

Stein's final flourish gives Luton the Cup

By Stuart Jones
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Luton Town..... 3
Arsenal..... 2

Luton Town, the little club that plays on a wall-to-wall carpet and refuses to accommodate visiting supporters, yesterday won the Littlewoods Cup in a match as unpredictably dramatic as the FA Cup Final of 1979. Then, it was Arsenal who emerged victorious against Manchester United. Nine years on, in a similar climax, the same team was left defeated.

Were there no UEFA ban on English clubs taking part in European competitions, Luton's victory would send them on their way into next season's European Cup Winners' Cup. Yet even if the ban is to be lifted — UEFA's decision is to be announced at the end of the European Championships in June — Luton could well find their invitation withdrawn. UEFA is unlikely to allow Continental ties to be staged on Kenilworth Road's artificial surface.

Wembley has become Luton's temporary home, anyway. A month ago they took part in the Simod Cup final and disintegrated embarrassingly during a 4-1 defeat by Reading. Last week they returned to the national stadium, albeit for a mere 40 minutes, to compete in the League's centenary festival.

Yesterday they came back for a final in which they were regarded as the underdogs. Like Coventry City and Arsenal themselves last season and Reading, they overcame the odds, a disturbing sequence of injuries and a dispiriting run of form to claim the first trophy in their history.

Having won only three

fixtures on natural grass this season, Luton's enterprise throughout the opening hour was unexpected. The character they showed within the closing seven minutes was even more so. Their overall contribution to a glorious and sunlit afternoon was a credit to their manager, Ray Harford.

He had gambled on the health of several players and also on his formation. Having lost McDonough through injury in training, he selected Hill and Preece, who had reemerged from an enforced winter's hibernation, and Black, aged 19, a winger of limited experience, much to the disappointment of the younger of the Stein brothers, Mark.

The elder, Brian, lifted Luton out of their apparent problems in the thirteenth minute. Stealing in behind a momentarily frozen Caesar, Stein swept in Foster's delicate flick and Arsenal, as in last year's final against Liverpool, found themselves be-

hind. The favourites and holders should have been in deeper trouble.

Arsenal's midfield engine was running but they were unable to find a gear. Luton, restricting them to a stall throughout the first half, flourished again immediately after the interval. Lukic's save from Brian Stein's header then was astonishing and later seemed to have been a significant turning point.

Arsenal, inspired a year ago by the belated introduction of Groves, were similarly lifted by the arrival of Hayes. Injecting a sense of urgency into their timidity, he was the central figure in a dozen minutes that seemingly utterly transformed the game in the most explosive and unforeseen fashion.

His initial feat was to clear up an untidy mess to equalize. Foster and Donaghy, a pair of colossi in Luton's resistance, suddenly collapsed and all of their

admirable work was almost instantly undone. After Mick Harford had retired, Foster failed to complete a clearance and Thomas invited Smith to put Arsenal ahead.

Hidden for so long, Arsenal were now irresistibly rampant. Dibble touched Smith's header against the bar and Hayes, from little more than a yard, nudged the rebound against a post. Seconds later Luton's goalkeeper tipped over another header from Hayes, blocked Smith's threatening break and then completed his act as his side's saviour.

After Donaghy had been harshly adjudged to have brought Rocastle down, Dibble parried Winterburn's penalty. "I'd gone the wrong way for the two kicks in our last two games," he was to say later. "This time I guessed right. It is a dream come true." He has the sponsor's man of the match award as a memento.

His colleagues were to add a winner's medal to the collection. The impetuous Caesar, O'Leary's understudy, committed another costly error in the 83rd minute and Wilson nodded in Black's cross. The possibility of victory, which had been ripped out of Luton's imagination, appeared to be a genuine prospect.

Within the last seconds it became reality. Grimes, another substitute, escaped from Richardson on the right and drove in a cross with his left foot. Brian Stein accelerated towards the bank of Luton's supporters and urged them to rise off their seats as he prodded in the most dramatic of winners.

LUTON TOWN: A Dibble; T Breacker, R Johnson, R Hill, S Foster, M Donaghy, D Wilson, B Stein, M Harford (sub: M Stein), D Preece (sub: A Grimes), K Black.
ARSENAL: J Lukic; N Winterburn, K Sansom, M Thomas, G Caesar, A Adams, D Rocastle, P Davis, A Smith, P Groves (sub: M Hayes), K Richardson.
Referee: J Worrall.

Harford finds it hard to smile in victory

Ray Harford, the Luton manager, had "twisted emotions" after his side's victory. "I feel 10 times worse today than when we lost to Reading in the Simod Cup Final," he said. "I could not explain my feelings today. This was the greatest win in my time at Luton yet I could not even smile to the photographers."

Harford thought that Luton had lost the match when Arsenal, leading 2-1, were awarded a penalty nine minutes from time. "At that point I thought we were dead and buried," Harford said. "But I never really thought we deserved to lose, and I certainly did not fear the prospect of extra-time."

Harford picked out two Luton players, the goalkeeper, Andy Dibble, and Kingsley Black, the teenage winger, for special praise. "Considering all the circumstances, I think Dibble had to be the man of the match," he said, "and as for the young boy, Black was sensational. He has so much talent."

George Graham, the Arsenal manager, was philosophical in defeat. "I thought we were there when we were leading 2-1, for we were in a purple 25-minute patch," he said. "We scored twice, hit the bar and the post and had a penalty saved. I suppose we really should have wrapped it up."



Brothers in arms: Brian Stein (left) and Mark celebrate (Photograph: Ian Stewart)