

Littlewoods Cup final — Luton Town 3, Arsenal 2

Luton steal home at the last gasp

87/88

Soccer Comment

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BY a delicious stroke of irony Luton Town, thrown out of the Littlewoods Cup last season when they refused to relax their ban on visiting supporters, won the trophy yesterday by beating the holders, Arsenal, after one of the most gripping climaxes seen in a Wembley final.

There was barely half-a-minute to go when Brian Stein swept Grimes's centre from the right past Lukic to bring Luton a 3-2 victory in a game which they had appeared set to win after 70 minutes and fated to lose after 75. The closing 18 minutes produced four goals, a series of remarkable saves by Dibble, Luton's reserve goalkeeper, and a missed penalty by Arsenal after they had forced their way to a 2-1 lead. The strength of Arsenal's recovery saved the 21st anniversary of the first League Cup final at Wembley from becoming a scrappy, one-sided affair.

Eventually the afternoon was full of heroes and heroics with Brian Stein, whose two goals in his testimonial season brought the Cup to Kenilworth Road,

not least among them. Yet the performance of Dibble, keeping goal only because of an injury to Sealey, was surely on a par. When Arsenal, 2-1 ahead, pressed forward for a quick kill Dibble tipped one close-range header from Smith on to the bar, Hayes sending the rebound against the near post, and pushed another over the top in the space of three minutes.

With 10 minutes remaining Rocastle cut into the penalty area from the right and, after he had been brought down by Donaghy, Winterburn prepared to keep the cup at Highbury with the ensuing penalty. He placed the ball inside the left-hand post but Dibble's dive kept Luton in the match.

Lukic, the Arsenal goalkeeper, was not far behind his opposite number. Early in the second half, after Harford had rampaged past Caesar on the left wing and taken the ball to the by-line before crossing, Lu-

KINGSLEY BLACK, Luton's 19-year-old winger, was called up for Northern Ireland's friendly against France in Belfast on Wednesday after manager Billy Bingham had watched his performance on television.

Black, a former England schoolboy, qualifies because his father comes from Belfast. He takes the place of David McCreery, who has a chest ailment.

kic almost turned himself inside out to turn away Brian Stein's firm header. That save kept up Arsenal's flagging spirits and at one point George Graham's decision to replace the disappointing Groves with Hayes for the last half-hour looked an inspired substitution. In the event Luton's introduction of Grimes for Preece when they were 2-1 down proved the more crucial switch.

Yet for a final so rich in melodrama much of the plot was surprisingly thin. O'Leary was absent but otherwise Arsenal were at full strength. For a long time they did not play to it. Ray Harford, the Luton manager, had been forced by injuries to improvise and his decision to take risks was vindicated, not least in the case of 19-year-old Kingsley Black whose confidence on the left wing grew as the match progressed. Mark Stein, who had thrown a paddy on hearing he would start the game on the bench, came on after Harford had been hurt in a tackle with Adams and nearly scored at his first touch.

After a briefly menacing start Arsenal found a rut of mediocrity and stayed there for the first half. Thomas, Davis and Rocastle had the pace to dominate the midfield but the standard of passing was often poor and predictable; little of consequence reached Smith and Groves up front.

In addition Luton defended

with increasingly good discipline, and Foster was as much an influence when he went up for corners and free-kicks as he was in his own penalty area.

Foster's was the moment of inspiration which led to Luton's opening goal after 14 minutes. Harford challenged strongly for Preece's free-kick from the left and the ball bobbed to Foster whose first-time, shrewdly angled pass found Brian Stein running clear to beat Lukic. It

was only the second goal Arsenal had conceded in the competition but for the next 50 minutes Harford's aerial power and all-round aggression suggested that it would not be the last. When he went off Arsenal must have thought they had heard the all-clear.

They had brought on Hayes three minutes earlier and his determination to get the ball forward and take on defenders immediately caused Luton

problems. In the 72nd minute Davis lobbed a free-kick into the penalty area and Foster's half-clearance ended up with Hayes, who brought the scores level. Three minutes later Hayes's persistence won the ball for Arsenal on the left, Thomas found Smith in space to his right and suddenly Luton were behind.

No doubt images of the Simod Cup final swam before their eyes. It was just as well they

were not playing Reading. Dibble kept them alive and in the 83rd minute the scores were level again. Caesar stumbled in the Arsenal penalty area as Mark Stein challenged him, Black crossed from the left and, after Lukic had blocked Brian Stein's shot, the ball was turned across for Wilson to head in.

The decisive goal came after Winterburn had reached a free-kick ahead of Foster and cleared the ball out to the right.

