

# SKY BLUE FALL



Inside Coventry City's  
Fall From Grace

RICHARD CHAMBERLAIN

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## Revving up the Rolls-Royce

WITH GORDON Strachan gone, attention turned to who his replacement would be. Stuart Pearce was mentioned as a potential candidate. This was unsurprising as during the relegation season, several members of the club's board had pushed for Pearce to replace Garry Pendrey as Strachan's assistant. Despite insistence from those upstairs, Strachan held firm, denying Pearce a potential return to Highfield Road. However, just a few months later Pearce didn't seem to realistically be in the frame for the manager's job, primarily because he had just joined Kevin Keegan's Manchester City in the summer of 2001. Early frontrunners included Gary Megson and Joe Royle. On the day of Strachan's sacking, *The Guardian* reported quotes from former City striker Mick Quinn and club legend John Sillett, both of whom called for an experienced head to take charge, suggesting that someone who had been there and done it was required to get Coventry back on track.

It was then something of a surprise when a managerial novice was appointed. Roland Nilsson was a former player but one who was taking his first steps into management. Within 24 hours of Strachan's exit, Nilsson had met with

Richardson about taking charge. He stepped in first as player-caretaker and quickly staked his claim to take the job on a permanent basis. The move came just over six months after Sven-Göran Eriksson had taken charge of England and much was made in the media of Nilsson taking advice from his fellow Swede. Aiding Nilsson would be Richard Money, who had overseen the club's successful youth team, and scout Ray Clarke. Money would later describe Clarke as a father figure to himself and Nilsson, someone who was able to offer a sounding board and emotional support, as well as putting forward his undoubted footballing knowledge. Clarke would often sit in the stands on matchdays, offering a different perspective to that of Nilsson and Money. Money was already an experienced, and fully qualified, coach, while Nilsson brought with him the respect earned from his playing career. Meanwhile, in terms of characters, you surely could not see a more polar opposite pair than Strachan, the fiery Scot, and the cool, calm and collected Nilsson.

'You couldn't get two more different characters than Gordon and Roland,' Marcus Hall agrees. 'Gordon could be very irate and he was just a heart on his sleeve kind of guy. He could lose it, but he would love you at the same time. Roland was so calm, collected and assured in his approach. I don't remember him ever raising his voice. Maybe he did, he must have done, but it would have been in the way that Roland would raise his voice where you'd have to cup your ear to hear him! Roland had a lot of respect from when he played with us and we knew what he was about. I think there were a few doubts from certain quarters whether or not he was going to be able to get that across as a manager but he did and we started well. Perhaps we needed a little more calmness after the relegation and Roland certainly brought that.'

Barry Quinn had broken into the first team during the relegation season and made 22 appearances across several positions in 2001/02. He echoes Hall's assessment of the new gaffer.

'Roland was totally different [to Strachan],' he says. 'He was just more chill. He was laid-back. He was someone that you could always go and speak to. He's a very good coach. He had your respect but he wasn't on your case. It was from one extreme to the other.'

'Roland would never get flustered,' concurs Marc Edworthy. 'He would never get irate and he worked really well alongside Richard Money. Roland would be laid-back and Richard would be the one that would dictate sometimes. I thought they would really work as a partnership. Roland was so different to Gordon. I've seen Gordon turn a different colour sometimes at half-time and the air would be blue. Gordon was very passionate as a player and a manager. He probably calmed down later in his career but he was just a winner. He was constantly at it like cat and dog with someone like Darren Huckerby. They would remonstrate with each other at half-time. It was comical to watch at times. Roland was the opposite of that.'

Nilsson's managerial debut came away from home to Peterborough United in the second round of the League Cup. Unsurprisingly for someone auditioning for a job, Nilsson fielded a strong side that included himself at right-back alongside Premier League campaigners such as Magnus Hedman, Gary Breen, David Thompson, Marcus Hall and Lee Carsley. It may have been a disappointment, then, that City needed a last-minute Carsley goal to salvage a 2-2 draw before progressing 4-2 on penalties. Thompson, Bothroyd, Hughes and Carsley scored from the spot, with only

Hedman failing to convert from 12 yards. It was a surprise to see the goalkeeper step up and Nilsson later explained that his countryman took one of the five because he was a clean striker of the ball and, somewhat worryingly, no one else volunteered to take one. With the likes of Joachim, Safri and Hall on the pitch at the time, it would have been expected that there would have been several players ahead of Hedman in the queue for the shoot-out.

Ahead of Nilsson's first league match in charge, Coventry were languishing 19th in the table. They travelled to Bramall Lane to face Sheffield United. It was the scene of one of Nilsson's most disappointing evenings as a player, an FA Cup quarter-final defeat in which an uncharacteristic error from the full-back led to a United equaliser and, eventually, penalty shoot-out heartbreak. Thankfully, this trip to the Steel City was a far happier affair. A Laurent Delorge goal was the difference as City left with a 1-0 win. Delorge, who didn't even have a squad number prior to the match, had been on the field for a matter of seconds after replacing Julian Joachim on 71 minutes. It was a landmark moment for Delorge, who had suffered terribly with injuries since joining from Gent in 1999. The young Belgian was signed by Strachan on the back of a high recommendation from scout Ray Clarke but struggled to get a look in, even when he was fully fit. Nilsson admitted that in the case of Delorge, there was an issue with the attacker not 'seeing eye to eye' with Strachan. The Belgian himself reflects that some aspects of life were tricky upon his move to England, including understanding his new manager.

