

## **Premiership Headline Makers: JOHN HARTSON**

**By Graham Lister, Chief Football Correspondent,  
China Monitor (UK) Sports Division**

Since their promotion back in 1967, Coventry City have perfected the art of avoiding relegation. Only Arsenal, Everton and Liverpool have a longer unbroken tenure in the top division than Coventry. Their continued survival has often involved amazing feats of escapology in the closing games of the season, when all has appeared lost. But this season their plight looks distinctly ominous.

The one bright aspect of a gloomy Spring has been the arrival of John Hartson at Highfield Road. Once the protracted, on-off transfer saga with Wimbledon was finally completed, Hartson made an immediate impact on the team. His six goals in nine games (with three for Wales in two internationals sandwiched among them) have given the Sky Blues a glimmer of hope of avoiding the drop. They are certainly not safe yet, but if Hartson has anything to do with it they soon will be.

Coventry's manager Gordon Strachan feels the greatest contribution Hartson has made, apart from his goals, has been the boost which his presence has given the rest of the team. Suddenly they had a target man to get the ball to, someone who could hold it up, shrug off opponents and crucially find the back of the net.

Strachan had spent much of the season pointing out to whoever would listen that Coventry were not playing badly. They were much better than their results indicated, he said, but they lacked the cutting edge to turn chances into goals. Enter John Hartson.

His transfer from Wimbledon dragged on because of doubts about his fitness. He had already endured the disappointment of seeing transfers to both Tottenham Hotspur and Glasgow Rangers collapse on medical grounds, and for a while it seemed that the move Coventry would run aground on a suspect knee.

But Hartson was keen to join, Strachan persisted, and Coventry found a way of protecting their financial investment in the event of the player's fitness breaking down. As a result, Hartson is now fully committed to the cause of keeping the Sky Blues in the Premiership for at least one more season.

It is the latest challenge in the sometimes controversial career of the big Welsh striker. In fact Hartson has already faced so many challenges that it is easy to forget he is still only 25. He left his home in Swansea at the age of 16 to embark on a life in professional football with Luton Town. After scoring 11 goals in 54 First Division games for the Hatters, Hartson was signed by George Graham for Arsenal in January 1995. The £2 million fee made him Britain's costliest teenager, but Hartson displayed coolness and maturity beyond his years, fitting smoothly into the Gunners' line-up and ending the season in a European Cup Winners' Cup Final against Real Zaragoza in Paris.

By then Graham had left the club, and his replacement Bruce Rioch lasted just one season at Highbury. Arsene Wenger initially persevered with Hartson but the new manager's longer-term vision for the team did not readily accommodate the centre-forward's tough, physical style of play. Accordingly, Wenger sold Hartson to West Ham United in February 1997 in a deal worth £5 million. Hartson had scored 17 goals in 69 League and Cup games for the Gunners.

At West Ham his new partnership with Paul Kitson in the final months of the 1996/97 season produced the goals that helped the Hammers avoid relegation, and in the following season he proved his worth, finishing top scorer with 24 goals in all competitions. However, Hartson began to be distracted by activities and incidents off the field, which affected his form. In October 1998, a cameraman caught him aiming a violent kick at the head of team-mate Eyal Berkovic in a training session, and from that point his West Ham days were numbered.

Harry Redknapp eventually sold the striker to Wimbledon in January 1999 for a club record £7.5 million. Hartson had scored a total of 33 goals for the Hammers in 72 matches. Injuries blighted his time at Wimbledon, and the team crashed out of the Premiership at the end of last season. Hartson was suddenly an expensive luxury for the Dons, but his injury problems frustrated their attempts to sell him to Spurs and Rangers. His career seemed to be in limbo, although he returned to fitness and weighed in with more goals for Wimbledon before Strachan finally secured his signature for Coventry.

Hartson had scored 19 goals for Wimbledon. His mission now is simple: provide the forward-power and goals to keep the Sky Blues in the Premiership. Rarely lacking in self-belief, the muscular centre-forward is convinced they can do it.

[www.chinamonitor.com](http://www.chinamonitor.com)