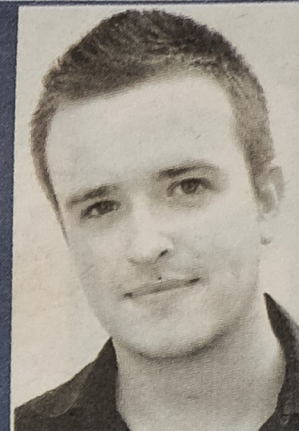




Luton Town FC

Crystal Palace 1 Luton 2

TOM LEECH reports
from Selhurst Park



■ Battling Hatters: Peter Holmes gets stuck in at Palace yesterday



Superb Hatters rule at the Palace

MAJESTIC Hatters pulled off the result of the opening day of the Championship with this stunning win.

Crowned League One champions in style, they carried on with the same swagger that took them to the title.

Goals in each half from Steve Howard and Ahmet Brkovic cancelled out one from Bedford-born Andy Johnson.

Hatters could even afford the luxury of a missed penalty.

Jubilant Hatters boss Mike Newell said: "I am not going to get carried away – there are 45 games left. All we have done is prove to ourselves that we can compete at this level.

"The new lads doing so well was a bonus, Marcus Heikkinen was outstanding and Dean Morgan also acquitted himself well.

"I was a bit worried at half time that we had let them off the hook with the missed penalty but we showed what we are made of in the second half and took the game to them.

"I won't state that my ambition is just to stay up as that is negative. I don't know what we can achieve yet. All I ever ask is that my players give it their all."

Despite the win, Newell was steaming about remarks in the programme. A column by fitness coach John Harbin said: "Today's opponents will be keener than anyone to impress and prove the critics wrong after coming up..."

"It will be a bit like a cup final for them, and we all know what can happen in the cup so we have to make sure that we are not the

victims of any so-called giantkilling."

Newell blasted back: "They went right to the death in the Premiership which is no mean feat but the condescending comments I read in the programme angered me.

"We have absolutely nothing to prove after winning our league convincingly."

The team from the top of League One and the team from the bottom of the Premiership met somewhere in the middle for most of the first half.

Newell was forced to withdraw Chris Coyne from the starting XI 20 minutes before kick-off when the Australian defender tweaked a hamstring in the pre-match warm-up.

That meant Finnish international Heikkinen joining Curtis Davies in the job of shackling England's Andy Johnson.

There was also a start for fellow new signing Dean Morgan. With left back Sol Davis getting injured on Friday with a thigh strain, Paul Underwood moved to defence and Morgan came in on the left wing.

After early sparring the game took an unexpected twist when the Hatters were awarded a penalty on 24 minutes.

An incisive ball from captain Kevin Nicholls put Steve Robinson clear in the penalty area and his shirt was almost ripped off him by two Palace defenders.

Referee Phil Dowd had no hesitation in pointing to the spot despite furious protests but it ended in disappointment when goalkeeper Gabor Kiraly guessed correctly from Nicholls' kick with a save to his left.

Nicholls almost made amends on 35 minutes with a header to the

perfectly placed Brkovic but his shot came to nothing.

Two minutes late there was a scare for the Hatters when the ball was hacked off the line by Heikkinen from Ben Watson's near post corner.

It was Luton who went into half time in the driving seat when Palace were caught out trying to play the offside trap on 44 minutes.

Nicholls swerved in a free kick and Howard timed his run powering in a header from five yards.

The lead lasted until seven minutes into the second half.

Johnson, who apart from a wayward shot in the first half, had been superbly marshalled by Heikkinen and Davies, showed on 52 minutes why Sven Goran Eriksson might yet take him to next year's World Cup.

Jobi McAnuss' exciting run came to an abrupt end when Heikkinen fouled him on the edge of the area and was subsequently booked.

The free kick looked to be lined up for Watson but Johnson tricked the wall with a quick turn and shot that was well saved by Brill.

From the resulting corner, Johnson capitalised on Mark Hudson's flick-on header by nodding in from close range.

Palace put Luton under the cosh and Hatters had teenage goalkeeper Dean Brill to thank with a brilliant reflex save from McAnuss' far post header.

Eleven minutes from the end Hatters made it the perfect start to the Championship campaign when another Nicholls free kick punished the South London side.

He drilled it across the box and as Luton threw bodies at the ball and all Kiraly could do was block



■ New boy on the ball: Dean Morgan, drafted in on the left wing