'I remember struggling in the beginning to understand the accents, especially Mr Strachan,' he recalls. 'I had a really hard time deciphering the Scottish accent sometimes. Also

the other players always called him gaffer and I didn't have a clue what it meant at first.'

Injuries blighted Delorge's early time at Highfield Road, with the exciting winger suffering a broken leg in his debut for the reserves and a torn hamstring upon his return. These almighty dollops of poor luck meant that the majority of his appearances in sky blue came after Strachan had moved on. Delorge wasn't the only one to benefit from Strachan's departure. Nilsson commented in his programme notes later in the month that as far as he was concerned the slate was wiped clean with the squad. This was illustrated by his inclusion of Iván Guerrero and Delorge, while the likes of Runar Normann and Tomas Antonelius (the full-back previously known as Tomas Gustafsson) would also come more into the first-team picture than they had under Strachan.

Next came one of the most exciting nights at Highfield Road since the 'Entertainers' wowed the Sky Sports cameras two seasons earlier. Manchester City were the visitors. Nilsson and Joachim had both picked up injuries during the Sheffield United match which ruled them out, the latter being hit with a frustrating recurrence of the ankle problem that had kept him out of the season's opening weeks. John Eustace also missed out. The midfielder had made his first appearance of the season in the defeat to Grimsby but he required an injection in his knee afterwards and admitted that he had returned too quickly. In his programme notes ahead of the clash with Manchester City, he suggested that he would be out for up to three weeks. As it turned out, he would require knee surgery in October and was not fit enough to play again until March. He continued to fulfil his captain's duty by writing programme notes throughout

the season. This appeared to be his main contribution to the club for much of the campaign in what was a slightly bizarre series of reports as Eustace often acknowledged that he had not seen many of the matches that he was writing about as he had been elsewhere undergoing treatment for his injury. Returning to this September fixture, both sides had been relegated the previous year and both had dispensed of their managers. While Coventry had, in the short-term at least, replaced Strachan with Nilsson, their Manchester counterparts had opted for the glamour of Kevin Keegan when searching for the successor to Joe Royle. A Stuart Pearce own goal opened the scoring after a fine move but, in what would set the tone for the evening, Manchester City soon levelled. In fact, the Sky Blues would regain the lead twice before finding themselves locked at 3-3 as the 90-minute mark loomed. With just two minutes left to play, a looping flick from Lee Hughes found David Thompson in the box and the winger fired the winner. A pulsating, topsy-turvy match ended 4-3 in the favour of the Sky Blues. It suggested that Nilsson's men were far happier playing sides who came and attacked rather than those who saw a visit to recently relegated opposition as a call to pack the midfield and employ what would later be known as a 'low block' – a tactic in which space is at a premium and the onus would be on the Sky Blues to show patience in order to break down a compact defence.

Afterwards, Nilsson singled Mo Konjic out for specific praise, noting the Bosnian's presence and bravery as he scored at one end and helped prevent Keegan's side from adding to their tally at the other. It followed the bruising defender being named man of the match in two of the three previous home matches, suggesting that he was finally

adjusting to life in English football. It would prove to be a breakthrough year for Konjic, who had struggled since his move from Monaco three years earlier. The man-mountain had only clocked 16 league appearances between 1998/99 and the end of 2000/01 but pulled on the Coventry shirt 41 times in 2001/02. An imposing figure, Konjic had already faced tougher battles than he encountered at Coventry, having been drafted into the Bosnian Army at the age of 21 amid the continuing brutality that followed the break-up of Yugoslavia in the early to mid-1990s. The conflict kept him away from football for the best part of a year and so it is a testament to his will to succeed that he earned a move to the Premier League. That transfer had been several years in the making as Gordon Strachan had first spotted Konjic playing for Bosnia against Croatia back in 1996. Strachan, who was on a scouting mission to check out another player, enquired about Konjic's availability after seeing him keep Alen Bokšić firmly in his pocket but the reply came that the defender had already agreed a move to Monaco. Fast forward to January 1999 and Strachan finally got his man, although a combination of injuries and struggles in adapting to the pace of the English game meant that fans didn't see the best of the Bosnian until 2001/02. However, within the opening weeks of this new season, the Sky Blue faithful had seen enough to already deem Konjic as a cult hero. The will to put his head in where others would shy away and his regular forays running with the ball through the middle of the pitch led to Highfield Road often reverberating to the sound of, 'Mo Konjic, woah, he comes from Bosnia, he is a big fucker.'

'Big Mo was a cult hero, and the fans loved him, didn't they?' Barry Quinn says. 'We used to laugh because he had just been in the war and here he was playing with us. He was

a big, big monster of a lad. But he was a nice bloke. He kept himself to himself a little bit. I tell you what though, he's a scary man. You wouldn't want any trouble with Mo, you'd just look at Mo and keep on walking!

