Sports News

● ATTACKING: Lars Elstrup dances clear of Eric Young's tackle, with Kingsley Black hoping for a lucky break.

SWEEPER TAKES THE FROM BOTH SYSTEM STING TEAMS

Brian Swain reports from Selhurst Park

THE introduction of a sweeper almost paid off for Luton Town at Selhurst Park on Sunday.

But if it had saved a point I suspect we would have come home kidding ourselves.

It worked in the sense that Palace's nippy and very crafty strike force of Mark Bright and Ian Wright was contained to just one goal in a season where so far Arsenal have been the only visitors to keep a clean sheet at Selhurst.

But with the midfield depleted and too many Town men off form and unable to pass accurately they did not mount a single worthwhile attacking move in the 90 minutes.

By contrast Alec Chamberlain was the man of the match for another splendid performance, including a diving save to keep out a shot by Bright which ought to have been Palace's second goal.

The result flattered the Town, yet towards the end Palace were the more edgy side when they were put under pressure by the Town's return to 4-3-3.

And Palace deserve credit for being a better footballing side than they were at Kenilworth Road on the first day of the season.

On Sunday they were quick and mobile, on and off the ball.

But they also had a mean streak that let them dish out a bit of stick now and again, and then fall over when they thought it might be worthwhile.

A poor performance by referee Vic Callow helped neither side, and if Steve Williams should know better than to collect another booking for dissent — and a suspension that will follow — I had some sympathy for a man who was booked for complaining by a ref who let violent tackles go by, including one on Williams.

David Preece was cautioned in the 18th minute for a foul on Geoff Thomas, and with players on both sides getting more and more upset by dodgy decisions Preece did well to stay out of further trouble on the ground where he was sent off last season in the Zenith Cup.

But that booking on the Town dear. Preece was not as effective as usual, and with Williams also off the ball with his passing the Town looked the sort of team that might be hard to beat rather than likely winners.

David Beaumont returned to play a sweeper, with Jason Rees taking his place as sub.

IRONIC

The Scot looked comfortable in the role and it was ironic that when Palace scored what turned out to be the winner it was a simple and orthodox move that brought success.

Palace often got John Salako and Eddie McGoldrick into good wide positions, and from Salako's left wing cross Bright was left on his own to power a header into the net.

And one bright spot gave us hope as the minutes ticked away and Palace failed to get a second goal: the Town were always working and battling, and perhaps on another day that spirit alone might conjure up an equaliser.

It almost arrived during the Town's most encouraging period, the last 12 minutes.

RISKS

Rees had replaced Black, and in the 78th minute Sean Farrell was sent on in place of Beaumont.

The sweeper formation had done its work so far as limiting the opposition was concerned, and it was time to take greater risks and try to save a point.

The Town looked a better unit in the more familiar 4-3-3 line-up and once again we saw possibilities in the twin attacking threat of Iain Dowie and Farrell.

SAVE

Dowie was a 90-minute worker, often with no real support, but with Farrell alongside him the flicked headed passes took on a new value.

One gave Farrell the chance to run at the defence and he did well to get to shooting range, but from an angle, and Nigel Martyn was able to make a simple save.

The rest of the Town's efforts, for all the late hustle and bustle, amounted to precious little.

I felt players got drawn into the helter-skelter pace that suited Palace, and with on-one able to slow things down and spray out the telling pass the muscular team won the prize.

It is no pleasure to report that on balance they deserved to.

But they had the good fortune to meet the Town on a day when their passing game was out of sorts.

Town match verdict ★ ★

Action pictures: Josh Levy

It was not a pretty goal — three centre-backs in the team and not one marking a dangerous forward waiting for the cross.

The goal gave Palace confidence to play quick attacking football and the Town were confined to hopeful counter-attacks.

But Kingsley Black was starting with the first symptoms of flu and the neat passing we expect from a Jim Ryan side was not often in evidence.

DUBIOUS

Palace held the initiative for the first 80 minutes, aided by some dubious offside decisions which went in favour of Wright.

Three times he was through on his own, and should have scored, but on each occasion the goalkeeper timed the advances and smothering saves to perfection.

Bright should also have got a second goal, just after the interval.

For the most part John Dreyer and Darron McDonough did well in their marking roles, but once more neither got near Bright when he rose to meet a right wing cross by McGoldrick as Palace countered the sweeper system by pushing four men up. Bright had a free header but put it over the bar.

● SUB STRIKES: Sean Farrell holds off Eric Young to put in one of the Town's few shots at Selhurst Park.

Communism was a failure as well!

Managers' views

PALACE MANAGER Steve Coppell said the Town were just the latest in a succession of teams who decide that a sweeper is a necessity at Selhurst Park.

"I suppose it's a compliment to our strikers — but it shows the other team is more concerned about us than we are about them.

TWO REASONS

"A sweeper, with man-to-man marking on Wright and Bright sounds like a good idea. But so does Communism . . . and that doesn't work either."

Jim Ryan said his decision was made for two reasons: because of the threat of Palace's two strikers and because of his own injury problems — Ceri Hughes was still ruled out by injury and Kingsley Black was struggling with the start of flu.

The manager's problem was to inject the experience he felt would be necessary at Selhurst Park.

He was pleased with the first class effort and application his men put into the game — "They battled their way back into the game through willpower. But in doing that we lost a lot of our football — we didn't play as much as we normally do and our passing got careless.

"Palace raise the pace and the problem is not to be dragged into that. That happened to us but it is difficult to avoid it."

Both managers chose their words carefully in talking about the ref, but neither was impressed by his performance. As well as four bookings he had long dramatic lecture-sessions with four other players and with Mr. Coppell at the dug-out and Mr. Ryan complained that Steve Williams, done for dissent, had effectively been booked for being the victim of a very bad tackle about which the ref did nothing.

