assistant based in Gillingham's opening goal was a fact recognised by both managers though.

James struck out a vulnerable leg to deny Nicky Southall a clear run on goal and paid the consequences when he was left clutching his ankle.

More than a minute later, the Hatters right back was still laid prostrate on the edge of the penalty area and advised to be playing Southall and Ade Akinbiyi onside, when the two home players burst through unopposed, with the superb step by Kelvin Davis preventing a goal for Southall.

Only there was James allowed treatment but, in his absence, the Hatters fell behind when, after the resulting corner had cleared, David Oldfield managed to lose possession on the halfway line and Steve Butler breaked past makeshift right back Graham Alexander to cross for Akinbiyi to turn the ball in.

Julian wasn't exactly feigning injury, but, in common with most of his decisions throughout the afternoon, it didn't smack of common sense," was Lawrence's appraisal of the incident and even Pullis said, "I think he's got to play offside there.

GILLINGHAM. 2
Akinbiyi 28, 49
HATTERS 1
Allen 45
Attendance: 6,846

In the second half, Patterson entered Stretton's notebook for a cynical challenge on Gillingham's tricky 17-year-old sub Jim Corbett and, on 81 minutes received his marching orders for an innocuous looking trip on Akinbiyi.

The ex-Norwich City striker spun off his marker and contact was made, but with the offence lacking both intent and malice and not in a dangerous position, Stretton's decision to send the Northern Ireland international off surprised most in the 6,846 crowd at Priestfield.

The red card completed Akinbiyi's impressive demolition job on the Hatters defence and if Stretton was the joker during Saturday's game, Gillingham's 21-goal his man is rapidly becoming the "King of Clubs" in Division 2. Unarguably the hottest property at this level of football, the Nigerian-born front man tormented the visitors back four all afternoon and Lennie Lawrence's men finished the game relieved that the havoc he had wreaked during this very one-sided encounter, hadn't caused greater damage.

Akinbiyi scored two, but could have had five, and when his pace and power can be allied to more consistent shooting, the finished article could be awesome. A couple of half chances fell his way in the opening stages, before he signalled his first real threat to Davis' goal, using his upper body strength to brush past Patterson and then moving up a gear to leave Alan White trailing in his wake he got himself into a great goalscoring position but dragged his shot wide.

He was not as generous with his next two chances on 28 and 49 minutes, both ending up in the back of the Hatters net. The second was clinically dispatched after Paul Smith's cross from the right had been left by Butler on the near post, the ball sat up perfectly for Akinbiyi and he didn't need a second invitation to turn the ball past Davis into the bottom corner.

The athletic striker, finding gaps in the visitors defence with alarming ease, then wasted two gift-wrapped opportunities for his hat-trick, firing over after being through one-on-one by Corbett and then somehow turning the ball over from four yards after Adrian Pennock's 86th minute cross.

He was surprised no runners later, but the Hatters had lost any hope of a point and Akinbiyi's countrymen Ince looked to have made debut notice but his last-minute strike was ruled out for

The Hatters under Ray Allen had earlier given his team at home for the game in first-half injury time with a weakly short back pass by ex-Hatter Mike Rosenbaum and coolly slipped by the large Vince Bartram and Allen.

Just like he offers no nothing spectacular about the Hatters' 1-0 win last spell, but he continues to underplay look simple and unlikely to yield out service by his team-mates. In his sixth successful all afternoon was when a ball intended for Gillingham defender Barry Ashby was intercepted of the 22-man header at Kelvin Davis.

Allen's first half game arrived inadequate through the middle was lackly gathered by Bartram after a Davis punch and his instinctive header of Steve Butler's great post flick-on from an

Corbett and Corbett both saw fers shots by Davis and Pat Scott, the latter having a bizarre goalpost header.

Hatters, we didn't defend well enough and we play only with concinding goals," he said. "No scoreline was only 2-1, but we definitely beaten, let's get that out of the way. It's the first time I've said that I felt sorry for the players because they've all put in the best we can, but I'm left with no one to blame but myself. I'm responsible for the performance."

