

ON A NIGHT when Bobby Robson was looking at one or two individuals as he prepares to name an England World Cup squad, all-round teamwork gave Luton Town a deserved cup-tie victory at Selhurst Park on Monday.

Second Division Crystal Palace offered plenty of spirited hustle and bustle, but were still in with a shout until the 85th minute only because the Town's more measured approach lacked the killer touch in the penalty area.

Mitchell Thomas did most to advance his claims for an England squad place, bursting through after an uncertain start to double up as full-back and auxiliary left-winger.

Mick Harford, in his last game before suspension, had a quiet night by his standards, with Palace veterans Micky Droy and Jim Cannon obviously aware of the danger he could pose.

A stern lecture by referee Brian Stevens, for a rash late challenge on goalkeeper George Wood, may have helped to quieten the aggression of the centre-forward.

Even so his skill led to the second Town goal, and could have produced another.

Individual flair was not the priority on a pitch that might have caused major problems. The tie was postponed on Saturday because it was frostbound and dangerously hard, but a thaw then allowed Charlton and West Ham to play at Selhurst Park on Sunday.

By Monday night the ground staff had worked wonders, and a touch of frost setting in from just before kick-off time helped to make the grassy surfaces on the flanks ideal for football.

The middle cut up and bogged down some moves by both sides, and the major difference between the teams was that the Town had the extra class down the outside edge.

Ricky Hill and Brian Stein worked the right with consistent passing and good understanding, while Thomas and David Preece exerted a lot of pressure down the left.

Report by Brian Swain Pictures: Mark Richards

Palace had a pair of nippy central attackers in Ian Wright and Andy Gray, but their best work came to little against the covering of Mal Donaghy when they tried to attack at ground level and against the height and reliability of Steve Foster when the aerial route was tried.

It was Palace's bad luck that their most likely-looking attacker was Alan Irvine, operating on their right against a full-back quick enough to exploit the space when the midfielders got forward and lost possession.

And while Thomas's speedy exuberance caught the eye down the Town's left, the steady persistence of Tim Breacker on the right was invaluable. He was made to work hard at times, was occasionally in minor spots of trouble, but battled through doggedly.

The midfield trio was a nice blend of sensible defending when necessary and quick counter-attacking once the ball had been won, and in that vital role Peter Nicholas had a very happy return to his old club.

Conditions were something of a leveller, but the will to

win shone through every step he took, and Nicholas's work was a major reason why a cup-tie that could have been difficult was rarely a pleasure for Palace.

My feeling was that the Second Division side were lucky to be only one goal down for so long. Thomas's accurate cross and Stein's perfectly-placed header from about ten yards put the Town ahead in the eighth minute, and they played a sensible controlled game from then on.

They worked to give nothing away at the back, and look for the counter-punch as Palace had to drive forward.

SCARES

The only first-half scares came when a couple of crosses might have led to anything, but one flew across the face of Les Sealey's goal with Droy and Gray both unable to reach it and the other brought a weak header by Wright which Sealey caught comfortably.

Palace had to commit more men to attack in the second half, with Irvine trying hard to force Thomas into more defending, and a couple of times they were caught on the break by smart Town passing.

Hill led one move with a jinking run down the right and pulled a pass back to Stein, on the edge of the penalty area in the inside right position. He side-stepped an attempted challenge and shot wide of the far post.

Harford launched another incisive counter-attack that could have brought a second goal. He won the ball on the half-way line and put Breacker clear in space down the right. The full-back's cross was delivered perfectly to Harford, who had charged forward to the edge of the penalty area, and from the headed pass Mark North blasted wide of the far post from a sharp angle.

Those two chances arrived within a minute of each other with nearly an hour gone, and had either been converted I thought Palace could have been taken to the cleaners.

Instead they fought on, with more optimism and effort than skill, and Wright, looking offside from my position, got clear for an 18-yard drive which Sealey saved well, tipping the ball over his bar to stifle the Palace fans' exultation.

A 2-0 Town victory, which would have been fair reward for their performance, seemed to have been assured five minutes from time when the gulf between Second Division endeavour and First Division class was exposed.

If Harford and North had been obliged to stand off a little to try to find space away from Droy and Cannon, they showed that a little thought and common sense can still pay dividends.

Harford attacked down the middle, waited for the inevitable tackles and then laid off a pass to North, who had pulled away to the right.

Palace defenders were still chasing shadows as North crossed towards the far post, and Preece, alert and still full of energy, calmly controlled the ball and placed his shot wide of Wood, who must have been much aggrieved by the wide space Preece had found in the penalty area.

A minute later Palace reduced the arrears from a short free kick routine, Kevin Taylor blasting in a curling 25-yarder. Not so long ago it might have been the occasion for a touch of panic to set in, but not for the current Luton Town team.

Match details

CRYSTAL PALACE 1 LUTON TOWN 2
HALF-TIME: 0-1

TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, Foster, Donaghy, Thomas; Hill, Nicholas, Preece; Stein, Harford, North. Sub: Johnson, not needed.

PALACE: Wood; Locke, Droy, Cannon, Hughton; Irvine, Taylor, Barber (Higginbottom, 81 mins), Ketteridge; Wright, Gray.

THE GOALS: Brian Stein for the Town, eight minutes, header from cross by Mitchell Thomas; David Preece for the Town, 85 minutes, careful shot after Mick Harford and Mark North carved the Palace defence open; Kevin Taylor for Palace, 86 minutes, 25-yard block-buster.

OTHER STRIKES: Town four saved and eight wide; Palace five saved and six wide. Corners: 6-4 to Palace.

ATTENDANCE: 9,886, nearly double Palace's average in the Second Division, with a good following from Luton swelling the total.

REFEREE: Brian Stevens, Gloucester — kept the game flowing and used his common sense on a night when some tackles were bound to be mistimed on a hard frosty surface.

ENTERTAINMENT: Well contested cup-tie, with the Town always looking the better footballing side but never able to take it too easy.