

'Wildcard' sell-out to sponsors

By Henry Winter

WELCOME to a world where losers can be winners. By allowing one defeated second-round club into the FA Cup third-round draw, so compensating for Manchester United's withdrawal, Lancaster Gate have produced one of the game's more bizarre decisions that can be explained only as a craven sell-out to publicity-seeking sponsors.

The logical approach to having only 63 teams in the draw would have been to add a "bye" ball, so allowing the natural knockout rhythm to continue smoothly. The team drawing the "bye" ball would have happily marched into the next round, celebrating their "luck of the draw".

But no. The sponsors, worried by a possible loss of interest in the absence of United, suggested the creation of an "AXA Wildcard" to the Football Association. They have certainly received some coverage, almost exclusively derisive and rightly so.

As insurance policies go, this "Wildcard" was not one of AXA's better ideas. One team can now lose to another, be reinstated, be drawn against them again, win this time and carry on. Confused? Any more of this and FA Cup coverage will be switched from ITV and Sky to the Comedy Channel.

This attack on FA Cup tradition, not to mention sporting lores which dictate that winners go through and losers go out, reflects an alarming modern trend witnessed in the Champions' League. Arsenal failed to progress but still found themselves relocated to the UEFA Cup.

The farcical nature of this situation was highlighted by their entering a competition after Tottenham Hotspur, who had qualified properly, had gone out. Spurs certainly got their own back at White Hart Lane on Sunday.

The moral of all this tournament-tampering is that if football keeps tugging its forelock to big money, the lustre that makes competitions like the FA Cup and European Cup still special will eventually be rubbed away.

It will serve the sponsors right if inability prevails, if Arsenal win the UEFA Cup and the "AXA Wildcard" lift the FA Cup. Such silverware would be tarnished.