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# THE BLACKPOOL MIRACLE

BY H. E. BATES

A great writer of short stories  
recalls how Blackpool beat  
Bolton Wanderers in a  
Cup-Final almost too  
dramatic for  
fiction!



IT IS A PITY that every schoolboy in England could not have been at Wembley, in the clear golden sunshine of May 2nd, to see what I think will surely go down in football history as the most exciting and remarkable Cup-Final ever played. For here was a match that might have come straight out of the pages of the *Boys Own Paper* — every schoolboy's miraculous dream of glory come true.

From the day in September when scores of small local clubs begin to oppose each other in the preliminary rounds to the

moment when a hundred thousand people begin to yell themselves hoarse at the Final Tie, the competition for the Challenge Cup is something unique in our sporting calendar. We have nothing else quite like it in any other sport. In cricket the only comparison would be a series in which hundreds of sporting little local clubs began to knock each other out in the chilly days of April for the completely remote and impossible honour of appearing in the final match at Lord's; I do not suppose that anyone has ever thought such a competition to be pos-



sible. Yet *the Cup* has been going on in this fashion since the days of Queen Victoria, offering its glamorous chances for any little David to be drawn in battle with Goliath. And in that, I think, lies much of the excitement and fascination it has for any lover of football.

It is that, too, which makes it the most unpredictable competition ever played. It is the great leveller of reputations, the most tremendous humiliator of pride. No club has ever felt itself to be really safe – unless it was wildly foolish – against even the smallest opponent left in the competition. Who will ever forget, for example, the humiliation of Arsenal by obscure Walsall, or how two minor clubs, Yeovil and Colchester, not long ago took scalp after scalp from the giants of the upper divisions? In his heart every football fan loves the glory of these uncertainties and in the heart of every player in the competition lies the hope, however impossible, that one day he will walk out on to the dazzling turf of Wembley and try to play the game of his life and at last hear the thunder of the arena as he goes up to receive his winner's medal from the hand of his King or his Queen.

To most of us the idea of playing at Wembley even once is quite absurd and impossible. But supposing you were a player who had been to Wembley several times, not only to play in the Final Tie (these are the modest official words that always appear on the tickets) but to represent England too? Not only is it not easy to get to Wembley. It is not easy to play there. Many players find its powerful atmosphere too much for them: there are others who find its rich thick turf tiring and unsuitable

to their game. But supposing you were a player who had played there again and again, in Final Ties and Internationals, and had played brilliantly and yet had never been able to step up to receive the highest and most coveted honour the game in England has to offer – the winner's medal? And supposing, when you were thirty-eight, surely near the end of your playing career, the chance to gain the medal came once again, and probably for the last time – the third chance in five years? You would say that that, I think, was the most difficult and impossible thing of all.

### Thousands of Union Jacks

Yet this was the situation when Stanley Matthews walked out with the Blackpool team to confront their neighbouring Lancastrians, Bolton Wanderers, on May 2nd, 1953. The day was beautifully bright; the turf was a vivid juicy emerald after nearly fifty hours of rain. Perhaps it was an augury that the tangerine shirts of Blackpool were even brighter than the sun. The scene was made more resplendent too because the Queen was there and because a hundred thousand people waved her welcome with thousands of Union Jacks printed on the backs of their song sheets. All of us indeed had high hopes of a great match and all of us who were not raving supporters of Bolton hoped that for one man's sake it would be won by Blackpool – yet not one of us had the slightest notion of what a great match it was going to be or in what a great moment it was going to be won.

The game, for Blackpool, started most disastrously. Within two minutes that fine





*BOLTON'S FIRST. After on y 75 seconas Loftiouse nas scorea off a pass from Holden. Farm dives, but the ball sails into the net. Below: BLACKPOOL'S FIRST. Blackpool draws level, as Hassall dashes back and diverts a cross from Mortensen into his own goal*





player Nat Lofthouse, England's centre-forward, hit a long, low and curiously curling ball from outside the penalty area towards the far Blackpool goal post. It seemed utterly to deceive Farm, a goalkeeper of splendid reputation, and it swung away from his hands and into the net. Farm looked horribly disconsolate and more than half the spectators must have felt in their hearts that it was going to be neither Blackpool's nor Matthews' day. A little later Lofthouse hit the post; then another shot skimmed the Blackpool bar and then still another, and to both of them the poor unhappy nervous Farm had really no answer. At the other end of the field the Bolton goalkeeper was not much better. He too made a mistake as Blackpool equalized and then, to our utter astonishment, Farm blundered again and allowed Bolton once more to take the lead.

