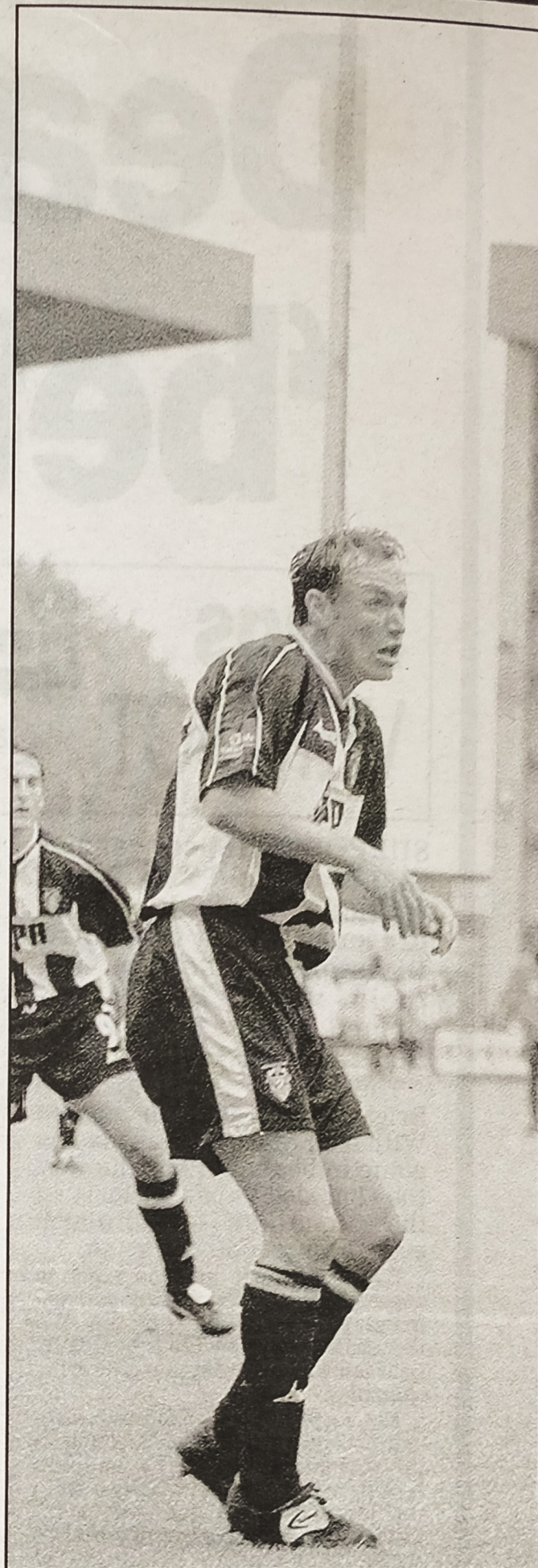


First-day check on reality for goalless County...

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AUGUST is football's version of New Year.

Granted a new start, journeyman professionals convince themselves they are going to become better players, just as ordinary members of the public vow to be better people.

Having returned from holiday with a new sense of resolve, they train with renewed determination for the season that will surely be the watershed in their career, all eagerly anticipating the red-letter day that this year came on August 7.

Just as ordinary people soon slip into the bad habits that have dogged them in the past, though, so do footballers soon show why this year might not, after all, be their career's turning point.

Tackles are mistimed, passes are misplaced and shots go awry.

For the players of Notts County, at least Saturday was relatively error-free and the defenders' copy-book is still clean.

Sadly, however, it lacked the inspiration and excitement that even the most cynical old supporter might have hoped for.

Faced with opponents who were happy just to be here — financially troubled Luton Town were still under a Football League suspension until 24 hours before kick-off — Notts lacked

Notts VERDICT



By **OLIVER KAY** at Meadow Lane

the cutting edge to claim what would have been a morale-boosting win.

They are all morale-boosting, of course, but few victories instill the same optimism and excitement in football supporters as the one on the first day of the season.

That optimism rarely lasts — the opening-day win at Oldham this time last year was the archetypal false dawn — but it would have been nice to have had just one night speculating about whether this season was going to be the one.

Seasonal cheer never seemed likely here. No sooner had supporters opened their match programmes than they were presented with a distinctly downbeat chairman.

Derek Pavis's inaugural column of the new

campaign began: "I realise this is no time for negative talk, but ..."

In fact, it did not seem like the dawn of a new season at all. Whether it was the early start, the inclement weather or the lack of new signings, the general atmosphere was one of indifference.

The same could not be said of the orange-clad visiting supporters, who contributed a quarter of the crowd and around three-quarters of the noise.

Sadly, any admiration for them vanished when fighting broke out within their ranks

Sam Allardyce said afterwards that Luton had made things difficult for his side, defending deep and getting nine players behind the ball.

But such tactics are often employed away from home at this level and Notts will simply have to find a way of dealing with them.

Their best source of creativity was usually the full-backs, Richard Holmes and Clayton Blackmore. They might be at opposite ends of the career spectrum, but they were the two best players in black-and-white, not least with the way they passed the ball into dangerous areas on the rare occasions the Luton defence left them vacant.

But while those balls over the top promised

Big match quotes

SAM ALLARDYCE

Notts County manager

FIRST and foremost, a clean sheet is a delight to me because we didn't get enough of those last season.

"We concentrated in the closing stages so that they didn't get what would have been an undeserved winner.

"That would have been a travesty, but it's happened to us before.

"Attack-wise, it was difficult because they had eight men behind the ball — nine if you include the

goalkeeper. In the second half it was very difficult to break them down.

"I'm disappointed at not getting the three points. We just didn't get that bit of luck on the day.

"I thought Rico might have won it in the end with a free header, but it wasn't to be.

DUANE DARBY

Notts County striker

IT'S been a long time waiting for my debut, but I got on for ten minutes at the end, which was great.

"I was disappointed in a way

not to be in the starting 11, but basically I'm just delighted to be back after being out for such a long time.

LENNIE LAWRENCE

Luton Town manager

IT'S been a traumatic week but I'm well pleased with that. "We had a fair appeal for a penalty towards the end, but I have to say my arms weren't in the air.

"The crowd did something for us today. They were extremely vocal.