



By MATTHEW HAYES

SUNDERLAND moved into the top half of the Championship for the first time this season after extending their unbeaten run to six matches.

The Black Cats chalked up a third successive win and condemned the Hatters to an eighth defeat in nine matches despite taking an early lead.

A goal feast looked imminent after both sides found the net in the opening ten minutes with only bad finishing keeping the teams dead-locked at the interval.

Stan Varga cut out an angled drive from Dean Morgan in the fifth minute but the ball rebounded to the Luton striker who left debutant Marton Fulop with no chance of making an instant impact.

Sunderland responded immediately with a fierce drive from Graham Kavanagh that whistled just past the post. But the Black Cats were not to be denied and in the ninth minute were on level terms.

Ross Wallace released Daryl Murphy who held off Leon Barnett and, although there was a suspicion of handball, the Irish striker blasted an angled left-foot drive into the roof of the net for his fifth goal of the season.

Barnett headed over when well-placed after the home failed to clear a free-kick and, when Markus Heikkinen was caught in possession, Murphy fired into the side-netting.

Morgan sent a vicious 20-yard dipping free-kick just over the top

MATCH STATS

SUNDERLAND v LUTON

9	Shots on target	5
6	Shots off target	9
5	Corners	8
4	Offside	5
12	Fouls conceded	9
0	Yellow Cards	1
0	Red Cards	0
58	Possession %	42

Att: 30,445 Rating: ★★★★★
Ref: A Penn - 6/10

but Luton missed a great chance to regain the lead when Varga allowed a long ball out of defence to drop over his head and leave Morgan in the clear.

But with only Fulop to beat, the Hatters' leading goalscorer failed to hit the target.

Murphy had a thumping drive beaten out by Dean Kiely but, in an even contest, Rowan Vine was just too high and Fulop saved well from David Bell's free-kick.

David Connolly was even closer to a goal when he latched on to a back pass by Heikkinen only to be denied by the alert Kiely on the stroke of half-time.

It was Connolly, however, who put the Black Cats ahead in the 53rd minute with another stunning effort. Receiving from Elliott, Connolly turned smartly to drill the ball wide of Kiely into the bottom corner of the net.

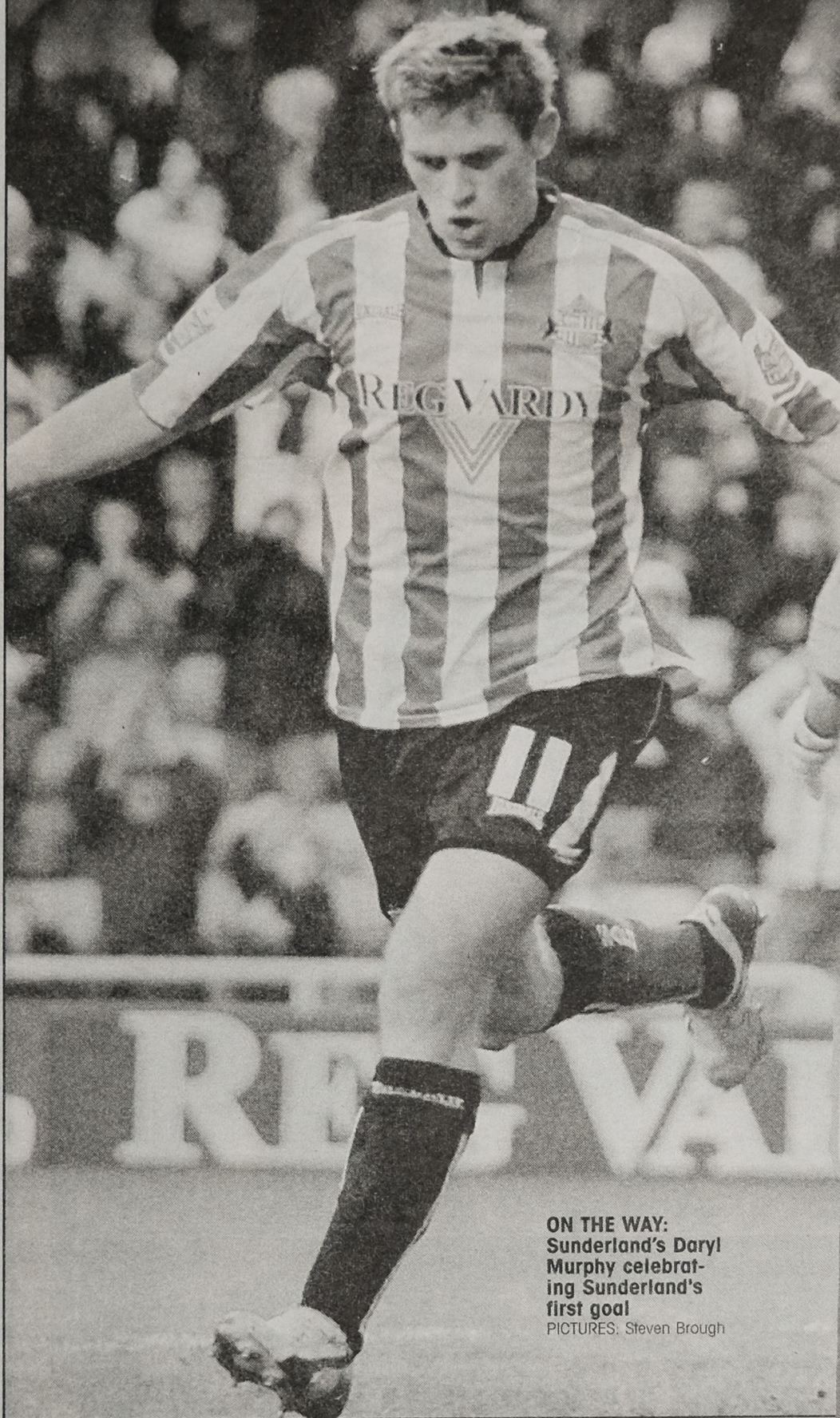
Only a brilliant save by Kiely from Liam Miller prevented the midfielder giving Sunderland a two-goal cushion in the 57th minute. Connolly cleverly cut in along the by-line and, from his centre, Miller's effort was turned behind in style.

