Luton woe: 'We didn't close the game down' says disappointed boss

Hatters let it all slip-slide away

Report by PETE KENYON

HATTERS boss Lennie Lawrence blamed an 'inability to close a game down' as Luton crashed out of the play-offs at the first hurdle.

In the manager's own words, Wednesday night's 2-2 draw against Crewe was 'a microcosm of our whole season'.

At 2-0 up Luton appeared to be, if not exactly cruising, in a strong position.

But a goal from Little 50 seconds later gave Crewe the lifeline they needed - and come the end the visitors were worthy two-leg winners.

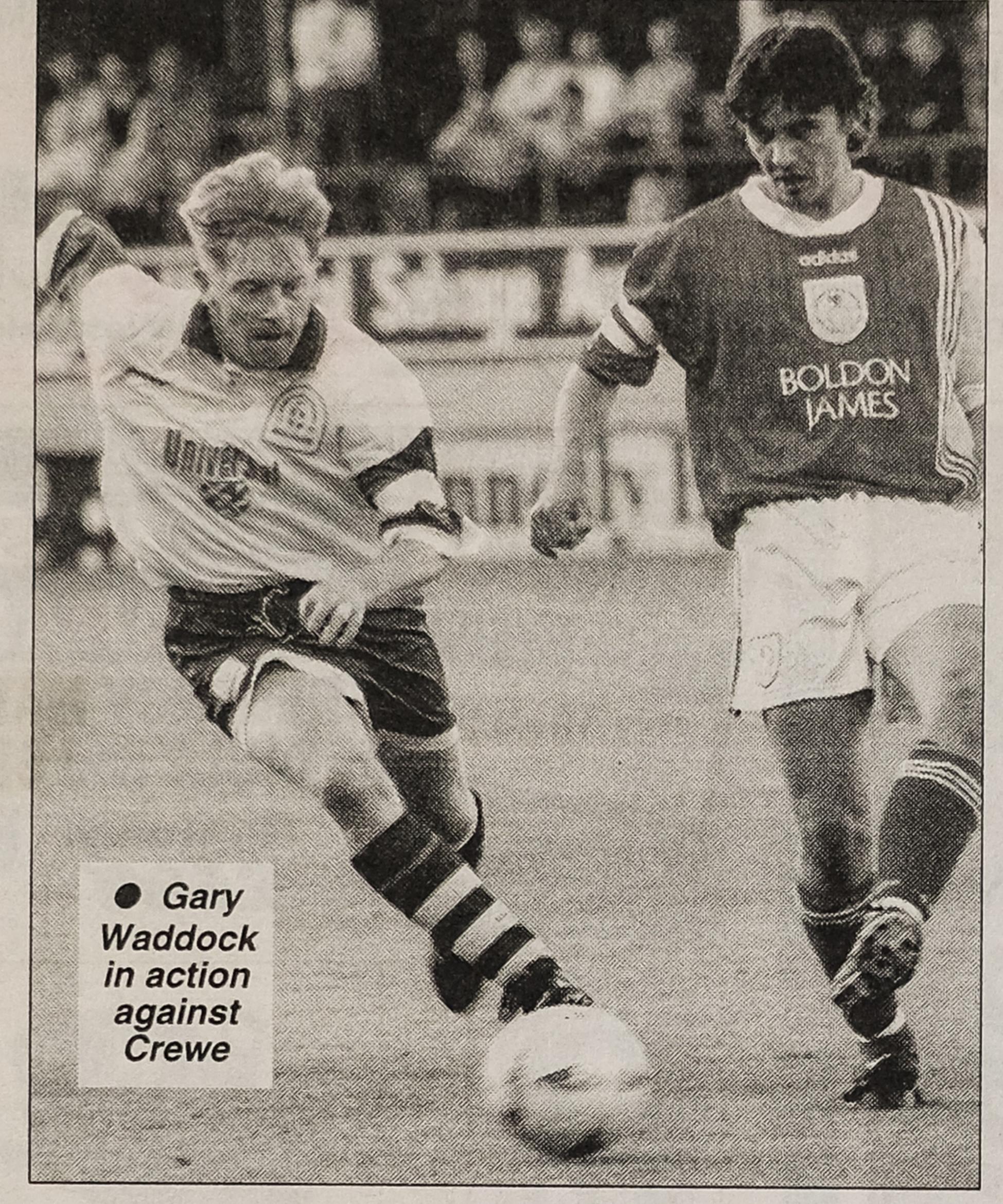
In the end Luton's inability to hold on to a lead cost them promotion.

