

Luton knuckle down for a long stay at the top

John Ashdown Ninian Park

Cardiff City 1
Ricketts 9

Luton Town 2
Morgan 30
Holmes 57

05/06

The Championship may be waiting for Luton Town to fade away, but it is not going to happen. They are simply too good for that. This victory, claimed at the league's archetypal "difficult place to go", took them five points clear of fourth-placed Wolves and three behind Reading in second. They are capable of at least maintaining that lofty position.

"Our plan is to carry on going the same way we've been playing," said Newell. "Other people's expectations have changed – not ours. We didn't set any targets as we didn't know what we were capable of doing."

Now everyone knows. Newell's Luton are a side not used to losing. The Hatters have been beaten only eight times in their last 58 games in the league, winning 36, and a continuation of that sort of win-loss ratio will see them close to automatic promotion come May. Their midfielder Kevin Nicholls's assertion last week that the club should forget the play-offs and concentrate on the top two places has been backed with hard on-field evidence.

Every time the Hatters seem to be running out of steam they have responded. Their first defeat of the season at Stoke was followed with back-to-back league wins and a spell of one victory in four games in September has again been followed by two consecutive triumphs. This game was that in microcosm: unperturbed by Cardiff's early goal, Luton maintained their control of the game, confident that the goals would come. They duly did through Dean Morgan and Peter Holmes and more should have followed, with Steve Howard hitting the inside of a post and Neil Alexander in the Cardiff goal forced to make a series of excellent saves.

"We controlled the game but I'm not



Luton's defence survived a late assault by Cardiff when Darren Purse's drive hit the woodwork at Ninian Park Ollie Martin/Wales News Service

ecstatic as I think we can do better," said Newell. "We always try to play decent football and to be honest we haven't been bettered yet. We haven't scraped any points or come away from games thinking we've been lucky."

His side may have been lucky with their first goal. Ahmet Brkovic curled the ball across a back four that was pushing out to catch Steve Howard offside. Howard though was inactive (one of the few times in the match that he was) and Morgan, certainly onside and very much active, raced through and finished emphatically. It was

probably the correct interpretation of the rules, but such decisions make the offside trap a dangerous ploy to use.

Cardiff's manager Dave Jones was commendably phlegmatic. "I felt that once we scored we should have gone on and imposed ourselves on the game," he said. "Even though I'm not sure we deserved it, we should still have come away with a point."

Before this game Cardiff could claim to have been the form side in the Championship. Jones's side had not conceded in the last four league games and were

unbeaten in the last eight in all competitions.

Here they were swatted aside as so many of Luton's opponents have been this season, rousing themselves only for a late onslaught that saw Carlos Edwards forced to clear off his own line, Darren Purse volley a corner against bar and post, and Michael Ricketts, who had given the Bluebirds the lead with a cracking low drive, also hit the woodwork.

"Everyone came here today expecting us to build on our recent success but people shouldn't get carried away," said

Jones. "We are building solid foundations here and that means doing things block by block. The test is how the players react to this."

One potential problem for Cardiff, though more likely one for Wales, is the injury to their enigmatic midfielder Jason Koumas, who left the field with a groin problem in the second half. He will report with the Welsh squad today but may miss the qualifiers against Northern Ireland and Azerbaijan.

Man of the match: Carlos Edwards (Luton Town)