

LUTON ROCKED BY WEMBLEY'S ROYAL HEROES

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By BRIAN SCOVELL

READING showed that there is still room for romantic endings in the harsh world of professional football by winning the Simod Cup in a marvellously entertaining and open game at Wembley yesterday.

Next to bottom in the Second Division and seemingly doomed to relegation, they inflicted such damage on the Littlewoods Cup finalists that Ray Harford's team could now see their season blow up in their faces.

Harford kept his men in the dressing room for an hour then emerged to say: 'Embarrassing... the worst we've played. Painful. We never passed the ball and we didn't deserve a goal. Today was my lowest point as a manager.'

Luton's back four, not the quickest in the First Division, were undone by the pace of 22-year-old Michael Gilkes in the opening half hour. They never recovered.

Gilkes, once a winger on London's Hackney Marshes, was relegated to substitute last week. He's played at left-back this season and, because first choices Billy Whitehurst and Steve Moran were cup-tied, was used to partner midfielder Mick Tait up front.

People may have labelled the competition the Also-Rans Cup, but there were 61,940 fans present yesterday, the biggest gate in England this season apart from last week's international against Holland.

Relaxed

Reading, whose average home gate is 6,500, had 40,000 supporters at Wembley.

So the Royals had won a trophy at last, along with the £60,000 first prize and around £120,000 as their share of the £500,000 receipts.

Manager Ian Branfoot said: 'I didn't expect it to go as well as it did. But we were very relaxed in the dressing room beforehand which surprised me a bit, and we played some smashing football.'

They weren't too despondent when Mick Harford, the only Luton man to look on form, dived to head his team's goal in the 13th minute.

The equaliser came in the 20th minute when the spindly Gilkes seized on Neil Smillie's pass.

Gilkes had right-back Tim Breaker stranded again in the 25th minute and the defender brought him down inches inside the box. Stuart Beavon converted from the spot.

Tait neatly side-footed the third goal in the 57th minute and Smillie added the fourth in the 66th minute when a shot from Linden Jones was charged down.

□ BASHLEY have failed in their brave bid to reach Wembley. The New Forest village side lost yesterday's FA Vase semi-final second leg at Emley 1-0.