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LIONS BATTLE TO FIRST-NIGHT CUP GIANT-KILLING

THEY presented new Scottish defenceman Alastair Rodger with the man-of-the-match champagne after Lee Valley Lions had edged mighty Nottingham Panthers 3-2 in Sunday's Norwich Union Cup thriller.

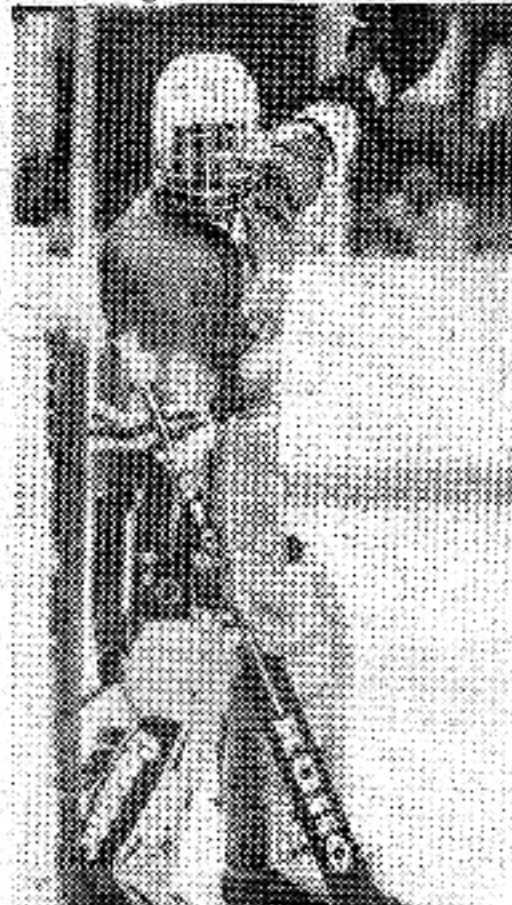
But on statistics alone it was surely Lion's Finnish net-minder Vesa Pennanen who contributed most to this giant-killing.

Pennanen faced 37 shots from Panthers as against the 32 that his opposite number, Ian Woodward, dealt with and there surely won't be a more memorable display of goal-tending than the Finn's in British league and cup hockey this season.

After Pennanen had made the last of his startling reflex stops, Panthers pulled off their own net-minder to try and save the match with a one-man advantage in the final seconds.

Lee Valley, short of match fitness through having had no competitive pre-season hockey, somehow held on to record what was probably the most remarkable result in the game's history in East London.

Nottingham could blame their



They shall not pass . . . Lee Valley goalminder Vesa Pennanen had key role in Lion's giant-killing.

bus driver for getting them to Lee Valley late and so missing the chance of a warm-up to get Saturday's match aches and pains out of their system.

After taking to the ice barely 20 minutes after their arrival for a delayed face-off, they further con-

tributed to their own downfall by incurring 12 minutes of first-period penalty time.

Twice when they were short-handed, Lions defenceman Janne Lehti rocketed home shots for a 2-0 lead.

The 13 stone 12lb Finn, a resident of Chadwell Heath during the hockey season, is clearly going to be a threat to all teams whenever he gets over the blue line when Lions press for promotion to the premier division this winter.

Jim Keyes threatened a second period revival from Nottingham when he spoilt Pennanen's shut-out prospects, only for Lions to re-establish a two-goal advantage by the second break through Finnish newcomer Jari Virta.

