

FA Inter League Cup – Semi Final Saturday 24th March 2018

AFC vs North Riding League (NR)

The waiting was over, the squad had been selected, the final team had been published and all match day arrangements had been sorted. The opponents had spent a leisurely overnight stay in a Hemel Hempstead hotel, had a light pre match brunch and training session and were on the pitch warming up as the crowds arrived. Was it to be another master class from manager - David Cross and his team?

The AFC support team were swelled by assistant manager Aaron D'Sousa and helped on the day by Bob Leeds and Pat Folan, who both led on pre match warm ups and tactics. The FA's representative was again Ray Lewis (ex FL referee) who also thought the AFC were underdogs having looked at final venues in the North East !! The four match officials selected from the FA's elite were also primed and ready for what was anticipated by many to be a stroll for the North Riding League – were the underdogs strong enough – you bet we were!!

I have to once again thanks and admire Geoff Lence for making the trip from his home in Chelmsford by replacement buses, train tube and foot to the game and back again – he is looking more sprightly at every round and will be a definite be considered as the team mascot if we won .

So to the match in question. The North Riding team playing in all red kicked and within minutes, disaster for the AFC as a strong header won in midfield from the NR captain was somehow missed by the AFC defence allowing their forward to run through unchallenged and slip it past Chris Parlett (Suttonians) **0-1**. The start could not have been worse and the AFC team seem overawed by the importance of the game and were definitely well off the pace in the first 10 minutes. Another super chance for NR and on this occasion a fine save from Parlett, pushing the ball onto a post and off for a corner. Come on boys lets fight!!

It was all North Riding in the first ten minutes but gradually the AFC gained confidence and began to knock the ball about and get the speedsters Chris Heritage (Hamptonians) & Ryan Bright (Meadonians) behind the full backs. Two good chances for the AFC came and went and the next ten minutes was more in the NR half than the first ten and so the crowd began to sense the come-back was on. However in Stuart Rose the NR team had a forward of immense power and skill, having scored in every cup round in the past two seasons, his speed and vision saw a great chance smash against Parlett's upright, so near to 0-2, but still so far. Could the AFC get an equaliser before half time – you bet they could. A great move and through pass so Chris Heritage in the clear, it had to be a goal , but no the keeper blocks his shot with a great save , but wait he knocks it out and straight against an onrushing defender who knocks it straight past him and into the net GOAL!!!! **1-1**.

The AFC were back in the game and taking it to the opposition, who had decided that the game plan was to target the speedsters, Bright and Heritage certainly took a kicking, the referee maybe could have helped them from the battering they took, but did caution when most thought necessary. NR first caution after 40 minutes with their full back scything down Heritage, followed soon by the first AFC caution as Stevens of Parmitterians dished a bit back!!

Half time and the score remained 1-1 in what ended up a very even half. The half time cuppa & cake and discussions between the AFC contingent suggested caution and expected the next 45 minutes to be the hardest yet as the NR team looked very strong and despite the score most felt they were going to be too strong for the AFC.....only time would tell and never give up on the under-dog.

A stirring half time team talk by the management team must have worked wonders as the AFC started the second half strongly and another excessively strong challenge saw the 2nd caution for NR as No 4 Dillon hacked down Bright. Everything was looking positive but a rare NR attack saw a needless foul conceded 10 yards outside the penalty area and from the resulting free kick, with the AFC defence switched off, man of match Rose of NR, broke free to fire the ball home **1-2**.

It was now a repetition of the first half as once again North Riding gained the upper hand, the AFC backed off, with constant pressure on Parlett's goal. That man Rose should have made it 1-3 when he broke away again firing a screamer which smacked against the post and away to safety. The AFC were up against it and another needlessly conceded free kick caused massive issues at the back before being cleared from under the bar by skipper Aidan Chapman (Meadonians).

Slowly but surely the fight back began with Stevens firing in a real scorcher from fully 40 yards that flashed just over with the NR keeper clutching this air. Again Bright was felled with what considered should have been a straight red, but only another caution as this time the NR 7 entering the refs book. It was tough out there and all the hard challenges seemed to be affecting our ball players, only time would tell if we could get that equaliser.

