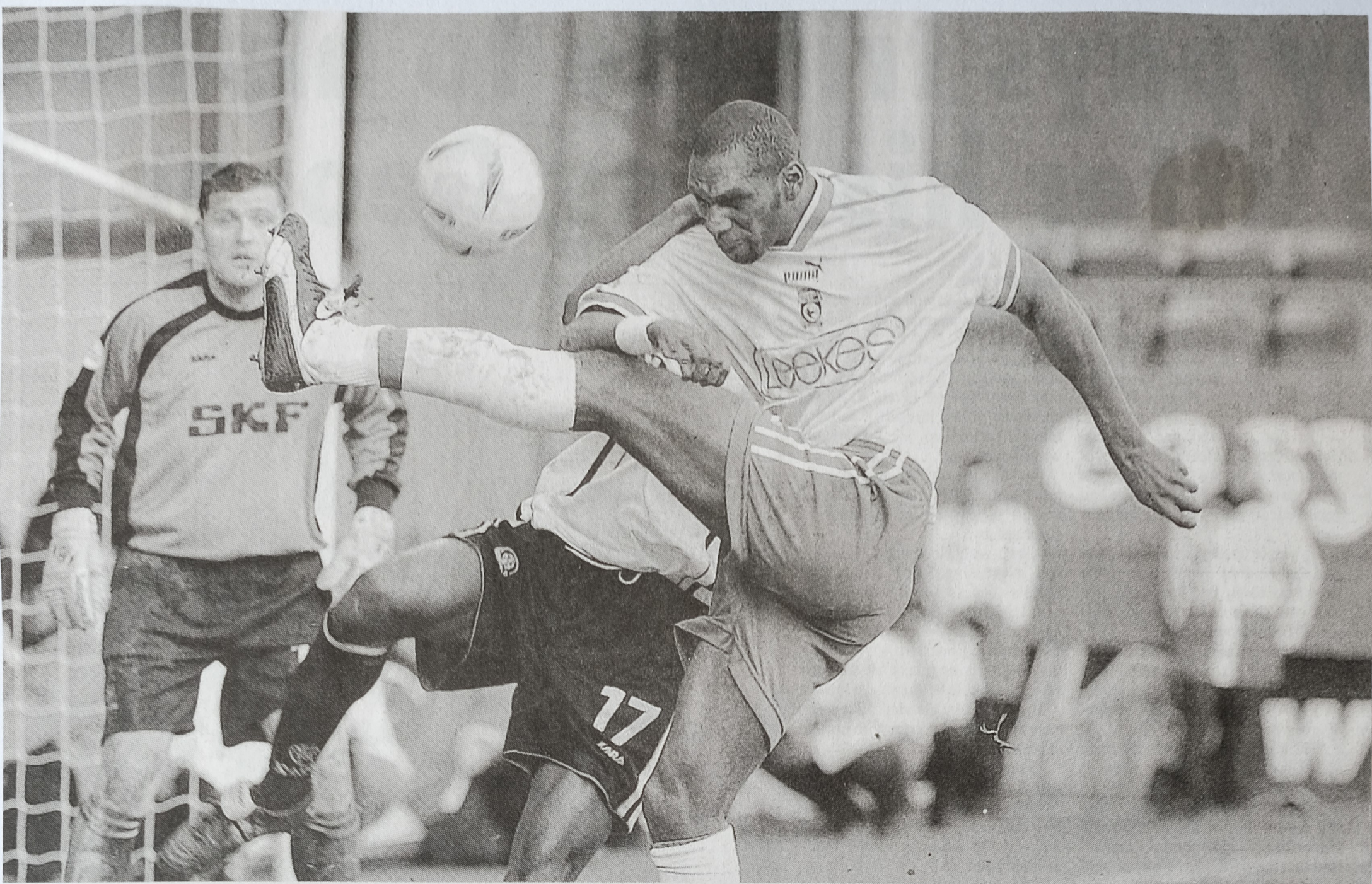




ANXIOUS MOMENT: Cardiff City's Leo Fortune-West causes concern in the Luton goalmouth Picture: Steve Pop

Hatters capitalise on City's weaknesses at the back 02/03

LENNIE LAWRENCE suffered a nightmare return to Kenilworth Road as Cardiff City's promotion charge came off the rails again after Luton Town grabbed two late goals.

The Bluebirds slipped to third in Division Two – swapping places with automatic promotion rivals Bristol City – after two dreadful pieces of defending.