Fulop dropped an easy cross to cause panic in the home defence and was then relieved to see a Vine header flash across the face of goal when well-beaten.

Luton made a double substitution in the 76th minute, sending on Warren Feeney and Adam Boyd but, apart from Feeney lashing a cross over the bar late on, the home side held on for another hard-fought win.

Roy Keane said: "It was the same as

KEANE'S CATS ON THE PROWL



ON THE WAY: Sunderland's Daryl Murphy celebrating Sunderland's first goal

PICTURES: Steven Brough



GOING IN: Sunderland's Daryl Murphy hits Sunderland's first

MARTON FULOP	6/10
Made debut, recovered well from conceding an early goal	
STANISLAV VARGA	7/10
Looked short of match practice, allowed several long balls to drop over him	
STEPHEN CALDWELL	6/10
Hesitant at times, caught in possession and guilty of wayward passing	
GRAHAM KAVANAGH	7/10
Recovered from an early knock to give usual highly competitive display	
LIAM MILLER	7/10
A fierce competitor in midfield without being involved much in setting up attacks	
ROSS WALLACE	6/10
Drifted in and out and failed to much impact despite good service down the left flank	
DANNY COLLINS	6/10
Steady performance without catching the eye	

SUNDERLAND

DEAN WHITEHEAD	7/10
Pressed into service though not fully fit, gave another all-out performance	
DAVID CONNOLLY	8/10
Restored to the starting line-up, lively and a constant threat, fully deserved his goal	
DARYL MURPHY	7/10
Took his goal in style, always a threat despite playing alone up front	
STEPHEN ELLIOTT	7/10
Lively on the right-wing, a constant threat when cutting inside	

SUBSTITUTES

LEADBITTER: FOR CONNOLLY (78)
NOT USED: CARSON; NYATANGA; ELLIOTT; YORKE

STAR PLAYERS



DAVID CONNOLLY
STAR RATING
8



CARLOS EDWARDS
STAR RATING
8

DEAN KIELY	7/10
No chance with the goals, made couple of important saves	
LEON BARNETT	6/10
The only ever present in defence, came to the rescue with timely headed clearances	
KEVIN FOLEY	7/10
Did good job in containing the usually dangerous Wallace	
MARKUS HEIKKINEN	7/10
The versatile defender was a tower of strength in keeping tabs on Connolly	
LEWIS EMANUEL	7/10
Steady in defence and used ball well when going forward	
DEAN MORGAN	6/10
Took his goal well but did not enjoy best of games thereafter	
STEVE ROBINSON	6/10
The Northern Ireland midfielder was always in the thick of the action	

LUTON

DAVID BELL	7/10
Kept going and did his best to give a spark from midfield	
AHMET BRKOVIC	7/10
The Croatian enjoyed good spells down the left with both pace and dangerous crosses	
CARLOS EDWARDS	8/10
Always a danger with his runs down the right-wing	
ROWAN VINE	6/10
Missed at least one good chance to add to his ten goal tally	

SUBSTITUTES

BOYD: FOR MORGAN (76)
FEENEY: FOR VINE (77)
NOT USED: BERESFORD; PERRETT; LANGLEY

last week, we did not play particularly well but I think we deserved to win though Mike Newell might think different.

"It was always going to a long afternoon after we conceded a goal after just five minutes but the players kept their discipline to grind out another three points.

"We are down to the bare bones and we just had enough players to make the bench. It took two great finishes to win the game and we are heading in the right direction.

"We have been playing catch up and I think we will be doing that until the last game of the season."

Newell said: "In the last 15 to 20 minutes we put Sunderland under a lot of pressure so I think that must tell you something.

"We could have put the game beyond Sunderland in the first 20 minutes but we didn't and we have paid for that. You never win anything if you don't take your chances when you are on top."