

HOW TO MINIMISE THE PENALTY SHOOTOUT LOTTERY **by ROSS MCMULLIN**

Ross McMullin was among the millions who watched last week's FA Cup Final and its unpalatable conclusion.

A familiar situation unfolded last Saturday. An important match was level at full time, deadlocked after extra time, and a penalty shootout ensued.

Commentators made familiar remarks as things moved inexorably towards the dreaded climax. Breaking the deadlock in this way was fundamentally unfair and unsatisfactory, they said. It was akin to a lottery, disliked by the fans and loathed by the players.

Last Saturday's conclusion reinforced this repugnance. Arsenal were comprehensively outplayed, but Manchester United couldn't convert their on-field dominance into scoreboard superiority. So there had to be a shootout. A United player, an experienced international forward, had his kick blocked by the Arsenal keeper, and that basically was that. Arsenal had a completely undeserved victory.

With the golden goal out of favour, is there really no alternative to the lottery of the shootout?

Here's one.

It's based on a premise and a question. If you find penalty shootouts abhorrent and you're looking for a fairer means of determining who deserves to win, what's the most obvious way to decide which team comes closest to scoring?

The answer is straightforward. The nearest misses occur when the ball hits the framework of the goal and stays out. There lies a possible alternative to the penalty shootout.

How would this work in practice? Easily. Every time the woodwork is struck during a game, the referee confirms and the scoreboard records. Where it isn't obvious and the referee isn't sure, and the match is televised, technology could be utilised.

Matches still last 90 minutes with scope for extra time. But if at the end of extra time scores are deadlocked, the match is decided by whichever team hit the woodwork most. If those woodwork instances are also identical, you can resort to a penalty shootout.

It's a mechanism that produces fairer results than a shootout and reduces the need for a shootout.

And there are other benefits. Some matches that result in shootouts are exciting encounters with spills, thrills and goals. More often, though, they are dour affairs.

Nil-all after extra time, as in last Saturday's final, is not uncommon. Often one side is doing plenty of attacking but can't find

the net as their opponents flood the backline and defend grimly, hoping to hang on and put their faith in the kind of fraudulent success via the shootout lottery that Arsenal enjoyed last week. No special spectacle and no fair outcome.

The beauty of this novel proposal is that it creates better matches. Manchester United's numerous scoring opportunities resulted in the woodwork being struck twice. If Arsenal, or a side in their situation, knew they could not sit back and hope to hang on for a lottery shootout, they would attack more, and a more attractive game would result.

In the AFL there is minor recognition when a shot for goal narrowly misses. This adds to the game's possibilities and can decide close matches. For those who loathe penalty shootouts, might this be a new dimension worth considering for the world game?

Historian Ross McMullin's award-winning biography *Pompey Elliott* is published by Scribe Publications.