



Matches – 2 March 1968 – Arsenal 0 Leeds United 1

Football League Cup final – Wembley – 97,887

Scorers: Cooper 18 min

Arsenal: Furnell, Storey, McNab, McLintock, Simpson, Ure, Radford, Jenkins (Neill 75), Graham, Sammels, Armstrong

Leeds United: Sprake, Reaney, Cooper, Bremner, Charlton, Hunter, Greenhoff, Lorimer, Madeley, Giles, Gray (Belfitt 75)



As Leeds United prepared for their Football League Cup final against Arsenal at Wembley on Saturday 2 March 1968, there were two schools of thought regarding the outcome. The Doubting Thomases looked back on two lost finals, a couple of runners up spots in Division One and two defeats in semi finals since United's return to the top flight in 1964, and concluded that Leeds were bottlers, freezing when their moment came. There was also the little matter of an incredible 45 matches that United had played thus far in the season, and another 20-odd still to go, making them understandably a little leg weary.



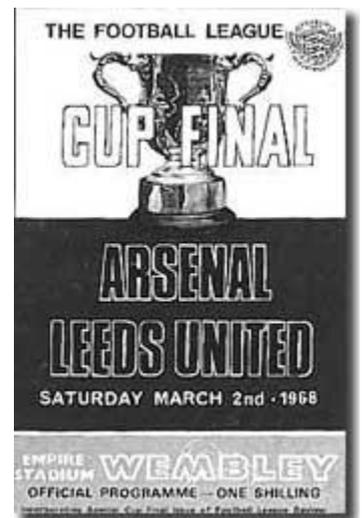
More positive voices boasted of United's status as the team of the season, still in the running for the League, the FA Cup, the Fairs Cup and, of course, the League Cup. They were on a run of 16 games unbeaten in all competitions, registering eight clean sheets in the process.

Recent form between the clubs also favoured United. In fact, they had won all seven games since being promoted, with a goals record of 17-3. Impressive going!

The official comments from the United camp were positive. Don Revie: "It would be a nice reward if we could win this one following four years of hard toil and sweat. If we do succeed I feel it will be a springboard for even bigger things."

Billy Bremner: "The boys are all very confident of winning this one. We only hope we do not suffer from over confidence."

Leeds were eager to wipe out the memory of their previous appearance at Wembley, the 1965 FA Cup final against Liverpool, a sterile occasion that raised no one's blood pressure. But the first priority was victory and an end to all the Elland Road hard luck stories.



The programme for the final

The competition's status of being the least significant of the majors did not matter to Leeds – a trophy was a trophy.

The Football League Cup was still relatively new. It was introduced in 1960 by Alan Hardaker,

secretary of the Football League, and, according to Bryon Butler, “few tournaments have had a more painful or difficult birth. It was a competition just for the 92 clubs of the League, a brand new source of income with a two-legged final on the grounds of the two finalists, but there were many who condemned it as ill-timed, ill-conceived and a burden on an already overloaded season. Six big clubs even refused to take part.

“Aston Villa just pipped Rotherham in the first final and Norwich easily overcame Rochdale in the second – some unusual grounds enjoyed the distinction of staging a ‘national’ event. In 1967, however, the final became a one shot affair at Wembley with all the trimmings, the winner was promised an automatic place in the Fairs Cup and suddenly attitudes changed. Alan Hardaker was soon able to claim that ‘if the FA Cup is football’s Ascot then the League Cup is its Derby Day’.

“The first League Cup final at Wembley also happened to be rather special. West Bromwich of the First Division met Queens Park Rangers of the Third in front of a full house – and at half time Albion were leading 2-0 and looking home and dried. But Rangers, managed with style by Alec Stock and inspired by the delightfully talented Rodney Marsh, came back brilliantly in the second half to score three and help shape a little piece of history.”

Leeds had injury and illness concerns ahead of the big day, but were able to name Jack Charlton (back problems), Gary Sprake, Jimmy Greenhoff (both knee strains) and Johnny Giles (chill) in their starting eleven, though the last two were far from fully fit. It was a gamble that Revie felt worth taking, for Giles was the man who made United tick and he had been enjoying a wonderful season. Cup-tied Mick Jones was replaced at centre-forward by the versatile Paul Madeley.



