

# **THE TALE OF THE TROPHY - Stuart Fuller canters through the history of the FA Trophy**

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In early September last year Horsham kicked off the 2013/14 FA Trophy when they took on Chipstead. In between that game, won with ease by the Hornets, and the Final also won with ease By Cambridge United at Wembley on Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> March, there was over 300 games.

The tournament is definitely a sprint rather than a marathon, with games coming almost every fortnight from now on. The nature of the competition now means it's incredibly difficult for clubs in the lower levels of the non-league pyramid to have a run in the Trophy. You need luck with the weather and a decent squad to make a serious challenge. Or you simply ignore the league. Come January, those luck few still in the competition will already be playing two games a week just to ensure they meet the ridiculous deadlines the league impose on the finish of the season.

Two seasons ago, Wealdstone's reward for a run to the semi-finals was to have to play three games a week for the final six weeks of the season. Whilst the final itself is a genuine one-off, reaching Wembley is for the big professional non-league clubs who can afford to rotate their squad to cope with the league and cup demands. Whilst the prize money is a carrot, it's really one of those which has sat at the bottom of the fridge for a few months and destined to sit on the face of this year's first snowman.

To prove how difficult the tournament is to win, just have a look at some of the runners-up in the previous few seasons: Torquay United, York City, Stevenage, Mansfield Town and Newport County have all lost in the final in the past six seasons but have since gone on to reach the Football League. Doesn't fill you with much hope does it?

But, then again, fellow Ryman Premier Leaguers Enfield, Wealdstone, Kingstonian (twice), Canvey Island and Grays Athletic (twice) have all won the Trophy since it was introduced back in 1969. Forty years ago, the runners up were Wigan Athletic. Four weeks ago they beat Valencia in the Mestalla to kick off their Europa League campaign. To dream the impossible dream!

Whilst the cup was introduced to replace the FA Amateur Cup, the two competitions actually ran simultaneously from 1969 to 1974, when Bishop's Stortford won the last ever final, beating Ilford at Wembley Stadium. During the 1950s, the competition was as popular as the FA Cup itself with crowds of 100,000 cramming in to see finals at the Twin Towers. Back then, some players earned good money with a proper job and were happy to play for the love of the game. Northern League sides such as Crook Town and Bishop Auckland dominated the competition in the 1950s, building sides that were feared up and down the country.

But life has moved on and the competition today is dominated by professional teams, despite their non-league status. The finals have become all too predictable. Occasionally there are the odd surprises such as Barrow beating Football League-bound Stevenage in 2010, or Ebbsfleet United beating York City in 2008, but you have to go back to 2005 to find a team from outside the top flight who won the competition, and even then Grays were already champions elect in the Conference

South. Contrast that position with the passion and drama that the FA Vase throws up each year, where the competition really means something to the clubs involved and is wide open.

But even so, there is always the chance of glory, so I will leave you with five fantastic facts about the FA Trophy to keep you amused during half-time:-

1. In 1980-81, Bishop's Stortford became the lowest-rank winner of the competition, winning through nine rounds as an Isthmian League side to beat Sutton United at Wembley.
2. The record attendance for the final came in 2007 when over 53,000 saw Kidderminster Harriers lose to Stevenage Borough. Contrast that with under 14,000 who saw the 2006 final at Upton Park between Grays Athletic and Woking.
3. Talking of that game, the referee that day officiating in his first ever major final was none other than future FIFA World Cup Final referee, Howard Webb.
4. The last team to score more than three goals in the final was Wycombe Wanderers, then managed by Martin O'Neill in 1993 when they beat Runcorn 4-1. No team has ever scored more than two goals in the final and lost since it started back in 1969.
5. Last season, Gosport Borough became the first non-Conference Premier side to reach the final since it returned to Wembley Stadium in 2006.