

WEMBLEY AGAIN AFTER A SCARE

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(SC)

IN A PULSATING cup-tie which went to extra time Luton Town clinched their third Wembley appearance of the season at Kenilworth Road on Tuesday evening.

But Second Division Swindon, fast, positive and menacing once they had got over their early nerves, put up a magnificent fight, to leave Town manager Ray Harford worrying that it might have an effect on Saturday's FA Cup quarter-final.

At half time the Town seemed to be cruising to their record-breaking target of two Wembley cup finals.

But by the 90th minute Swindon had given the big crowd plenty to think about, and manager Lou Macari was full of praise for the way they so nearly snatched victory.

PENALTY MISS

Mick Harford missed a penalty which would have made it 2-1 against the run of play, and Paul Bodin hit a post in extra time before Mark Stein got the winner, to add to his brother's earlier goal.

"It was not really the sort of hard slog we wanted a few days before a big FA Cup game," admitted the Town manager.

"In the first half we played as well as we have done for a long time. But Swindon came storming at us in the second half, and gave us as hard a game as we have had this season.

"I can't imagine that Reading can be any harder in the final."

Simod Cup: Luton Tn 2 Swindon 1

Mr Macari said he thought his players, who have little hope of another Wembley appearance, were unfortunate not to be going to the famous stadium.

Mr Harford picked out good work by Les Sealey, solid defending by Mal Donaghy and Darron McDonough, who deputised for Steve Foster, and the ability to "ride your luck a little bit" as the major causes of the Town's survival when Swindon pounded away for most of the second half.

There had been no hint of the trouble in store for the Town as they controlled the first 45 minutes. England under-21 goalkeeper Fraser Digby had made a good save to stop Brian Stein capitalising on an astute flick-on by Harford.

But he was left groping air in the 28th minute when Stein headed his 14th goal of the season from a cross delivered perfectly by Tim Breacker, who had made a quick run down the right after Harford's quick short free kick set him free.

WARNING BELL

The first warning bell sounded just before the interval when Northern Ireland international Jimmy Quinn caught the defence square on the half-way line to chase a clearance.

Sealey committed himself and was a yard too slow out near the touchline in an attempt to bundle the striker over. But from Quinn's cross Dave Bamber's header was too weak and the Town cover charged back to clear.

Swindon seemed to step up a gear after the interval, and had the better of the second half. Sealey palmed away a hot shot by Quinn for a corner, and McDonough made a saving recovery tackle on Keiran O'Regan when his pace had taken him past Donaghy.

A free kick conceded by Donaghy for hands in the 67th minute led to Swindon scoring a deserved equaliser. Quinn's 25-yard scorcher was blocked by Sealey, but the ball ran loose and O'Regan smashed in the rebound.

Bamber's big miss came in the 68th minute when he

was clear, in an offside position. There was no flag and no whistle, but he was so very offside that he only went through the motions of shooting.

COMEDY ROUTINE

Sealey, equally certain an offside decision would be given, saved nonchalantly and the whole incident was a slow-motion comedy act. But there were no smiles from either side when it was realised that Bamber could have made it count if he had played to the whistle.

Five minutes later the Town missed an even better chance to regain the lead.

Rob Johnson's cross was dropped by Digby, under pressure from Harford. Dave Hockaday seemed unlucky to be penalised for the clumsy tackle which brought down Ian Allinson, but Swindon thought justice was done when Harford missed a penalty for the second time this season, smashing the shot too near to the goalkeeper.

In extra time Swindon's best effort was a 25-yard blockbuster by Bodin, which beat Sealey, hit the post and rebounded off the goalkeeper, who recovered swiftly as Bamber closed in.

The Town's midfield had not been too impressive, but with 13 minutes to go Kingsley Black was sent on in place of Rob Johnson, and immediately started to run at men with the ball.

Within two minutes his run and cross from the left was headed towards goal at the far post by Harford, and Mark Stein nipped in to deflect the ball past Digby with his head.

The jubilation at the end, with another pitch invasion, a celebrity appearance by the team in the main stand, and much quaffing of Lucozade was a mixture of relief as well as sheer joy.

THE MATCH DETAILS

LUTON TOWN: Sealey; Breacker, McDonough, Donaghy, Grimes; Wilson, Rob Johnson (Black, 107 mins), Allinson; Brian Stein, Mark Stein, Harford. Other sub: Marvin Johnson.

SWINDON: Digby; Hockaday, Parkin, Gittens, King; Barnes (White, 112 mins), Foltz, O'Regan, Bodin; Bamber, Quinn. Other sub: Henry.

THE GOALS: Brian Stein header for the Town, 28 mins; Keiran O'Regan for Swindon, 67 mins; Mark Stein header for the Town, 109 mins.

OTHER STRIKES: Town nine saved, including a penalty and seven wide; Swindon nine saved, seven wide, one hit a post. Corners: 12-12.

REFEREE: Ffrangcon Roberts, Prestatyn. Puzzled both sides at times.

BOOKED: Ashley Grimes for a foul.

ATTENDANCE: 10,027 — only two league games have been higher.

ENTERTAINMENT: A cracking match, with Swindon playing their part to the full, encouraged by 3,500 of their supporters.

REPORTS BY
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