

Promoted Luton produce a shock on the opening day of the season

ROBBERY AT THE PALACE



PALACE RAIDER: Luton's Ahmet Brkovic celebrates his goal yesterday

MIKE NEWELL accused Crystal Palace of treating Luton with contempt after his side's surprise 2-1 win.

Goals from Steve Howard and Ahmet Brkovic gave last season's League One champions a deserved victory at last season's Premiership side.

But Luton manager Newell was unhappy with comments in the match programme by Palace fitness coach John Harbin, who claimed the match would be 'a bit like a cup final' for Luton.

Newell said: 'I read a couple of things that disturbed me. 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.'

But Palace manager Iain Dowie — a former

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Luton player — insisted that Harbin's comments were not meant to patronise Newell nor his team. The Selhurst Park chief also offered no excuses for his side's defeat after a tepid performance, in which Andrew Johnson's equaliser was a rare bright spot.

Dowie said: 'John would not have meant to be condescending. I have the utmost respect for what Mike 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.'

Sir Clive Woodward and Harry Redknapp's Southampton kicked off with just a point at home to Wolves, drawing 0-0 after being out-

played for large parts of the game and taking 62 minutes to get a shot on target.

The duo's misery was compounded when Claus Lundekvam was sent off for a second bookable offence.

David Johnson, who cost Nottingham Forest £3million four years ago, ensured Gary Megson's side began their League One campaign in winning style. Coming on as substitute, he plundered a late decider to clinch a 2-1 win over Huddersfield.

Burnley boss Steve Cotterill accused a fan of racially abusing his players as his side were beaten by David Vaughan's late goal. He demanded stewards take action after the supporter insulted Burnley's former Stoke players, Ade Akinbiyi and Gifton Noel-Williams.

After the 2-1 defeat Cotterill said: 'There was a racist remark made from behind the dug-out. I didn't take too kindly to that. You don't expect it at a place like Crewe.'

COCA-COLA CHAMPIONSHIP					
Crewe	2	1	Burnley		
Crystal Palace	1	2	Luton		
Derby County	1	1	Brighton		
Hull City	0	0	QPR		
Ipswich	1	0	Cardiff City		
Norwich City	1	1	Coventry City		
Reading	1	2	Plymouth		
Sheffield Utd	4	1	Leicester City		
Southampton	0	0	Wolves		
Stoke City	0	0	Sheffield Wed		
Watford	1	2	Preston NE		

seems a long way off for Johnson

ANDY JOHNSON registered the first of the many goals he will need to keep his World Cup hopes alive, and yet it was not enough to rescue woeful Palace.

Steve Howard headed confident Luton into the lead before the break and Ahmet Brkovic then scrambled a winner 11 minutes from time to wipe out Johnson's equaliser.

Iain Dowie's team were so inept in defence that it took a penalty save from Gabor Kiraly and a succession of squandered Luton chances to keep the home side in the game at all.

Even then, Johnson's simple header in the 50th minute failed to have any lasting impact.

On the final whistle the England striker cut a lone figure, trudging over to the furthest corner flag to collect the match ball and delivering it dutifully to referee Phil Dowd. Johnson

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By Mark Ryan		

seemed lost in thought, almost depressed.

And although he will never admit to such negative thoughts, the 24-year-old could be forgiven this morning for wondering what on earth he has done by signing a five-year contract with a club unlikely, on this early evidence, to achieve a swift return to the Premiership.

Mike Newell's bubbly Luton took control, largely through the vision of their captain Kevin Nicholls and the trickery of the match-winner, Brkovic.

Howard squandered a 12th-minute opportunity and watched seconds later as Johnson was even slower off the mark. Luton keeper

Dean Brill sold himself cheaply, leaving the international with his back to an empty net, but Johnson failed to react in time.

Palace defender Mark Hudson sent two headers wayward from Ben Watson corners, and it was Hudson who pulled back the dynamic Brkovic after 25 minutes to give away the spot-kick.

Visiting skipper Nicholls only found the outstretched arms of Hungarian Kiraly, who correctly dived low to his left and received rapturous applause from the home supporters.

After Johnson had blasted a half-chance into the side-netting, Brkovic danced clear again and only more smart guesswork by Kiraly smothered the latest chance.

The goalkeeper, wearing his trademark tracksuit bottoms, could not stem the tide alone, however, and

Nicholls clipped a free-kick with perfect accuracy on to the head of the advancing Howard. Johnson's rescue act came five minutes after the break when he was in the right place at the right time to turn in a scarcely deserved equaliser from point-blank range.

But it was not enough and Brkovic was a more appropriate hero on this occasion when he converted another dangerous Nicholls free-kick.

It could be a long hard season for Johnson, with World Cup 2006 in Germany currently looking a distant prospect indeed.

CRYSTAL PALACE (4-4-2): Kiraly; Borrowdale, Hudson (Ward 84min), Hall, Boyce; Soares (Kolkka 62), Watson, Hughes, McAnuff; Macken (Andrews 84), Johnson. **Subs** (not used): Ligertwood, Speroni. **Booked:** Hughes, Hudson.
LUTON (4-4-2): Brill; Underwood, Heikkinen, Davies, Foley; Morgan (Holmes 71), Robinson, Nicholls, Brkovic (Showunmi 88); Feeney, Howard. **Subs** (not used): Vine, Seremet, Perrett. **Booked:** Underwood, Foley. **Referee:** P Dowd (Staffordshire).