'He came in while we were in the Premier League and then maybe he found it tricky as it's obviously a big change,' Richard Shaw recalls of his defensive partner. 'Maybe it was a little bit too quick. He had a few injuries as well. It was in that Championship first season that he really seemed to settle. He was massive. I mean, when he stood next to me he was massive, I couldn't believe the size of him. He would run with the ball as well, a bit like John Stones now. He was perfect for the Championship where it's a bit more physical. That really suited him. As a character as well, he was a really good guy. If we went on a night out he would be our bodyguard as well!'

'He comes across as this intimidating character for the opposition, but by all accounts, he's a bit of a gentle giant,' John Eustace concurs. 'I think he's a big softy really. Obviously, if you were walking down a dark alleyway and he was coming towards you down the other side, you'd think, "Oh my god, what's going on here?" He was great though.'

Following the Manchester City win, momentum was building, hope and expectation were both returning. It had been just 11 days since the Grimsby defeat that led to Strachan's exit but three wins had put City in the League Cup third round and lifted the club from 19th to tenth in the table. Suddenly, anything seemed possible. Three days later, the Highfield Road faithful were treated to a 2-0 win over Portsmouth courtesy of goals from Jay Bothroyd and Lee Carsley. Carsley seemed to have finally found his feet after struggling following his move from Blackburn midway

through the previous season. Youssef Safri's preference to sit and pull the strings from deep allowed Carsley to enjoy a freer role in the midfield, bombing forward and chipping in with goals. The Portsmouth result was all the more impressive as they had gone into the game sitting third in the table having smashed 16 goals in their previous eight league fixtures. It was a morale-boosting result that meant back-to-back home wins before the end of September. For context, Coventry had only managed that feat once in the entire previous campaign. A draw with Barnsley before wins over Gillingham and Walsall followed and it had become pretty much impossible to hand the job to anyone other than Nilsson. The rookie had transformed the atmosphere in just a few weeks, with his only defeat coming to Chelsea in the League Cup. The upturn in form came despite a mounting injury list, with Nilsson stating after the Gillingham match that he was without ten players due to injury. On 16 October 2001, his full-time tenure as Coventry City manager was announced.

		<i>Pld</i>	<i>GD</i>	<i>Pts</i>
6	Manchester City	12	+7	20
7	Coventry City	11	+5	20
8	Portsmouth	12	+4	18

Revealing the appointment on the club's website, chairman Bryan Richardson said, 'We are all absolutely delighted that Roland has agreed to be our manager. Roland has had a fantastic start to his managerial career and we have great confidence in his ability to get us back into the Premier League and take us forward from there.'

Nilsson's spell as permanent boss continued to yield positive results. A 0-0 stalemate away to Rotherham

United kicked off the Nilsson era proper. It perhaps should have been a full three points for City but Lee Hughes was uncharacteristically wayward with his finishing as he curled a left-footed effort from inside the box high over the bar in what was the away side's best chance of the match. Nilsson didn't have to wait long for the first three points of his full-time reign as four days later City earned a slender 1-0 win over Crewe at Highfield Road. A clumsy Sam Sodje challenge on Safri gave Hughes the chance to win it from the penalty spot. He duly obliged by slotting the ball away right-footed into the bottom corner. There had been some debate whether Hughes or Carsley would take the penalty, but the chrome-domed midfielder was happy for the equally hair-challenged striker to have the responsibility, particularly as Hughes had found goals difficult to come by since his summer move. It was only the £5m man's third goal of the season and there was great relief on the pitch and in the stands when it nestled in the back of the net, igniting hopes that it could be just what Hughes needed to kickstart his campaign. Shortly after the match, Andy Goram signed a deal to keep him at Highfield Road until the end of the season. The Rangers legend brought an experienced goalkeeping option, an important addition given that first-choice Hedman had already missed four matches through illness and injury.

A long-range David Thompson effort was the difference three days later away to Wimbledon. Nilsson commented afterwards that he had been disappointed with a jaded first-half performance which he felt had allowed Wimbledon to assert physical dominance. Around this time, Nilsson and sidelined captain John Eustace both commented on fatigue and the thick-and-fast nature of the division that they found

themselves in. The Wimbledon fixture was City's fifth in just 15 days and the manager expressed that tired bodies were to be expected; however, he would not accept tired minds and errors that arose from lapses in concentration. Nilsson also harped back to a criticism that came from Strachan at the start of the season by stating disappointment at his side's passing throughout the match. That said, grinding out an away win when you're not playing your best is, dare we say it, the kind of thing that a team bound for promotion might do. A trio of wins was completed with a 2-0 Highfield Road victory over Sheffield Wednesday. Safri scored a cracker of a free kick before Hughes netted again from 12 yards, taking his tally for the campaign to four, two of which had been penalties. Hughes and Nilsson both spoke afterwards of frustration that the striker was finding chances but consistently missing by a whisker as he tried to hit the goalscoring form that he had shown for his former club.