Don Revie and Bertie Mee lead out the two teams - the United players pictured are Gray, Charlton, Cooper, Hunter, Giles, Reaney, Sprake and Bremner

Another absentee was former chairman, Harry Reynolds, forced through illness to return from Wembley to Leeds on the morning of the game. He sadly missed the occasion of what he fervently hoped would be the first of United’s big time triumphs.

The Gunners were at full strength, with the three Scots, Frank McLintock, Ian Ure and George Graham, probably their outstanding players. The North Londoners had been without a trophy themselves since 1953, and had been in sad decline ever since, culminating in an embarrassing period under the management of former England captain Billy Wright. Former club physio Bertie Mee, who had minimal experience in professional football, took over as manager following Wright’s departure in 1966. He had started to steady the ship, though Arsenal were a pale imitation of the side that had enjoyed such a glorious past, particularly when inspired by the legendary Herbert Chapman, formerly manager of Leeds City.

Neither side had been particularly extended en route to the final, though the Gunners had required a replay against Burnley in the quarter finals after a 3-3 draw at Turf Moor. Leeds’ passage had taken in Luton, Bury, Sunderland, Stoke City and Derby County.

The day of the final was dull and overcast, but there was little wind and it was a firm, if bare, pitch, with thankfully less of the holding going that had left many former Wembley contestants injured. The United support was outnumbered two to one, but they were much noisier than their London counterparts.

United took the game to the Gunners in the opening minutes, with McNab having to intercept a neat through pass from Bremner to Madeley, and then Eddie Gray probing up the left flank. Arsenal responded smartly to create a decent opening but young David Jenkins sent it high, wide and not particularly handsome.

There were a number of long balls played high into the penalty areas, but the two defensive king pins, Charlton and Ure, gobbled up everything that came their way.

Arsenal were starting to make a mark on the game and McLintock was prompting his forwards well, but it was United who broke through after 18 minutes.

Bremner went away down the right, supported by Madeley and Hunter, and won a corner. The ball found Giles, whose shot was deflected to bring another flag kick, and this time Gray's centre was far more dangerous, dropping in perfectly towards a crowded goal area. Gunners keeper Jim Furnell had both Madeley and Charlton to contend with as he flapped at the ball. It dropped out to the left hand side of the penalty area, where Terry Cooper was waiting. He moved in eagerly to volley it unerringly back into the corner from whence it came.



Bremner, Charlton and Madeley watch as Terry Cooper's shot beats the Arsenal defenders to open the scoring in the 1968 League Cup final. The Gunners in the picture are McLintock, McNab, Ure, Graham, Furnell and Storey

Arsenal protested long and hard that Furnell had been impeded in his leap, but referee Hamer would have none of it, instantly signalling the players back to halfway for the restart.

Arsenal were visibly shaken by the goal and Ure nearly laid a chance on a plate for Greenhoff with a tentative pass back to his keeper but the Gunners recovered thereafter and came out to pressurise United.

Giles was clearly under the weather, and not nearly the influence he usually was. By way of compensation, Hunter and Cooper made some useful sallies to keep Arsenal on their toes. Attacking moves by Leeds became less frequent as they seemed content to play within themselves and protect their advantage even at this early stage. Had the Gunners' shooting been more accurate they might have made more of the few chances that came their way.

Frustrated by an inability to convert their possession into goals, Arsenal tried to turn United's own dead ball tactics against them at a corner shortly before the break. McLintock heavily charged Sprake as he caught the cross, sparking an untidy set to. Ure was surrounded by Leeds defenders pushing and pulling him in concerted rage. The referee calmed affairs quickly, but things had threatened momentarily to get out of hand.

The whistle went shortly afterwards to give time for tempers to cool during the interval, and it was just as well, for the mood had started to turn decidedly ugly.

Gary Sprake: "There were a few unsavoury incidents but nothing major – even the incident with McLintock was nothing really, just a few handbags. However, the tension between the two teams was genuine and was similar to the hostility that had developed between us and Chelsea. The London press hated us and this certainly created a North/South divide. Revie really stoked us up to put one over the London clubs every time we played them."

Despite being behind, Arsenal had enjoyed the greater possession, but there was always the feeling that Leeds could up their game if they needed to and were content to keep the Gunners at bay.



