

Conditions produce ice lottery at Highbury

85/86 (FAC)

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Pictures: Mark Richards**

THE happiest result of Monday's FA Cup trip to Arsenal was the luck at the toss of a coin which brought the Gunners back to Kenilworth Road last night.

In two hours of soccer at Highbury on Monday the Town rarely looked like their old selves in a match which was always something of a lottery.

And while they should have won the teams first met in this FA Cup fifth round tie at Kenilworth Road, Arsenal were the side who should have been kicking themselves this time.

The big surprise at Highbury was that both teams eventually managed to produce a pretty good cup-tie on a pitch made difficult by frost and a partial cover of frozen snow.

The synthetic turf last night must surely have felt like Wembley to the 22 men who struggled to keep their feet in North London on Monday.

On balance, Arsenal should have won at the second attempt, particularly for their attacking in extra time. Yet the Town showed resilient defence, with Steve Foster and Mal Donaghy outstanding, and Les Sealey backing them up when Arsenal did break down a determined rearguard.

The Town's major problem was in attack, where Mick Harford had little support. Andy King was recalled for his first game in more than a month in place of cup-tied Mike Newell, and asking him to deputise for Brian Stein was a tall order.

Arsenal kept an extra man spare in midfield to clamp down on Ricky Hill, who had been close to destroying them in the first meeting at Kenilworth Road, and in the 30 minutes of extra time the Town's forward line all but subsided.

Sealey saved his side with saves from Charlie Nicholas

and Viv Anderson and the Town's draw was a triumph for determination and spirit.

Talent, was never going to be the decisive factor on a pitch of varying quality. One corner, stretching to nearly a quarter of the area, still had snow on it, and the rest was an expanse of bone hard and uneven turf.

Passes could not be struck confidently, players could not accelerate or turn smoothly, and every tackle was a test of temperament.

On that score the Town came through well enough, but rarely will the Town go through a match with such a depressing goal attempts record: not one on target in the first half, two in the second, and none in extra time.

Their best scoring attempt in the first 45 minutes was when David O'Leary and John Lukic misunderstood each other when Peter Nicholas humped an optimistic high ball forward.

The goalkeeper half-advanced and his skipper directed a back-pass header at the space. Luckily for Arsenal the ball drifted wide of a post.

Sealey, who had a very good game and always choose the right moments to advance and punch clear, tipped a lob by Paul Mariner over the bar, and by half-time most of the Pressbox occupants were already looking up details of replay arrangements.

The second half was more interesting, with Arsenal gradually forcing their way into something near dominance.

Sealey spread himself to save when Charlie Nicholas might have caused danger, and was let off the hook with eight minutes to go when a wicked bounce, always a problem, put Viv

Anderson clear. But from five or six yards the full-back blazed a wild shot wide.

Donaghy, always brainy in his covering of danger from flanks or down the middle, threw himself full-length to block another effort by Nicholas to force extra time.

The additional half-hour needed strong nerves for Town fans. Arsenal controlled almost all of it. Sealey saved well from Nicholas and competently from David Rocastle, then gathered a header by Anderson which might have been better directed.

Steve Williams threatened attacking danger only once, with a late run which was about to take him clear when Foster's leg stretched out to bring him down, to earn a booking for a skipper who clearly had no intention of seeing a hard-won draw get away.

For a team famous for its skill and enterprise, it was some consolation to know that when battling determination was needed it could be found.

Long before the end the joke going round the Pressbox was that Arsenal had won the toss to choose the replay venue and had insisted on the Town's artificial pitch.

Monday's details

ARSENAL 0 LUTON TOWN 0 (After extra time)

TOWN: Sealey; Johnson, Foster, Donaghy, Thomas; Hill, Nicholas, Preece; North, King, Harford. Sub: Grimes, not used.

ARSENAL: Lukic; Anderson, O'Leary, Keown, Sansom; Allinson, Williams, Rocastle, Rix; Mariner, Nicholas. Sub: Quinn, not used.

GOAL ATTEMPTS: Town two saved, three wide; Arsenal seven saved and seven wide. Corners: 8-6 to Arsenal.

ATTENDANCE: 26,547, on a very cold night, with Town fans making their presence heard.

REFEREE: Allan Gunn, Burgess Hill, Sussex — the morning verdict by another referee that the pitch was playable was more debatable than any decisions he made during the match.

ENTERTAINMENT: Improved as the game went on, but with the pitch hard and frosty, and neither side able to win real control in lottery conditions it was not a classic match. Arsenal had more chances of breaking the deadlock, particularly in extra time, but the Town battled through a trying examination.