The Wednesday win meant that City were unbeaten in their last 11 in the league, a run dating back to Nilsson's first league match in charge. More importantly, the sequence, which included eight wins, had propelled Coventry to top of the table. Incredibly, it was the first time they had led a division since August 1992 when they were early table toppers of the then all-new Premier League. All of a sudden, fans began to believe once again. The team had risen 19 places in the league in just 47 days. Nilsson had made Coventry difficult to beat. Of those eight wins, seven had come by a single goal, while the Sky Blues had racked up five clean sheets on the bounce. While Nilsson had City purring on the field, the man he replaced, Gordon Strachan, found a quick route back into employment as he was appointed as manager at Southampton.

## REVVING UP THE ROLLS-ROYCE

		<i>Pld</i>	<i>GD</i>	<i>Pts</i>
1	Coventry City	15	+9	30
2	Wolverhampton Wanderers	14	+12	28
3	Crystal Palace	13	+15	27

Back to Nilsson, and consistency at the heart of the defence was key to the upturn in fortunes that he was overseeing. The previous year, Coventry had chopped and changed at the back, with Magnus Hedman and Chris Kirkland regularly swapping the number one role while it was almost a lucky dip each week over which combination of Paul Williams, Richard Shaw and Gary Breen would start in the centre of defence. This season, however, Breen and Konjic found themselves as the settled first-choice pairing, with Shaw often deployed at right-back. A lot is made, particularly prior to the modern boom of playing one up front, of striking partnerships and how one striker can be the perfect foil for another. However, the difference between 2000/01 and 2001/02 perfectly demonstrates the importance of a settled partnership at the back.

‘The centre-half partnership’s at the forefront,’ Richard Shaw says. ‘I look at the successful teams and they had good centre-half partnerships and a settled goalkeeper. When you have a regular partner as a centre-back you develop that understanding of what your partner is going to do and where they will be. I played my best football when I had Chris Coleman at Crystal Palace and Paul Williams at Coventry as my regular partner week in, week out. When you have that relationship you can pull each other up on mistakes. We would have massive rows and no one would get offended because we were there to win the game. I played with some defenders who were only bothered about themselves and would look at it that as long as it wasn’t their man who scored

then they were OK. That is terrible because then you don't get that defensive partnership. I played with one centre-half who, if his centre-forward went out wide he would go out there with him. I'd be like, "Where are you going?!" You can't play like that where it's, "Well, that's my man and that one's your man." If you have a younger partner as well and you have that relationship then you can talk them through the game and use your experience. A little later on when Calum Davenport came through I played alongside him and I would be talking to him the whole match.'

A change in the vibe may have been a factor in the turnaround from City's underwhelming start to the season. David Thompson and Lee Hughes both spoke of the more relaxed atmosphere under Nilsson. Hughes commented that the hangover from relegation was evident upon his arrival in the summer with many fans still wanting a change at the top following the poor previous season and that once Nilsson had taken over that weight of negativity appeared to have been lifted.

Some of the shine was taken from the impressive start on Halloween as City were pegged back twice by Preston North End in a 2-2 draw. That man Thompson scored both goals, two long-range beauties, with the second the pick of the pair. The diminutive Scouser picked up the ball 30 yards from goal before shimmying his way to the edge of the box and unleashing an unstoppable drive that flew into the net and brought an almighty roar from the Highfield Road faithful. It was one of those strikes that you couldn't help but respond to with, 'Bloody hell, what a goal.' I'm sure that was my response at the time and it definitely was on watching it back more than two decades later while researching this book. With just 14 minutes remaining, the home crowd burst into

a particularly loud version of ‘The Sky Blue Song’. However, two minutes later, as we had just reached ‘Tottenham or Chelsea, United or anyone’, Richard Cresswell equalised for Preston, ensuring a share of the points. A disappointing end to the month but this was still light years away from the gloom of just six weeks earlier.

Life is never easy as a Coventry fan, though. As I’m sure those reading this are already aware, we seem to specialise in prising misery from the jaws of victory. Typically, after being handed the Manager of the Month award for October, Nilsson’s honeymoon period abruptly ended with three defeats in a row – against Millwall, Burnley and Birmingham. The 3-2 loss to Millwall was particularly disappointing as City had come back from one down to lead 2-1 thanks to a bizarre, stooping near-post header from Jairo Martínez and a fine Jay Bothroyd 20-yarder. It had been the first time that City had fallen behind in a league match since Nilsson had taken charge. Thompson’s red card for a second booking in the 88th minute while the scores were locked at 2-2 did little to help the cause and Millwall grabbed a stoppage-time winner. A pair of 2-0 defeats came next, against Burnley and Birmingham. Nilsson bemoaned a mounting injury list as he sought explanations for the dip in form. The loss to Burnley had seen him without Konjic, Carsley, Safri, Thompson and Hughes. There was more than a hint of controversy about both Burnley goals. The first was allowed to stand despite Burnley attacker Gareth Taylor appearing to be climbing all over Gary Breen as he nodded home. The killer second came on 33 minutes and simply should not have been allowed. Barry Quinn was penalised for a foul on Ian Moore just outside the box, but the kick was moved ten yards closer to goal due

to dissent by Davenport. This meant that it moved into City's penalty area, something which was against Football League rules. A kick could be moved forward by ten yards to punish dissent, but couldn't be moved into the penalty area. Former City midfielder Paul Cook laid the ball into the path of Glen Little who swept the ball home. Afterwards, Football League spokesman Jim Ashworth described the decision as the result of referee Fraser Stretton having a 'mental aberration' adding that the official had been left 'mortified' by his gaffe. He wasn't the only one to suffer; Magnus Hedman took offence to the space given to Little and ended up in a fierce exchange of words with Richard Shaw. Carsley and Safri returned for the Birmingham match but the result was the same and was paired with a performance that Nilsson was bitterly disappointed with. The boss admitted that he had seen his side out-battled, with the Sky Blues unable to deal with the home team's pressing and counterattacking setup.

