

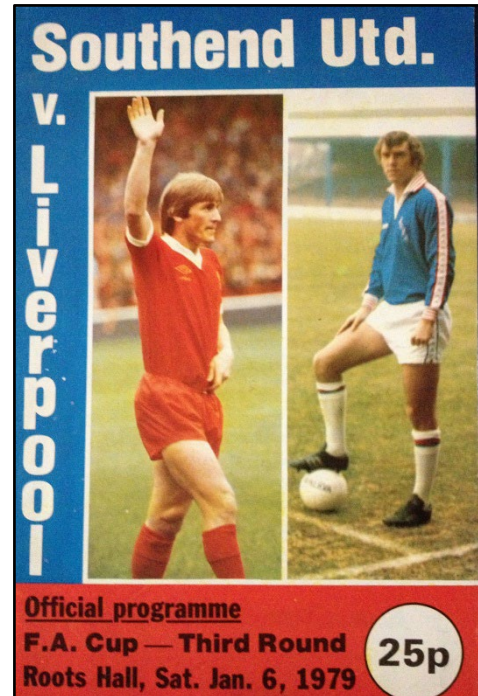


THAT SNOWY NIGHT IN JANUARY 1979 – A REFEREE’S VIEW (KEITH HACKETT)

In October 2024 we had the privilege of speaking to someone who had perhaps the most important role in one of the most significant matches in our club’s history.

We connected with former referee Keith Hackett on LinkedIn and, seeing a comment from him on one of our SUEPA posts when he referenced his part in that wonderful snowy night back in January 1979, we thought we’d see if he was up for a chat ... and were delighted to find that he was.

Keith, who turned 80 in June 2024, was an experienced man of high regard in his field by the time Andy Polycarpou’s replay winner against Watford in the second round set up our date with the reigning European Champions. In refereeing circles, the bigger the team, the more experienced the match official is, tends to be the rule, and none at that time (or even today) were much bigger than the Anfield Road men. So, the occasion demanded a man with the whistle of Keith’s standing.



A red team full of internationals, who most of us who were there can still quote the 1 to 11 of now (today maybe we might not manage to recall more than that Egyptian chap and a couple of others despite their earning capacities), Liverpool FC commanded top treatment, and so on the Friday, the day before the game was due to take place, Mr KS Hackett of Sheffield had an early start on the M1. But it was clear that, along with many of the fixtures that day in icy England, no ball was going to be kicked. So, the game was put back four days to Wednesday 10 January 1979. A wise move so it seemed, and Keith, with business to attend to in nearby Romford, stayed ‘down south’.

Late Wednesday afternoon he made his way to Roots Hall (for what turned out to be his first and only visit), took a look around the green pitch and its vast empty surrounding terraces, and retreated to the claustrophobic warmth of the match officials’ room (cupboard would be a better description) to prepare for the match. Though at the time it was the newest ground in the UK, a title it would hold for 33 years until 1988, it was far from luxurious – albeit the old bath in the home dressing room did, when the boiler worked, receive warm water.

The good folk of Essex were streaming in, a ground which typically housed 5,000 would that night have to squeeze in over 31,000, and queues of up to what proved to be over two hours long to gain entry were beginning to form. Some 5,000 Liverpool supporters, many on away day train specials, were adding to the mix. John Motson was looking in some disbelief at the wooden ladder he had to negotiate to get to his commentary position on top of the West Stand roof. Then it began to snow.

About half an hour after Keith had settled in, one of his linesmen asked him to pop outside to view the scene – snow was falling heavily and dear old Sid Broomfield and his merry band of ground staff were fighting a losing battle to keep the pitch clear. The local constabulary were worried – the masses descending on Roots Hall were better managed within the ground rather than being left to roam outside, and they wanted the game on. What to do with 5,000 guests from Liverpool was a key concern – the trains to take them home would not be in place until 10 pm and the thought of bands of marauding scallies swamping local hostelrys for several hours was not on the agenda.

Keith spoke to managers Bob Paisley and Dave Smith – they were positive and appreciated the police position. He rang the FA for guidance – no response despite repeated attempts to call them, they'd probably all gone home early because of the snow. Life before mobile phones was a mess.

So, despite the snow continuing and a thick layer beginning to build on the pitch and making the terraces look like a Christmas card, it was 'game on'. A supply of orange balls was found, and Sid was ordered to focus clearing the lines and to try and find some red dye for the touchline paint.

Paisley told his team that they'd be playing, they couldn't quite believe it. Smithy told his men – they were delighted, the conditions would certainly help to level things up a bit.

The ground filled up, Roots Hall had once seen a crowd of almost 29,000 in 1957 for the visit of Birmingham in the FA Cup (when a Jimmy Thomson goal, today 93 years young and SUEPA's second-oldest member, had seen off Liverpool in the previous round), but it had not come close to that since. The massive South Bank open terrace alone was rammed with some 15,000 snow-capped hardy souls, and a steward with a loud hailer was going around the perimeter of the pitch shouting at folk to move back to relieve pressure at the front.

Meanwhile, perched on top of the double-barrelled West Stand roof, Motty wiped away the snow from his notes and hid under a blanket wanting to think of a warm car journey home but trying to block from his mind a descent back down that ladder to get there. Liverpool fans were housed in the traditional home fans North Bank abode and had brought a few red flares with them to ward off the cold, whilst the main stand on the East side, the only (partially) seated area, bristled with activity as match officials wrestled with the challenges of managing something they'd never seen anything like before (or, as it turned out, since). The ageing bulbs of the four traditional floodlight pylons hummed and hissed to light up the scene below them.

The two teams came out on time to a tumultuous roar, Keith recalling that the atmosphere was electric. Emlyn Hughes and home skipper Alan Moody met him in the centre circle for the coin toss. Keith recalls getting out his 50p, Emlyn calling tails, and the coin then disappearing into the snow never to be seen again. Keith said it was heads, Emlyn went mad, and Alan chose to forgo kicking off and play towards the South Bank in the first half. Keith told us that many years later he met up with Emlyn at a function and the Liverpool skipper quizzed him about that coin toss – competitive to the last was 'Crazy Horse'.

"The snow was fairly level and the ground soft underneath at least to start off with" Keith remembers, "the ball bobble was not too bad, and I decided from the outset to give all the players some leniency to take account of the conditions. Some tolerance and common sense was what

was needed, and afterwards both managers came up to compliment me on how things went. After the match I drove back home to Sheffield, I had my day job to do the day after, it was a long trip!”

That night for us Shrimpers was magical. Certainly, Keith played a huge part, and his ‘light touch’ approach to the whistle was key – Jimmy Case received a booking (nothing new there) but that was about it. And close your eyes tight as you get to the moment in the first half in the YouTube Sportsnight highlights when Derrick Parker breaks free, and our number 9 rounds Ray Clemence to score a glorious winner. In reality of course, the England shot-stopper runs out of his box to block the shot and we all trot off to Anfield for a bit of scouse hospitality and a 3-0 defeat.

There will never be a night quite like it again – all of us who were there have a treasured memory to last forever, and it is only right to acknowledge the calm and assured way the man in the middle dealt with it all. Maybe it’s time, Keith, that we prised you out of Sheffield once more and treated you to another day at Roots Hall, this time as our matchday guest – we’ll check the weather forecast first though.

Andy Leeder, October 2024