

Ice dance marks for effort only

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(FAC)

SOCCER

The rush to finish the season in time for World Cup embarkation is understandable, but the FA Cup is surely worth more than this farcical attempt to settle the fifth-round tie between Arsenal and Luton in impossible conditions at Highbury.

Luton's pitch may be artificial, but the surface on which the teams were asked to decide their replay last night was unreal. Highbury's ice-melting system has long since fallen into disrepair and so for two hours a crowd of 26,500 had to suffer the unwatchable on the unheatable.

A goalless draw means a second replay at Kenilworth Road tomorrow evening, Luton having won the toss for choice of venue. Their supporters cheered the news but if some Arsenal fans had joined in it would have been logical. At least we are assured of sane conditions for the third meeting.

The players did their best to play positive football on a pitch that was one part arctic to two parts tundra and was extremely painful for knees, elbows and any other parts of the anatomy which met it with any force.

Arsenal, relieved to come away from the original match with a 2-2 draw, had the better of last night's game and missed several opportunities to earn themselves an attractive quarter-final at home to the winners of tonight's meeting between Tottenham and Everton.

For neutral observers, however, the fact that nobody lost in such circumstances was the most satisfactory outcome.

At Kenilworth Road, Hill had inspired Luton with a skilful and authoritative display between the penalty areas. He was never likely to repeat that last night, and as the game progressed Arsenal gained a consistent grip on the midfield and the wings, which might have brought them victory.

For a long time Foster's strength in the air foiled many an Arsenal attack but in the

last half-hour they began to get behind the Luton defence and Nicholas's good first-time control near the goal looked as if it might end the deadlock.

However, the Scottish international was unable to control the ball in the crucial moment that O'Leary's header found him clear to the left of the goal area, and in the 82nd minute Anderson lifted the best chance of the night over the bar, having set himself up by flicking the ball over Thomas's head and running round the Luton left-back to meet it as it dropped.

Nicholas had a well-struck shot saved by Sealey at the start of extra time and Anderson miscued with a header from close range, but that was the last time Arsenal came close to scoring. Luton forced a number of corners during the two hours but never achieved anything quite so clear-cut. Obviously they will fancy their chances back on their own pitch but they have now met Arsenal four times this season without managing to beat them.

Arsenal: Lukic; Anderson, Sansom, Williams, O'Leary, Keown, Allinson, Rocastle, Nicholas, Mariner, Rix.

Luton Town: Sealey; Johnson, Thomas, Nicholas, Foster, Donaghy, Hill, King, Harford, North, Preece.

Referee: A. Gunn (Burgess Hill).

A DANISH striker, Flemming Christensen, could help Portsmouth's push for a place in the First Division. Christensen, 26, capped seven times, had ended his contract with the Danish First Division side, Lyngby, and wants to press his World Cup claims by playing in England.

A £1.2 million sports centre was officially opened at Middlesbrough FC yesterday after a six-year delay.

Remedial work to meet fire and safety regulations has been met by the Second Division Club, the Sports Council, the Football Grounds Improvement Trust, and Middlesbrough Borough Council.

GARTH CROOKS and Micky Thomas have been put on the transfer list by West Bromwich Albion because they have refused to move home to live near to the Hawthorns. Crooks, signed from Spurs, lives in London, while Thomas, who moved from Chelsea, has a home in North Wales.



TALL ORDER . . . big men Mariner and Foster leave Hill grounded
Picture by Frank Baron