

Le Tissier fails to find usual channel

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Simon Barnes sees the mercurial Southampton playmaker in subdued mood during the 1-1 draw with Luton Town

94/95 (SAC)
“No, I am not Eric Cantona, nor was meant to be...” Lines, of course, from *The Lovesong of M. Le Tissier*.

A vignette from Saturday at Kenilworth Road. Thomas, in the Luton Town defence, caught Le Tissier with a biff in the face and charged upfield with the ball. Le Tissier set off in pursuit, chased him for 30 yards and then did absolutely nothing.

Thomas got his pass away when Le Tissier was too far off to make contact with the ball. Cantona, whose response to what American football terms “personal fouls”, is more (or perhaps less) complex, might have put stud to calf, for foul without vendetta appears to be unthinkable for Cantona.

But Le Tissier bided his time, no doubt pondering revenge through goalscoring



Le Tissier endeavours to get to grips with Oakes, of Luton Town, in the FA Cup fourth-round tie at Kenilworth Road



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rather than maiming. He was still biding it at the final whistle, as Southampton drew 1-1 with Luton the fourth round of the FA Cup.

There is the joke about the footballer who dies and goes to heaven, enjoys ecstatic reunions with Billy Wright and Bobby Moore, and then asks St Peter about the fellow with the upturned collar. “Oh, that’s just God. Keeps thinking he’s Eric Cantona.”

Nobody will make such a joke about Le Tissier. The two most gifted players in English football can both chip with gasp-making precision, orchestrate games with bewildering clarity of vision, but in their natures they are not half a channel apart, but an ocean and more.

Cantona personalised his team uniform by turning up the collar; if Le Tissier ever thought about personalising his, he would install pockets in his shorts, so that he could lurk about with his hands in them. Unless he happens to be doing something magical with a football, you cannot pick him out with a casual glance.

Cantona carries himself with his shoulder blades touching and his chin 45 degrees above the horizontal; Le Tissier mostly has his shoulders bowed, his chin 45 degrees below. It is all a matter of the way these things take a player. Cantona’s gifts fill him with hauteur, if not

hubris; Le Tissier’s own gifts fill him with diffidence, even embarrassment.

They share, apart from their colossal gifts for transforming football matches, the ability to disappear from them. Cantona has long had the ability to rise to the small occasion, to impose himself with impossible glory at a humdrum league fixture, to vanish without trace at a Wembley final.

The hurliness and burliness of a traditional cup-tie does not necessarily find him at his best. That was certainly the case with Le Tissier on Saturday. We waited for the moment when Le Tissier would show us the difference between commitment and genius, and that moment never came. Sometimes it does not; that is the way with Le Tissier, with Cantona, with every play-

er that has gifts beyond the ordinary.

Le Tissier was carrying an injury; a calf strain has been bothering him for a couple of weeks. And Luton, especially in the first half, gave us a lesson in cup-tie aspiration, with football hectic, uninhibited, committed. They showed us everything that foreigners love in English football.

Mind you, there was a moment when, in one long and beautiful pass, like a ball thrown deep by a quarterback, when Le Tissier showed us what the English love in continental football, and in the unEnglish gifts of such as Cantona and himself.

Nothing came of it. It was Luton’s half, but the goal failed to come. Southampton re-emerged with their ears burning from a managerial

tirade and scored a few minutes later. Heaney discovered an open door on the Luton right; again, he charged through it and pulled the ball back for Shipperley to touch home.

A bizarre penalty incident complicated the game. The

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referee gave a penalty for what seemed like inadvertent handball by Benali, and Telfer hit it sweetly enough. But Grobbelaar performed one of his mongoose springs to biff it away.

That seemed to be that, but Luton kept on pressing, with Marshall, wide on the right,

always the danger. With ten minutes to go, he served a copy of Southampton’s goal; his pull-back put away by Biggins.

“In the press room, journo come and go, getting quotes from Bally, Pleat and Co.”

Le Tissier agreed with both managers in thinking it was a good game. Seeing him with everyday clothes on, I recognised him at last. He is Ford Prefect of *The Hitch Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, exiled from his home on a small planet somewhere in the vicinity of Betelgeuse and who, skimping on preparatory research for his trip to Earth, chose the name “Ford Prefect” as being nicely inconspicuous.

“His features were striking but not conspicuously handsome. His air was wiry and gingerish and brushed back

from his temples. His skin seemed to be pulled backwards from the nose. There was something very slightly odd about him, but it was difficult to say what. Perhaps it was that his eyes didn’t blink often enough...”

The replay is on February 8; perhaps Le Tissier’s calf will be better by then. It would be nice to see what he can do at Wembley; he seems destined, alas, to be one of the great not-quite men of English football. “I grow old, I grow old, I shall wear the collar of my shirt unrolled...”

LUTON TOWN (3-5-2): J Sommer — M Johnson, T Peake, M Thomas — D Marshall, P Telfer, G Waddock, D Preece, S Oakes — W Biggins, K Dixon (sub: M Williams, 87min).
SOUTHAMPTON (3-5-1-1): B Grobbelaar — R Hall, T Widdington, F Benali — J Kenna, N Heaney, J Magilton, N Maddison, S Charlton (sub: D Hughes, 75) — M Le Tissier — N Shipperley.
Referee: G Ashby.