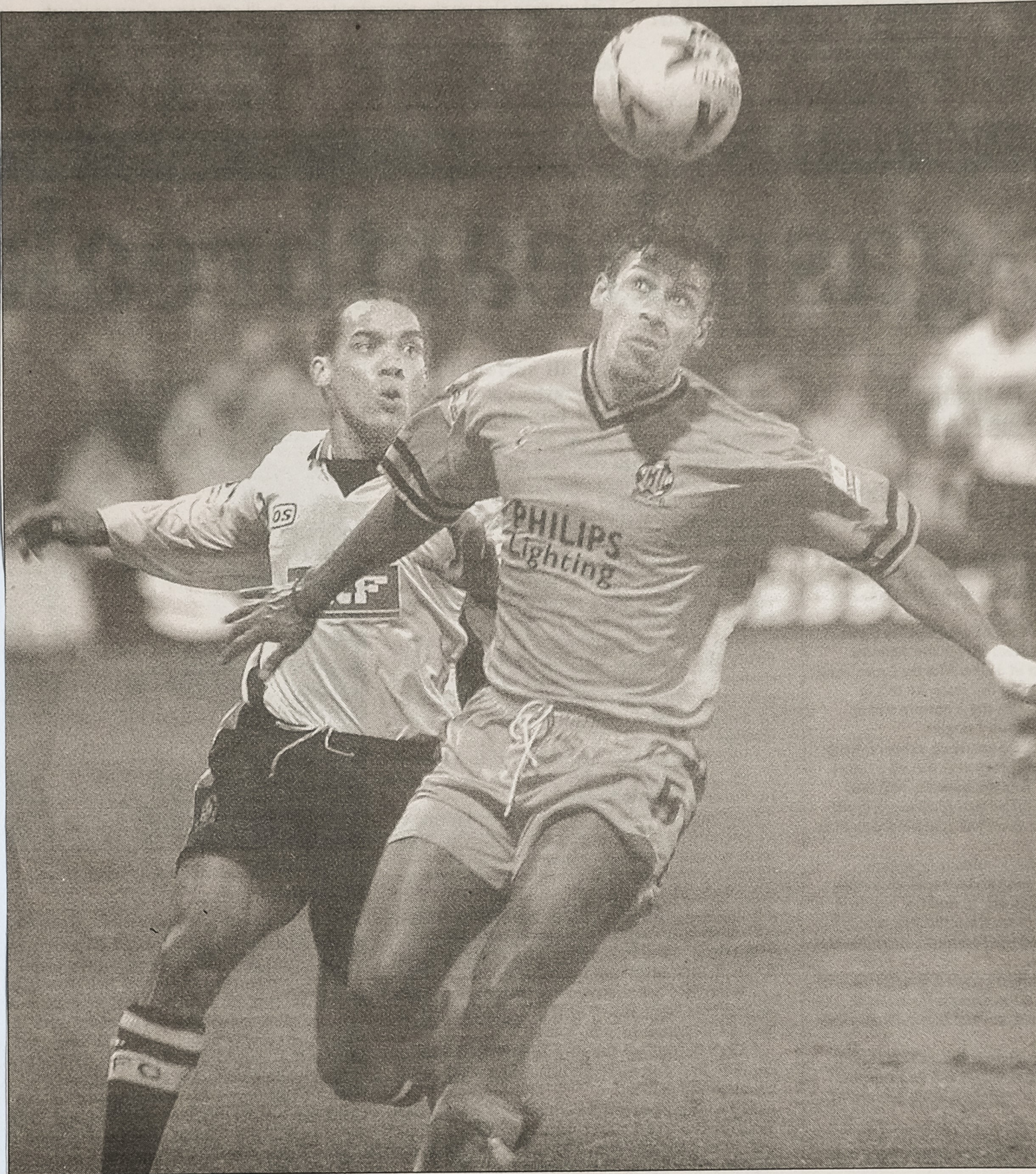


Bizarre winner puts United in deep mire

THAT'S MINE . . . United defender Marc Joseph keeps his eye on the ball as he beats Luton's Mark Stein in a race for possession.



