

Dunne inspired by memories of Cup heartache

Luton Town

0

Millwall

3

Henry 12, Hulse 36, N'Guessan 86

Att: 9,678

By Jonathan Liew at
Kenilworth Road

The FA Cup broke Alan Dunne's heart. Now the pair may be about to make their peace. After putting out non-League Luton Town, Millwall are in the last eight of the competition for the first time since they reached the final in 2004. Dunne was a 21-year-old midfielder at the time, travelling to Cardiff in the hope of making history. He never got a kick.

"I was in the starting line-up until two nights before the game," recalled Dunne, now a 30-year-old defender, and the only member of the Cup final squad still playing for the club. "Wisey [player-manager Dennis Wise] then came back from seeing a specialist in France on the Thursday and said he was going to play.

"I was heartbroken, but he told me he was only going to last 50 minutes, and then I would come on. So after half-time I started warming up, thinking I was going on, and ended up spending the whole half running up and down the touchline. Then when he decided to come off near the end, he chose to send on Curtis Weston so he could become the youngest player to appear in an FA Cup final."

Like most footballers, Dunne has managed to take the positives from disappointment. "It was tough to take," he said. "But I was only a young boy, and looking back, it was all part of growing up. I had a few words with Wisey afterwards. He was a friend as well as a manager, and he looked after me, so there are no grudges. He put his arm around me and we had a good drink that night. I might not have got on the pitch in the final, but it was still great to get a medal and be a part of it."

Though it is almost a decade ago, Millwall's appearance in the Cup final and their subsequent, brief, European campaign is still remembered with immense fondness at the Den. It was a time when the club were, however fleetingly, able to shake off the unsavoury reputation that a small kernel of hooligans manages to perpetuate.

The game on Saturday saw nasty chants – on both sides, it needs to be noted – a stand-off with police, and plenty of all-round lairiness. Seven arrests were made, with Bedfordshire Police hinting at more after video evidence has been scrutinised.

Meanwhile, the sight of a party of drunken Millwall fans spewing racial slurs outside Luton train station on Saturday evening was a reminder that the club's bad press is not entirely unwarranted.

But to happier things. To the irrepressible Kenny Jackett, the Championship's longest-serving manager, an exemplary ambassador for the club, and who is now just one game away from Wembley. "This is headlines for the right reasons," he said. "It is what we all want to talk about, which is the football."



Second chance: Alan Dunne (left) battles with Luton's JJ O'Donnell

A play-off final represents Luton's best chance of getting to Wembley, but they require significant improvement to rise from their position of eighth in the Conference. Saturday's defeat was their fifth game without a win, and manager Paul Buckle said his players needed to adapt to thrive.

"There's got to be a real acceptance that we're a non-League club," he said. "I know what it takes to get out of the Conference. It takes things that are probably not easy on the eye, dogged performances, a whole group of players who are just willing to do the basics and are happy to go home at night being probably a six out of 10."

Dunne's dream, meanwhile, lives on. And in his story lies something of the essence of the Cup. Often it makes dreams; every so often, it remakes them.

"It would be lovely to get into the semi-finals or even the final," Dunne said. "And this time I would love to be involved. That would make up for Cardiff."