This was the score at half-time. Farm looked utterly dejected as he came from the field; his backs had little confidence in him and there was a possible weakness at left-half; some of the football had been scrappy and we had seen something, but not a very great deal, of Matthews. I ought perhaps to explain to those who have not seen him that Matthews is thin, stooping and, like many great footballers, a little pin-toed. I have seen him play many times for England and I remember particularly one extraordinary day when he put an entire Swiss defence into a state of abject mesmerism. But until Saturday, 2nd May, I have never thought him a more brilliant player than Tom Finney, whose superb display against Wales last November I shall never forget. Both are two-footed players of the greatest class who do their work with perfect eco-

nomy, impeccable accuracy and a smooth coolness that is wonderful to see. But until 2nd May I had not seen - and nor had anyone else of this generation - all that Matthews could do.

For Blackpool the second half soon looked as disastrous as the first. The score was soon 3-1 against them and Bolton, even with a man injured, looked most deadly and dangerous whenever they raided, especially down the Blackpool left. Farm stood staring disconsolately at the penalty spot and I think all of us felt that it was not, after all, Matthews' day. Yet I noticed that Blackpool had never given up trying to play football. Mortensen and Taylor, their tiny inside-right, were playing beautifully, and it seemed to me that Taylor had still not touched the peak of his form. And sure enough, about twenty minutes from time, he seemed to grasp that he had the measure of every one in front of him. He began to feed Matthews with a series of inspired passes. And presently one of these gave Matthews the chance to show us that genius has always something extra to give that is beyond the capacity of ordinary people. He put the entire Bolton defence into the same mesmerised tangle as he once put the Swiss and over went the typical low perfect centre. A one-legged tramp could have pushed it in with the side of his foot - yet every tangerine shirt missed it hopelessly.

### Rocket of a shot

Even so, the touch of inspiration in the movement was so great that it seemed to set the entire Blackpool team on fire, and it was no surprise when, a few minutes later,





*BOLTON'S SECOND. Moir jumps in front of Farm, and helps a clever lob from Langton into the Blackpool net. Right: BOLTON'S THIRD. After half-time Bolton increased their lead to 3-1, when Bell got this one*



*BLACKPOOL'S SECOND. Mortensen has pushed the ball between Hanson and Ball to make it 3-2*



*BLACKPOOL'S THIRD. Mortensen takes a free-kick from the edge of the penalty-area, and it is 3-all!*





*BLACKPOOL WINS! Only seconds left and Matthews races for the bye-line and in the last yard sends back a diagonal pass (above) for Perry to shoot home (below)*





the performance was repeated. And this time there was no mistake – and the score was 3-2. I had then no idea – and nor had anyone else, I think, except the referee and his linesmen – how much longer there was to play. The entire ground was in a state of growing pandemonium, and then a still more amazing thing happened. Blackpool were awarded a free-kick just outside the Bolton penalty area, at about the inside-left position. I had some impression that it was going to be taken either by Shimwell or Johnson, the Blackpool captain, who had all along played a fine cool game, but in fact it was Mortensen who calmly aimed at the top corner of the net and slapped in such a fierce rocket of a shot that the Bolton goalkeeper had not time to move a finger.

After that there could not have been more than two or three minutes of added time left for play and my impression was that everyone on the ground stopped thinking. All of us became stupefied with excitement as the stooping pin-toed figure of Matthews went time and time again through a series of swerves, dummies, switches and

above all that remarkable short swift burst of speed that is so astonishing in a man of nearly forty. I think Taylor was hardly less inspired. He fed Matthews at last with a perfect spoon of a pass and with it Matthews seemed to beat the entire Bolton left-flank – almost exactly as Finney had done to make Froggatt's great goal against Wales – and then the perfect low cross was over to the middle and Perry whipped it in the net.

A few mad seconds later the whistle went, and in front of me several otherwise respectable gentlemen threw their overcoats high in the air. I cannot ever remember spectators at a football match throwing their overcoats away – hats, often, but overcoats never – but then I cannot ever remember such an inspired piece of football as was given us by Matthews and his colleagues that day. I do not think Wembley has ever seen anything like that miracle of Blackpool's recovery and the sheer beauty and skill of Matthews' part in it, and I shall be surprised if it ever does again. It was a masterpiece of a match, and a triumph for a masterpiece of a man.



*At last! Stanley Matthews receives his Cup-winners' medal from the Queen*