RANDALL BUTT
reports from
Kenilworth Road

THEY deserved better than this. One of the most spirited displays of the season by depleted, injury-hit Cambridge United ended in bitter sting-in-the-tail derby defeat.

Despite losing Ritchie Humphreys as early as the sixth minute, they won the physical contest against Joe Kinnear's pumped-up Hatters and dominated the second half at rain-lashed Kenilworth Road.

It was 7-1 to John Beck's battlers on goal attempts after the break when Luton hoisted a long, hopeful ball downfield three minutes from time and won the jackpot.

The switch to three centre-backs has stiffened the resistance of a defence which was glad-handing goals, but they are not the swiftest unit in the League and were caught napping by scurrying little striker Mark Stein, so often a thorn in United's flesh over the years.

Lionel Perez, who had snuffed out a few other moments of danger in the game by operating as a back-up centre-half, again won the race to win a header outside his penalty area, but this time the clearance fell perfectly for the home team.

Most of the time a long shot — especially from near the touchline — to take advantage of an absent keeper, flies high or bounces wide, but Matthew Taylor was on target from 45 yards, and none of the defenders had kept on running hard enough towards goal to get back to block it.

It was a costly moment of slackness in an otherwise disciplined, as well as gritty, display from a tougher,

higher-tempo team than the one which surrendered to some tame defeats during the slide that raised relegation fears and cost Roy McFarland his job. And only a week since his sad, but necessary, departure there are signs of Beck's stamp on the attitude and organisation of the side.

The long ball may be no more in evidence than earlier in the campaign, but the long throw is back as an upgraded weapon in the armoury.

Used occasionally during McFarland's reign, it was haphazard and not particularly effective.

In the first half last night, though, United employed the tactic, especially from Tom Cowan on the left, to frustrate Luton, prevent their game flowing, and to put pressure on them.

The presence of Paul Wanless close to the bye-line at the near post each time to make contact with the missile was a clue to the practice which had been done.

No doubt the seriousness of their situation has also concentrated the players' minds, but tackling and backing-up was another area of improvement.

They could have been over-run in the first half, but stood up well against the strong wind and a Luton side on a resurgent four-wins-in-six games run under the inspirational Kinnear.

Emmerson Boyce slicing through to set up a shot which Liam George lifted over the crossbar in the fourth minute seemed an ominous sign, but it took the Hatters until the 41st to carve out a similar chance, Perez saving well from George after Marc Joseph did just enough to delay the shot a precious couple of

seconds.

With the wind at the backs, mixed with heavy rain after the break, United, cheered on by around 750 fans at the end they were attacking, got on top territorially.

West Ham loanee Omer Riza began to get opportunities to display his skill and pace, and Kinnear admitted John Taylor, "as old as he is these days," gave his defence problems.

Wanless and Ian Ashbee, back to his rumbustious best, were the powerhouse, both men also going close to scoring early in the half, before Ashbee set up a 64th minute chance Taylor was obviously angry at missing. He steered a header towards the far post from the right wing cross but it flew inches wide.

There was a threat to United in the half from the right-wing runs of substitute Andrew Fotiadis, but that diminished after a collision which caused the unfortunate player to drop to his knees and reveal in steaming detail the contents of his pre-match meal to almost 7,000 people.

Ten minutes from time United looked sure to make it "a sickener" for all of the Hatters when Cowan found Ashbee, whose cross put Neil Mustoe in at the far post. He rammed in a shot, but goalkeeper Nathan Abbey, brother of the dearly departed Zema, did well to dive in and deflect the ball for a corner with his shoulder.

It looked like a case of having to settle for a point until Luton's only shot on target in the half, stripped that deserved reward away and turned the heat up higher in the sweaty relegation struggle.