

Date: March 28th 2010

League Cup: Milton v Hardwick

KO: 2.30pm

This cup semi-final had been eagerly anticipated by both teams, with the final at Histon's 'Glass World Stadium' at the end of the season at stake. Hardwick went into the game as favourites, being 2nd in the league, but Milton had shown improvements since Christmas, and had given leaders Chatteris a run for their money only a few weeks ago.

Both teams arrived early, with Milton keen to warm-up in a 'Pro' manner. Fortunately, Rosie hadn't meant 'Pro' literally, which meant we were all spared from watching the tumbleweed roll on by.

After the sportsmanlike handshakes had taken place at 2.28, the cup semi kicked off bang on time, watched by a generous crowd of 70 old men. We would have had 100, but many punters were pulled away by the smell of hot dogs and burgers, gratefully provided by pub sponsors Lion & Lamb.

It was obvious from the start that both teams were up for the game. Tackles were flying in, but no team were able to create any clear opportunities. Hardwick tried to take advantage of their long throw weapon (Rory would have been impressed), but Westy, Chaz and Cookie dealt with all deliveries assertively. It was in the 13th minute (possibly) the deadlock was broken. No-one knew that when they ball went off for a throw-in just halfway inside the Hardwick half, that trouble was on the horizon. Pro picked up the ball and launched in into the Hardwick box where Stevey J was able to lose his marker and run onto it. An acute angle led him to strike the ball powerfully towards goal where the goalie could only stick a leg at it. A great save it would have been, except Nicky 'I don't give up' Haycraft had gambled on the back post and was able to direct the ball in, off his shin, from almost 2 yards. Some might say he didn't give up! Milton 1-0 Hardwick.

Milton continued to attack, and were looking comfortable with the ball at their feet. The defence were giving nothing away, and were happy to pass the ball to the midfield 5, who continued to pick passes and play the beautiful game the way it should be. Sweeney believed at one point that he was back in time watching the Dutch during the 80's. Fisher's tireless running up top, with the support of BO, Nicky and Stevey were causing problems, and there was no surprise when the lead was doubled in the 26th minute. A swift counter attack gave Fisher the ball in the centre circle. He provided the ball outside to Nicky, who was in acres of space (not sure why they didn't want to mark him?!), who timely played it back into the run of Fisher, who calmly finished first time 1v1 with the keeper. Milton 2-0 Hardwick.

The rest of the first half was full of half chances for both teams. The whole crowd thought Hardwick had pulled one back when a through ball wasn't dealt with (for once) by the defence. After rounding Cookie, the striker could only power his shot straight at Christian on the line. This was a definite wake-up call for Milton. Milton kept it tight until half-time, where everyone was happy coming off to the smell of burgers, I mean leading 2-0.

The team talk was straight to the point- keep doing what you're doing. Milton knew that the next goal was important, so a strong start was imperative. Once again, a strong Milton performance gave their hosts little opportunities. Hardwick, who are known for having a strong attack were running out of ideas. George and Pro zipped up their wingers in their pockets, Manu and Hodgey worked tirelessly at breaking play down and preventing through balls, which meant Hardwick were only able to go long and high. It goes without saying that the defence of Westy, Chaz and Cookie were able to deal with these long balls all day long.

Pro was soon to be substituted when his calf/ hamstring/ groin gave way (maybe he should have taken the warm-up a bit less seriously). On came Mr Gray.

It wasn't until the 64th minute that Milton finally got their third. Good work between midfield and attack led the ball being delivered from the right. Bolandi had come in from the left and leapt up to head the ball beautifully into the top hand corner. Then came the scariest moment of the match. Being a close friend of the Hardwick boys, the goal meant a lot to Bolandi, who turned into the Incredible Hulk and rampaged through anyone who tried to celebrate with him. Harshly, the referee booked BO, not realising that he didn't take his shirt off, his anger ripped it to pieces. Milton 3-0 Hardwick.

Hardwick began to throw more and more men forward hoping for something, but Milton stayed strong and could have possibly added to their total. Cookie was called into action more often, but he continued to impress. 'Capello, sign him up, Capello Capello sign him up' was the cheer from the stands. A welcomed return to action for striker Mikey Evans in the final 15 minutes kept Hardwick's defence on their toes, but by this point, it was route 1 all the time for them. They did hit the bar, but finally beat Cookie in goal, after a goalmouth scramble. Some might say it was a tad fortunate after keeper Cookie seemed to be man-handled out of the way. Milton 3-1 Hardwick.

Final whistle was blown, with cheers and relief from all players and supporters. A trip to Wembley (as good as), is now set in stone. A difficult month ahead for Milton, but they will know that performances like today will not only move them up the league table, but will give them a real chance come May 3rd.

Man of the match went to James Bolandi, but it could have quite easily gone to any of the 10 players out there (sorry Pro- man up!).

Team: Ben Cook, George Hadfield, Tom West, Christian Wright, Andrew Proctor, Nick Haycraft, Manu, Glenn Hodges, James Bolandi, Stephen Jordan, Matt Fisher

Subs: Thomas Gray, Mikey Evans, Rob Toulson, Simon Rose (not used)

Written and narrated by Stephen Jordan