In the autumn of 1980 Celtic were invited south to play in a testimonial for Arsenal's long serving full back Sammy Nelson. These days such games are common place but this one would see Celtic's first appearance down south in a testimonial for six years, since the Ron Yeats' game against Liverpool in 1974, and a date was set for November 25th of that year. There were a number of worrying factors. Scotland's fans had caused destruction in their visits to Wembley in 1977 and 1979 and as recently as October 1980 Rangers fans had gone in the rampage through the small town of Chesterfield after they had been thumped 3-0 in the Anglo Scottish Cup. Indeed, on Celtic's previous journey south in that same competition, 'The battle of Burnley' had taken place when an element of Celtic's huge 12,000 contingent had shamed the club with their drunken, loutish behaviour. So it's fair to say the club were a bit concerned over the forthcoming trip to London.

Sammy Nelson's choice of opponents seemed a strange one. Nelson was Belfast born and a Northern Ireland international with no links to Celtic yet it is too his credit and the credit of Celtic's fans that they bonded with each other as would also happen a year later with another fine Northern Ireland stalwart, Allan Hunter of Ipswich.

Nelson was certainly a colourful character, In 1979 he had scored an own goal at Highbury against Coventry City and when he redeemed himself by later scoring an equaliser at the North Bank end of the ground, he ran right up to the fans and dropped his shorts to bear his bottom ! (See pic). He was thoroughly deserving of a testimonial given his 14 years of service to Arsenal and went on to perform with distinction for Northern Ireland in the 1982 World Cup finals in Spain.

At the time of the game this Celtic team was not in the best of health. In that month of November they had lost heavily, 3-0, 2-0 and 3-0 to Rangers, Aberdeen and Dundee United respectively and the worry was that another heavy defeat could be on the cards. Yet they raised their game at Highbury and this game proved to be the catalyst for a fine recovery which culminated in a happy ending at Tannadice in April 1981 when Celtic won the league title.

Happily enough everything went well for Sammy on the night. He got a good turn out, including the 6000 travelling Celts, and the fans behaved superbly which set the bench mark for future visits to England and in Europe. Perhaps the Arsenal fans who frequented the North Bank that night remembered his 'mooning' too well because they totally disappeared after the final whistle, leaving the 6,000 Celts to cheer Sammy on an impromptu lap of honour and leave him draped in green and white scarves.

NELSON'S COLUMN – FANS' SPECIAL SALUTE AS CELTIC DRAW

ARSENAL 0-0 CELTIC…….ATT 23,000…..By Ken Gallacher

Celtic fans sang their own songs of salute to Arsenal's Sammy Nelson on the Highbury terracings last night.

They provided the most emotional moment of the night after 6,000 of them had watched their team draw 0-0 in the testimonial match for the Northern Ireland international Nelson.

The North Bank was deserted. The stands were almost empty. But the Celtic fans remained until Nelson came out to salute them and took their tokens of appreciation – a shower of green and white scarves which he festooned himself in before going back to the dressing room. Then the Celtic fans left for home.

It had not been a great game despite Celtic pushing forward in their own special way and trying to make the game as meaningful as possible.

But, while they drew and perhaps played with more confidence than they have done at home, the sobering fact remained that Arsenal played the last quarter hour with only five recognised first team players.

They were the fearless Pat Jennings in goal, Brian Talbot, Alan Sunderland, Steve Gatting and Graham Rix. For in the second half Arsenal replaced their players one by one with four substitutes.

Celtic on the other hand replaced Pat Bonner with Peter Latchford and then in the closing minutes Charlie Nicholas appeared for Frank McGarvey.

Of course Arsenal did not replace Jennings. They knew better. It was Jennings, that so accomplished veteran, who saved them so often during the game.

In the opening four minutes alone he had three saves, two from young John Weir and one from

McGarvey, as Celtic poured forward keeping to their promise of playing the game for real.

After 15 minutes Roy Aitken made another chance for them, bursting forward from the sweeper role he operated behind Roddy MacDonald and Tom McAdam, and allowing George McCluskey a chance. The striker shot just past from just inside the box.