Gillingham: 1 BARTRAM; 2 Smith, Sean Evers, 29), 3 Ashby, 4 Pennock, 5 Ince, 6 Rosenbaum, 7 Butler, 8 Carey, 9 Akinbiyi, 10 Ward, 11 Scott, 12 Hessenthaler, 14 Mitchell, 15 Hessenthaler, 16 Pullen, 17 Pullen, 18 McLaren, 19 Ward, 20 Graham Alexander.

● RIGHT BACK WHERE HE BEGAN: Not for the first time this season Graham Alexander was called upon for defensive duties when injury to Julian James. Alexander started his career as a full back at Scunthorpe and is seen here challenging winger Paul Smith.

LENNIE'S VERDICT

● The referee might not have helped matters in the slightest, but our performance didn't warrant blaming him for the defeat. When you play against a side like Gillingham, it's hard to cope physically, and you've got to play your football but we gave the ball away silly. ●

Pictures: Gareth Owen

LUTON TOWN FC 1997-98 THE STORY SO FAR ...

August	Opponents	Score	Scorers	Att	Pos
Sat 9	Blackpool	2-1	Thorpe 2	6,845	-
Tues 12	Hartlepool (FCC)	1-3	Thorpe 1	2,245	-
Sat 16	SOUTHEND	1-0	Douglas 75	6,140	12
Sat 23	Bristol City	1-1	Thorpe 24	6,215	12
Tues 26	COLCHESTER (FCC)	1-1	Thorpe 54	2,016	-
Sat 30	GILLINGHAM	1-1	Thorpe 60	5,404	12
September					
Tues 2	MILLWALL	0-1		5,376	15
Sat 6	Wolverhampton	0-1		7,246	15
Tues 9	Hartlepool	1-1	Marshall 43	4,067	15
Sat 13	WEST BROM (CCC)	1-1	Douglas 23	5,407	23
Tues 16	Bristol City (CCC)	1-3	Davis 20, L. Sims 30	3,237	23
Sat 20	Bristol City	0-0	Davis 22, 84, Thorpe 73	6,223	23
Sat 27	Bristol City	2-0	Davis 32, 58	8,009	23
October					
Sat 4	Bradford	0-0		8,041	22
Sat 11	WATFORD (FA R3)	3-0	Thorpe 90, 94, Fickling 97	6,000	-
Sat 18	Grimsby	1-1	Thorpe 90	5,000	22
Sat 21	Grimsby (FA R4)	2-1	White 87	4,941	22
Sat 25	BRENTFORD	2-0	Davis 90, Thorpe 90	6,000	21
November					
Sat 1	Wycombe	2-2	Oldfield 16, Thorpe 74	9,219	18
Sat 8	Bournemouth	1-0	Alexander 32, 38	5,000	18
Sat 15	PRESTON	1-3	Thorpe 25	5,732	22
Tues 18	Hartlepool (FACT)	1-1		1,500	-
Sat 22	WALSALL	2-1		5,732	22
Sat 29	Swansea	2-1	Alexander 13, Thorpe 72	3,506	20
December					
Tues 2	GILLINGHAM	2-2	Davis 20, 35, Fickling 77	4,802	22
Sat 6	Bristol City	1-1	Thorpe 90	6,000	22
Sat 20	CARDIFF CITY	1-1	Thorpe 90	5,000	22
Fri 26	NORTHAMPTON	2-2	Oldfield 88, Thorpe 90	8,005	21
Sat 27	Cardiff	2-1	Davis 28, 90, Thorpe 90	6,000	21
January					
Sat 3	Bristol R	2-1	Alexander 41, 45	5,266	19
Sat 10	BURY (FA R3)	2-1	Davis 75, Thorpe 76	6,000	19
Sat 17	BRENTFORD (AWE)	2-1	Thorpe 51, Oldfield 80	6,000	19
Sat 24	Bristol R	1-1	Thorpe 90	6,000	19
Sat 31	FULHAM	2-0	Thorpe 14, 90	8,356	19
Sat 7	Northampton (AFC)	1-1	Thorpe 90, Oldfield 90	5,193	-
Sat 14	BOURNEMOUTH	1-2	Thorpe 90	5,408	19
February					
Sat 7	Wrexham	1-0	Davis 23, 90	3,597	20
Sat 14	Bournemouth	1-1	Johnson 81	5,000	20
Sat 21	Northampton (AFC)	0-1		3,367	20
Sat 28	BRISTOL ROVERS	1-1		5,000	20
Sat 7	WIGAN	1-1	Oldfield 29	4,402	20
Sat 14	Brentford Ag.	1-1	Sutcliffe 78, Lyons 90	5,000	20
March					
Sat 7	WYCOMBE	0-1		6,992	-
Sat 14	Fulham	0-1		6,000	-
Sat 21	Wycombe	1-1	Thorpe 90	5,000	-
Sat 28	GRIMSBY	2-1	Thorpe 90, Davis 90	5,732	-
Sat 4	Preston	3-2	Davis 32, Allen 38, Marshall 73	6,000	-
April					
Sat 11	YORK CITY	1-0	Alexander 35pen, Oldfield 45, Gray 88	5,541	18
Sat 4	Grimsby	1-1	Abel 54	5,000	18
Sat 11	Wigan	1-1	Abel 90	6,846	19
Tues 14	CHESTERFIELD	1-0			-
Sat 18	Walsall	1-1			-
Sat 25	Cardiff	1-1			-
May					
Sat 2	CARLISLE				-