Things turn nasty at Wembley after McLintock's foul on Gary Sprake. Ian Ure is being accosted by Cooper, Bremner and Hunter while Reaney and Charlton tackle McLintock

The Whites came out of their shell for a moment when Paul Reaney's speedy overlap took him clear to set up a break which ended with Bremner's blazing shot flying across the goal and wide of the far post.

Later, the Leeds skipper chased a loose ball into the box and nearly took Furnell's head off his shoulders in his eagerness to get in a shot, provoking more anger in the Gunners ranks, but the incident was quickly over.

Such chances were becoming scarcer as United settled for not conceding. They had missed too many previous opportunities of success to throw this one away now that they had the advantage. Madeley was withdrawn into an auxiliary defensive role, with Rod Belfitt coming on for a limping Gray with 15 minutes to go to plough a lone furrow up front.

Sprake did have to make one late save, diving low to his left to turn a good shot from Radford away for a corner, but, that apart, Arsenal had few direct chances thanks to a strong defensive showing from Leeds. They did get the ball in the net once, through a shot from George Armstrong, but the goal was disallowed for an infringement on Giles.

The stars of the day were all in defence and few played better than Hunter and Cooper for Leeds, faultless in their covering and tackling, and ever ready to spring United counters.

That splendid defence held out to register its 5th clean sheet in 9 matches and secure the trophy in the process, breaking the duck that had haunted the club. The match was hardly thrilling, but it was a job well done, as Eric Stanger reported in the Yorkshire Post: “It was far from being a good game. But then Wembley finals seldom are. Not in any game where defences are obviously too strong for the opposing attacks. As Jack Charlton said to me afterwards, ‘The only time you are likely to get a spectacular game in a final is if you have two sides in opposition each with good attacks but poor defences.’”

“Leeds, four times robbed of a rich prize in the last four seasons, played this game as they would a cup-tie in Europe – tight, taking no risks and leaving no loophole behind on the occasions they did move upfield. It does not make for bright entertainment but it is

the result which is remembered long after the details of the play are forgotten.



The Leeds team celebrate victory after the League Cup final - Back: Sprake, Lorimer, Gray, Charlton, Madeley, Belfitt Front: Greenhoff, Cooper, Reaney, Hunter, Giles, Bremner

“United got the result they wanted, very much in the manner that Yorkshire cricketers have won championships down the years, by giving nothing away and by strict application of every man to his task and attention to detail. Such as Rhodes, Robinson, Leyland and Mitchell would have approved. Like Leeds, they did not believe in throwing a game away merely to entertain.

“But those who yearned for fast, attacking football should not lay the entire blame on Leeds if they found it dull. Arsenal, themselves far stronger in defence than attack, always had eight or nine men scuttling back at the first sign of danger. Diamond cut diamond for nearly the whole of the 90 minutes.

“For second favourites Arsenal, I thought, played well. Certainly there was nothing wrong with their spirit. They refused to accept defeat until the last whistle. They tackled hard, often more sharply than Leeds, but like so many teams before them they found movements they had begun so well in midfield destroyed by the power of the Leeds defence as they approached the penalty area. They had perforce to do most of their shooting from long range and if Cooper’s was just about United’s only worthwhile shot on target, Arsenal had not



What it was all for - this is Les Cocker's League Cup winner's tankard

many more.”

Eric Todd was more scathing in the Guardian: “Leeds United fired only one shot in anger on Saturday ay Wembley, but it was enough to finish Arsenal who, in spite of their name, had no big guns, no small arms, and seemingly no ammunition. So Leeds won the Football League Cup, their first major trophy to which their dogged persistence and remarkable consistency assuredly have entitled them.

“It was, nevertheless, a ‘poor do’, as they say in the North. What they were calling it in North London on Saturday night is nobody’s business. Even a newspaper that prides itself on getting to the heart of things would hesitate to repeat some of the descriptions bestowed upon the proceedings. A quickly taken Gallup poll revealed that it probably was the worst final seen at Wembley. And many a spectator went home determined to add a rider to his prayers between now and May 18 asking that Arsenal will not meet Leeds in the final for the FA Challenge Cup.

“The standard of play was low enough in all conscience, but the behaviour of some of the players was unpardonable. In addition to private skirmishes, there was a free for all in the Leeds goalmouth after Sprake had been charged. Yet no names were taken, nobody was sent off. One of these days some referee will earn undying fame – and gratitude – by forgetting that this is Wembley, that royalty is present, and remembering that fighting among players should be punished so severely as it should be punished on any ground anywhere.

