

Date: 28 January 1987
 Opposition: Luton Town
 Competition: FA Cup

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THE TIMES

Plastic pitch at Luton shatters Liverpool dream

Luton Town 3 Liverpool 0

The FA Cup was first eased and then ripped out of the hands of Liverpool last night. But it was their footing as well as their understandable psychological suspicion of the grassless surface at Kenilworth Road that was the cause of their downfall in a thoroughly undistinguished third round second replay.

Kenny Dalglish, Liverpool's manager, was gracious enough to admit: 'Luton were better on the night. You have good days and bad days. ' It is difficult to imagine Liverpool being less efficient or less confident in their approach, but Dalglish said: 'The players had enough time to prepare mentally, but I still believe that if you have an artificial surface, you have an artificial game. '

He also referred to Luton's failure to travel to Anfield for the replay last week. 'I believe that the dice were too heavily loaded against us from the beginning. I think that perhaps the match should have been on a neutral ground and if you can't turn up for a match, you shouldn't be in the competition. '

The tie was utterly unrecognizable as a knockout contest in the famous old competition after glimpses of the future that were at once both tasteful and distasteful. The environment, relatively sedate and quiet but free of the threat of crowd trouble, offered the more pleasurable view.

The artificial surface, as smooth and as fast as polished marble, detracted from the evening's entertainment. It detracted from Liverpool's performance as well. Timid and understandably cautious in conditions they detest, Liverpool looked thoroughly uncomfortable from the start.

Luton, accustomed at least to the unnatural speed and bounce of the hard and unforgiving pitch, appeared to be far from settled either. The ball, seemingly as elusive and uncontrollable as a blob of mercury, was rarely moved with certainty or purpose.

As a consequence, the game was more often than not unutterably unattractive, a mess devoid of either imagination or fluency. As it unfolded amid an eerie silence, any visions of Wembley were so inappropriate that the national stadium might have been on another planet.

Luton took the initiative, although never convincingly. It took 10 minutes to construct a move of note and even then Harford, greeting a Grimes cross with a looping header, failed to finish effectively. Liverpool, despite Johnston's energetic running, offered little in response.

The lone bright spots were provided by the glaring scoreboards at either end. As the game meandered aimlessly towards the interval, Luton unexpectedly lifted it from dull obscurity with a simple goal in the 34th minute to break a deadlock of 214 minutes. Gillespie opened the way by leaning on Harford on the edge of the area. There seemed no significant danger until Stein strolled forward and curled a free kick over the wall. Grobbelaar, guarding the far post, moved surprisingly slowly and only helped it in.

Despite the introduction of Irvine for the anonymous Wark and Ablett, surprisingly, for the dangerous Walsh, Liverpool's attack never functioned. Instead their defence continued to creak and was eventually broken within the last dozen minutes. Yet the crucial second goal was laced with misfortune.

Stein, the most mobile individual, had a header cleared off the line by Johnston and Foster had another effort touched onto a post by Grobbelaar before Liverpool's decline was completed when Molby was harshly punished as Stein fell over his outstretched leg. Harford converted the penalty.

Newell, who claimed three goals in Liverpool's 4-1 defeat here in October, added the third almost immediately with a ferocious drive. Luton's reward for knocking out the holders is a home tie against Queen's Park Rangers, a side who are significantly more practised in the art of dancing on a green floor.

Liverpool, dismissed from the competition in their opening appearance for the first time since 1978, will regret failing to make the most of their own grass at Anfield on Monday. Before a capacity audience of 14,687, they will be thankful that no more than a hundred of their own supporters witnessed their night of ignominy.

LUTON TOWN: L Sealey; T Breacker, R Johnson, P Nicholas, S Foster, M Donaghy, R Hill (sub: D McDonough), B Stein, M Newell, M Harford, A Grimes.

LIVERPOOL: B Grobbelaar; G Gillespie, B Venison, M Lawrenson, R Whelan, A Hansen, P Walsh (G Ablett), C Johnston, I Rush, J Molby, J Wark (sub: A Irvine).

Referee: D Vickers