

Wimbledon wonders

MIKE EGERT

LUTON TOWN 0

AFC WIMBLEDON 0

Result: AFC Wimbledon win 4-3 on penalties

John Aizlewood
at City of Manchester stadium

ACCORDING to the 89-year-old evangelical preacher Harold Camping, the world was supposed to end at 6pm last night. For Luton Town's Alex Lawless and Jason Walker, it caved in 14 minutes early. After 120 gripping but goalless minutes, their shootout penalties were saved by Seb Brown. AFC Wimbledon, who scored four out of their five kicks, will play in League Two next season, one level below MK Dons, who were created when Wimbledon relocated in 2002.

AFC Wimbledon manager Terry Brown, whose team had practised spot-kicks intensely for six weeks, said: "Nobody deserves to lose like that. I'm a very lucky manager, but what we've done at this club has been phenomenal."

Whoever had triumphed would have exorcised a handful of demons. Luton's recent history has involved administration, 30-point deductions and administration. They must brood for another year, but for the supporters-owned AFC Wimbledon there is the sheer

joy of proving that while the franchise of the former Wimbledon FC has headed up the M1 to Milton Keynes, they have full and undisputed ownership of the spirit of the Crazy Gang.

Nine years ago, they made their debut in the Combined Counties League, facing the might of Viking Greenford, Walton Casuals and Cove. In their first game they travelled to Sandhurst United where Glenn "Trigger" Mulcaire, later to find a very different kind of fame as a private investigator, scored their first ever goal. Having hurtled through four tiers of the non-league pyramid with a fleet-footed pace old boy Laurie Cunningham would have enjoyed, there is justice in the team who finished second in the Blue Square, six points ahead of Luton, prevailing.

"I'm devastated, the players are devastated," sighed Luton's manager, Gary Brabin. "It's horrible. We all thought it was going to be our day."

For both teams the memory of travelling to Manchester City as top table equals rather than kitchen staff enjoying a day out still lingers. If not quite a big club in waiting, Luton can muster troops for the big occasion. In contrast, AFC Wimbledon follow the Wimbledon FC tradition of keen but numerically slender support. Yesterday, orange outnumbered blue and yellow by three to one. All, though, were united in jeering the FA chairman, David Bernstein, as the guest of honour was presented to the teams before a rendition of the national anthem that was as superfluous as the fireworks and giant Bunsen burners that greeted them.

Unruffled, the players sensed their football lives would struggle to better this moment in the sun. Luton had early territorial hegemony and after Claude Gnaka's mazy 20th-minute run around the veteran Jamie Stuart, only Brown's alertness kept Wimbledon level.

But Wimbledon's approach is more sensible students than Crazy Gang and after the break Rashid Yussuff began to menace and the immediate future no longer seemed to be orange. James Mulley added further zest to Wimbledon but, in a half where they had barely figured, Luton came closest of all in the 89th minute when Walker's towering header cannoned off the inside of a post and into Brown's arms.

A contest that always looked to have goals in it finished goal-



Jump to it: Luke Moore, left, tussles with Luton's Keith Keane in the playoff final, which AFC Wimbledon won

HOW DRAMA UNFOLDED

Luton 3 | AFC Wimbledon 4

AFC Wimbledon will kick off in League Two next season after victory in yesterday's penalty shootout

Lawless (Luton)	✗
Hatton (Wimbledon)	✓
Pilkington (Luton)	✓
L Moore (Wimbledon)	✓
Newton (Luton)	✓
Mohamed (Wimbledon)	✗
Walker (Luton)	✗
Yakubu (Wimbledon)	✓
Howells (Luton)	✓
Kedwell (Wimbledon)	✓

less. Tired legs took their toll in extra-time, although Lawless went close for Luton in the first period.

In the second, Wimbledon's Kaid Mohamed hit the post and Ismail Yakubu missed a sitter but both teams were buying

tickets for the penalty lottery. When it came, none was cooler than captain Danny Kedwell, who thumped home the kick that clinched promotion as if it was a park kickabout. AFC Wimbledon are up but already the real world is beginning to

intrude in the fairytale. "We'll have the smallest wage budget in division two," predicted Brown.

Star man: Rashid Yussuff (Wimbledon)
Yellow cards: Wimbledon: Johnson, L Moore, Minshull; Luton: Keane, Lawless
Referee: J Adcock

Attendance: 18,195

AFC Wimbledon: Brown 6, Hatton 6, Stuart 6, Johnson 6, Gwillim 6 (Yakubu, 61min), Gregory 6 (Minshull, 94min), Yussuff 7, Wellard 6 (Mulley, 67min), Moore 6, Mohamed 7, Kedwell 7

Luton Town: Tyler 6, Gleeson 6, Kroca 6, Pilkington 6, Asaifu-Adjaye 6, Gnaka 7 (Newton, 96min), Lawless 6, Keane 6, Howells 6, J Walker 6, Willmott 6 (Barnes-Homer, 61min)