NATIONWIDE LEAGUE DIVISION TWO

	Pld	Won	Drn	Lst	For	Agst	Pts
Bristol City	43	24	12	7	75	41	84
Luton	43	24	10	9	70	36	82
Fulham	43	21	14	8	67	40	77
Gillingham	43	19	14	11	54	36	71
Watford	43	19	14	11	54	40	71
Walsall	43	19	12	12	58	45	69
Bristol Rovers	43	18	13	12	54	45	67
Northampton	43	18	13	12	53	39	67
Chesterfield	43	18	12	13	49	45	66
Brentford	43	17	13	13	54	47	64
Bournemouth	43	15	12	16	51	48	57
Wycombe	43	15	12	16	48	51	57
Wigan Athletic	43	15	9	19	60	61	54
Preston	43	13	15	15	52	51	54
York City	43	13	14	16	51	55	53
Cardiff	43	13	14	16	45	54	53
Wrexham	43	13	13	17	51	54	52
Millwall	43	13	11	19	51	55	50
Swansea	43	12	12	19	51	61	48
Plymouth Argyle	43	12	11	20	51	64	47
Grimsby	43	11	14	18	45	61	47
Brighton	43	12	11	20	44	61	47
Burnley	43	11	12	20	44	61	45
Carlisle	43	10	12	21	44	67	42
Southend	43	9	12	22	41	67	39

APPEARANCES & GOALS

Player	Apps	Goals
Kelvin Davis	46	0
Graham Alexander	45	4
Kevin Douglas	45	2
Kevin Davis	44	9
Steve Oldfield	44	4
Tony Thorpe	44	19
Alan White	44	0
Gary Waddock	43	0
Chris Allen	43	2
Richard Harvey	2	0
Kevin McGowan	2	0
Thomas Abel	3	2
Lee Allen	4	0
Stuart Douglas	4	0
Lee Evans	4	0
Phil Gray	4	1
Adam Sims	4	0
Bryan Small	4	0

BAD BOYS

Yellow Cards	Red Cards
Paul McGregor	
Kevin McGowan	
Dave Beasant	
Kevin Davis	
Lee Allen	
Gary Doherty	
Kevin Douglas	
Steve Oldfield	
Jamie Ashby	
Kevin Davis	
Tony Thorpe	
Kevin Davis	
Kevin Davis	
Kevin Davis