

ARSENAL AND LUTON IN STALEMATE

By MICHAEL CALVIN

Arsenal ... 0—Luton Town ... 0
(after extra time)

THE DUBIOUS morality of exposing top-class players to unnecessary risk was emphasised at Highbury last night when Arsenal and Luton conducted a fittingly futile FA Cup fifth round replay.

Natural justice, ignored by an incomprehensible decision to pass fit the frost-bound pitch, was served by a draw which will necessitate a second replay at Kenilworth Road tomorrow.

A winning goal from either side would have lent an air of credibility to a match which should, by any standards, not have been played.

At least a third of the playing area, littered with the treacherous remnants of snow and ice, was positively dangerous.

It was little surprise that both managers were reluctant to discuss their feelings. Criticising referees is hardly the best way to win friends in influential places.

Referee's decision

Privately, however, I suspect they are seething. Adaptability has become the hallmark of a modern footballer yet the limits of logic were stretched to breaking point by the decision of referee Gunn to bring the match through the full 120 minutes.

Clubs have a duty to their players to resist the commercial and administrative advantages of easing the backlog of matches in World Cup year.

But at times last night—notably when Luton's North and Arsenal's Keown fell heavily on the rock-like surface—when one feared a repeat of the incident which led Reading's Andy Rogers to his recent brush with death.

Even the 26,547 fans were not rewarded for their hardiness. A tie between two well-matched teams emerged instead as an attritional duel in which players were reduced to exercising the simple option of a hefty boot forward.

For the record Arsenal, who have lost only one FA Cup-tie at Highbury in the last 21 years, created the better chances.

Nicholas hesitated fatally with 15 minutes of normal time remaining and Anderson's lack of composure ensured that the two other major opportunities were squandered.

There have been many rash words spoken recently about the merits of artificial pitches. But I suspect, that both sets of players will welcome the chance to play on Luton's synthetic surface tomorrow.

As David Pleat, Luton's manager said: "That game was a wonderful advertisement for synthetic pitches. Ours is as soft as a baby's bottom.

"Both Don Howe and myself were here at 11 o'clock this morning and it was not the match referee who inspected the pitch. But we are both respectable managers and abided by the decision to play. Taking the snow off left patches of ice which is a very dangerous element."

Arsenal.—Lukic; Anderson, Sansom, Williams, O'Leary, Keown, Allinson, Rocastle, C. Nicholas, Mariner, Ry.

Luton.—Sealey; Johnson, Thomas, P. Nicholas, Foster, Donaghy, Hill, King, Harford, North, Preece.



Charlie Nicholas of Arsenal, all set to find his way between Luton's Bob Johnson (right) and Mitchell Thomas at Highbury last night.