Without suggesting that a sweeper system was right for every game the boss was pleased with his first use of it in a league match.

"The two markers, John Dreyer and Darron McDonough especially, did excellent jobs.

"We have considered using a sweeper for other games — we are flexible in thinking about tactics. It wasn't really a failure at Selhurst. In fact you could say it worked pretty well — the goal came from an orthodox cross and header and it was down to poor marking in the box.

POOR PASSING

"But overall I was not too disappointed. Everybody gave 100 per cent effort. That was great. But our passing was poor. Perhaps we were two keyed up. We couldn't relax and pass and Palace were very difficult to play against — awkward and physical.

"I like to beat teams like Palace. I think we should. We play a certain way and they play differently and I feel strongly that our way should come through in the end."

And Mr. Coppell admitted that while he felt Palace ought to have won by a bigger margin because they created more chances he was getting a little anxious towards the end of the game.

"We played very well in the first half, as good as I have seen this season. But the longer it went on without another goal the more inevitable it was that Luton were going to squeeze their way back into the game.

● HEADS UP: Darron McDonough in the thick of it, getting in a near post header from an early Town corner. Unfortunately no-one could make contact on the far post.

Match details

CRYSTAL PALACE 1 LUTON TOWN 0

Half-time: 1-0

TOWN: Chamberlain; Beaumont (Farrell 78 mins); Johnson, McDonough, Dreyer, Harvey; Williams, Preece, Black (Rees 65 mins); Elstrup, Dowie.

PALACE: Martyn; Humphrey, Young, Thorn, Shaw; Gray, Thomas; McGoldrick, Wright, Bright, Salako. Subs: Pardew, Thompson, not needed.

THE GOAL: Mark Bright header, 22 minutes, unmarked to meet left wing cross by John Salako.

OTHER STRIKES: Town four saved and four wide; Palace nine saved and seven wide. Corners: 3-3.

REFEREE: Vic Callow, Solihull — had the sort of day that would get him dropped if he was a player.

BOOKED: David Preece, Darron McDonough and Geoff Thomas for fouls, and Steve Williams for dissent when the ref did nothing about a set of studs attacking his leg.

ATTENDANCE: 15,195, Palace's lowest of the season so far, but on a bitterly cold Sunday afternoon when a warm chair and live soccer on TV might have sounded a good idea to those who stayed away.

ENTERTAINMENT: Good exciting stuff if you were a Palace supporter but cold comfort for the Town die-hards. It was not one of the Town's better performances

The season so far

THE TOWN's results, scorers, attendances and league table position:

August			
25 C. Palace (h) 1-1 (Dowie)	9,583	—	
28 Arsenal (a) 1-2 (Elstrup)	32,723	—	
September			
1 Southampton (a) 2-1 (Elstrup 2)	14,878	8	
4 Man United (h) 0-1	12,576	8	
8 Leeds Utd (h) 1-0 (Black)	10,185	8	
15 QPR (a) 1-6 (Hughes)	10,196	11	
22 Coventry (h) 1-0 (Dowie)	8,336	7	
29 Norwich (a) 3-1 (Elstrup 3)	12,794	6	
October			
20 Sunderland (a) 0-2	20,025	8	
27 Everton (h) 1-1 (Elstrup)	10,047	7	
November			
3 Derby (a) 1-2 (Black)	15,008	8	
10 Liverpool (a) 0-4	35,2017	13	
17 Man City (h) 2-2 (Dowie, Dreyer pen)	9,564	12	
24 A. Villa (h) 2-0 (Black, Elstrup)	10,071	9	
December			
1 N. Forest (a) 2-2 (Elstrup 2)	16,498	10	
8 Arsenal (h) 1-1 (Dreyer pen)	12,506	11	
16 C. Palace (a) 0-1	15,195	12	

LEAGUE APPEARANCES, including as sub in brackets: Ever-presents, 17 each: Chamberlain, Dreyer, Preece, Elstrup and Dowie; Black 16; Hughes 15, Beaumont 14(1), Harvey 12(2), Williams 10, Johnson 9(2), McDonough 7(4), James 6(1), Rees 5(6), Nogan (4), Farrell (4), Breacker 8. Number of players used, 17 games: 17. Last season's total: 27.

LEAGUE GOALS: Elstrup 10, Dowie and Black 3, Dreyer 2 pens, Hughes 1.

THE RUMBELOWS CUP

September	
25 Bradford (h) 1-1 (Harvey)	5,120
October	
10 Bradford (a) 1-1 (Black) — lost on pens	6,180

APPEARANCES: Chamberlain 2, Dreyer 2, Beaumont 2, Hughes 2, Preece 2, Black 2, Dowie 2, Harvey 2, Rees 1 (1), James 1 (1), Nogan 1 (1), Breacker 1, Elstrup 1, Williams 1, Johnson (1).

GOALS: Harvey and Black one each.

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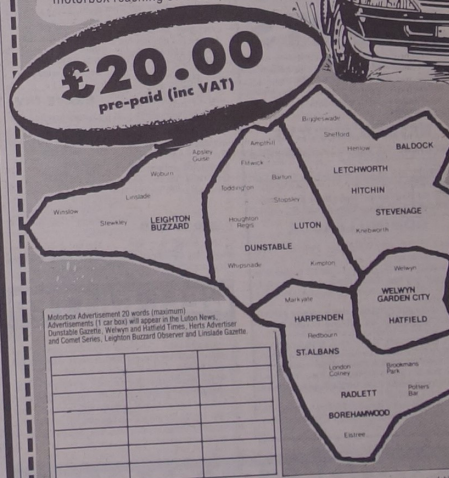

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