

Doomed Luton look to future

Youth policy offers
a ray of light at the
end of a very dark
tunnel for League
Two strugglers

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By David McVay

FOR a recent global tournament for under-11s held in Zurich, only two teams from England were selected

to represent the elite of our domestic game. Purists will hardly be shocked to learn that Manchester United, Premier League champions elect, were invited as one of the clubs.

What may raise eyebrows among the football fraternity

is that Luton Town, almost as far adrift bottom of the game's pile as United are ahead at its summit, were the second choice.

There is one further twist to the story which is even more unlikely. While the pride of Old Trafford did not make the



Looking ahead: struggling League Two side Luton and their manager, Mick Harford, have a Wembley final to look forward to

last 16, Luton beat Bayern Munich in the final.

"We are very, very proud of them and that trophy," said Luton managing director Gary Sweet, admiring what appears to be a gold replica of the European Cup in the club's boardroom. "It's bigger than most of the players who won it!"

If the result does not signal a seismic power shift in the game's natural order, it has given Mick Harford's side a ray of light at the end of a gloom-laden tunnel congested by Football League bureaucracy and previous regimes whose last concern seemed to be the welfare of the club.

Hope springs eternal in Bedfordshire although it is surely more blind faith after Exeter's 2-1 win at Kenilworth Road. Early goals by Adam Stansfield and Liam Sercombe proved sufficient despite Tom Craddock's 39th-minute response.

Exeter confirmed their push for a second successive promotion while Luton need to make up 16 points in the last 12 games to be safe. They seem doomed to the Blue Square Premier.

Carelessly accumulating penalty points like bankers acquire debt has been the root of Luton's problems, a 30-point censure at the start of this season the latest punishment for the sins of previous incumbents.

Sweet, whose consortium of local businessmen and all fans took on a £4.5million debt and the baggage last year, retains optimism while enjoying the irony in Luton's trip to Wembley next month to play Scunthorpe United in the Johnstone's Paint Trophy final, the League's showcase competition.

...getting to the final

is not too popular with the League but the pity is, if we win, we won't be able to defend it. If we do go down, we will lose some of our youth grant but we will continue to invest in that. It's the younger players who have come through the ranks and will be loyal to this club. That's why we won't be long in the BSP."

With more than 10,000 tickets already sold for Wembley, the omens are encouraging, but the slog for League Two points continues at Notts County tomorrow night.

While youth and the future dominate Luton's agenda, that road to Meadow Lane will

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nourish nostalgia for their fans as they pass Nottingham Forest's City Ground, a reminder of their last visit to Wembley when Brian Clough's team prevailed 3-1 in the Littlewoods Cup two decades ago.

Thirty years before that, Forest, reduced to 10 men, proved their nemesis again in Luton's only FA Cup final appearance, a tie watched by one Bernard Law Montgomery. The legendary field marshal knew a thing or two about tactical retreat before rebounding with glorious triumph. Luton may care to take note.