

Hatters show why club will never die

LUTON TOWN

Martin 30, Craddock 69, Gnakpa 5 (extra time)

SCUNTHORPE Hooper 14, McCann 88

Johnstone Paint Trophy Final Wembley

BY JAMES CUNLIFFE

SCUNTHORPE UNITED, Graham Taylor, Lord Mawhinney, The Football League, the number 30 and the letters F and A... YOUR BOYS TOOK ONE HELL OF A BEATING.

And the message as Kevin Nicholls lifted the Johnstone's Paint Trophy on Sunday was 'Luton Town will never die'.

It was won in spectacular fashion. The match was always going to be so much more than a final for the club, but as a football spectacle the Hatters provided one of the best Wembley games

And out of the shadows of that 1988 Littlewoods Cup win can step the class of 2009. Now attention turns to trying to stay in League

Club chairman and TV presenter Nick Owen summed up the feeling after the 3-2 win, saying:
"The team and this club will not die after a 125 years of history. And however bad the injustice handed to us, we still feel that this club has soul,

spirit, guts and the community loves it. Forty thousand people inside Wembley certainly loved it and the hope now has to be that some of those happy Hatters, even if it's just a small percentage, fill Kenilworth Road in the remaining six games to try and roar their club on to achieve what everyone outside of Luton has deemed the

impossible all season. If it can spur their team on to beat their fourth League One opponents in the competition then

Outnumbering the opposition fans by almost three to one was certainly a sight to behold but now, three days after the triumph and with a litthe bit of hindsight, it just seems like fate that the trophy was always on its way back to Bedfordshire. Either that or history has a lovely

way of repeating itself. In the end it was it was a little piece of je ne sais quoi from a French substitute that settled a match that was every bit as engrossing, nervous



and memorable as that famous Littlewoods Cup

The Hatters went behind early on to a Gary Hooper goal, but Chris Martin levelled. Tom Craddock then looked to have won it in normal time until Grant McCann's wonder strike forced extra time. That set the stage for substitute Claude Gnakpa to make himself a hero and seal a win and a trophy that on the day was thoroughly deserved even if they did do it the hard way.

This time, either Luton were nervous or Scunthorpe were just exercising their advantage of being 42 places above them, because the traffic in the early stages was all flowing towards

Lewis Emanuel had to make a last ditch tackle Dean Brill's goal three minutes in before the Luton keeper was

forced into early action. On 14 minutes United's danger man Gary Hooper pounced to stun the huge Luton support latching on to a Paul Hayes header to slam the

ball past Brill from 20 yards. From the midway mark the Hatters began to settle, although the Iron still looked dangerous and Brill had to be at his best on 26 minutes to

palm away Marcus Williams' daisy-cutter

Just after the half-hour a raking 40-yard Jarvis pass found Craddock who clipped an inch perfect ball to Martin. The top scorer didn't have to break his stride as he chested down and stroked into the corner of the net in one movement.

After the restart, and against the run of play on 69 minutes, Luton pushed forward in numbers to take the lead.

Martin crossed where Jarvis laid in wait to set up Craddock on the edge of the area. The striker's chest-down and half-volley skimmed through the legs of Mirfin and into the corner of the

The giant Hatters support were sure they could win the trophy in normal time until McCann lev-United net. elled with a stunning strike in the 88th minute. The ball rolled to him 20 yards out and he buried a curling effort that Brill tried in vain to prevent. Five minutes in Gnakpa beat Williams to the ball and lobbed over a stranded Joe Murphy in

Before Sunday, the club's one and only cup win 21 years previously had seen Town led out at Wembley by a manager called Harford and seen

them trail to the favourites only to come back

Andy Dibble and Brian Stein were the heroes of that day in 1988. This time it was Luton's French connection – an inspired substitute if ever there was one – that settled it. And even if Luton take another 20 years to get back to Wembley, Hatters' fans will still be talking about Claude Gnakpa.

The defender turned striking hero said after the match that scoring the winner was a dream come

"I said [to myself] when I came on, 'now I have to do it. If you get the chance to score you must score. That's what happened and I'm very happy."

The Frenchman had fluffed a chance to race clear minutes before he pounced for the winner but he said he was never in any doubt he'd get another chance.

"I believe in myself and I belive in the team," he said. "I kept believing because it's the final and we had to win. When the second opportunity came I saw that the left back was in front of me but I said to myself, 'Claude, you have to believe', and I scored.

He admitted his goal had put him on cloud

"Today it's still a dream," he said after the match.

"And this dream has come true. My mum and dad came from France to see me, so did my brother and all my friends.

"This has been a difficult season because I played all the games at the start but then the gaffer didn't give me too many opportunities. I kept working hard in training because I am a pro-fessional and I love Luton, but I've had to keep myself up. So to come and score the winning goal

inysen up so to come and score the winning goal is something great."

He added: "When I scored the goal I thought about my family but I also thought about all those fans because they didn't deserve the 30

Gnakpa said that the events of the game had not begun to sink in and he modestly admitted he'd no idea how it may be remembered by Luton

"At the moment I don't realise [what it means], but maybe in years to come I will realise the impact of it all.

For now it means, like Eric Morecambe, Luton's most famous fan – Gnakpa, Chris Martin, Tom Craddock, Mick Harford et al have brought the club and the town some sunshine.