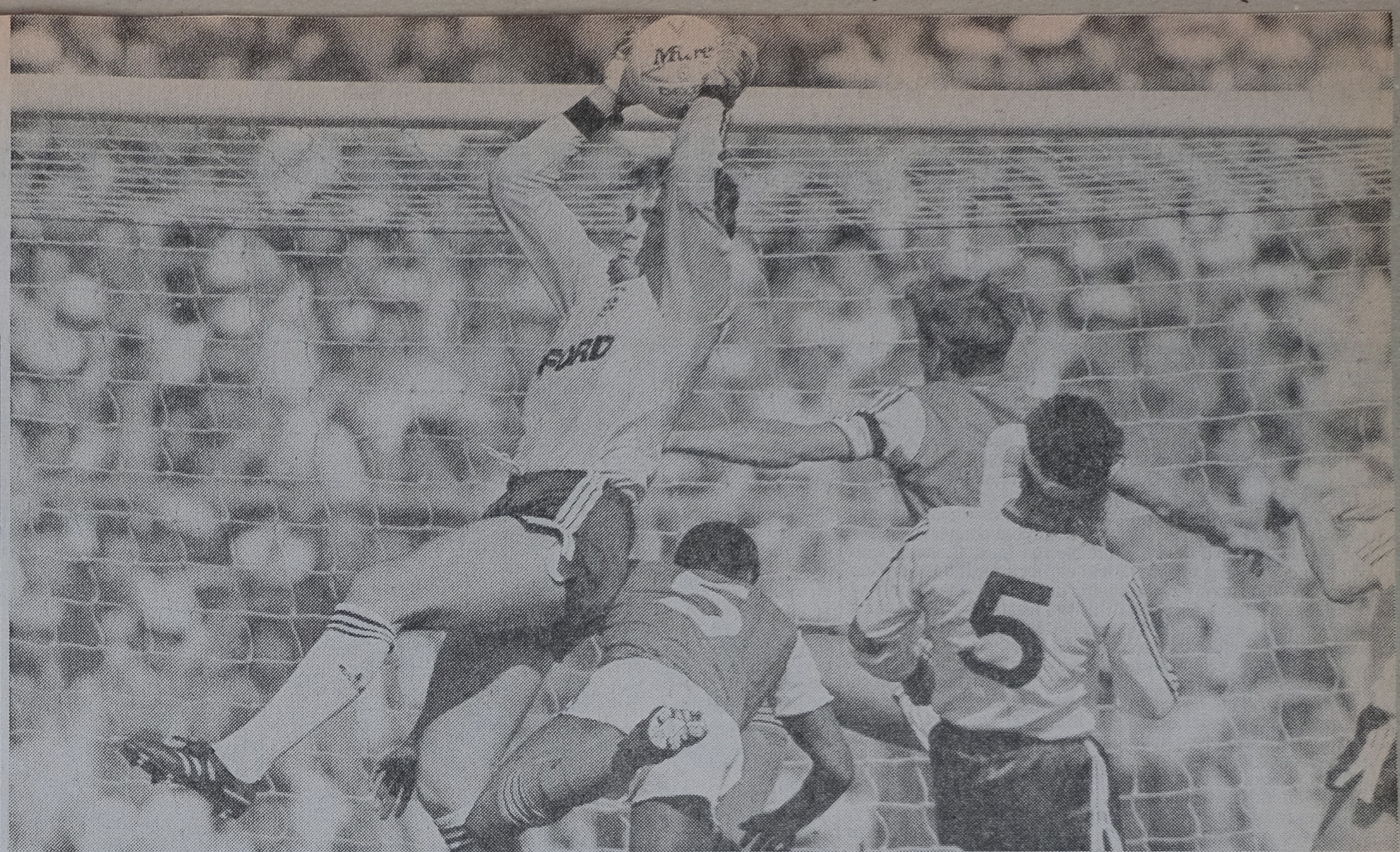
Grimes knocked it back in again with the outside of his left foot and Brian Stein's glancing shot gave Lukic no chance.

Luton for Europe? That is up to UEFA but at least they have always had the support of Mrs Thatcher.

Arsenal: Lukic; Winterburn, Sansom, Thomas, Caesar, Adams, Rocastle, Davis, Smith, Groves (Hayes, 59), Richardson.

Luton: Dibble; Breacker, Johnson, Hill, Foster, Donaghy, Wilson, B Stein, Harford (M Stein, 57), Preece (Grimes, 77), Black.

Referee: J Worrall (Warrington)



Rising to the occasion . . . Dibble, Luton's goalkeeper, holds firm against the challenge of Caesar and Adams as Foster looks on

PHOTOGRAPH: FRANK BARON