

FANS ARE THE BIGGEST WINNERS



● TOP HATTER: Brian Stein rises to head the Town's third goal at Selhurst Park, his 11th of the season. Ricky Hill, whose superb far post cross made it possible, is on the extreme right.

TWICE BEHIND, then leading until 14 minutes from time, Luton Town set their supporters arguing over what might have been at Selhurst Park. An uncharacteristic mistake by skipper Brian Horton gave Crystal Palace an equaliser which left some fans feeling that the Town had thrown a couple of points away.

The other side of the story was that no-one doubted the Town were worth their point, and even if the recent run is poor by previous standards, they still sit on top of the Second Division.

Every team has a bad patch every season, and in the last couple of weeks we have seen the nerves exposed as the Town have come up against sides full of determination and enthusiasm.

In two consecutive away games the Town have scored six goals and conceded seven, yet despite the dropped points they have contributed to the general welfare of soccer.

The clash of contrasting styles at Selhurst Park was another superb game to watch, and neither side deserved to lose.

Palace, racked by boardroom and managerial problems, turned in one of their best displays for months. The players want Steve Kember to be given the manager's job on a permanent basis, while the directors have put him on trial until the end of the season.

FIRE AND PASSION

That background seemed to give Palace more fire and passion than the Town. Palace played four men across midfield and pushed extra men forward.

Clive Goodyear's enforced long spell as deputy for Mike Saxby will pay dividends for a long time to come. Wayne Turner went in at left-back in place of Mark Aizlewood, and was given a hard time on occasions. His tackling was sure, but inexperience showed at times as he got to grips with his first Second Division game since Terry Curran ran him ragged in September. There was never any danger of that happening against Crystal Palace.

Horton and Mal Donaghy were my men of the match, both eagle-eyed to anticipate danger and give cover, and it was sad that each made just one crucial error in 90 minutes and was punished severely for it.

The disappointment was that Ricky Hill had a very quiet game in midfield, and while Raddy Antic showed a lot of bright ideas and scored a classic goal he does not provide the consistent driving force we see from Lil Fuccillo at his best.

Steve White's goal famine now stretches for seven games, yet the Palace defence often looked in danger of opening up when he ran at them, particularly down the Town's left flank. I'll settle for his name being off the score-sheet every week if we get three goals from other players.

And those supporters who worry about the Town's recent inability to create so many chances can at least take comfort from the fact that the team is still good enough to convert a much higher percentage than most.

The spirit and ability to fight back after going behind is another welcome feature of the Town's success this season, and was well illustrated at Selhurst Park,

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PICTURES: MARK RICHARDS

particularly in a frantic first half.

Only eight minutes had gone when the Town's defence was spread across the width of the pitch as Palace attacked down their left. Kirk Stephens failed to stop a deep cross going in, and as Goodyear and Langley went for the ball without being able to make firm contact Neil Smillie raced in on the far post to hammer a close-range shot past Jake Findlay.

FRANTIC FIRST HALF

A year or two ago, in any away match, that would have been the end of the Town, but Palace had only four minutes to savour their success before the game went through an amazing spell, with three goals scored in barely two minutes.

White's strong run down the left in the 12th minute ended with the ball pulled back for Antic to hammer in the equaliser. Straight from the re-start Palace counter-attacked, with the ball lofted over Donaghy's head for Kevin Mabbutt to race through and regain the lead.

Within a minute the Town had pulled level again, with White making another determined run and being upended by a rash tackle from Paul Hinshelwood. For the tenth time this season Moss scored from the penalty.

In the 38th minute the Town went ahead for the first time. Antic and Hill did the spade work, with Stein rising perfectly at the far post to head Hill's deep centre past Paul Barron.

They were forced to defence in depth, yet Palace rarely looked like getting through to close quarters, and the Town always looked capable of catching Palace on the break.

Vince Hilaire's close control and trickery was introduced in the 72nd minute to replace the more basic physical abilities of Langley, and Kember could claim later that the switch worked.

