

Worthington
cup final

LEICESTER CITY 2

Referee has left lot of Hill feeling



John CROSS

REFEREES have fought long and hard to steal the headlines from the multi-million-pound Premiership stars this season.

Fourth official Phil Richards yesterday took just five minutes to try and grab them. The Preston whistle-blower had hardly warmed up when out came the red card for Tranmere's Clint Hill.

Richards had replaced experienced Premiership referee Alan Wilkie, 48, in his last season on the top-flight list. Wilkie was a bizarre sight as he collapsed to the ground as if he had been pole-axed by Leicester hardman Robbie Savage.

The mop-haired City midfielder - known to his pals as Tiger Lily - was, however, nowhere near him.

Nor, for that matter was anyone else. Wilkie just crumpled in sheer agony and was then stretched off with a thigh injury.

Who says being 45-plus makes you too old and past it to be in charge of top-class football? Never!

Then just for a terrible



CARD SHARP: Referee Phil Richards

moment, Manchester City boss Joe Royle must have had his heart in his mouth as lineswoman Wendy Toms looked on as the Wembley crowd wondered whether she was about to take over.

Poor old Tranmere defender Hill probably wished Toms had been introduced for, perhaps, her more caring feminine side. Because, within five minutes, Hill became Richards' red-card victim.

Fourth officials seem slightly eccentric as week in, week out they try to laugh and joke with managers on the sideline.

But they are just like any other official. If a bit of Wembley glory is to be had, they want it.

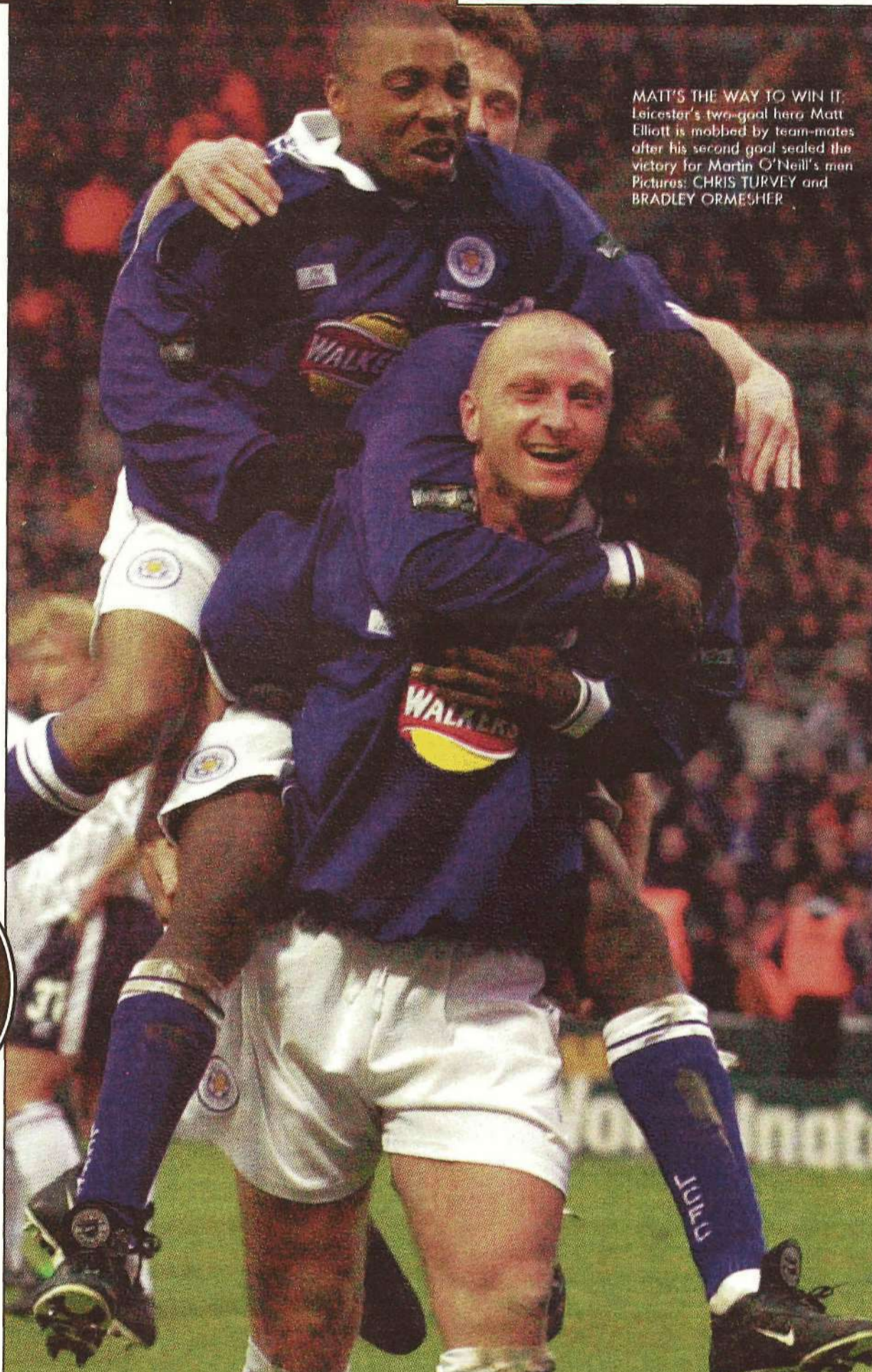
Richards certainly brought an often tepid final to the boil. The controversy of the sending-off did not end there.

