

Unlikely twist to Thorpe transfer saga

TONY THORPE turned out at Bristol on Tuesday - but he played against Luton.

Thorpe was recalled from his loan spell with Luton and came off the substitute's bench for half-an-hour.

But just as at Colchester, when he failed to make any contribution even when his side were down to ten men, Thorpe was conspicuous by his absence from the action.

So what is the position regarding Thorpe?

"There is talk that other clubs are interested in him," said Luton manager Lennie Lawrence.

Luton would have signed Thorpe had the striker been able to come to a financial arrangement with Bristol with regards to a pay-off for the remaining two-and-a-half years of a salary believed to be in the region of £3,000 a week.

A substantial settlement would have sweetened the blow for having to take much lower wages with Luton.

That wage level had been agreed with the player and his agent, as had the £150,000 fee to be paid to Bristol.

Presumably Thorpe will have the

same problem if other clubs come in for him, especially if they had watched him in his last game for Luton and for Bristol on Tuesday.

His situation at City is confused. Their manager Tony Pulis said: "I heard he was back and put him in the squad."

"I feel he may have a future here. I have no problem with him, but we have got too many players and we must reduce the wage bill."

Lawrence said: "The transfer may be resolved in the course of time, although I won't be taking him on loan again."

"It's a permanent transfer or nothing."

Newspaper reports have been linking Gary Doherty with a £1.5 million transfer to Sunderland.

Lawrence said: "I had a conversation with Sunderland manager Peter Reid, who expressed an interest after watching him on television, but I discouraged him from making a bid. I told him - 'Peter, you don't usually offer silly money, so don't start now!'"

"No-one is going before the March transfer deadline, unless someone does offer silly money."

Lawrence is happy with away point

Report:
Bill Cole
Pics:
Andy Handley

Bristol City 0 Luton Town 0
A DISMAL away run of four league defeats ended with a much improved performance and a well earned point on Tuesday.

Indeed only the thickness of a coat of paint on an Ashton Gate goalpost denied Luton all three, which they really deserved.

Matthew Taylor, 18, was the star in attack, crashing in three long range shots, all of which would have brought goals given average luck.

One brought a superb save from Billy Mercer, a late shot flew inches wide with the keeper well beaten - but it was a 35th minute effort which came closest to ending the deadlock.

Fed by a shrewd pass into space by Adam Locke, who had a good game on his return to his previous club, Taylor advanced and let fly from 25 yards.

It looked for all the world like a wonderful goal, but the ball struck the inside of Mercer's left post, flashed across the face of the goal and went out of play on the other wing.

For all Taylor's hard luck though, it was a sterling defensive performance, not something the Town have achieved too often on their travels this season, which earned them a point.

The back three of Gary Doherty, Julian Watts and Marvin Johnson simply refused

to wilt under an aerial assault from the big City team.

Alan White, brought back from a loan spell at Colchester, was equally effective playing just in front of them.

Lennie Lawrence was well pleased. "This may only have been a draw, but it was a big step forward," said the Luton manager. "It was a solid professional performance."

He must feel he has found the answer to the problem of leaking goals away from home, which bodes well for a push back up the table.

He intends, though, to change the side for tomorrow's game with Scunthorpe.

At Bristol he rested leading scorer Liam George, bringing Phil Gray into the starting line-up after his protracted hamstring problems. Another long term injury victim, Andrew Fotiadis, was on the substitutes' bench.

It was Gray who had a golden chance in the opening exchanges. Stuart Douglas, a constant thorn in the side of a one-paced home defence, robbed Keith Millen and a put a lovely square ball into Gray's path.

The striker had a clear route to goal, but his first touch was poor, allowing Mercer to get out to block the shot.

Bristol had their moments too, especially down the left where full back Mickey Bell proved a real threat. He was only stopped by a magnificent last ditch tackle by White on one occasion.

By dint of good defending, Bristol were restricted to long range shots, but even then keeper Abbey had a difficult time, being far from happy with the bounce.

He was normally quick to the rebounds, although Peter Beadle got there first to one ricochet in the second half. Abbey made amends with a point-blank save from Beadle's follow up shot.