Following the back-to-back 2-0 defeats, it was announced that Richard Money, who had stepped away from his academy director role on a temporary basis back in September when he agreed to assist Nilsson, had signed a new full-time deal. He penned a two-and-a-half-year contract as first team coach. That wasn't the only change; Nilsson also dipped into the transfer market to secure some extra firepower up front. As we came towards the end of November, Thompson had chipped in with an admirable five goals from midfield but Hughes's tally of just four goals (including two penalties), from the opening 19 matches, was not what we had hoped for from a £5m signing. Perhaps in search of the perfect foil for his expensive frontman, Nilsson recruited Lee Mills. The 6ft 4in striker had enjoyed

fruitful spells in front of goal with Port Vale (35 goals in 109 matches) and Bradford City (29 in 65) and was available on loan from Portsmouth. Mills had joined the south coast club in 2000 but had endured a difficult time, having picked up an injury early on. By the time he'd recovered, two managers (Tony Pulis and Steve Claridge) had been sacked by Pompey's trigger-happy chairman Milan Mandarić. Harry Redknapp replaced Claridge and Mills is frank in admitting that he didn't see eye to eye with everyone's favourite wheeler dealer.

'When Harry Redknapp took over it all went pear shaped from there,' Mills admits. 'He's not my favourite person. I didn't like the way he went about his business. He came into Portsmouth and he put, I think, about 30 players up for sale. We had a big squad and he wanted to get rid of all of these players, including me. Back in those days if you weren't wanted, you were made to train with the under-18s. Basically, you were treated like crap. So I knew that I was leaving. It was just a matter of when. I got a phone call out of the blue saying to go speak to Coventry. I'd been training with kids, not playing in the first team. I'd started to go a little bit stale so I jumped at the chance.'

Mills got in the car and headed up the motorway. He stopped just off the M40 to meet the representatives from his new club.

'We went to this hotel just off the motorway for a meeting,' he explains. 'We sat down and my agent looked up, nodded to a bloke nearby and said, "Oh god, look at this bloke here, what does he look like?" This bloke had cowboy boots on, jeans on with the boots tucked in. He's got this brown leather waistcoat, a Stetson hat and everything. And my agent is, like, going, "Oh my god, look at this bloke." I

looked up, it was Roland Nilsson. He was dressed up for the party!’

Nilsson’s fashion sense may have left plenty to be desired but he had little difficulty in selling his footballing vision to Mills. A loan deal was done and the striker was quickly impressed by the methods employed by his new boss.

‘Roland was kind of this new breed,’ he says. ‘I was used to the hairdryer treatment, you know, managers going off on one and blaming everybody else but themselves. Roland was completely different. It was about actually talking to players and trying new formations. Up until this point it was all 4-4-2. There were hardly any tactics. It was a big striker and a little striker. Every team followed the same blueprint. All of a sudden, I came to Coventry and it was different. The Coventry experience opened up a completely different way of thinking about football for me. It was something that I’d not been used to before. Roland was more of a tactician.’

Unsurprisingly, given that the story goes that while injured during his own playing career Nilsson would weigh his food to ensure he didn’t take on more than he was burning off, Mills found that the Swede was big on fitness and had high demands of his players.

‘I remember a morning fitness session and Roland joined in,’ he recalls. ‘He just blew everyone away. It was ridiculous. He led by example and his knowledge of the game was immeasurable.’

It certainly was an enthusiastic thumbs up for his new manager and it seems that Mills was bowled over by the club as a whole right from his first trip to Ryton.

‘I went to certain clubs and the training facilities were almost amateur,’ he says of his career away from Coventry. ‘At one club I played for, we would have to walk through the

brook to get to the training pitch. You're going into training with wet feet! Joining Coventry was like when you've always been stuck in a two-star hotel, and then all of a sudden, someone gives you a six-star hotel to stay in, and you just go, "Wow."

