



THE FACE OF VICTORY... Luton's smiling players celebrate their triumph

Graham follows the Mercer motto

87/88 (FLC)

WITH the conviction of a man who knows that the best is still to come, George Graham shrugged off the first major disappointment of his managerial career and promised that Arsenal would be back at Wembley next season.

Graham was genuinely pleased that his team had contributed so fully to one of the most dramatic Wembley occasions of recent years but, in the privacy of the Highbury dressing rooms this week, he is sure to pull to pieces a defensive performance that cost Arsenal the Littlewoods Cup.

Arsenal had conceded just one goal in their previous seven games in the competition and, had they shown the same discipline and organisation in yesterday's Final, they could have expected at least to extend an enthralling match to extra time.

As it was, the hesitancy of Arsenal's Gus Caesar, a missed penalty by right-back Nigel Winterburn, Luton's cunning use of the flanks, and the lightning anticipation of Brian Stein conspired to present the underdogs with a breathless 3-2 victory and their first significant trophy in 103 years.



Michael Hart gives his verdict on dramatic Final

Stein's winning goal in the 13th second of injury time simply underlined the irony of the triumph for a club that was removed from the Littlewoods Cup last season because they refused to admit visiting supporters to Kenilworth Road.

The ease with which he was able to turn in a perfectly struck cross from substitute Ashley Grimes on the right wing must have been like a dagger in the chest for Arsenal's Graham, who has used a solid defensive platform as the base for his success in the last two years at Highbury.

Final

"The back four has always been at the heart of Arsenal's success, but they performed below their best yesterday," said Graham. "I'm not making excuses. It's not a disaster. We'll bounce back — there's nothing surer."

Had Nigel Winterburn scored from the penalty spot in the 79th minute Arsenal would have led 3-1 and, I'm sure, held on to retain the Littlewoods Cup. Instead, Luton goalkeeper Andy Dibble, dived full length to his left to scoop the ball away from inside a post.

Dibble's acrobatics in that

moment, and two brilliant saves from Alan Smith, earned him general acclamation as the man of the match.

Ultimately, his save was the turning point, though 30 minutes earlier Arsenal's John Lukic had performed a stunning one-handed save from Brian Stein that, at the time, was equally critical. Had Stein's header from Harford's cross beaten Lukic, Luton would have led 2-0 and even Arsenal's resilient youngsters would have had difficulty climbing that hill.

As it was they had the fortitude to overcome Luton's 14th minute opening goal, conceded when the defence failed to clear a free-kick and allowed Steve Foster the time to push a short ball into the path of Stein. Lukic dived full length but had little chance of stopping Stein's shot into the corner.

Graham's 60th minute decision to replace Perry Groves with substitute Martin Hayes made an immediate impact. Hayes, running at the Luton defence with the ball, suddenly began to trouble the experienced Foster and Mal Donaghy.

In the 72nd minute Michael Thomas touched a free-kick to Paul Davis and Foster was able to only half clear the

high ball into the Luton area. The ball ran free to Hayes who gleefully planted it into the net.

Three minutes later Hayes won the ball in a tackle with Foster and gave Thomas the chance to run straight at the defence before pushing the ball out to Smith on the right. Smith carried the ball into the penalty area, before firing past Dibble.

Brilliant

Then, in the 83rd minute, after Dibble had saved Winterburn's penalty, Caesar stumbled trying to clear the ball in his own penalty area and, after Lukic made one brilliant save from Stein, the ball flashed back across the face of the goal and Danny Wilson swept in with a stooping header to equalise.

Then Grimes swept past Kevin Richardson on the right flank, hit a superb cross with the outside of his left foot and there was Stein to add the final touch to the afternoon's drama. "Just after we restarted I asked the referee how long we still had to play," recalled Stein. "Before he could answer he blew the final whistle."

For Graham the search for perfection continues. "When I was a youngster Joe Mercer once told me to win and lose with equal dignity and, whatever the outcome, learn from the experience," he said. "We will have learned from that."

Chess solution

1...Q-R5 ch! and White resigned
due to 2 RxQ, RxR ch, 3 K-Kt1,
R-KR8 ch and mate.