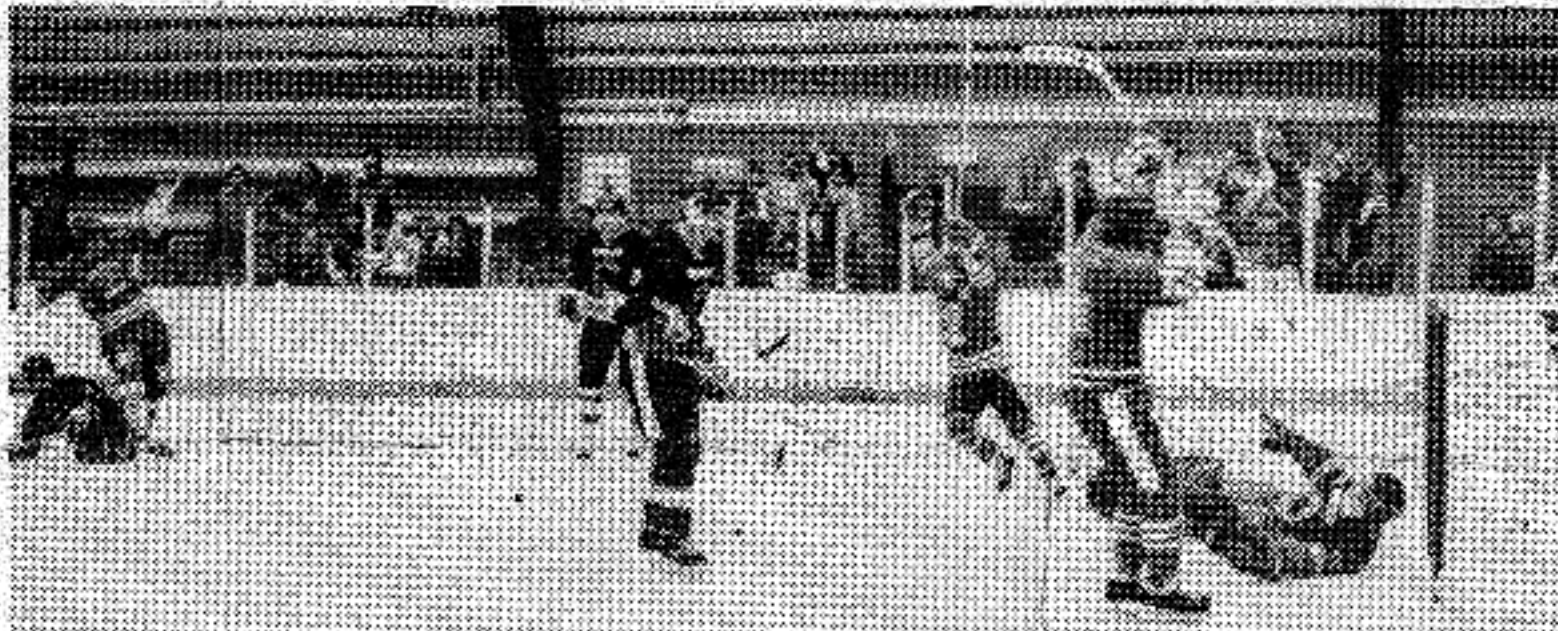
Virta, 25, inevitably attracts comparisons with last season's now departed leading marksman Ari Arvila, and in his first match impressed as much for his readiness to backcheck as to attack, such was the game's pattern.

Lions in fact added four new names to their squad during the midweek preceding their opener, and had need of every stick hand they could muster before they scraped to their shock victory.

Panthers' Terry Kurtenbach made it 3-2 less than four minutes into the last period, but then left his team vulnerable to the power play by collecting two minutes of the visitors' penalty time totalling 28 minutes against the 16 suffered by Lions.

Prior to Sunday evening, Lions had perhaps realistically set their Norwich Union Cup ambitions no higher than defeating London rivals Streatham in their formidable qualifying pool.

The danger now surely is that such a result would seem almost anti-climatic when set against that achieved at Panthers' expense.



Late-on-parade Panthers gave us our chance, admits coach Richie

LEE VALLEY Lions' American coach Richie Doran acknowledged that his team caught premier division Nottingham Panthers on the right night for a giant-killing after Sunday's Norwich Union Cup upset.

"They had a match the night before and were obviously tired, they showed up late and then we twice hit them at the right time.

"But for all that I am not taking anything away from our team.

"We had not had a serious warm-up match and we had several new boys in the squad. We can only get even better," he maintained.

Lions iced new names in Martyn Barratt, Atari Suwari, Mark Nicholls, Danny O'Hanlon and Phil Gosbee, all added to the squad's strength midweek in addition to the previously signed Jari Virta and Alastair Rodger.

During the weeks ahead, Lions face a return with Nottingham at the City's legendary Icedrome, plus additional Norwich Union Cup meetings with Solihull, Telford,



Janne Lehti capitalises on Panthers having men in the penalty box to score his side's two first-period goals.

Solihull and Streatham before they contest a new-look first division of the Heineken League in earnest.

Lions' growing reputation has also attracted an invitation to visit Durham Wasps, arguably England's strongest club over the past decade, for a challenge match on Saturday, October 25.

One question mark against this prestige trip is the official fixture list which has Wasps hosting Dundee Rockets that night.

Lee Valley rink manager Mike Smith commented: "The invitation came from Durham and I presume our fixture takes precedence and goes ahead, but it will have to be confirmed."

Lions' ability to live with the country's top teams gives the game an intriguing impetus in East London at a time when Havering's ice rink is nearing completion.

With the Havering rink management — who already own a thriving team at Medway — very much

hockey orientated, Metropolitan Essex will shortly have double representation on the fast expanding British circuit.

Lee Valley's management at present view the impending emergence of a Romford-based team with only passing interest. For in terms of genuine local rivalry meetings could be some winters away — particularly if Lions justify the status of favourites for promotion to the premier sphere with which they are widely credited.

Lee Valley this Sunday (5.30 pm) stage another Norwich Union Cup game with Solihull Barons, familiar opponents from division one in the past.

Lions expect to have forward Chris Leggett available following his absence on honeymoon.

Barons are again expected to ice Bradd Schurr and Jay Forslund, division one's two leading scorers for much of last season.