He is reporting Tranmere's goalscorer David Kelly for his Wembley celebration.

The Rovers captain pulled his side back into the game in the second half with a cracking shot, before running behind the goal to celebrate with the First Division club's fans - to the disgust of the ref.

Richards will now surely star in football trivia questions for many years to come.

Job done Phil, well done.



MATT'S THE WAY TO WIN IT: Leicester's two-goal hero Matt Elliott is mobbed by team-mates after his second goal sealed the victory for Martin O'Neill's men. Pictures: CHRIS TURVEY and BRADLEY ORMESHER



FIRST CLASS: Elliott heads home Leicester's opener



SECONDS OUT: Elliott rises unmarked to nod No2

MARTIN O'Neill halted his triumphant ascent of Wembley's famous 39 steps en route to lifting the Worthington Cup for an emotional embrace with Brian Clough.

Two born winners together, with O'Neill only too happy to accept the legendary former Nottingham Forest boss as his very own alter-ego.

If ever one manager was created in the mould of another, it is Leicester's O'Neill. And, like Cloughie, he is turning the Venue of Legends into his second home.

Apart from two European Cups and a title triumph, 65-year-old Clough led Forest on to the hallowed turf eight times in the space of eight years.

Now O'Neill, who celebrates his 48th birthday on Wednesday, is following in the footsteps of controversial Clough, who he calls "simply the best there has ever been".

Emotion

Like Old Big 'Ead, O'Neill has seized hold of an unfashionable East Midlands club and transformed them into a team capable of writing their name into the soccer history books.

This was not a classic final, never mind one of Leicester's finest performances, but once again O'Neill underlined his firm belief that victory counts for everything.

Much of the emotion was created by Tranmere's valiant First Division fighters, reduced to 10 men when Clint Hill was sent off by substitute referee Phil Richards within five minutes of the Preston official taking over from the injured Alan Wilkie.

Hill had been booked after only nine minutes for a late tackle on Stefan Oakes, but

6	SHOTS ON TARGET	3
7	SHOTS OFF TARGET	3
6	CORNERS	10
0	YELLOW CARDS	3
0	RED CARDS	1
ATTENDANCE: 74,313		
MAN OF THE MATCH: Elliott		

that yellow card had no bearing on his dismissal in the 63rd minute.

Richards judged that his foul on Emile Heskey as the England strike burst through the middle was sufficient for a red card in its own right. Hill simply had to go.

Yet, trailing to Matt Elliott's first-half header, 10-man Rovers snatched an equaliser after 78 minutes.

David Kelly confirmed his status as the competition's top scorer this season with goal number eight, fired low past Tim Flowers at the near post after Gary Jones headed down a long free-kick hoisted by Gareth Roberts.

Stunned

Leicester were stunned almost to the point of disbelief. Sadly for Tranmere, that incredulity lasted for no more than two minutes.

City skipper Elliott showed that anything his rival captain could do, he could do better.

And once again, it was the simplest of ploys which unhinged Tranmere, with the giant Elliott losing marker Dave Challinor to head in an in-swinging corner aimed from Steve Guppy.

Elliott's first goal went in off the bar and keeper Joe Murphy. The second needed no assistance, with Tranmere's teenage keeper left flat-footed on his line.

Incredibly, Tranmere could still have forced the game into extra time. Scott Taylor was inches from a second equaliser in injury time at the end.

The astute Kelly got in an inviting cross from the left and as the ball cleared Frank Sinclair, Taylor was presented

IT'S CLOUGH AT THE TOP FOR O'NEILL

David  Moore at Wembley



KELLY GOLD: Rovers striker David Kelly (left) avoids Matt Elliott's lunge to shoot home and give John Aldridge's men a lifeline, while, (above) Brian Clough watches from the stands as his protegee Martin O'Neill masterminds another Wembley final triumph

with a clear sight of the net from no more than six yards out.

However, with Tim Flowers leaping across his goal, Taylor's header glanced off the face of the bar and over.

Leicester are often credited with being one of the most spirited and hard-working teams in the land, but Tranmere matched them every step of the way in a show which must have had manager John Aldridge's own heart beating with pride as the Birkenhead banner fluttered in the Wembley breeze.

For Leicester, the prize is a place in Europe. Entry into next season's UEFA Cup could be worth hundreds of thousands of pounds, if not a million or two.

For Tranmere, though, it is back to the daily grind of League football, still seeking their first victory in the year 2000 and risking being dragged into a relegation scrap which would be poor reward for their exploits in both domestic cups.