The equaliser came four minutes later. A Palace attack was beaten off and Horton tried to set up a counter from the edge of his own penalty area. He has done it countless times this season, but on this occasion the ball bounced off his shin when he could easily have hacked it anywhere, and Smillie pounced to drive in a first-time shot to make it 3-3.

Moss had a couple of chances to regain the lead, with Barron lucky to block one shot with his body, and on the final whistle an appreciative crowd cheered both sides off the pitch.

So they should—the paying customers were the day's real winners.

Watford make it level on points

THE TOWN'S draw at Selhurst Park, their fourth consecutive match without a victory, enabled Watford to join them at the top of the Second Division for the first time this season, level on points but behind on goal difference.

Watford beat Shrewsbury 3-1 at Vicarage Road to complete an eight-day haul of six points out of nine. But the Town still have two games in hand, and three on fourth-placed Rotherham, who are seven points adrift.

Sheffield Wednesday, out of the top three for four months, moved back into third place with a 2-0 home win over Leicester.

Oldham, second for a long time, have dropped down to tenth place. They have won only once in their last nine attempts. Their 0-2 defeat at Newcastle was their fifth consecutive game without scoring.

Just one point behind Newcastle are QPR, who put FA Cup semi-final worries out of their mind with a 4-0 thrashing of Charlton.

Dark horses in the scramble for third place could be Leicester City, who moved up to within six points of the target, with three games in hand, when they won 2-0 at Crystal Palace.

Barnsley kept on the fringe of the race, and overtook Newcastle with a 3-2 home success over Grimsby on the same night.

The Town's draw at Selhurst Park ends the dream of setting a record 100 points for the season. Their maximum is now 98 points. Watford's highest possible is 92 and the next top possibility—needing a win in every remaining game—is Leicester's potential of 86.

But realistically the promotion target now looks like being 72 or 73 points.

FIGHT FOR PROMOTION

	P	W	D	L	F	A	P
Luton Town...	29	17	8	4	59	32	59
Watford	31	17	8	6	55	33	59
Sheff Wed ...	32	15	8	9	43	37	53
Rotherham ...	32	16	4	12	48	36	52
Blackburn ...	32	14	9	9	39	28	51
Barnsley ...	31	14	6	11	45	33	48
Newcastle ...	30	14	6	10	38	29	48
QPR	30	14	5	11	40	30	47
Leicester ...	29	13	8	8	40	31	47
Oldham	32	12	10	10	38	38	46
Charlton ...	32	12	10	10	44	45	46

Match Details

CRYSTAL PALACE 3, LUTON TOWN 3
Half-time: 2-3

TOWN: Findley; Stephens, Goodyear, Donaghy, Turner; Hill, Antic, Horton; Stein, White, Moss. Sub: Johnson, not used.

PALACE: Barron; Hinshelwood, Wicks, Gilbert, Boulter; Murphy, Giles, Smillie, Cannon; Langley (Hilaire, 72 mins), Mabbutt.

THE GOALS: Neil Smillie for Palace, free on far post for close-range shot, 8 mins; Raddy Antic for the Town, drive from edge of the box, 12 mins; Kevin Mabbutt for Palace straight from the re-start, defence beaten by long ball over the top; David Moss, penalty, 14 mins, after Paul Hinshelwood downed Steve White; Brian Stein, far post header from cross by Ricky Hill, 38 mins; Smillie, 76 mins, after Brian Horton lost possession just outside the penalty area.

OTHER GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town four wide, seven saved; Palace 13 off target and three saved. Corners: 5-3 to Palace.

ATTENDANCE: 12,001, Palace's best league gate of the season against visitors from outside of London.

REFEREE: Clive White, Harrow — showed why he is the only English ref picked for the World Cup trip to Spain next year and will also control the Cup Final at Wembley.

ENTERTAINMENT: Another real sparkler. Coaches and managers might not appreciate the Town's last two games, with 13 goals, but the crowds certainly do.



● EQUALISER: Raddy Antic gets down to the business of scoring the Town's first goal.