At Walsall they were 2-1 up - only to lose 3-2. If they had won that one, they might well have been looking at automatic promotion.

At York they were 1-0 up, only to draw 1-1. Again, they were 1-0 up at Bristol Rovers, only to lose 3-2. Similarly at Bournemouth, and at Plymouth Argyle, where only a last-gasp equaliser from Tony Thorpe scrambled a draw.

And crucially against Crewe in the first leg – 1-0 up turned into a 2-1 defeat, though Julian James' sending off after 59 minutes did not escape the critical eye of Lawrence.

Time and again despairing Lawrence laid into his players for not sticking to an apparent game plan they were supposed to adopt immediately after



scoring. Time and time again the game plan was still ignored.

What must come as a real sickener is that neither of the two sides promoted automatically actually beat Hatters. A pair of 0-0 draws against Bury - at Kenilworth Road Bury hardly had the ball near Luton's goal - and two 1-1 draws against Stockport.

Against other play-off teams it was again even. A win each against Brentford, though Luton should have won in London, a massive defeat against bogey side Bristol City in Bristol, followed by a fighting draw against the same side, and a 6-0 trouncing of Crewe and a 0-0 draw away.

But while Bury put in a fantastic run after Christmas,

and Stockport overcame the end of season fixture pile-up to record a string of back-toback victories, Luton limped home with five draws in their last eight games. Crucially, goal-machine Tony Thorpe managed just a single goal in the last nine games, including the play-offs.

In Lawrence's words: "He ran out of steam. Tony had a great season but 50 plus games proved too much for him. He looked tired."

Throughout the run-in Lawrence bemoaned the fact that nobody seemed to be scoring except Thorpe, and that too cost Hatters dear. Interestingly no other player in the division's top scoring team managed double figures. That the second highest scorer



