

Farce in the Fog

London, November 1945

Moscow Dynamo's four-match tour of Britain attracted considerable publicity. The third match of the tour, against Arsenal, was unanimously described as a farce. It was played in a pea-soup fog at White Hart Lane, Tottenham – Arsenal's ground was still requisitioned for war use – and contained many disputes typical of matches between British teams and Continental opposition during that era. Post-match whining shifted between the Russian referee's system and decisions, the fouling, substitutions and, of course, the weather. In one afternoon the Russians were treated to a range of love-hate emotions.

The public became aware of a culture clash at the start of Dynamo's first match of the tour, against Chelsea, when each Russian player presented a bouquet of flowers to his opposite number. They drew that game 3-3, then beat Cardiff City 10-1 to set up an intriguing fixture with Arsenal. George Allison, Arsenal manager, included six guests in his team, the most famous being Stan Matthews and Stan Mortensen (both Blackpool) and Joe Bucuzzi (Fulham).

Fog muffles sound and destroys vision, and London in the 1940's provided regular experience. There is one story about a Charlton Athletic match being abandoned and the players lying in the bath before they realized goalkeeper, Sam Bartram was not among them. They found him still in his goalmouth, hopping about, staying alert, thinking his team must be doing all the attacking.

The White Hart Lane farce shouldn't have started. According to the players, visibility was down to a yard or two. The Russian referee encouraged criticism by sticking to the diagonal system. The two British linesmen were on the same side of the pitch, helped a little by their luminous flags, a novelty in Britain.

Moscow Dynamo scored in the first minute but went 3-1 behind to goals by Ronnie Rooke and Stan Mortensen (2). At half-time Arsenal led 3-2.

Arsenal made a substitution at half-time – goalkeeper Brown for goalkeeper Williams – but later complained that Dynamo had substituted a player in the fog without anybody going off. There were also complaints that players from both sides were committing fouls and then sneaking back into the fog before the referee saw them. Considering visibility was so poor, people had amazing opinions of what was happening elsewhere on the pitch, such as complaints about the last two Dynamo goals being offside or the shirt-pulling on Stan Matthews. Dynamo won 4-3, and, after the farce was completed, people agreed that the Russians were an excellent team, the best to visit Britain, a passing combination rather than individual dribblers. They went to Glasgow and drew 2-2 with Rangers before leaving.

Similar problems were faced by players during a wartime Edinburgh derby between Hibernian and Heart of Midlothian. Their fog-shrouded match should have been abandoned but it was continued so that German Luftwaffe pilots, listening to the improvised radio commentary, would think it was a clear day over Edinburgh.