

A TYRO'S IMPRESSIONS OF THE CUP-TIE

NINETY MINUTES WITH GEORGE OF THE FELT TRADE

This article is printed exactly as received.

2.25 p.m. Luton football ground. I am surrounded on all sides by fans who, like myself, are paying at the rate of a penny a minute for their fun. This, compounded, would buy a dog licence, three cheap tickets to town, or a new novel. Too late to exchange now, however. Opposite, the 3s. terrace looks positively indecent in its nudity. Prudish bandsmen try to cover over some of it with trombones and other blasting instruments, but the effect is negligible.

2.26. Every seat around me is now occupied; late-comers, several with floodlit noses, have used my knees and shoulders as stiles and all is excitement and bubble.

2.27. A roar. Luton are out.

2.28. A roar just behind me which would have made Blackpool Tower quiver like an electrocuted elephant. Blackpool are out.

2.29. Dead silence. The referee and linesmen are out.

2.30. Zero hour. Over the top and away they go! Quick raids through the marshes from both sides. Blackpoolis

almost through. My neighbour strangely afflicted. Stands on my right foot. Then groans and pushes me sideways. Ball cleared. Audible deflation of neighbour, hereinafter referred to as George.

GEORGE GETS GOING

Play from end to end. George in hysterics of rage and elation by turn. Two of Luton's team are not trying, he says. Luton's right wing-three, or whatever you call him, is hurt, and though carrying on gallantly, is obviously hors-de-combat.

George intensely upset at this and says we shall lose by four clear goals; still, what does it matter, three of the players don't care if they're on the field or not, judging by their rosy kicking and still rosier tackling.

Blackpool score. George 32 degrees below zero. Won't accept sympathy. Ball in Blackpool's goalmouth. Good scrumming. Ball heeled out to Payne, who scores. Other ten players and George register emotion, especially George, who says we shall now win three—one if rosy so and so will only wake up. Ball in Luton's goalmouth. Two Luton players leave it to George, who doesn't oblige. Goal. Half-time.

BAND PARTS

Band uncover the 3s. terrace, and all melody, profanity and cigarette-smoke.

Teams come out again. George, who had disappeared, returns, and repeats gist of conversation he has just had with Blackpool fan, confirming all George's predictions of a smashing defeat in the second half for Luton, owing to (1) Wing three's injury, (2) gross neglect of duty on the part of four of Luton's players, (3) depopulated 3s. terrace, and (4) the bad felt season.

Game restarts. Blackpool must have been given a Norbreck Special, and gallop away time after time. Mackey, who is now thirty yards across the chest, gets in the way of all Blackpool's forwards at once. Ball clouts him behind the ear enough to fell King Kong, but he treats it with obliv. Blackpool taking him back as a breakwater.

Joe Payne gets right through, but shoots politely into goalie's hands. George says Joe isn't trying.

Blackpool's right wing-three bursts away and fires in a shot which darts coquettishly from upright to crossbar, crossbar to the other upright, takes a turn along the goal line, strikes Luton's goalie as an *arrière pensée*, and then starts back again for Blackpool. Sigh from George which would have inflated a lorry tyre.

DEPTHS OF DESPAIR

Blackpool score again. George's face elongated several magnitudes. We are going down 6—1, he says. Someone opines that he's known teams worse down than 3—1 and lose. Laughter (except from George).

Luton's gallant wing-three goes off at last to the graving-dock. Ten minutes to go. Payne scores. Crowd in raptures. George informs me that only one of Luton's team is not trying now.

Five minutes. . . . Luton pressing hard. Crowd on their toes (George on mine). Mackey rushes along, the ground fairly vibrates, he thinks he's the missing wing-three, and takes a cunning place-kick at goal himself. Magnificent effort. Square six. Just saved by Blackpool goalie. All Luton now, except goalie, in Blackpool goalmouth, and Blackpool's skipper could easily plead the Overcrowding Act. Stephenson, with remarkable accuracy and judgment, shoots through twenty pairs of legs. Goal.

George now up to boiling point, stands on both my feet at once, and makes a noise like a foghorn. ALL Luton now trying, he says, but too late. Final whistle.

George opines that if rosy — (name deleted by censor) and blushing — (ditto) had only tried, if the wing-three had not been crocked, if the 3s. Stand had been full, if there had been no rain in the morning, and if manufacturers would only have a frank round-table conference about the felt trade, Luton would have won.