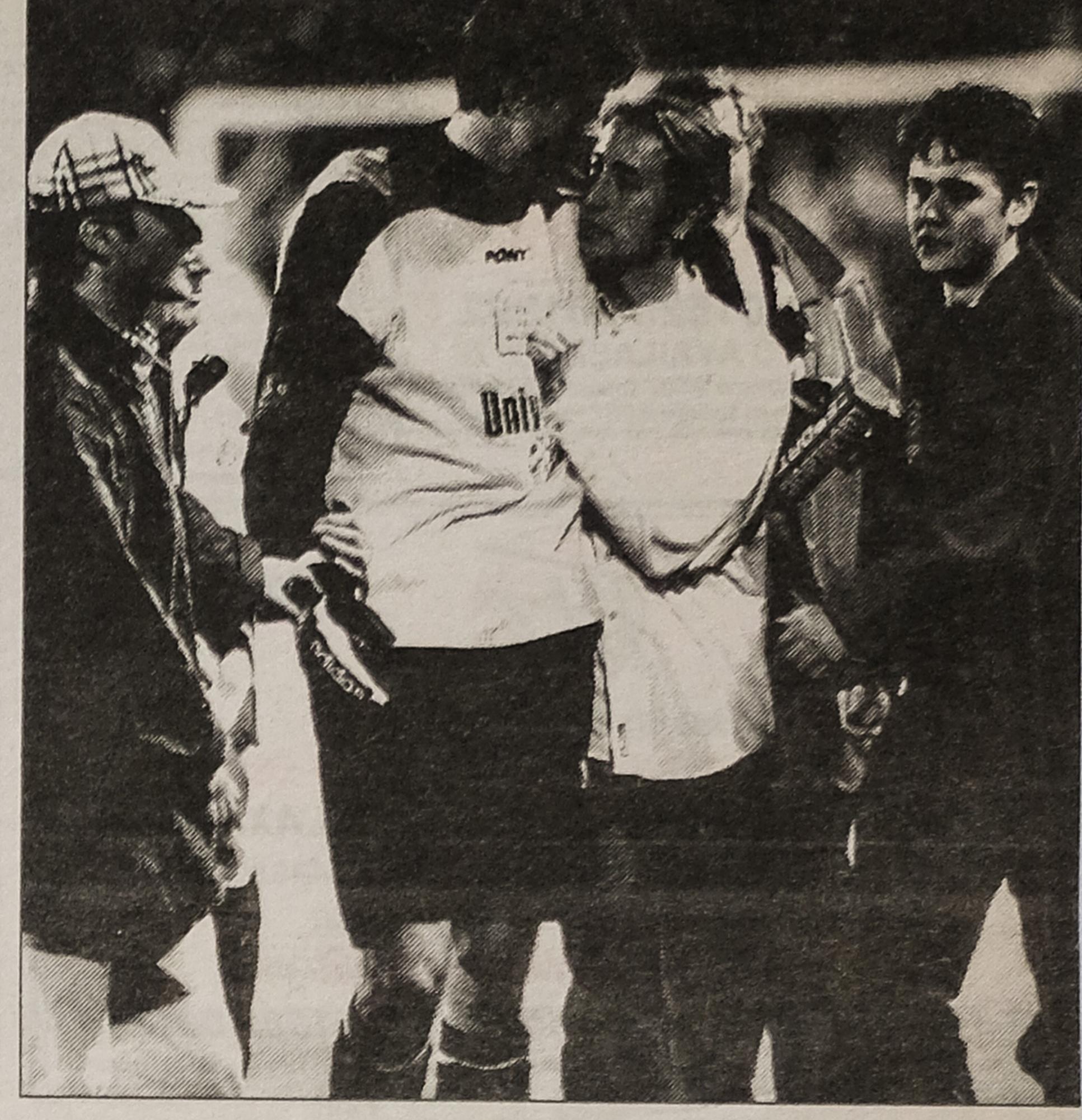
twice against Crewe

was centre half Steve Davis with eight goals speaks volumes.

Worryingly, Hatters may have to contemplate next season without the services of Tony Thorpe. Chairman David Kohler this week said the sale of Matthew Upson for £1m wasn't enough to balance the books and that any offer for any player would be considered.

With the number of scouts who have been trailing Luton's find of the season it seems unlikely he will stay at Kenilworth Road.

Next season looks like being a very dangerous one for Luton – one only has to look at the plight of Notts County, relegated in last place this season after making the playoffs last season, to see that.



• Goalkeeper lan Feuer is consoled by Luton fans

Ref not to blame says Lawrence

Lawrence refused to blame referee Roy Pearson after two controversial decisions helped consign Luton to another season in Division Two.

Keeper Ian Feuer looked to have been bundled off the ball by the diminative Shaun Smith for the scrappy 62nd minute equaliser.

And 13 minutes from time Mr Pearson gave an indirect free kick five yards from Crewe's goal after Tony Thorpe appeared to have been tripped as he prepared to put a loose ball into an empty net.

Whether it was a penalty is debatable - Thorpe tripped over his own feet as much as those of the defender - but the general consensus from a stunned press box was that having given a foul, to award an indirect free kick for obstruction was a complete cop-out.

But with a shrug of his shoulders Lawrence said the heartbreak of failure to reach Wembley was somewhat tempered by the fact that over the two games Crewe were far the better side.

"We have a weakness - we are unable to close games off.

Within less than a minute of scoring our second Adebola popped up in our penalty area unchallenged and crossed it for a goal.

"What is he doing there? We have a clear game plan at the back after scoring and yet within seconds he pops up unmarked," said Lawrence.

Of Feuer's failure to hold on to the hit-and-hope cross which led to the equaliser, Lawrence said: "It was a routine cross and a routine challenge. The referee was spot-on not blowing up and it ended up in the back of our net.

"Crewe outplayed us in midfield all game and over the two legs. Although we were two up they were clearly the better team, and that makes defeat a far less bitter pill to

"We lost this play-off match in two moments - the moment Julian James got sent off in the first game, and the moment we gave away a goal just seconds after going two up.

"What you saw out there was a microcosm of our season - a good start, goals, an inability to consolidate or hold on to a lead, mistakes and in the end disappointment."