

The days of FA Cup giant-killing

says JOHN MORRIS

THE COMPUTER decided that Rocky Arciano beat Cassius Clay, and I will never believe that is the way it would have been. If a computer decided before the game that Manchester United whipped the Cobblers I would believe it even less.

There are too many variables around the FA Cup for the mind of a computer to allow for them all. They are the factors that give it its glamour, its fascination, and help it to capture the imagination of the fans like few other sporting events in the world.

Skill, hard work, sheer luck, tiny grounds, wind, ice, snow, injuries and so on. They can all be at work to help produce the goals that stun the soccer world. People may try to tell you that the day of the giant-killers is over — don't believe it for a moment.

More power

The whole structure of the professional game in England today is geared to making the big clubs more powerful, to widening the gap between the chosen few towards the top of the First Division and the rest of the suffering herd.

But just as long as the FA Cup goes on there will come days when the unconsidered minnows will topple out famous, star-laden giants: days when the form books are thrown aside and the underdogs are sampled in the mud.

Northampton's County round has seen a few such occasions and I will never

forget the murky, muggy afternoon when Arsenal, led with drive by Dave Bowen, were swept out by a Cobblers team struggling desperately to survive in the Third Division, a feat they did not achieve. When the Fourth Division was started the following season there were Northampton, who had finished top of the bottom half of the Third, for all their Cup glory.

If anyone knows about giant-killing it is Alec Stock, now manager of Luton Town but player-manager of non-league Yeovil in their greatest cup-fighting days and manager of Queen's Park Rangers when, as a Third Division club they won the Football League Cup by beating West Bromwich at Wembley.

'Load of rubbish'

"They say the day of the real giant-killers is over in Cup football, but that is a load of rubbish," said Stock.

"The little 'uns can still produce the shocks and claim a bit of glory on the Wembley road. Somehow the Cup is different — it has an aura all of its own. The supporters make it different and the little team often get caught up in the sheer enthusiasm and magic of it all.

"Skill is supposed to win but it doesn't always. When the outsiders slap the big boys it is often because the eleven little fellers all play the match of a lifetime at the same time.

"The little men rise to the occasion but there is often an element of complacency in the attitude of the big boys. They will say it is just another match which is the opposite attitude to their rivals. They say they'll keep pushing the ball about and everything will come right; when it

much they amaze themselves."

Conditions are a great leveller too and when Norwich beat United it was a snow-covered pitch. "We used the ball better in the Third Division style and it paid off," recalls Ashman.

If United were guilty of complacency that day, the same applied to Sunderland when they crashed 2-1 in extra time at Yeovil in 1949. Shackleton, Mapson and the rest went stumbling out to a club then near the bottom of the Southern League.

To add to the humiliation Yeovil had a man limping badly from the early stages, and that was long before substitutes were heard of.

Stock has vivid memories of his triumph. "They simply underestimated us," he says. "They were there to be beaten. They didn't want to run and sweat. I remember a throw-in with five minutes left. I went to it with Shackleton and booted the ball into the crowd.

Undying memory

"Don't spoil a good game," he said to me. Spoil the game? It was life and death to me. You can never treat cup matches as just another game because it will only be decisive if two teams are working equally hard. If 22 players are giving everything then skill, like cream, will rise to the top.

Great Cup feats are an undying memory in soccer, like the day when Herbert Chapman's mighty Arsenal crashed at Walsall in 1933, or when Wolves were shot out by lowly Mansfield Town in 1929.

Just before the game a supporter informed Mansfield right-winger Eddie McLachlan that he had dreamed that he scored a goal in the 25th minute. The Mansfield men only smiled, but McLachlan

Lachlan scored all right on the dot of the 25th minute.

But most managers take a realistic line and Bob Stokoe, large and implacable boss of Second Division Carlisle United had no illusions after his team had knocked out Nottingham Forest this year in a fourth round replay.

"All we proved," he stressed, "is that it is possible for any club to lift itself for a particular test. There is a world of difference between that and getting through 42 matches in the First Division, the toughest competition in the world."

Only three

Nor, to put the other side of the coin, have the later stages of the FA competition seen much of the small fry over the years for all the upsets in earlier rounds.

Only one Second Division club have ever won at Wembley, and that was West Bromwich in 1931. Since the war the Second Division has provided only three finalists — Preston in 1964, Leicester (1949) and Burnley in 1947. Even more revealing on current trends is that the Second has had only one club in a semi-final in the past five seasons, Birmingham City.

No Third Division side have ever triumphed at Wembley in the FA Cup and that Division's peak was the Norwich run in 1959.

But for all that, the chance remains that some little club will get caught up in the spell of the Cup and storm through to Wembley in the end. It could even happen this year. Northampton v Scunthorpe at Wembley? Of course not, but just pipe-dreaming about it is fun!



FLASHBACK to Yeovil's giant-killing days, in this case their game against First Division Sunderland.

doesn't they can get caught out."

Ron Ashman, now manager of Scunthorpe United, today busy with a fifth round tie at Swindon — knows all about cup giant-killing. He was in the Norwich team that reached the semi-finals in 1959. Division Three and they beat Manchester United (3-0

no less). Cardiff, Spurs and Sheffield United before going out rather unluckily to Luton in a semi-final replay.

"Big clubs really do underestimate you without knowing they are doing it," claims Ashman. "They let you play football which makes for a much more open game. It becomes 11 against 11 and the outsiders can often raise their skill so