



Dunston UTS's Andrew Bullford celebrates in a deserted Wembley

FA PHOTOS

The FA loses out financially by hosting this game at the national stadium and they are under pressure to use other venues. But talk to anyone involved in a non-League club that has ever made it to Wembley, or fallen agonisingly at the last hurdle, and it is evident that the simple mention of its name stirs the emotions. Speaking after Dunston's semi-final win over Staveley, manager Billy Irwin could barely contain his feelings. "This means everything. I live in the town and it's just brilliant for Gateshead and the whole area. I've never even seen Wembley before. Leading your hometown team out at Wembley, it's the stuff that dreams are made of."

Dunston chairman Malcolm James agreed: "When we beat Staveley, a lot of the lads on the committee who have been involved in the club for years were in tears at the final whistle. There was a lot of emotion." For this reason alone, the argument to move the FA Vase final from Wembley is an awkward one to advocate. Amos has no doubts about where the game should be played: "The thrill of Wembley never diminishes or dissipates. It is truly special to walk up Wembley Way. Ask anyone in the game, and it's all about Wembley."

With better planning, the attendance for this year's final could have been greater. Scheduling the match at the same time as the last day of the Premier League season was unfortunate. Many Premier League fans also follow local non-League clubs. If played on a different date, travelling Newcastle United and Sunderland fans would have boosted this year's Wembley gate.

The FA were also criticised in some quarters for doing little to promote ticket sales for the game. In the matchday programme notes, FA chairman David Bernstein described it as a "great pleasure" to be hosting the game at Wembley. One wonders about the sincerity of that sentiment.

Andy Ollerenshaw

Crowdsourcing

FA VASE

As the drama of the crowning moments of the 2011-12 Premier League season unfolded in Manchester, Dunston UTS were lifting the FA Vase at Wembley. The team from Gateshead had won 2-0 in an entertaining game against fellow Northern League side West Auckland Town. A disappointingly low crowd of 5,126 saw Andrew Bullford score a brace, taking his Vase tally to 15 this season and making him the first player in the history of the competition to score in every round.

The FA Vase is an annual competition for clubs playing below Step 4 of the National League System (Step 1 is the Conference Premier). This season 539 clubs entered and, unlike the FA Cup or FA Trophy, teams playing in the earliest stages of the competition have a genuine chance of making it all the way to Wembley. West Auckland achieved this feat. They began last September, beating Cleator Moor Celtic in the first qualifying round. The final was their 11th game in a run that included the defeat of another Northern League team, holders Whitley Bay. Dunston entered the competition at the second round, opening in style with a thumping 12-1 win over Blackwell Miners Welfare.

The presence of two Northern League teams in the final was a testament to the strength of the league. Non-League football in the north-east has a rich history. Starting in 1893 and ending in 1974, the FA Amateur Cup was the forerunner of the FA Vase; the Northern League provided 21 winners.

In 1909 West Auckland were chosen to represent England in the Sir Thomas Lipton Trophy, a new international tournament held 19 years before Jules Rimet's own idea was realised. The north-east club won in Italy, thereby laying claim to be winners of the first "World Cup". In more recent times Whitley Bay have dominated in the Vase, lifting the trophy on four occasions since 2002. Their home defeat to West Auckland in February ended a record-breaking run of 29 games undefeated in the competition.

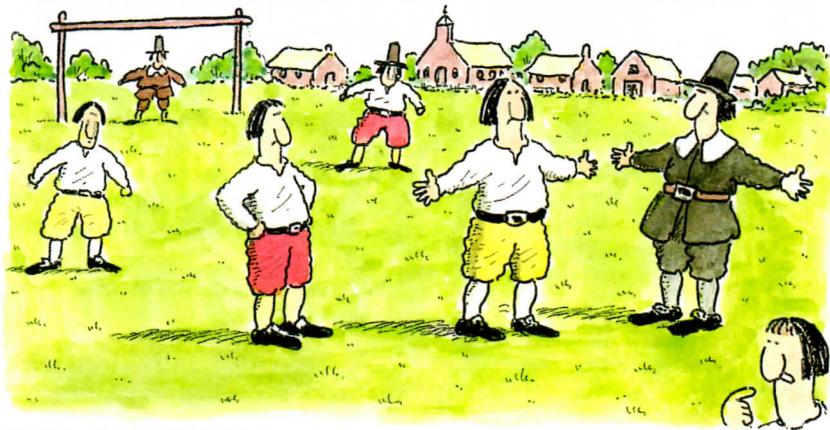
Mike Amos, the chairman of the Northern League, was especially proud of what Dunston and West Auckland had achieved: "We've had nine Vase finalists in the last 16 years, but to get two this year really is something else." The geographical isolation of the region explains the league's strength. Many part-time players in the league have the ability to play at a higher level but opt to stay with Northern League clubs, citing how the increased travel required higher up the pyramid would impact upon work commitments.

Dunston and West Auckland, only 30 miles apart, travelled 300 miles south to play this season's final, prompting further debate about whether the FA Vase showpiece should be played at Wembley. This year's turnout was close to the lowest for a final – only 4,254 attended in 1987 – and the sight of 85,000 empty seats in Wembley Stadium made for uneasy viewing.

Scenes from Football History

No 253

The New World pilgrims realise too late that they've left the ball in England.



DAVE ROBINSON