

Palace get off on wrong foot

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AT SELHURST PARK	

IF Crystal Palace are to meet their chairman's expectations by winning the Championship, they will have to take the lesson in application administered by Luton here. The promoted team displayed more concentration when defending and infinitely superior movement going forward and might have won by a greater margin.

Although Andy Johnson

cancelled out an opening goal from Steven Howard, whose deft aerial work often left Fitz Hall and Mark Hudson looking statuesque, Mike Newell's men never lost their composure during Palace's best spell of the afternoon and gradually built the platform from which they launched the push for victory that culminated in a close-range winner by Ahmet Brkovic towards the end.

If Simon Jordan is capable of embarrassment, he would have been a very sheepish chairman at that stage, having established himself as a poor man's Peter Kenyon by declaring: "We will be top of the league - I guarantee you." Like Chelsea's boastful chief executive, Jordan was able to back up his claim with plausible argument: the managerial talent of Iain Dowie, who Jordan hailed as the best in the country; the

continued presence at the club of Johnson, who signed a new five-year contract last week; and some promising summer acquisitions. With Jon Macken, Jobi McAnuff and Darren Ward, the club do look at least as well endowed in the Championship as they did in the Premiership, despite the loss of Wayne Routledge.

But they will have to work a lot harder than this. Although Johnson's goals did most to stave off relegation until the final few minutes of last season, the eye was also caught by young Tom Soares and he, too, remains, along with the skilled and industrious central midfielder Ben Watson. Soares, however, had a very quiet match and gave way to Joonas Kolkka around the hour mark.

No one in Dowie's defence, meanwhile, was as sharp as

Newell's tall 20-year-old Curtis Davies, whose contests with Johnson were always worthy of close attention. After gaining half a yard on Davies, the England striker shot into the side netting and, as was the case in the Premiership, he showed he could drop off the front to good effect as well; fed by him, McAnuff dashed into the penalty area, where his protestations that he had been fouled by Markus Heikkinen were plainly unjustified.

Watson's set-piece delivery was another source of danger to Luton. But their emergence as the Chelsea of League Two last season identified Newell as a manager with a future and his side, though recast due to the late replacement of Chris Coyne by Heikkinen, never exhibited the slightest sense of inferiority. Indeed they ought to have taken the lead before

Howard performed that service a couple of minutes from the interval; their captain, Kevin Nicholls, had had a penalty saved.

The opportunity had arisen due to an excellent decision by the referee, Phil Dowd, who waited until Steve Robinson, his shirt being tugged by Gary Borrowdale, had shot wide under these trying circumstances before pointing to the spot. Nicholls, though, could not force the ball past the diving Gabor Kiraly.

Shortly afterwards there was another chance for Luton, but again the shot, now from Brkovic, lacked conviction and Kiraly was able to throw himself upon it. Warren Feeney then had an effort deflected wide before Howard got his head to a cross by Nicholls and left Kiraly helpless.

A thrilling run by McAnuff

which Heikkinen was cautioned for curtailing raised the home supporters' spirits and soon they had an equaliser to cheer.

After a free-kick had been tapped to Johnson, the 19-year-old Dean Brill made a superb one-handed save, but at the expense of a corner, which Watson flighted on to the head of Hudson, leaving Johnson to do the rest with a nod that said normal service, after all the speculation that he would leave to pursue his international ambitions, had been resumed.

Howard sent a header into Kiraly's arms before, nudging on another free-kick by the irrepressible Nicholls, he set up Brkovic for the goal that Luton merited. They were to endure the odd scare before the final whistle but always remained the better side.

Winning start... Ahmet Brkovic celebrates after scoring promoted Luton's second goal against Crystal Palace/ Jim Keogh