“There was far too much negative, purposeless football all round to generate sustained enthusiasm among the 100,000 onlookers. Arsenal’s shooting was quite execrable, that of Leeds negligible. Arsenal had 75 per cent of the play, maybe a bit more, yet Sprake was required to make only one tumbling save. The ball probably would have gone wide anyway. Armstrong did put the ball into the Leeds net – after the whistle had been blown for a foul on Giles.

“Out of all the drabness, however, emerged once more the indisputable fact that this Leeds defence is nothing short of magnificent. Cooper, in my opinion, had no equal on either side, and his goal was a fitting reward for his outstanding work this term. He should have a great future. Hunter also had a distinguished match, and Reaney, Charlton and indestructible Bremner all helped to make things more tolerable. For those who came from Yorkshire, of course.

“The Leeds forwards seldom had a look in, and in the second half, Greenhoff excepted, they concentrated on defensive matters. Giles, so many times the architect of Leeds raids, obviously had not recovered fully from his cold (he did well enough to finish the course) and Madeley was too slow at centre-forward, although he looked more the part when he became an auxiliary centre-half.



Goalscorer Terry Cooper with the trophy - he had an outstanding Wembley debut

“Arsenal’s eccentric form this season justified the general prophecy that they would be defeated. Their most perfervid supporters did not, however, anticipate such a dilatory performance. Once or twice Armstrong and Radford promised riches, but their inside-forwards could do no more than give full employment to the ball boys behind the Leeds goal.”

Terry Cooper, who had a wonderful game in his first appearance at Wembley, claimed afterwards that he had dreamed of scoring the winning goal three nights running. He said later: "The most

important thing about that success was that it broke the ice as regards winning something. Up until then we had been regarded as the bridesmaids, always coming runners-up in the League or losing cup semi-finals and finals. We didn't pick up as many trophies as we should have but after that win against Arsenal we went onto some big things. Our side wasn't far off its peak then. All the players were there and it was just a pleasure to play in that team.

"Regarding the goal, I remember it came after we had won a corner. Arsenal were worried about the presence of Big Jack (Charlton) on the goalkeeper but it was an outswinger. I just whacked it on the volley from the edge of the area, the kind of effort that either hits the corner flag or flies into the roof of the net which happily was what happened.

"It was a hard game with not many chances and the sort where one strike would decide it but I think the result was a fair reflection of the play.

"As a young lad - I was 23 at the time - you don't take it all in and I can't remember a lot about the day even though it was my first appearance at Wembley."

Don Revie used his column in the Yorkshire Evening Post a week later to write defiantly of the circumstances that prevented his men from playing the attacking game they had promised pre match: "Our pride in at last winning a major soccer honour has not been dented by fierce criticism about the way this was achieved. I make no apologies for the fact that Leeds United did not keep their vow to produce a more attractive display than on their last appearance at Wembley against Liverpool three years ago.

"Injuries and illness to forwards Jimmy Greenhoff and Johnny Giles forced us unfortunately to adopt a more cautious approach in the final. It was not our original aim to close up the game. I wrote here last week that we badly wanted to prove ourselves as a skilled and entertaining side in front of the millions who would be watching. I meant it. Greenhoff and Giles would never have played in a normal League or Cup match, but I decided to put them in the team because of the psychological effect their presence would have on the other players. These two have been playing superbly this season and without them we might have been a beaten side before the final whistle.

"After taking a 1-0 lead in the 18th minute, United contained Arsenal rather than attempting to score more goals. Only a person who understands the frustration and disappointment we have suffered in recent seasons can understand why our players were so intent on keeping that lead, rather than give 100,000 fans a soccer treat.



The Yorkshire Evening Post of 2 March 1968 carries the early news of the League Cup final

“Now we have won this trophy, we feel that a great weight has been lifted off our shoulders. At last Leeds has cast away that champion runners up tag – and are now in a good position to win more honours. I am positive we will take another title before the end of the season. Our best chance must be the FA Cup, but the League championship is still my real goal.”

It was a drab and dull game for the neutrals, worse even than United’s dismal defeat in 1965 against Liverpool, but no one at Elland Road cared about that. Harry Reynolds’ desperate desire to “win summat” was the only driving force that United cared about that day, and few could deny that they deserved their moment of glory.