

Ideas in short supply

THE FIFTH home defeat of the season was dished out to the Town by a Crystal Palace team which attracted more praise from David Pleat than it did from Town supporters.

Palace look like winning promotion back to the First Division, and Mr Pleat's opinion after their 1-0 victory was that they are strong enough to stay up if they do get there.

I can only say that First Division crowds will surely expect more for their money than Palace showed. Their success was based on a sound, hard defence, with very good cover provided for colleagues.

There was nothing very adventurous about their play, but after Jerry Murphy's midfield burst had laid on the goal for Peter Nicholas in the 18th minute, there was little danger of the Town working out how to get back into the game.

SATURDAY'S DETAILS

LUTON TOWN 0, CRYSTAL PALACE 1

Half-time: 0-1

TOWN: Findlay; Stephens, Price, Turner, Donaghy; Aizlewood, Hill, Carr (West, 63 mins); Taylor, Hatton, Stein.

PALACE: Burridge; Hinshelwood, Sansom, Cannon, Gilbert; Kember, Nicholas, Murphy; Swindlehurst, Hilaire, Walsh. Sub: Fenwick, not needed.

THE GOAL: Peter Nicholas, 18 minutes, cracking drive from the edge of the box after Murphy made the chance with a controlled run through the middle.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town four saved and four off target; Palace four saved, three off target, one hit the post.

ATTENDANCE: 11,008—how did the missing thousands know it would be a good game to miss?

ENTERTAINMENT: In very short supply, with Palace not sharp enough at the front to risk making a game of it, but too good in midfield and defence to let the Town shine.

REFEREE: Morris R. Baker, Wolverhampton. Made some debatable decisions, but was not helped by some ill-tempered clashes from both sides.

BOOKINGS: Three for fouls: Jim Cannon of Palace and Steve Taylor and Paul Price. Chris Turner and Dave Hinshelwood ought to have had red cards in a fists-and-feet flare-up. Both managed to avoid even a yellow one.

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The Town's tactics were a puzzle. Compared with the side which had beaten Orient on its last outing, defence and midfield were re-arranged in honour of Palace's visit.

Alan West was dropped to substitute, with Paul Price going back into the defence and Mark Aizlewood moving forward to midfield.

Aizlewood's ability to hit accurate long passes was one of the few bright features of a poor Town display. But they produced very little in the way of careful build-up, and Palace, not the best goal-scorers in the world, were professional enough to hold on to their narrow lead without too much difficulty.

And at least they looked more like a team than the Town did, and they had much the better of the second half, having successfully defended the Oak Road end before the break.

For the Town, it was a match to forget as quickly as possible, although at least the defence came through a bruising test with some credit.

In attack, the only memorable moment was when Bob Hatton intercepted a roll-out, by goalkeeper John Burridge, wriggled through to an angled position, then hit the side-netting from the difficult chance he had created.

Otherwise it was a match of little enterprise, with Palace strong enough to maintain their promotion challenge.

The Town dropped to 14th place in the table. At the same stage of last season they were seventh, but sinking steadily. To put it mildly, there hasn't been very much progress in 12 months in terms of results, and supporters might take a lot of convincing that it is a case of taking one step backwards to be ready to make two or three forward.