

On the run: Warren Feeney, of Luton, shows some of the spirit that was typical of the promoted side's display at Selhurst Park as they defeated Crystal Palace



PALACE OUT OF ORDER

CRYSTAL PALACE (0) 1

Johnson 52

LUTON TOWN (1) 2

Howard 44, Brkovic 79

★★★★★

Johnson's inevitable goal not enough for Palace

RUI FARIA, THE CHELSEA FITNESS coach, gained notoriety last season for wearing a woolen hat that Uefa officials suspected contained a listening device. John Harbin, Crystal Palace's equivalent, attracted censure on Saturday for some woolly phraseology. Harbin wrote a couple of sentences in his programme column that Luton Town deemed unfit to print: that the match would be like a cup final for Luton and they would hope for a good result that would answer their critics. As Mike Newell, their manager, pointed out, it is difficult to imagine who would want to criticise Luton before the season had even begun; Watford fans, perhaps.

Luton felt patronised. "There was a couple of things that disturbed me from fellow professionals in the opposition programme," Newell said.

"If he's taken offence we apologise but John didn't mean it like that," Iain Dowie, the Crystal

Palace manager, said. Had Palace shown Luton enough respect? "No, I don't [think so], not one bit. I think they were a bit degrading and it backfired," Kevin Nicholls, the Luton captain, said.

"I think Palace underestimated us and there are probably a few teams who will this season which will work to our advantage," Steve Howard, the Luton forward, said. "There were a few reports that the gaffer showed us which we weren't happy about but we proved them wrong. It was our first game in the Championship and it was always going to be a big game. But to describe it as a cup final is a bit out of order. I don't know whether it is because they have come down from the Premiership and still think they are a Premier League outfit, but they are in the Championship the same as us now and we are fighting as hard as them."

If not harder, on Saturday's evidence. While never secure at the back, Luton might have been more than one goal up at the break; Nicholls's penalty was saved before Howard headed the visiting team in front. Palace equalised through Andrew Johnson but Luton were unfazed and Ahmet Brkovic bundled in the winner with 11 minutes left.

The outcome was probably ordained in the stars from the moment Simon Jordan crowed in Saturday's papers: "We will start well, and we will be at the top of the league — I guarantee you."

The Palace chairman, who mused on a favourite topic, the evils of bad agents, in a newspaper column yesterday, is surely right that Johnson, chasing a place in England's World Cup squad, will score goals. But the forward will need brighter performances than this from his team-mates to boost his cause and not give him reason to regret committing his future to the club.

"The chairman's always been outspoken and says what he feels," Dowie said. "At the moment that's not looking a good prediction but we'll see after another 45 games."

Palace proved two seasons ago that it is possible to be awful for a substantial portion of the year and still go up. Yet a team who were one point short of Premiership survival ought to have looked better against a newly-promoted side, albeit one that cantered to the League One title last season via the sort of neat, purposeful and varied football they showed on Saturday.

TOM DART