Southern sophisticates will no doubt judge that Leicester failed to erase the bitter memories of their 1-0 defeat by Tottenham in last season's final, but that won't

concern O'Neill one little bit, with another trophy to stick on the Filbert Street sideboard.

Just for once, Leicester were cast in the role of underdogs at Wembley, a spot normally reserved for the Foxes themselves.

And, breaking with tradition, they opened the scoring — the only time Leicester have grabbed the first goal in 11 appearances under the gaze of the twin towers.

Initially, they needed to survive a brief flurry by Tranmere with one of Challinor's extraordinary long throw-ins headed on by

Jones for Kelly's shot to be blocked by Flowers.

Then Alan Mahon slid Taylor through only for his effort to be lifted over the bar.

City seemed in second gear at this stage, but that all changed once Elliott put them in front after 28 minutes.

The giant Scot, whose goal was enough to see off Aston Villa in the semi-finals, met Guppy's corner with a firm header.

The ball smashed against the underside of the bar before hitting Murphy's hand on the way down

and bouncing over the line. The best move of the first half involved Neil Lennon, Muzzy Izzet and Tony Cottee, with the little forward's centre headed powerfully over by Heskey.

That was one let-off for Tranmere, and there was another two minutes before the interval when a clever free-kick routine saw Lennon smash a 20-yard drive just over.

Izzet wasted another golden opportunity for Leicester in the 55th minute, set up with time and space by Heskey and Guppy. With only Murphy to beat, the midfielder somehow tangled his feet and shot hurriedly wide.

Tranmere's disappointed fans chanted: "Boring, boring Leicester" to mask their own deep dejection.

But they were too late — the same song had already rolled down from 35,000 Leicester supporters only too happy to revel in their team's undesired reputation as killjoys.

Like Cloughie used to say, the result comes first, the performance next. Judged on results, O'Neill won't be bothered about anything his carping critics say now.



HAPPY MUNDAY: The Mirror and Worthington Creamflow arranged for John Munday to propose to girlfriend Gail Musselwhite at half-time yesterday

Matt keeps it in the family

FROM BACK PAGE

"I will move heaven and earth to keep him and maybe now we are in Europe that might help.

"He's priceless to us. I've got five or six players in the same category, including Matt Elliott."

LEICESTER v TRANMERE

HOW THEY RATED
Compiled by JOHN CROSS

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Tim FLOWERS 6
 His first major cup final at Wembley. Looked solid, but beaten on near post for the goal. | Joe MURPHY 6
 Made no mistakes, but was unlucky with Leicester's first goal, and could do nothing for the second. |
| Frank SINCLAIR 7
 Sent home in disgrace before last season's final, he took his chance to set the record straight. | Reuben HAZELL 7
 Solid game for the right-back who kept Steve Guppy quiet, and started a few attacks himself. |
| Gerry TAGGART 7
 Rock-solid at the back for Leicester, as he has been all season. A good partner for Elliott. | Gareth ROBERTS 7
 Had a tough job to look after Heskey, but he coped well with the England man's wandering runs. |
| Matt ELLIOTT 9
 Superb at the back, and scored the two goals. What more could you ask from your skipper? | Clint HILL 5
 Booked early on for a terrible lunge on Oakes and got deserved red card for foul on Heskey. |
| Steve GUPPY 6
 Took the corners from which Elliott scored both goals, but had a quiet game overall. | Dave CHALLINOR 5
 The long-ball throw expert did not create his usual havoc and lost Elliott on both Leicester goals. |
| Stefan OAKES 6
 Handed his big chance by boss Martin O'Neill and never looked like letting the Foxes down. | Andy PARKINSON 6
 Couldn't find enough space to get forward and use his pace to trouble the Leicester defence. |
| Neil LENNON 7
 Even below par he had a big influence in midfield, and was just too high with two fierce shots. | Gary JONES 6
 Solid in midfield, but was too busy defending to give Leicester many problems. |
| Muzzy IZZET 6
 Wasted a great chance to make the game safe, but still provided spark for Leicester in midfield. | Nick HENRY 6
 Tireless in midfield, but was rightly booked for an awful first-half challenge on Izzet. |
| Robbie SAVAGE 7
 Used in a wing-back role, the "bad boy" against Spurs a year ago got the winner's medal he wanted. | Alan MAHON 7
 A lively performance from the skilful winger will have caught the eyes of Premiership scouts. |
| Tony COTTEE 7
 A constant threat. Nobody deserved a winner's medal more after four Wembley defeats. | Scott TAYLOR 6
 Almost saved the game for Rovers in last minute with a header which beat Flowers but hit the bar. |
| Emile HESKEY 7
 Carried on where he left off for England on Wednesday. Tranmere's defence could never relax. | David KELLY 8
 Ploughed a lone furrow up front. Finished superbly to equalise and almost force extra time. |
| Substitutes
Andrew Impey (Oakes 76)
Ian Marshall (Cottee 88) | Substitutes
Steve Yates (Parkinson 65)
Battled in vain for Rovers. |

Referee: Alan Wilkie (Phil Richards 59)