

AS THE Chelsea faithful celebrated their team's return to the FA Cup final after an absence of 24 years it mattered not that Saturday's 2-0 semi-final victory over a hugely disappointing Luton side was one of the most sterile games staged at Wembley.

Entertainment was a luxury extra under the circumstances, but only the neutrals were concerned that the 90 minutes had been generally tedious, lacking in invention, inspiration or excitement.

Chelsea had won and if they go on to lift the Cup by scoring with the only shot of the final then, to their followers, it too will still have been a great game.

Glenn Hoddle, however, has done a superb job with limited resources during his first year as manager at Stamford Bridge.

Apart from Dennis Wise and Tony Cascarino, household names are thin on the ground. Even Eddie Newton, who had an outstanding game, is likely to produce the response "Eddie who?" from most outsiders.

Hoddle's biggest achievement, along with coach Peter Shreeves, has been in making Chelsea a difficult side to break down thanks to excellent organisation.

Dmitri Kharine, their Russian goalkeeper, has grown in stature as his protection has increased and although Norwegian Erland Johnsen and Jakob Kjelldbjerg, of Denmark, would not be rated as top-class central defenders, they are performing a good job for Chelsea by doing the elementary things well.

Luton froze on the big occasion and were never really in it, although we must not forget how heroically they played in beating Newcastle and West Ham on the way to the last four.

Scott Oakes was put out of the game, professionally not illegally, by Newton's marking while David Preece and Alan Harper were ineffective in midfield.

"Stronger team, defensively competent, Gavin Peacock very good," was Luton manager David Pleat's immediate verdict on triumphant Chelsea.

"It was Chelsea's day. We need more time for reflection. When the lads have had time they'll realise what an opportunity they had. Most are so young they don't realise how disappointed they are.

"In terms of quality there wasn't much between the sides. When you play a Premiership side you need that bit of thrust. To play Premiership teams you have to be strong and in one or two challenges we came second."

While there is never a good time to concede a goal, Chelsea's two came at particularly bad moments for Luton.

The First Division team had slightly the better of the early exchanges before Paul Telfer fouled Wise in the 13th minute. From Frank Sinclair's free-kick, Cascarino headed the ball on, John Spencer added another flick and Peacock applied the finishing touch. Telfer was initially lucky to escape a booking but eventually paid a far higher price.

Two minutes after half-time Peacock struck again for the decisive blow. Cascarino's power in the air was again crucial and this time Peacock played a one-two with Spencer from his knock-before, scoring his 13th goal of the season and his sixth in the FA Cup.

Three weeks ago Cascarino was told by Chelsea he was to be given a free transfer. The 90 minutes he played for the Republic of Ireland against Russia last month was the first match he had completed after five-and-a-half months out with groin and knee injuries.



Flight of the Peacock . . . Chelsea's match-winner turns away in celebration after scoring the first of his two goals at Wembley on Saturday Picture: SPORTSPHOTO

Peacock's double helps Chelsea to strut into final

"I wasn't thinking about Wembley when I was in Dublin," said Cascarino. "Only Tranmere v Southend on Friday night."

He turned down the chance to go to Tranmere Rovers on loan and a transfer to another First Division club, Charlton Athletic, fell through on deadline day last month.

"I kept my head down, worked hard and decided that if I was doing the business Glenn [Hoddle] would pick me," said Cascarino.

"It could have gone two ways. He could have left me out and made me train with the kids but now I can look forward to an FA Cup final."

"One of Glenn's strengths is that he is never afraid of trying something new. I remember playing in our victory over Ipswich Town earlier in the season and he told me I wouldn't play in the next away game because he

wanted to try out something different."

It was ironic that Cascarino's power in the air should have played such a decisive role, given Hoddle's principles although the former Millwall striker does not believe the Chelsea manager's ideals are cast in stone.

"If he thinks he can get some joy playing a certain way he'll do it. He doesn't play one way regardless of the opposition. He likes to look at other options. It's what suits his team on the day."

The feeling remains that Hoddle will revert to the Premiership's smallest strike force when Mark Stein has recovered from injury and is ready to resume his partnership with Spencer, but Cascarino was happy to enjoy an unexpected Wembley triumph.

Chelsea have improved steadily this year with a solid

4-4-2 formation. They should have pressed home their advantage by beating Luton by four or five clear goals but in a semi-final of so few goalscoring chances, 2-0 represented a high percentage of opportunities created. It was just a pity that the entertainment level could not have been higher.

Chelsea: Kharine; Clarke, Johnsen, Kjelldbjerg, Sinclair; Burley (Barnard 42) Peacock, Newton, Wise; Cascarino, Spencer. **Subs:** Donaghy, Hitchcock (g). **Goals:** Peacock 13, 47.

Luton: Sommer; Linton (Hartson 66), Peake, Dreyer, James; Hughes, Preece, Harper, Telfer, Oakes, Dixon. **Booked:** Dreyer. **Subs:** Thomas, Petterson (g).

Referee: R Dilkes (Mossley).