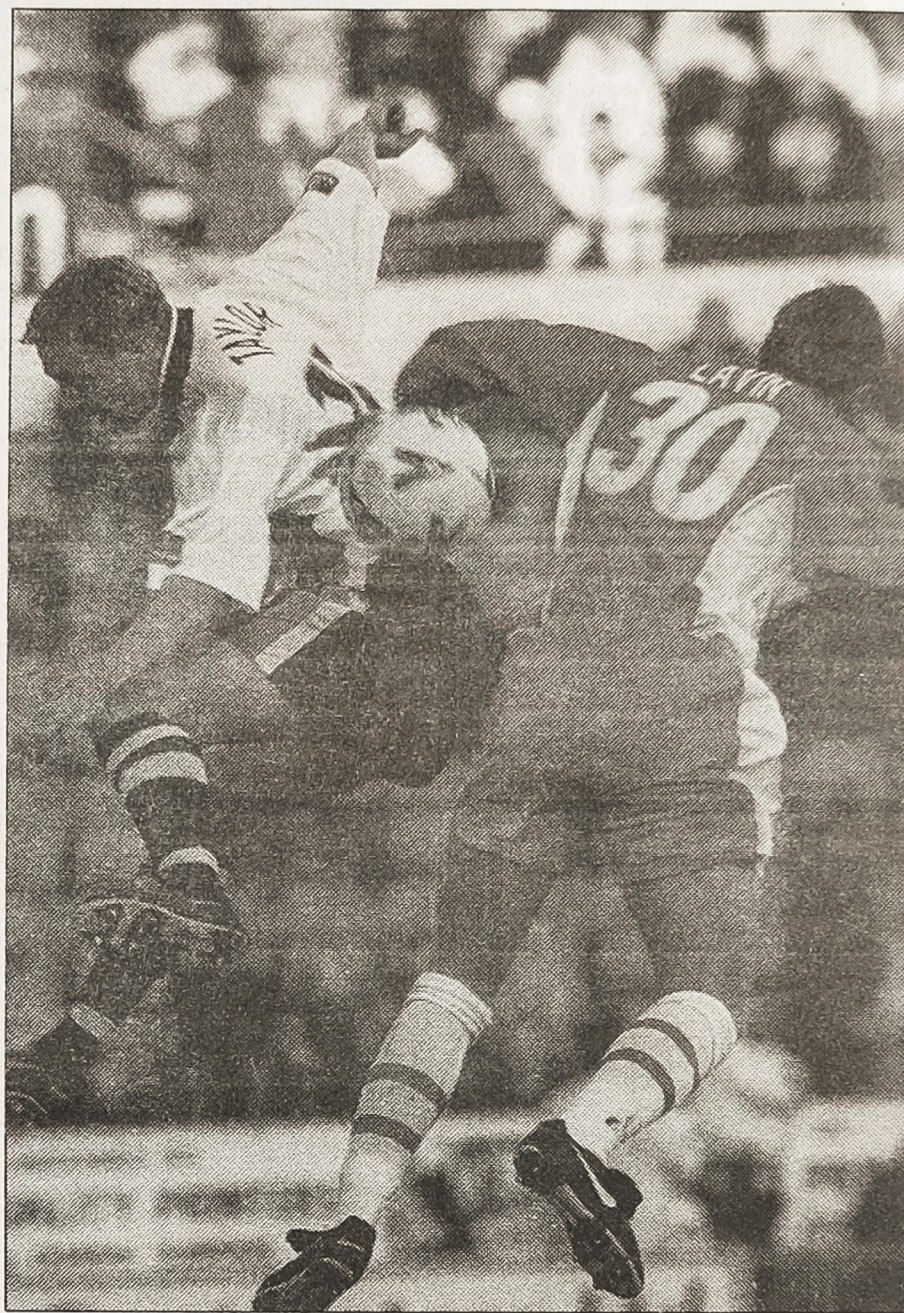
Despite City's territorial advantage, Luton created the better chances and twice Mercer came to Bristol's rescue in quick succession.

From a free kick a couple yards from a corner flag, Taylor surprised the defence, who were expecting a cross, by firing a shot at the near post. The keeper did well to get there, as he did when Gray pounced after a shot by Spring had been charged down.

An eager Fotiadis, back after three months out with a serious knee injury, replaced a tiring Douglas for the final few minutes and could have snatched victory for Luton.

He intercepted as City dithered on the halfway line, but he was forced wide by the experienced Shaun Taylor and sent his shot across the goal.

Luton: Abbey, Boyce, Doherty, Watts, Johnson, White, Taylor, Spring, Locke, Douglas (Fotiadis), Gray.



● Above: Matthew Taylor in an aerial battle with Gerard Lavin

● Below: Bristol keeper Billy Mercer saves at the feet of Stuart Douglas



● Stuart Douglas outjumps Keith Millen to head across goal for Luton

