

Hatters spring first-up surprise 05/06

Crystal Palace1
Luton2

By TOM COLLOMOSSE

PROMOTED Luton produced a shock on the opening day of the season with a remarkable win at Championship favourites Crystal Palace.

Goals from Steve Howard and Ahmet Brkovic — either side of England striker Andy Johnson's equaliser — were enough to prove last season's League One champions can cope with life at this level.

The two goals, and several missed Palace chances, meant Luton skipper Kevin Nicholls was not punished for missing a first half penalty against a Palace side that appears not to have recovered from last season's relegation.

The only consolation for Palace is that Johnson proved his value once more with a goal — just days after signing a new five-year deal.

Johnson could have given his side an 11th minute lead when Luton keeper Dean Brill's mishit clearance rebounded off debutant Jon Macken into his path.

But the ball would not sit quickly enough for Johnson and Curtis Davies was able to block his 20-yard shot.

Palace should have taken the lead in the 13th minute, but the unmarked Mark Hudson headed Gary Borrowdale's left wing corner wide.

Luton earned a glorious chance to take the lead when Borrowdale clearly tugged Steve Robinson inside the area in the 23rd minute.

But Nicholls' penalty was hurried and poorly-struck,

and Gabor Kiraly made a simple save to his left.

Fitz Hall thought he had given Palace a 37th minute lead with a close-range effort, only for Robinson to hack the ball off the line.

Then Hall saved his side two minutes before the break with a superbly-timed challenge to deny Warren Feeney from eight-yards.

But Luton did go in front just before the break. Palace's offside trap failed to work, and Howard — in acres of space — headed Nicholls' free kick past Kiraly.

Brkovic drilled wide for Luton after working his way into the area — and his side were made to pay in the 52nd minute.

Seconds earlier, Johnson had seen his fierce 20-yard drive superbly saved by Brill — but he did not have to wait long for his first of the season.

Hudson's mistimed header from Ben Watson's right wing corner fell perfectly for the unmarked Johnson, who nodded in off the bar from two-yards.

Palace grew in confidence, Michael Hughes prevented from shooting on goal only by an excellent Nicholls challenge and Jobi McAnuff — another debutant — firing wide when well-placed.

McAnuff was again frustrated in the 69th minute when his far post header produced another smart stop from Brill.

Palace were left to rue that miss when Luton seized the lead once more, Howard directing Nicholls' 79th minute free kick into the path of Brkovic, who bundled the ball home from a yard out.

'Condescending' remarks spurred Newell's boys on



MIKE Newell (*pictured*) accused Crystal Palace of treating Luton with contempt after his side's surprise win.

The Luton manager was unhappy with comments made in the match programme by Palace fitness coach John Harbin, who had claimed the match would be "a bit like a cup final" for the Hatters.

"I read a couple of things that disturbed me today," said Newell.

"There was a page saying this match would be our cup final and that we would want to prove our critics wrong.

"But I'm not aware that we have any critics. I do not expect to read condescending comments from fellow professionals in the opposition programme.

"This was never going to be our cup final."

But Palace manager Iain Dowie — a former Luton player — insisted that Harbin's comments were not meant to

patronise Newell or his team.

The Selhurst Park chief also offered no excuses for his side's defeat after a tepid performance, of which Andy Johnson's 52nd minute equaliser was a rare bright spot.

Dowie said: "Harbin would not have meant to be condescending. I have the utmost respect for what Newell has achieved at Luton.

"I would never be condescending about Luton. This is a very, very tough division — and they are one of the reasons for that.

"Our play last year was built on a solid defence, and we did not manage to be solid at the back today.

"Let's not look for excuses. Luton were better than us today, they created better chances and they deserved to win."

Newell adopted a low-key approach to his side's victory, the former Everton striker claiming his side were more than good enough to prosper in the Championship.

"We are not going to get excited," he said.

"All we have done is prove to ourselves that we might be able to cope at this level.

"I will not say that my ambition is to stay in this league, because that is a negative ambition.

"There is no reason why my players should not have confidence. They deserved a chance to prove themselves at this level."