Mills made his debut against Crystal Palace on 28 November in front of less than 14,000 fans at Highfield Road. This represented a 9,000 drop in comparison with the opening home league game of the season just three months earlier. Worryingly, the paltry Palace gate would only be the fifth-lowest home attendance of the season. This marked the first time that a Highfield Road league fixture attendance had dipped below 14,000 since 1995. The few fans present for the visit of Palace saw City return to winning ways. Mills partnered Lee Hughes in attack and marked his debut by having a hand in both goals in a 2-0 win. He almost opened the scoring with a 25-yard effort that just flashed past the post following some beautifully intricate build-up play from Thompson and Safri. Just after the hour mark, he nodded a deep Thompson centre back across the box where Laurent Delorge was able to prod the ball home from three yards. Soon after, he rattled the bar with a rasping effort before finally getting his name on the scoresheet on 80 minutes. His left-footed drive from the edge of the box made it 2-0, secured the points and led to enthusiastic chants of 'Sign him up' ringing around Highfield Road. He had only signed his loan deal at 10am that day and there he was turning in a man-of-the-match display less than 12 hours later. It was an excellent individual and team performance, one full of running and closing down, a marked difference from the trio of showings that had preceded it. Carsley was singled out for praise by Nilsson after the match, with the Swede

impressed by the midfielder's performance after dropping back to partner Konjic in the heart of the defence due to injuries.

Mills was among the goals again four days later in a 3-1 win over Wimbledon. The match saw Hughes also return to the scoresheet, netting his fifth goal of the season and his first from open play in 13 outings. The signs were there that this may be a strike force that could power the Sky Blues back to the Premier League. It was looking as if Mills's stature allowed him to play the target man role, taking some of the physical pressure off Hughes. Hughes enjoyed a direct approach but was far more adept being the man on the shoulder of defenders looking to latch on to flick-ons and Mills was tailor-made for getting above the opposition and nodding balls into space. That meant that the former West Brom man, whose game was never based on holding up long balls forward, was able to concentrate on getting in behind defenders and finding space in the box rather than coming short in search of the ball or battling with man-mountain centre-halves for balls in the air. Still, remember what I said a few pages back about Coventry being a club that snatches disappointment from the jaws of victory? Yeah, that happened again. Having got back into the play-off mix and sitting just outside the top six, City conspired to make life difficult once more with another trio of defeats on the spin. Prior to the Watford match, Nilsson warned of how quickly the table could change, particularly in December amongst the hectic festive schedule. Unfortunately, his comments were to prove to be as prophetic as anything Mystic Meg ever came out with. Losses to Watford, West Brom and Norwich City saw not a single goal scored. Despite this, the play-offs remained in reach with the Sky Blues sat in tenth, just two points off the top six.

The up-and-down form continued as City delivered an early Christmas gift to fans with a thumping 4-0 win over Bradford City on 23 December. Coventry were at the visitors right from the off and should have been out of sight by the time Bradford striker Ashley Ward missed a sitter from inside the six-yard box after a Benito Carbone pull-back. The goals did come soon enough, however. Hughes looked every inch the £5m man with a placed finish after beating the offside trap to break the deadlock. Thompson then fired home what was becoming his trademark, a thunderous 25-yarder with his right foot, before a Hughes penalty made it 3-0. Forgotten man Julian Joachim came off the bench to score the fourth, his first since his summer move. It had been a difficult start for the former Leicester and Aston Villa striker.

The attacker had arrived as part of the deal which took fan favourite Mustapha Hadji to Villa Park and had got off to the worst possible start, picking up an injury during pre-season which saw him miss the start of the campaign. He returned for the defeat to Grimsby which spelled the end of Gordon Strachan's time in charge. Joachim had been signed under the impression that he would partner John Hartson up front in a Gordon Strachan side and suddenly Hartson and Strachan were gone before the former Villa man had pretty much even laced up his boots.

'I'd fallen out with [manager] John Gregory at Villa and was looking to move,' Joachim recalls. 'Strachan spoke about bouncing straight back and I thought we could do that so I went to Coventry. Quickly after I signed things changed and talk was that Cov were in financial trouble. That was within weeks of me signing, that wasn't because I took all of the money! I got taken out with a nasty tackle in a pre-season

game and did my ankle and it took me weeks to get back. It was a nightmare. Up to then in my career I hadn't been injured all that often but suddenly my luck wasn't there. I'd done my ankle and I think my hamstrings kept going. I had to shave a bit of bone off my achilles because I'd landed funny in one game and had an impingement in my achilles.'

'Julian came in but he was injured a lot,' Richard Shaw adds. 'If he had been fit 24/7 then maybe he would have been the answer but he just couldn't stay fit. It was a shame because he had massive ability.'

'I just wanted to play and show Cov fans what I could do,' Joachim continues. 'It was so important to get back and get that first goal. I wanted to kick on quickly from there.'

Next up, the Sky Blues gained revenge for the earlier Grimsby defeat by reversing the score and picking up a 1-0 win. Hughes scored the only goal but then, in a way befitting the stop-start nature of his season, he got himself sent off in the dying minutes. The red card was Hughes's second of the campaign, meaning he was hit with a four-match ban. An enforced run in the stands certainly wasn't ideal for a striker who had netted three in three following a real battle all season in finding his rhythm in front of goal. A pair of defeats, to Nottingham Forest and Wolves, came next, once again underlining the boom or bust nature of this team. Nilsson was scathing of his side following the Wolves defeat, saying that City got exactly what they deserved following a performance that was 'not acceptable in work rate or attitude'. Nilsson singled David Thompson out for criticism, after the winger picked up his second red card of the season, saying that the former Liverpool man had an issue with his temperament that would need to be addressed.

