

Luton's Cupful of joy!

87/88 (FLC)

Luton ... 2 Oxford United ... 0 (agg: 3-1); By JEFF POWELL

LUTON, who only entered the Littlewoods Cup under protest at having to admit visiting hooligans to their home ties, rejoiced without restraint yesterday at reaching the final.

Thousands of their club members reverted to red-blooded supporters, surging down from the terraces to salute the men who have taken the club to Wembley. Ray Harford and his players climbed into the directors' box to shower the celebrants with sparkling wine.

It would have been just as appropriate had they all turned together to applaud the artificial pitch. Luton squeezed every last ounce from their exceptional home advantage and Oxford, surprise Littlewood Cup winners themselves two years ago, were on their way out from the night they failed to win their home leg of this semi-final.

Two goals as sweet as the bubbly which filled the cold afternoon air were the least Oxford might have expected to surrender on this skidpan surface.

Richer

Now, win or lose against Arsenal on April 24, Luton will happily forsake the plastic seclusion of Kenilworth Road for the wide open pastures of Wembley.

Having scraped barely £100,000 out of the competition so far, Luton will be £500,000 richer for the unlimited admission of 100,000 paying customers at the national stadium.

They will spend £350,000 on re-signing England left back Mitchell Thomas from Tottenham.

As the drink flowed over, rather than into, the assembly it was a sobering thought for Luton that their only defeat since Boxing Day has been inflicted by Arsenal ... on grass.

Not that the moguls of High-bury will take them lightly. manager George Graham was among yesterday's 13,010 all-ticket spectators and said: 'Luton are a good passing team and deserve their place at Wembley.'



WHAT A BEAUTY ... Luton mob Grimes

Stein and Grimes put skids under Oxford

As holders, Arsenal would also be favourites. Oxford manager Maurice Evans echoed the sentiments of underdog lovers everywhere when he said: 'I hope Luton go on to win the Cup but really I fancy Arsenal to retain it.'

For Luton, even arriving in the final enables the players and staff to lay an historical ghost. The club has not been to Wembley since they lost an FA Cup Final to the ten men of Nottingham Forest in 1959 and manager Harford said: 'We're delighted to put the legend to rest. It would be better still if we can do it by winning the Cup.'

Harford was given the chance to do that by a pair of goals which just about justified the

decision to decimate the weekend's First Division programme so this match might be screened by live television on a Sunday.

They came in the first half and Ashley Grimes, at last with something to show for his traumatic career, was involved in both.

It was Grimes' 32nd minute free kick which Mick Harford chested down for Rob Johnson to cross and Brian Stein to meet with an emphatic header.

Grimes came fully into his own two minutes before the interval, applying his educated left foot to the 25-yard free kick which curled almost lazily beyond the reach of the otherwise defiant Alan Judge.