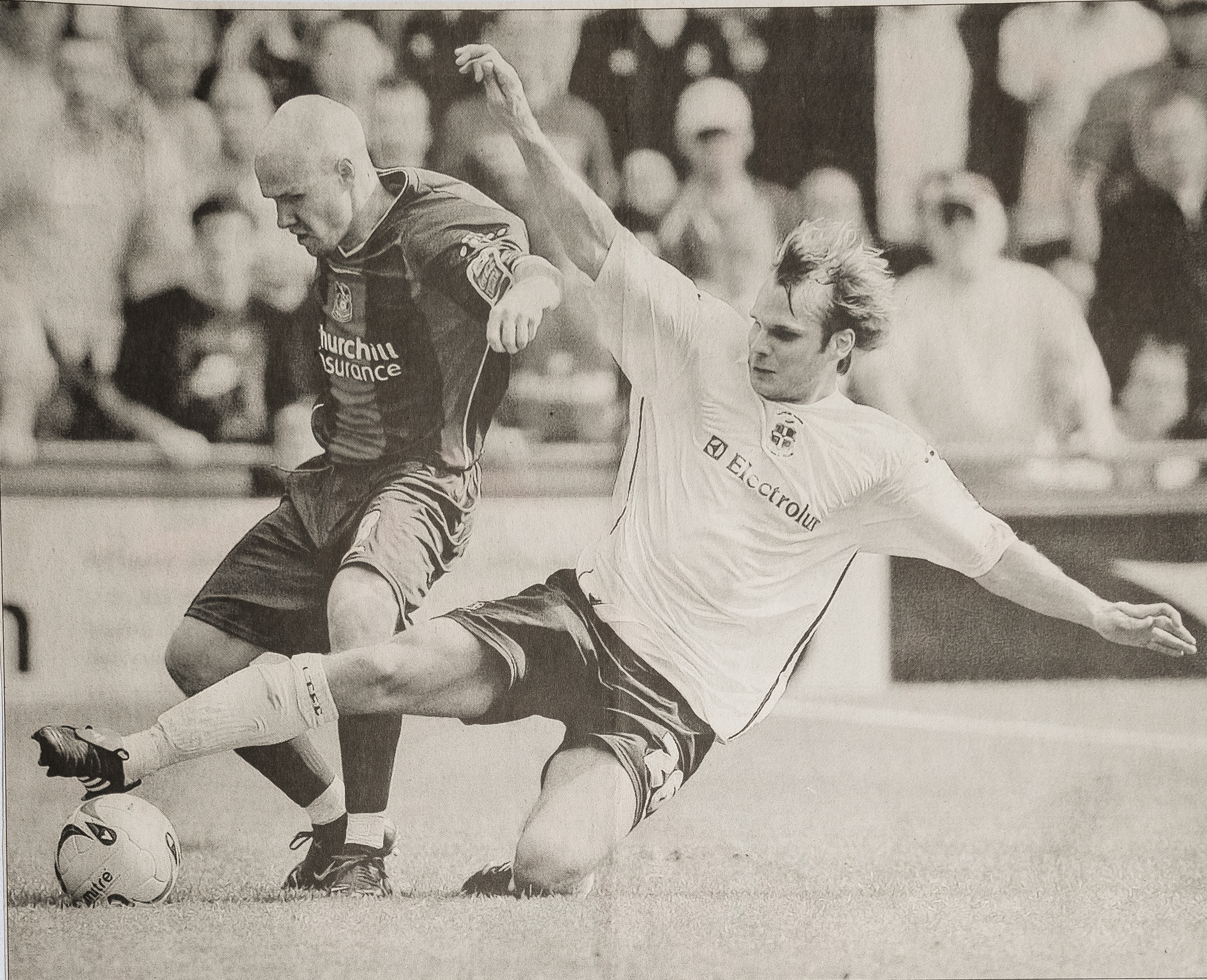




At full stretch: Luton defender Markus Heikkinen slides in to dispossess Crystal Palace scorer Andy Johnson. Relegated Palace suffered an unexpected 2-1 defeat against promoted Luton

Lively Luton shock Palace

LAST season Crystal Palace were relegated from the Premiership and Luton were promoted to the Championship. But had you not known their relative histories, you would have struggled yesterday to know which was which.