Postponements of a league match with Rotherham and the FA Cup third round fixture against Tottenham meant that City had enjoyed a 15-day break between matches ahead of the Wolves defeat, but the performance showed no sign of the freshness that should have been in the squad's legs. As such inconsistent performances crept in, the presence of an inexperienced manager in the dugout and a lack of leaders both on the pitch and in the dressing room appeared to be a telling factor in the team's inability to manage those matches that could have gone either way. Gordon Strachan had pointed to the loss of Dion Dublin and Gary McAllister, professionals who he could trust on and off the pitch, as being a contributing factor in relegation from the top flight and it may not be a stretch to suggest that this remained a problem in 2001/02. While Gary Breen and Lee Carsley could be seen as leaders, many of the first-team regulars such as Youssef Chippo, Youssef Safri, Laurent Delorge and Jay Bothroyd were more akin to letting their football do the talking.

'Someone like Chippo was a great guy, but he led by example rather than vocally,' Shaw says. 'We missed those vocal players a lot. We had started losing leaders while we were still in the Premier League, when you lose guys like Dion, Darren Huckerby and Kevin Richardson, you're losing leaders and friends. We brought in players like Runar Normann and Laurent Delorge. No disrespect to them but they were a little bit flaky in terms of physicality and you have two very young players playing in the Championship. That is such a hard league even for seasoned pros. We were missing the big characters. People don't understand how much that matters on and off the pitch when you have a leader in the dressing room.'

'Even now, Dion will phone up the ex-Coventry players every couple of months or so just to check in. That's a proper

leader. When I first signed for Coventry, we were having a bit of a bad time. I didn't play too well in my first few matches so Ron Atkinson pulled me in the office, and he sort of said, "What's going on? Who have I signed? Have I signed a twin brother, or is it really you?" In a way I blamed the centre-forwards because the balls that the opposition defenders were playing into their centre-forwards were unopposed when they were being played forward. I was blaming the forwards, Dion being one of them. Unbeknownst to me, Ron went and told Dion what I had said. Dion searched me out and took me into the physio room at the training ground. He asked me if I had a problem. He said Ron had said I wasn't happy with the balls forward going unopposed and I told him, "Well yeah, that is happening." He told me I wasn't doing my job either and I wasn't getting tight enough. Dion was up front about it, we went for a drink and just spoke about it and we spoke about where we expected each other to be and what we wanted each other to do in those situations. We had it out and bang, it was sorted. That's what you could do when you had those kinds of men, those leaders. They would just be on you. That didn't happen in the Championship. We didn't have that.'

Action was taken to try and arrest the slide down the table and it was seen that an old head was required to advise Nilsson. Former Derby County boss Jim Smith was given the role of assistant manager at the start of January. Bryan Richardson commented that Richard Money had expressed a desire to return to his academy director position and so a new man was required. It seemed an odd turn of events given that Money had only weeks earlier signed a long-term contract as first team coach, but this was the official line given by the club. Richardson was keen to stress that Nilsson and Smith

had met prior to the appointment and that the manager was happy to be gaining a new face to his staff. From the outside, it seemed a puzzling appointment, with Smith's old-school approach seemingly at odds with that of Nilsson. Having said that, perhaps it was thought that a good cop, bad cop routine was just what was required to get things firing again on the field. Smith was renowned as a superb man-manager and would have undoubtedly arrived with a contact book brimming full of names. The move may have appeared as a power shift, a mistrusting board taking some control out of Nilsson's hands. However, Marcus Hall insists that Roland remained the main man.

'Bringing Jim in I think was just to have that experience around Roland,' he says. 'Jim was very old school and I think he was there more as an advisor. People might have looked in and thought Jim was in control but Roland was still very much in charge.'

'Jim was a bit more like the bad cop,' Barry Quinn adds. 'Jim was old school. You have Roland who was so chilled out and laid-back. Jim would give the hairdryer treatment when it was needed.'

Not everyone was enamoured by the appointment. On the surface level at least, Smith and Nilsson appeared polar opposites. In one corner, Nilsson, the sophisticated Swede who brought European methods on tactics and diet. In the other, Smith, the very embodiment of the old school English managerial stereotype.

'I'd played under Jim Smith at Derby and he got rid of me,' says Lee Mills. 'He didn't fancy me one little bit. You could have knocked me over with a feather when he walked through the door at Coventry. The word was that Roland wanted someone with experience to help him. As soon as

he walked in my face dropped. I thought, "Gordon Bennett, this is all I need." I got the impression that there was a little bit of battling between Jim and Roland. I came in, scored a few goals, did well and Roland was delighted with me. Then Jim Smith came in and went, "No, he's rubbish." There was a battle between the manager and the assistant who had two completely different opinions of me. Let's just say, me and Jim Smith weren't the best of friends. It was a head-scratcher for me because you've got this young, up-and-coming manager with a wealth of experience as a player. I'm sure he's been in lots and lots of positions where he could tap back into his memories. The guy had got so much knowledge, and then he brought in an old school, Jim Smith. Don't get me wrong, he'd had success at various clubs previously. Maybe it was a last roll of the dice, I just found it really bizarre, a really odd one.'