The AFC continued to battle and take the numerous fouls that kept coming their way. Twenty minutes into the 2nd half and yet another poor foul wipes out Heritagebut this time it's in the area, "penalty" we scream, whistle blows, the ref agrees and up steps Stuart Holt(Meadonians) to fire home **2-2**.

Holt was immediately taken off for super –sub George Proctor (Suttonians) a move that had worked in the QF, would it work again? The NR team and management became incensed by the referee pulling them up for so many fouls and this was working in the AFC's favour but fouls they were and so the AFC ploughed on. Twenty minutes to go and a rare NR shot suddenly hits that man Rose again and finds the net, the assistant Ref's flag is immediately raised (VAR not required) offside – goal ruled out, we all heave a huge sigh of relief in the grandstand.

We move into the last 20 minutes and what's this Heritage skips past the tiring NR full back , who cannot foul him as he is on a yellow, so Heritage gets to the by line before firing in a low cross which sees that super sub George Proctor work his predators instinct to glide in and fire home from six **3-2**.

The teams begin to swap their players in an effort to win the game or in the AFC's case hold on. The pressure starts again from the NR team as their substitutes are forwards, fresh quick and skilful. Another silly foul 25 yards out is conceded and up steps the NR skipper to curl it home ,a shot that keeper Parlett must be unhappy to concede, being slow to react. **3-3**.– Twenty minutes still to go – can we hold on as the NR team mount constant pressure, but that's how it remained as it's extra time once again.

Skipper Cross makes his final change as Mariani (Parmiterians) starts the final 30 minutes replacing Johnny Meldram (Hamptonians). The tackles keep flying in from both teams and further cautions add up, its 5-3 to NR at the latest count. The final one another horrible reckless challenge by the NR no 10 sees him in the book. The resultant free kick almost gets the AFC the winner, so close. Things are looking good as NR are definitely tiring but that is countered by so many AFC players carrying knocks from those excessive number of foul challenges.

Three minutes to the ET half time whistle and Mariani picks the ball up in centre field and drives at the NR defence, a great through ball finds that man Proctor again who takes it in his stride, to fire a quite breath taking 18 yard cross shot, past the keeper and into the top far corner of the net . **4-3**

The noise from the AFC crowd is deafening, a whole second half of extra time to survive, but survive they did, with the defence magnificent soaking up the constant NR pressure, Parlett atoning for his earlier error with a string of solid saves and a command of his area under pressure. NR were attacking at every opportunity and it

really was a real tough final ten minutes. The clock ticked on, we screamed for the final whistle – but suddenly that man Rose was clear again and just like the first half, his shot was touched onto the post by Parlett, come on ref blow that whistle. Finally he did and in scenes of unbridled joy the team, management and supporters let rip.....The AFC had made it to the final.....what an achievement, what a performance yet again from the whole team. Players and jubilant supporters then ate and drank in the Uxbridge FC bar, who had put on an excellent day for both teams and need to receive huge thanks for allowing us to use their facilities. The Final awaits and dare we dream of being the representatives for England in the Euro tournament. Full details of the date and venue for the final will be advised once agreed with the FA.

Players

Chris Parlett(GK) Old Suttonians
Cameron McGovern Old Hamptonians
Harry Wakeford Clapham OX
Aidan Chapman Old Meadonians (Capt)
Johnnie Meldrum Old Hamptonians
Richard Turner Albanian
Chris Heritage Old Hamptonians
David Stevens Old Parmiterians
Ryan Bright Old Meadonians
Stuart Holt Old Meadonians
Ellis McLennon Old Suttonians
Subs : -
Henry Warne (GK) Dorkinians (Sub)
George Proctor Old Suttonians
Ryan Carolan Old Parmiterians
Joe Mariani Old Parmiterians
John Sargeant Old Parmiterians

Manager - David Cross
Asst Manager – Aaron D’Sousa

Ian Andrews
AFC Secretary 25th March 2018