Lawrence's men matched Luton for possession and chances in the first half, although both sides started the game as if they had spent the previous day gorging on turkey and Christmas pudding. The second 45 minutes was more entertaining but Cardiff struggled to cope with Luton's three-pronged attack.

The afternoon had started badly enough for Lawrence who, taking a side to Kenilworth Road for the first time since his five-year spell in charge of the Hatters ended in 2000, was unceremoniously booed and jeered by the home supporters. And, as if to rub salt in his wounds, Luton's first goal was scored by Tony Thorpe, who Lawrence sold to Fulham for £800,000 in 1998.

But with Sunday's home encounter against Huddersfield Town now a must-win situation, the Blue-

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birds manager will have more important things on his mind – such as how to shore up an increasingly vulnerable defence and address the lack of width and fluency that continues to trouble Cardiff.

A third defeat in six games is hardly promotion form and Lawrence will want to ensure his side do not lose any more ground on Second Division leaders Wigan, who beat Port Vale 1-0 to go seven points clear at the top.

City were unchanged from the side that claimed three points at Colchester last Friday, with Andy Campbell continuing to operate behind Peter Thorne and Robert Earnshaw.

The Hatters, who claimed a 0-0 draw at Ninian Park in August, made two alterations to the team that picked up a point at Bristol City last weekend.

The first-half was 23 minutes old before the Bluebirds found top gear –

Match details

Luton Town: Emberson, Thorpe, Robinson, Coyne, Crowe, Boyce, Brkovic, Howard, Hughes, Hillier Subs (not used): Ovendale, Fotiadis, Mansell, Osborn, Deeney

Goals: Thorpe (80), Howard (89).

Cardiff City: Alexander, Weston, Prior, Zhiyi (Bowen, 85), Barker, Boland, Kavanagh, Legg, Campbell (Fortune-West, 75), Earnshaw, Thorne Subs (not used): Bowen, Croft, Maxwell, Margetson.

Referee: P Armstrong (Berkshire).

Attendance: 7,805.

too many passes had gone astray up to this point, with Luton having two early opportunities to go ahead – and a number of neat midfield exchanges resulted in Earnshaw testing Hatters keeper Carl Emberson with a sweeping drive from the edge of the area.

City then endured a nervous few minutes, first when Luton defender Chris Coyne headed Paul Hughes's free-kick just over the crossbar from close range. Moments later, Spencer Prior made a crucial challenge to prevent Thorpe breaking the deadlock from inside the eight-yard box.

Two great chances fell to Campbell, the first of which he ballooned

over the crossbar. He did better with the second, carving out space for an 18-yard snap shot but it was still a comfortable save for Emberson. A Steve Robinson mistake put Thorne through for City on the stroke of half time but the former Stoke striker's effort was met with a magnificent fingertip save by the Luton keeper.

That Cardiff went into the interval with a clean sheet owed everything to a wonderful save from Neil Alexander. Deep into first-half stoppage time, Steve Howard met Alan Kimble's in-swinging cross with a header which the Scot pushed acrobatically over the crossbar.

Five minutes after the break Campbell found Earnshaw just inside the area but the Wales striker's effort was well-blocked by Ian Hillier, Luton's Neath-born defender, who was celebrating his 23rd birthday. Minutes later and the former Wales under-21 international saw a close range effort headed off the line.

Luton then had a legitimate penalty claim turned down when Ahmet Brkovic was tripped inside the box. Alexander kept City in the game again when he pulled off another fabulous save, palming away Dean

Crowe's ferocious 20-yard effort.

Far more entertaining than the first half, the action was switching swiftly from one goalmouth to another and Legg was at the centre of most of it.

No sooner had the veteran midfielder seen three blasted efforts saved by Emberson than he was at the other end clearing Howard's header off the line.

Luton then wasted two glorious chances, Brkovic miskicking his 75th minute effort and, seconds later, Thorpe too slow to take advantage of a loose ball that Prior eventually hacked clear.

But five minutes later a rare mistake by the Bluebirds defender allowed Luton to claim the goal they had been threatening. Howard played the ball forward and Prior botched his clearance, tapping into the path of Thorpe, who buried it from 12 yards for his sixth goal of the season.

Any chance City had of snatching a point evaporated a minute from the end when Luton scored their second. Crowe's corner was cleared but the ball fell to Howard who, unmarked inside the area, saw a sweetly-struck effort nestle into the top right-hand corner of the net.

