

PALACE FIRE IS EXTINGUISHED

89/90

AFTER LOOKING as though they might be taken to the cleaners in a harrowing opening 15 minutes, Luton Town buckled down to do a successful fire-fighting job at Selhurst Park.

Crystal Palace, very quick and direct, threatened to overwhelm a slow-starting defence with a fierce aerial and physical assault.

But the potential crisis was averted, and despite the loss of another central defender, when David Beaumont limped off with an ankle injury, the Town settled to play a brilliantly-organised smothering game to douse the Palace fire. The back four and Alec Chamberlain were magnificent.

WELL-EARNED EQUALISER

The equaliser was overdue, but well earned, and the only major worry for the faithful who went to South London was the fear that a linesman might make a critical error in judging offside when Palace were getting desperate as well as frustrated.

As manager Ray Harford said it was not pretty to watch, with Palace unerringly failing to master the tactic. But it was highly effective against a team still finding its way in the First Division after sneaking in via the play-offs.

Without producing the same flair, Palace reminded me of the Town at the same stage of their First Division education six years ago — always looking likely to score goals, but just as surely liable to let them in at the other end.

In Mark Bright and Ian Wright they had two big central attackers whose pace, power and aerial ex-

Reports: Brian Swain. Pictures: Josh Levy

cellence were well suited to the direct 'up and at 'em' style Palace used.

They were almost frightening in their early rush into a frantic attacking pattern, and the Town lived dangerously, and almost entirely defensively, before Palace got the breakthrough they deserved on run of play.

Bright beat Marvin Johnson in the air at the end of a long punted clearance by his goalkeeper, took a return pass from Wright, and lobbed a sweet goal from the edge of the box.

But that reverse, after 12 minutes, was the start of a change in the pattern. The Town defence started to get organised, Palace's long balls started to drop too shot, or into no-man's land behind the Town defence, and home confidence took a dive.

Beaumont limped out of the game in the 24th minute. Richard Harvey was sent on to play at left back and John Dreyer was switched to central defence. And the back four continued to grow in confidence.

MAN OF THE MATCH

I made Dreyer man of the match, but Harvey, Johnson and Tim Breacker were not far behind as the Town were given a stern test. The only drawback was that Breacker did not get forward as an attacker too often, but that was small price to pay to see the Palace frustration, on and off the pitch, increasing with every minute.

In midfield Mick Kennedy again did exactly what was asked, and with the help of Steve Williams, Kingsley Black and Danny Wilson, that department was more than a match for Palace. They were perhaps not firing on all cylinders, but each produced important interventions when it mattered.

The question of attacking power is still something to think about. At Oxford in midweek the Town had dropped Lars Elstrup, and played Roy Wegerle alongside Iain Dowie. At the Manor Wegerle was way below his best.

So he started on the bench at Selhurst Park, with Dowie and Elstrup taking the forward weight. Dowie had a particularly good first half. He adds beef to an attack that otherwise looks lightweight, and his power in the air was always a worry to Palace, especially in the knock-on areas in build-up play.

Elstrup, desperately keen to succeed, nearly got the equaliser as the Town got well into the game after the shaky first 15 minutes. Williams played a free kick to the Town's left, Dowie outjumped the opposition to head towards goal and Elstrup, stooping and under pressure, headed wide at the near post from about five yards.

He made brilliant use of a long throw by Kennedy to create a chance for himself, but saw the shot deflected for a corner, and then fired a fair chance wide after an eye-catching move made by Harvey's good pass and Dowie's headed flick.

By now Palace were looking like the side that had leaked ten goals in their last three games. They had left out goalkeeper Perry Suckling and given a debut to Mark Dennis to stiffen up their defence, and the locals were saying afterwards that the changes had been beneficial.

SUPPORT FROM MIDFIELD

My only concern about that was that the Town, like Palace, threatened so much more than they achieved in sharp attacking thrust.

But there was plenty of support work from midfield, and Wilson became more effective as the game progressed, playing on the right. Some of his early passing was less than Wilson-standard, but the determination was never in doubt, and Palace fans knew what was coming long before the skipper's 57th-minute equaliser.

The game had settled into a fairly steady pattern: Palace threatening and flattering, but reduced to frustration, and the Town easing along, looking very sure in defence, but needing more firepower of their own in the box.

The striking record is still below par: Wegerle, Elstrup and Dowie have scored just one each in open play in the league so far.

So midfielders have to get in at the sharp end, and Wilson set the captain's example with his fourth goal of the season.

It might have been Black's fourth, because his shot was worth a goal. He collected a chipped pass by Kennedy on the edge of the penalty area and lifted a shot above Parkin. The ball hit the underside of the bar and bounced down. Wilson and Palace's Andy Gray competed for the rebound, with Gray slicing

the ball against the bar again, before the Town skipper got the decisive touch.

After that neither side did enough to deserve to win: Palace had more attacking but made little of it. Just once the offside trap nearly failed. A linesman had to make several hair-line decisions, and got one wrong, to the annoyance of the Town, but Wright's run was ended by Breacker's quick recovery and Chamberlain's covering.

The Town put on Wegerle for the last 18 minutes, and although he was unable to add very much in terms of dire threat, his very availability to receive and hold the ball helped in the general task of taking the sting out of a home side which was desperate for success. And Palace were the disappointed side when the final whistle blew.

Match details

CRYSTAL PALACE 1 LUTON TOWN 1 (HALF-TIME: 1-0)

TOWN: Chamberlain; Breacker, Beaumont (Harvey, 24 mins), Johnson, Dreyer; Wilson, Williams, Kennedy, Black; Elstrup (Wegerle, 72 mins), Dowie.

PALACE: Parkin; Pemberton, Hopkins, Thomas, Dennis; McGoldrick, Pardew, Dyer, Gray; Bright, Wright. Subs: Barber, Shaw, not used.

THE GOALS: Mark Bright, clever 20-yard lob, for Palace, 13th minute; Danny Wilson, close range equaliser, 57th minute, after Kingsley Black's shot came back off the bar.

OTHER STRIKES: Town three saved, two wide, and two hit the bar in the incident that led to the equaliser; Palace four saved, six wide.

REFEREE: George Courtney, County Durham: kept very tight control, sometimes seeing fouls no-one else did. Was let down by a linesman a couple of times in the second half when the Town's reshaped defence was playing the offside trap.

ATTENDANCE: 11,346, Palace's second lowest of the season, with the locals worried about a team that had failed to win in its four previous outings.

ENTERTAINMENT: A strange mixture, with Palace looking likely to hit a cricket score in an all-action opening 20 minutes. Then the Town took over, but also seemed to go off the boil after equalising, and their tremendous defensive organisation in the latter stages was not pretty, but very effective.