

IS THE F.A. CUP LOSING ITS MAGIC?

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It is the oldest football competition in the world, and next Saturday, May 12th, will see its 120th Final contested by two of the Premiership's most glamorous clubs before a fanatical capacity crowd in Cardiff and a global TV audience of millions.

Yet the original and much-loved F.A. Cup has suffered a number of knocks in recent years. The dents have left it somewhat tarnished, prompting the question, is the F.A. Cup losing some of its magic?

As to some and the second and the third round is traditionally its most magical day. That is when the big fish from the Premiership join the lower league minnows, setting up the possibility of those heroic mis-matches and acts of giant-killing for which the competition is so famous.

The FA Challenge Cup was first contested in 1872 – 129 years ago. Taking into account the enforced breaks caused by two world wars (1916-19 and 1940-45), it has been contested 119 times, producing 42 different winners. Next week's contestants are the last two survivors from a record entry this season of 602 clubs. Around 700 ties will have been played before either Arsenal or Liverpool are saluted as the latest winners of the trophy.

The presentation of the Cup to this year's winning captain will take place at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff, the capital of Wales – the first time the final has been staged outside England. The reason is that Wembley Stadium is closed, supposedly awaiting demolition to make way for a new national football stadium.

If the change of venue is a break with tradition, it is the latest in a series of changes during recent years that, in many people's eyes, have devalued the heritage of the FA Cup.

For well over a century, the format of the competition worked admirably. If a tie ended in a draw, it was replayed within three or four days. If that replay ended all-square after 90 minutes, extra time was played. If the result was still inconclusive, a further replay was staged as quickly as possible. The two teams would continue to battle it out until one emerged victorious from open play.

Then, under pressure from police on the one hand and fixture congestion on the other, the FA decided that only one replay could be held, and that it had to be played 10 days after the original tie. This removed some of the tension and excitement that the Cup used to generate through rapid, occasionally serial replays. The tournament was forced to adopt the penalty shoot-out as a means of resolving draws.

The next step was to do away with semi-final replays altogether – another blow to tradition. Back in 1980 this year's two finalists, Arsenal and Liverpool, memorably battled through four matches against each other at the semi-final stage before the Gunners emerged victorious to face (and lose to) West Ham United.

Meanwhile, to accommodate the demands of television, the ties for each round started to be spread out over the week-end, from Friday to Monday, whereas previously they had all been played on the Saturday. At the same time, the draw for the next round became a television event, often taking place before some of the previous round's ties had even kicked off. Again, this break with tradition tended to dilute the tension and anticipation.

Then came sponsorship. The FA Cup had proudly existed beyond commercialism until its potential as a money-spinner could no longer be resisted. Today the tournament's official title is The FA Cup Sponsored by AXA, which many purists find offensive.

Last season, the Cup suffered one of the biggest blows to its prestige when Manchester United, the holders, took the unprecedented decision (at the FA's request) not to defend the trophy. Instead they went to Brazil to play in FIFA's inaugural World Club Championship. United's absence meant that Darlington, second round losers, were given a 'wild card' entry back into the third round, which ran totally counter to the concept of a knock-out competition.

However, the most damaging aspect of United's withdrawal was the message it conveyed about how far the FA Cup had slipped down the club's list of priorities. In truth however, their decision merely confirmed a developing trend. In the past it would have been unthinkable for any club even to contemplate not participating in the FA Cup. The glory of winning the trophy was on a par with winning the League Championship.

The advent of the Premiership and the UEFA Champions League have changed that. These newer competitions are so lucrative, and the rewards

for winning them so great, that the FA Cup has been relegated in importance.

This was demonstrated again during this season's competition, when Blackburn Rovers visited Arsenal in the sixth round. Rovers, challenging hard for promotion into the Premiership, rested some of their key players for the Cup tie with Arsenal in order to keep them fresh for their next League game. That would have been unthinkable a few years ago.

Yet despite these slights, the FA Cup still has a glorious aura about it, which will be evident again in Cardiff next week. English fans still adore the special atmosphere of FA Cup ties, as they still crave the unique prestige of winning it. Both Arsenal and Liverpool (who have met twice before in the Final, in 1950 and 1971, when the Gunners triumphed both times) will be desperate to lift the trophy towards their supporters on Saturday. And the world will thrill to the spectacle.

Encouragingly, the FA has itself begun to address some of the issues that have damaged the competition in recent years. They have resolved to meddle less in the dates of ties, and show greater sensitivity to the feelings of players, managers and fans when making the draws for each round. They have also lobbied UEFA to accept the winners of the FA Cup into the Champions League rather than, as now, the UEFA Cup (though this seems unlikely to succeed).

Fortunately, the Cup's magic should endure as long as the possibility exists that one of the small fry can be drawn against one of the game's aristocrats. While normally the aristocrats would be expected to win comfortably because of the obvious gulf in class, the one-off situation of a cup-tie, perhaps on a treacherous playing surface and in front of a cramped but impassioned crowd, means anything can happen.

The history of the FA Cup is littered with occasions when the underdog triumphed against the odds, but in the final reckoning the big, wealthy clubs tend to triumph. In fact Chelsea's victory last May against Aston Villa continued a recent trend. A club based in London (17), Manchester (9) or Liverpool (8) has won the FA Cup in 34 of the 40 seasons since the maximum wage for players was removed in 1961. In contrast, clubs from outside these three major English cities won the Cup in 24 of the 32 seasons between the opening of Wembley Stadium in 1923 and the change to the pay structure.

These statistics confirm that success has tended to go where most of the money is – the big city clubs. Arsenal and Liverpool are both in this category; but only Arsenal can become the 2001 FA Cup winners.

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