

Crystal Palace 1
Luton Town 2

By JAMES NURSEY

ANDY JOHNSON scored his first goal of the season but the England ace had little else to celebrate on his return to life outside the Premiership.

And with Sven Goran Eriksson naming his squad on Saturday for England's friendly in Denmark the following Wednesday, the striker could be forgiven for having second thoughts about his decision to stay at Palace.

After scoring 21 times in the Premiership last term, Johnson was linked with moves to some of the top-flight's leading clubs such as Liverpool, Spurs and Everton. But the 24-year-old signed a new five-year deal at Selhurst Park last week and vowed to fire Palace out of the Championship.

Eriksson's assistant Tord Grip was present to see Johnson open his account against the newly-promoted Hatters with a close-range header to cancel out Steve Howard's 44th-minute opener. However nothing else went right for the diminutive forward, who was singled out for rough treatment from the Luton defence.

And if Iain Dowie's side do not improve rapidly then no-one from England's hierarchy will be rushing back to

I'm A Premiership Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here!

JOHNSON IS IN CHAMPIONSHIP JUNGLE AND ALREADY HE'S NO.1 TARGET FOR EVERYONE

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: Dowie

watch them. The prospect of shackling Johnson appeared to inspire the Luton defence and their skipper Kevin Nicholls reckons Palace rely too heavily on the £1million-rated hit-man.

He said: "I have captained Luton to two promotions and success is all about the team, not individuals."

"Andy Johnson is a talented lad but he can't get them promoted on his own. If they didn't rely on Johnson so much, they might do a bit better."

Nicholls had a first-half penalty saved but he had reason to gloat after setting up Howard's header and Ahmet Brkovic's winner.

The feisty midfielder was determined to enjoy the win as he felt Palace were on a plateau and underestimated his side.

Nicholls added: "I don't think Palace showed us enough respect. Anyone looking at the game overall would think we had just been demoted from the Premiership, not that we were promoted."

Nicholls and his team-mates were particularly cheered off by Palace chairman Simon Jordan's pre-match claim that his club were "guaranteed" to win the league.

Eagles fitness coach John Harbin also described the match in the programme as a "cup final" for the visitors, which Luton felt was patronising.

Luton manager Mike Newell used Harbin's remark to motivate his side and Jordan's comment could yet return to haunt Palace. Boss Dowie

said: "Right now the chairman's remark is not looking like a good prediction, but we'll see after another 45 games."

"You won't ever hear me saying that sort of thing because it is not what I am about, but he has always been outspoken."

Confident

While Johnson stays fit and keeps banging in the goals, Palace's veteran midfielder Michael Hughes believes they will have a great chance of going back up.

But Hughes is wary about putting too much responsibility for the

club's fortunes on Johnson. He said: "We have re-signed Andy, which is fabulous for us, but we can't put all the emphasis on him to score 30 or 40 goals."

"The 11 players who take the field have all got to pull their weight and if Andy chips in with 25 goals then I would say that would almost guarantee us a top-six place."

"I'm fairly confident he will score 23 goals or more but I don't want to heap too much pressure on the kid and say he has got to get us up."

WHAT HAVE I DONE?
Premiership hotshot Johnson (right) with Ben Watson, faces life in the Championship



HOWARD'S WAY: Luton's Steve Howard powers in a header to put Luton in front in the first half



AHM IN CHARGE: Ahmet Brkovic slots in the winner to secure all three points for Luton Town



HAT'S MORE LIKE IT: Steve Howard celebrates his goal with Curtis Davies

Howard's in mood for a play-off bid

By JAMES NURSEY

STEVE HOWARD believes Luton could feature in the play-off race after the new boys stunned promotion favourites Palace.

Howard, 29, headed the Hatters' opener at Selhurst Park and Ahmet Brkovic netted a late winner after Andy Johnson had equalised.

Last season's runaway League One champions deserved the win and could have triumphed by a greater margin had Gabor Kiraly not saved Kevin Nicholls' penalty. Howard now says Mike Newell's team should attempt to climb as high up the table as possible rather than just aim to beat the drop.

He said: "We want to consolidate our place in the league and maybe look for mid-table but after this win has given us a lot of confidence."

"We always knew we had a good footballing side and our work-rate will match anyone, but this win has given us a lot of confidence."

"We were the underdogs but the lads worked their socks off and put in a great performance."

"I think Palace underestimated us and there are probably a few teams who will this season which should work to our advantage. If we keep trying hard like that we should be okay."

Proved

Newell fired his team up by highlighting an article in the Palace programme which compared the match to a "cup final" for Luton.

Howard felt that was patronising but he and his team-mates had the final laugh.

The Durham-born striker added: "We weren't happy about that 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 I think is a bit out of order."

"I don't know whether it is because Palace have come down from the Premiership and still think they are a Premier League outfit, but we are in the same league as us now."

Howard netted 22 goals last term and he is confident he can score regularly in the Championship too.

He said: "The gaffer has been telling me that just because I have gone up a league there is no reason to stop scoring. I want to get as many as I can."

Predators ready to hunt down AJ

JOLEON LESCOTT **CRAIG FLEMING** **TARIBO WEST**

Wolves v Palace, tomorrow
The intimidating Wolves defender has a huge scar on his forehead and will not be worried about preserving his looks when confronting AJ.

BUSHTUCKER RATING:
Stern examination ***

Norwich v Palace, August 13
Norwich skipper Craig Fleming is an uncompromising northerner but was unable to prevent AJ scoring twice against the Canaries last term.

BUSHTUCKER RATING:
AJ on top *

Palace v Plymouth, Aug 20
The Nigerian international has faced better players than Johnson in Serie A and will fancy his chances against the Championship's star striker.

BUSHTUCKER RATING:
West to win ***