At the turn of the year, the FA Cup third round pulled out a glamour tie against Tottenham at Highfield Road. One man who missed out on the re-run of the 1987 FA Cup Final was Youssef Chippo, who was away on international duty with Morocco. The midfielder commented in an interview with the club programme ahead of the match that he was reluctantly heading off to the Africa Cup of Nations and would have rather stayed behind to help City fight for promotion. Chippo and Youssef Safri would miss the first five matches of 2002 while away with Morocco. The Sky Blues would file a complaint with FIFA due to the pair not being available for selection until 6 February, despite Morocco's final match at the tournament coming on 30 January when their group-stage elimination was confirmed. Elsewhere in the interview, Chippo hinted at problems that had occurred the previous season. He suggested that Gordon Strachan had

questioned how physically able the Moroccan was to stand up to the rigours of Premier League football while he was fasting during the religious festival of Ramadan. Chippo suggested that he was told he would remain on the bench until his period of fasting, which saw him go without food or drink during daylight hours, was completed. However, when Ramadan passed, Chippo remained benched, despite the club's poor form in his absence. In what could be interpreted as a slight on the Strachan regime, he commented that he felt more comfortable with Nilsson in charge and that he was pleased that everyone at the club was now 'very friendly'.

The match itself was something of a damp squib. Spurs eased to a 2-0 win in what Nilsson described as a subdued atmosphere. Despite bringing a continental temperament, Nilsson had remained faithful to a very British 4-4-2, albeit while adding a little more attacking fluidity than the system often deployed. For the visit of Spurs, however, he switched to three at the back, with Richard Shaw, Mo Konjic and Gary Breen all starting, as Marc Edworthy and Tomas Antonelius played as wing-backs. The tactical move failed to inspire a cup shock and 4-4-2 returned for the visit of Stockport three days later.

Going into the Stockport encounter, Coventry were sat eighth in the table, four points off the play-offs but with a game in hand over the two teams immediately above them. A County side managed by Sky Blues old boys Carlton Palmer and Kevin Richardson dug out a dogged 0-0 draw in a match that had certainly looked winnable for City.

As January drew to a close there was a huge change at the top of the club as Bryan Richardson was ousted as chairman in what he later described as a 'boardroom coup'. Richardson and Strachan had faced plenty of fan

vitriol during the relegation campaign. With Strachan gone, Richardson continued to take the heat from the stands. That's fine if you have the support of the rest of the boardroom, but it transpired that his colleagues were keen to move the mastermind of the Ricoh Arena (much more on that later) away from the club. At an unscheduled meeting that Richardson later called an ambush, the chairman was faced with a vote of no confidence and he was asked to resign. Mike McGinnity, Richardson's deputy, took over in the chair. McGinnity stated afterwards that the decision had been taken amid fears that without action the club could have gone out of business within 18 months. Never a dull moment at Coventry, right?

Despite a dip in form and off-field turmoil, with a steady run of form, an end-of-season trip to Wembley was still very much up for grabs. If it was up for grabs in January, it looked tantalisingly close following a four-match winning run in February. A 2-0 victory over Rotherham kicked off the streak. Prior to kick-off, City's matchday programme highlighted a certain Mark Robins as the opposition's biggest threat, devoting a full page to profile the future Sky Blues manager. After Mo Konjic's jinking run from the halfway line forced a great save from Millers goalkeeper Mike Pollitt, Hughes headed the rebound on to the bar before the ball finally fell back to Konjic who headed home from close range. As full time approached, Delorge won a corner, more by luck than design, while trying to waste time. The resulting delivery saw Hughes pounce on a goalkeeping mistake to wrap up the win. Hughes had started the match on the bench with Nilsson suggesting that his number nine was showing signs of tiredness in training. A lack of match sharpness was perhaps to be expected as, due to his

aforementioned four-match ban, the striker had not played a single minute of competitive football in January.

The sales of midfielder Lee Carsley to Everton for £1.9m and full-back Tomas Antonelius to FC Copenhagen did little to impact matters on the field as the wins kept on coming. That said, Carsley would undoubtedly be the bigger miss of the two and Nilsson was keen to hold on to the influential midfielder. However, the club's dire financial situation meant that any offer had to be considered and Carsley was so keen on a move back to the Premier League that he waived loyalty payments that he was due from City in order to allow the transfer to happen. A 6-1 mauling of Crewe came next, courtesy of a Delorge brace, a Hughes hat-trick and a goal from Thompson. After the match, Nilsson commented that he had felt his men had been due to give someone a thrashing given the sheer volume of chances they had created in recent weeks. Thompson scored three in his next two appearances, wins over Walsall (2-1) and Barnsley (4-0). Four matches, 14 goals scored and just two conceded, this was surely the form of a team that would take its promotion push right to the wire. The run lifted City to sixth in the table, inside those much-coveted play-off places and they were just six points behind second-placed Manchester City, suggesting that even a late surge to the automatic positions was not inconceivable.

		<i>Pld</i>	<i>GD</i>	<i>Pts</i>
2	Manchester City	33	+32	65
3	West Brom	35	+19	63
4	Millwall	35	+19	60
5	Burnley	34	+10	60
6	Coventry City	35	+18	59
7	Norwich City	34	+4	58