

PRACTICAL jokes and a trip to the pub the night before an FA Cup final are not something you would associate with pre-match preparation in the modern game. But for the Crazy Gang of Wimbledon, changing their approach in the lead up to the biggest day in their history was not an option.

It has been 26 years since Wimbledon lifted the FA Cup. A surprise 1-0 victory over reigning Division One champions Liverpool has gone down in footballing folklore. Lawrie Sanchez, who scored the only goal of the game on a sun-soaked afternoon in May 1988, insists he never gets bored about talking about the final, even though he refers to it as his "Noddy Holder moment."

Sanchez spent the previous evening pumping up his deflated tyres and mingling with locals and fans with his team-mates at the Fox and Grapes in Wimbledon. Not something you'd imagine John Barnes and his Liverpool colleagues would have been doing the day before the final.

"We had trained late afternoon on the Friday," recalls Sanchez. "I remember coming out last and my tyres were flat and I thought bloody hell. They'd been let down, not punctured. It was typical of Wimbledon, it shows

what type of team we were. The day before the cup final and we were still playing pranks on each other. Luckily the groundsman had a pump. Just what you need the day before the biggest day of your life! I later found out it was Dennis Wise."

A final of firsts, including a penalty save and a goalkeeper captaining and lifting the cup, it was also a final of lasts, with the end of the simultaneous BBC and ITV broadcasts and the last truly massive Wembley crowd at 98,000.

Sanchez talks fondly of the Crazy Gang's unorthodox build-up to the game. "We stayed at the Cannizaro House, which was a beautiful hotel in Wimbledon. We had dinner the night before and the players were bored. We didn't want to sit in our rooms and watch TV twiddling our thumbs with the biggest game of our lives the following day. Dave Beasant and I asked Goulty (manager Bobby Gould) if we could nip down the local pub and kill a couple of hours and have some banter down there. Bobby thought it was a great idea and gave us £50 to have a drink on him."

The players sat in the bar for a few hours, chatting to astonished fellow customers. "We weren't drinking, just orange juice and coffee. I think I did

have a shandy, but we certainly weren't getting fanked up the night before the final. But it took our minds off the game. We wandered back to the hotel laughing and joking and I think it relaxed the team. Perhaps it was slightly different from what Liverpool were doing, but it worked for us."

In a game that Liverpool were expected to dominate, Sanchez headed the only goal in the 37th minute. "I had scored a similar goal against Chelsea a few weeks before. We had a free kick on our left-hand side and Dennis bent the ball towards goal, which wasn't common in those days. I actually stepped forward one, because Eric Young and John Fashanu were slow to get in to position. The ball came in and I flicked it and it ended up in the far corner. I looked around to check the linesman hadn't flagged and ran towards Dennis who jumped straight on top of me. It was a surreal feeling."

It was only after the game that Sanchez realised the significance of both his goal and of Dave Beasant's penalty save from John Aldridge in the 61st minute. "I was confident Dave would save it. Dave used to do his homework and find out who the penalty takers were and what their preferences were. After the save I think everyone in the stadium knew it was going to be our day. The penalty decision was terrible. Clive Goodyear clearly won the ball and Aldridge went

over him. If we had lost the final because of that it would've been a travesty.

"I just felt relief at the final whistle. When you are living in the moment you don't realise what an achievement it is. At the time I was 26 and thought it would happen again and I'd play in other finals. Looking back now at 54, you realise it was a once in a lifetime experience. I'm still miffed that Bobby Gould gave the match ball to Dave though!"

The celebrations at the end were to an almost empty stadium, with Wimbledon fans vastly outnumbered on the day. But Sanchez fondly recalls the evening celebrations. "It was done brilliantly. Friends and family were invited and they put a marquee on the pitch at Plough Lane. It was a tip of a ground but it looked great. *Match of the Day* was filmed there live and Jimmy Hill and Des Lynam were there - it's lucky we had won or it would've been like a wake.

"We paraded the cup the following day and it was bizarre. It was one man and his dog. We were waving to people and they were saying "what have you done?" and we were saying "we've won the bloody cup!" It was turning into a farce, but then we turned in to the Town Hall square and it was rammed. We went on the Town Hall balcony and did our waving. It was a real cup final moment."

words: CHRISTOPHER EVANS



SNAP SHOT

NODDY HOLDER MOMENT: Lawrie Sanchez's header is on its way into the Liverpool net.