

The football fans that Santa Claus forgot

ONCE upon a time when football was spelt with not so many 'fs' one of the highlights of the Christmas holiday used to be the local derbies on December 25 and 26. And in festive mood the fans used to gather for the fun and games, either to work up an appetite for their Christmas pudding or to shake it down after the big meal.

There were paper hats and penalties and perhaps even a few mild punch-ups. But it was all good fun.

Remember how Wycombe Wanderers always made the welkin ring with a Christmas cracker of local derby games with Oxford City? Alas the City have now descended into the lower reaches of the Isthmian League and that derby is no more.

But even if the City were back in the top flight and ready and willing, could such a holiday game now take place? Hardly. Nowadays Wycombe Wanderers come from much farther afield than Amersham, or Marlow or down at the Marsh. And this Christmas some of the lads will be going back up North to spend Christmas with their families.

Another member of the squad has an engagement with that new name in world football Tampa Bay Rowdies in far off Florida, while another is following in the footsteps of English football's erstwhile godfather, Don Revie, to sort out the game in the Middle East. Next year he may be dreaming of a white Christmas, but the best of luck.

So Loakes Park, ancestral home of the Wanderers, will be about as bare at Christmas as the family larder will be on the day after Boxing Day.

And there will be many a heavy heart in Desborough Road, Dashwood Avenue and Downley Common as the soccer starved supporters sigh for the return of their annual feast — the football fans that Santa Claus forgot.

Come to think of it there are probably heavy hearts in Desborough Road, Dashwood Avenue and Downley Common already, because of the cruel fate that has befallen the Wanderers over their fixtures of late.

As the nights of 1977 grew longer the floodlights of Loakes Park should have grown stronger. But have they heck.

They have been as dim as the proverbial service canteen candle as the Wanderers have packed their bags and gone over the hills and far away.

To places like Minehead to get kicked out of the FA Cup. To Leatherhead in the stockbroker belt of Surrey ... to Slough, often a place of despond, footballwise.

Then all quiet on the Loakes Park front for Christmas. Then away to Tooting. Then away again to Bridgend, look you, in the FA Trophy which has never given the Wanderers a home tie. (How Scrooge-like can you get?)

Then off to Slough again. Then on January 28, keep your fingers crossed, home at last, to Hitchin Town.

By then most supporters will probably need a map to find their way to Loakes Park, the players will be practically perfect strangers ... and the band, if they can get one, will play "There's no place like home."

The wizards of football have hardly waved their magic wand over Loakes Park of late. Perhaps they will do better in 1978.

Mind you there is one away fixture the fans would not mind in the New Year, a trip to Wembley in the final of the FA Trophy.

The Wanderers haven't been to that illustrious park since they lost to Bishop Auckland in the old Amateur Cup final. And that will be twenty-one years ago come next April.