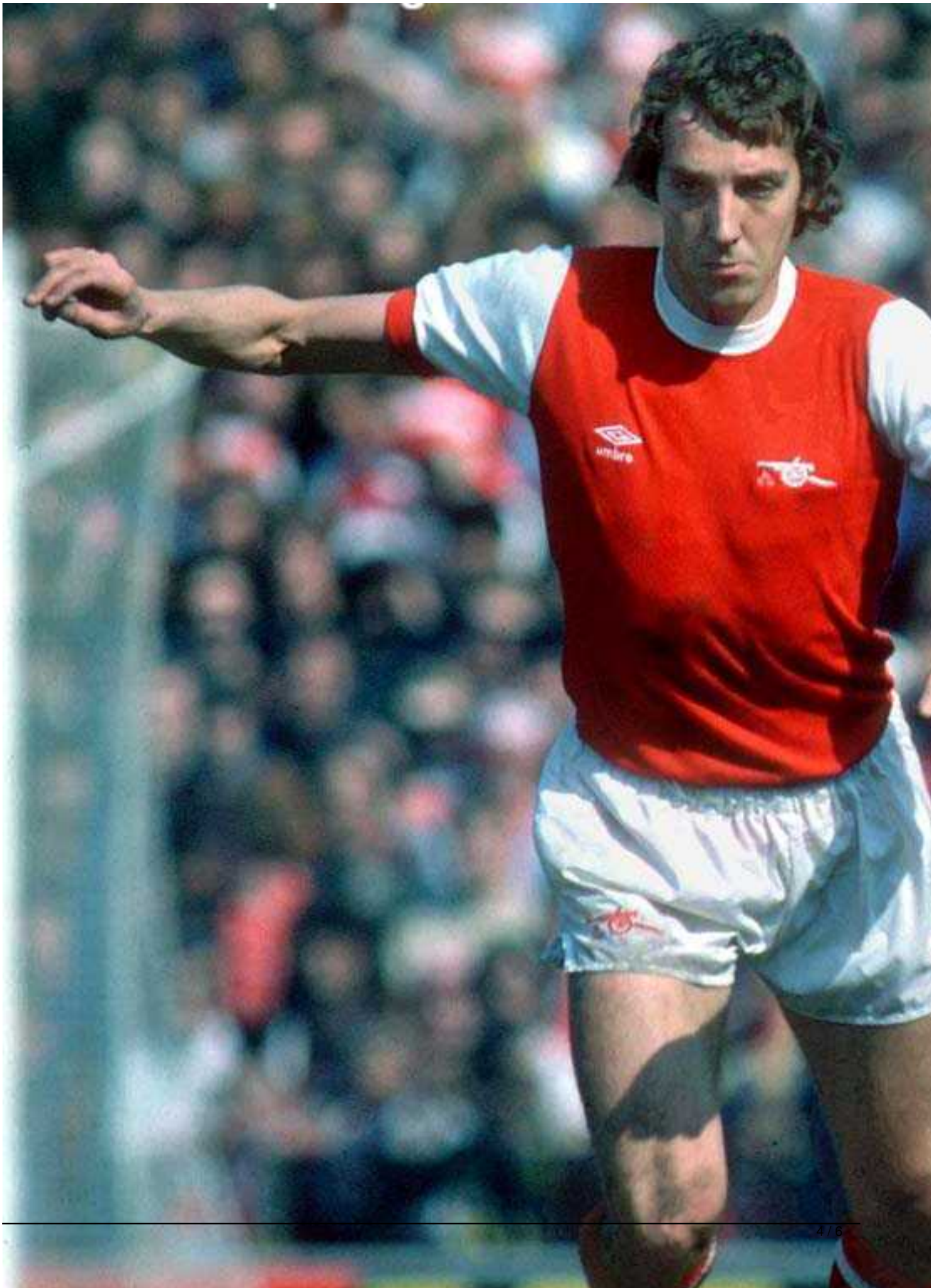
In all this time Arsenal scarcely had an opening, then in 24 minutes Bonner fumbled a shot from Steve Walford but recovered to smother the ball.

The second half was mainly notable for the Arsenal substitutions. They used them all except for the goalkeeper with guest of honour Sammy Nelson, Frank Stapleton, John Devine and Brian McDermott all being replaced.

It didn't make much difference as Celtic had most of the game but still couldn't take their chances. And when they were on target, that man Jennings, irreplaceable on the night, stopped them.

Arsenal – Jennings Devine Nelson Talbot Whyte Walford McDermott Sunderland Stapleton Gatting Rix. – Subs - Price Davis Vaessen Meade Wood.

Celtic – Bonner Sneddon McGrain Aitken MacDonald McAdam Sullivan Weir McGarvey Burns McCluskey - Subs - Latchford Sneddon Duffy Nicholas Doyle



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