Luton came out radiating confidence from the kick-off. But why shouldn't Luton be confident, demanded their highly effective manager, Mike Newell? After all, they had won League One last season by a dozen points and gained promotion by a margin of 21.

"I never do much of a team talk anyway," he said with typical frankness. "We believe we've got decent footballers. We will sooner or later be at a stage when we have to get in better players, but at this stage, it's only right to give the players who performed last season a chance."

He also confessed that, at

Crystal P (Johnson 52) Luton (Howard 37, Brkovic 79) Brian Glanville at Selhurst Park	1 Boyce Hudson Kiraly McAnuff Watson Hall Borrowdale Macken Johnson Feeney Howard Morgan Brkovic Nicholls Robinson Underwood Davies Heikkinen Foley Brill
---	--

half-time, when his team were one ahead when it might well have been several more: "We were always a little bit worried Palace might get into it and there might have been a feeling we'd let them off the hook."

Just before the interval, always an important psychological moment, Steven Howard headed in Kevin Nicholls's free kick to give Luton a belated lead, but earlier they had squan-

dered two good chances. First, after 25 minutes, Nicholls, a key provider, put an excellent ball through to Ahmet Brkovic. Desperately Mark Hudson, the Palace defender, tugged Brkovic back.

A clear penalty but Nicholls hit a weak shot to the left of Palace's resilient, tall Hungarian goalkeeper Gabor Kiraly, who saved.

Subsequently, Nicholls's

carefully cushioned header gave Brkovic what looked an easy chance but that too produced only a weak shot which Kiraly saved again.

It should have been a day of celebration for Palace since their prolific centre-forward, Andy Johnson, had, against much expectation, decided to stay with them. But in the first half Johnson was a virtual anonymity. Although he came to

life and scored in the second, by and large Luton's central defence contained him well.

Much to their credit, Luton scorned the easy option of playing long balls to the head or foot of their own powerful, classically English centre-forward, Howard, who scored last season in profusion. When they attack, which they frequently did yesterday so inventively, he is simply one more excellent alternative to be exploited when it looks productive.

In the second half Luton did owe much to their own defiant goalkeeper, Dean Brill. He was a little unlucky to concede a Palace equaliser on 52 minutes.

When Palace were given a free kick outside the area in a central position, Ben Watson shaped up as though he were going to run in and thump it. Instead, the ball was tapped to Johnson, who let fly a fierce right-footed shot which Brill

athletically turned behind. Ben Watson took the subsequent corner from the right, the ball skimmed off a head to Johnson and Johnson headed in.

On 70 minutes Brill made another fine save when Joonas Kolkka crossed long from the right and Jobi McAnuff got in a potent header.

Eleven minutes from the end, Nicholls (who else?) took a free kick from the right, there was bumping and boring in the Palace box, Howard made contact and Brkovic knocked in a well-deserved winner.

STAR MAN: Kevin Nicholls (Luton)

Player ratings. Crystal Palace: Kiraly 8, Hudson 5 (Ward 84min, 6), Boyce 6, Hall 6, McAnuff 7, Watson 7, Hughes 6, Borrowdale 6, Soares 6 (Kolkka 62min, 6), Macken 5 (Andrews 84min, 6), Johnson 7

Luton: Brill 8, Foley 7, Heikkinen 7, Davies 7, Underwood 6, Brkovic 7 (Showunmi 88min, 6), Nicholls 8, Robinson 7, Morgan 7 (Holmes 71min, 6), Howard 7, Feeney 7

Scorers: Crystal Palace: Johnson 52

Luton: Howard 37, Brkovic 79

Referee: P Dowd

Attendance: 21,166