

= 1996 Football League Third Division play @-@ off Final =

The 1996 Football League Third Division play @-@ off final was a football match played at Wembley Stadium on 25 May 1996 , to determine the fourth and final team to gain promotion from the Third Division to the Second Division of the Football League in the 1995 ? 96 season .

It was contested by Plymouth Argyle , who finished fourth in the Third Division table , and Darlington , who finished fifth . The teams reached the final by defeating Colchester United and Hereford United respectively in the two @-@ legged semi @-@ finals .

Plymouth Argyle won the match 1 ? 0 thanks to a headed goal from Ronnie Mauge to gain promotion back to the third tier of English football one season after being relegated . For the club 's manager , Neil Warnock , it was his fourth success in the play @-@ offs as a manager , having achieved it twice with Notts County and once with Huddersfield Town . His counterpart , Jim Platt , would leave full @-@ time management at the end of that year .

= = Route to the final = =

Plymouth Argyle had finished the 1995 ? 96 Football League season in fourth place in the Third Division , one place ahead of Darlington . Therefore , both missed out on the three automatic promotion places and instead took part in the play @-@ offs to determine who would join Preston North End , Gillingham , and Bury as the fourth promoted team . On the final day of the league season , Plymouth Argyle had the opportunity to finish third in the table and thereby clinch the final automatic promotion place but a 3 ? 0 win at Home Park against Hartlepool United was not enough to overtake Bury , after they also won 3 ? 0 at home to Cardiff City .

In the play @-@ off semi @-@ finals , Darlington were paired with sixth @-@ placed Hereford United and Plymouth Argyle with seventh @-@ place finishers Colchester United . Darlington won their first leg tie 2 ? 1 at Edgar Street courtesy of goals from Robbie Blake and Sean Gregan . They also won the second leg by the same scoreline at Feethams with Matty Appleby and Robbie Painter on the scoresheet .

Plymouth Argyle lost the first leg of their semi @-@ final tie 1 ? 0 at Layer Road after a goal from Mark Kinsella , but they responded in the second leg at Home Park . Goals from Michael Evans , Chris Leadbitter and Paul Williams were enough to secure a 3 ? 1 win and a 3 ? 2 victory on aggregate . The results set up a first visit to Wembley Stadium for the supporters of both clubs .

= = Match summary = =

The two teams were competing for promotion to the third tier of the English football league system , at the time called the Second Division , a familiar place for both sides . In its previous 68 seasons as a Football League club , Plymouth Argyle competed exclusively in the second and third tiers , exactly 34 seasons each . While Darlington had featured in the second tier just twice , competing in the third tier on 32 occasions and the fourth tier another 32 times . The official attendance of 43 @,@ 431 was a record for a play @-@ off final at that level , beating the previous record set in 1994 , until it was bettered a year later by 3 @,@ 373 spectators . There was also a significant disparity in the number of tickets sold to the supporters of the two clubs , with fewer than 10 @,@ 000 Darlington fans in attendance compared to 35 @,@ 000 fans representing Plymouth Argyle .

Plymouth Argyle manager Neil Warnock picked ten players who had started both of the club 's semi @-@ final matches , with Ronnie Mauge keeping his place in the team having replaced Chris Billy for the second leg . The match was to be goalkeeper Steve Cherry 's last for the club , having returned for a second stint with the club three months earlier . Darlington manager Jim Platt , who was taking charge of the team for the last time before the return of David Hodgson , made one change to the side that secured progress from the semi @-@ final stage with Tony Carss coming in at the expense of Matt Carmichael . The final would prove to be Man of the Match Matty Appleby 's last for Darlington .

== First half ==

Darlington were the first to settle with Gary Bannister a prominent player in midfield , but Plymouth Argyle eventually found their rhythm and had the first real goalscoring opportunity after ten minutes . Adrian Littlejohn found space after a one @-@ two with Michael Evans , but his first touch let him down and the opportunity was not taken . Darlington 's main threat was coming from attacking full back Appleby and he had their best chance of the match mid @-@ way through the first half . He carved out the initial chance , having carried the ball half the length of the pitch , but team @-@ mate Steven Gaughan was unable to convert . The hasty clearance from Argyle found its way back to Appleby but he sent his shot over the crossbar with goalkeeper Cherry completely exposed .

Plymouth Argyle came close to making their opponents pay for their profligacy in front of goal with Evans lifting a volley over the crossbar . Darlington 's captain Andy Crosby was proving to be a formidable figure at the heart of his team 's defence , but Argyle fashioned another chance to open the scoring just before half @-@ time . A flick on by Evans presented Adrian Littlejohn with the opportunity to redeem his earlier miss , but he dragged his shot wide .

== Second half ==

There were few clear @-@ cut chances at the start of the second half , but Plymouth Argyle were winning the midfield battle with Mauge and Chris Leadbitter leading by example with a number of forceful tackles . The pivotal moment arrived on 65 minutes after Martin Barlow had earnt a corner @-@ kick on the right @-@ hand side . Leadbitter played the ball short to full back Mark Patterson , whose well @-@ measured cross was met firmly by the unmarked Mauge to head into the back of the net . Darlington tried to force their way back into the match , but were being thwarted by Plymouth Argyle captain Michael Heathcote and his defensive colleagues which left strikers Robbie Blake and Robbie Painter , who both scored in the semi @-@ finals , with little to work on . As Darlington committed more players forward in search of an equaliser they left themselves exposed in defence which gave the leading side more space to launch counter @-@ attacks . Evans and Littlejohn threatened to score the decisive second goal , but in the end Mauge 's headed finish mid @-@ way through the second half proved to be enough to claim the final promotion place for the team from Devon . The match was by no means a classic , with serious goalscoring chances at a premium , but to the winners it didn 't matter .

== Post @-@ match ==

After the final whistle Plymouth Argyle 's captain Michael Heathcote received the winners ' trophy before parading it in front of the club 's supporters on the pitch . For the club 's manager , Neil Warnock , it was his fourth play @-@ off success at Wembley Stadium . He commented on his past experiences that " It can 't be a hindrance , having done it before , but it doesn 't make it any less tense . It makes it a very long season . I had booked a holiday starting today - I suppose I should have known better " .

Warnock was also full of praise for his counterpart , Jim Platt , commenting that " He should be made manager of the year for what he 's done at that club " . Citing Darlington 's financial worries " Everyone thought they would blow up , but they didn 't - they got within an ace . Unfortunately , someone has to lose " . Platt , a former Northern Ireland international , was equally optimistic . He said " My side is very young - nearly all of them in their early 20s . I think we will be here again next season or go up automatically - if we can keep the side together " .

As a result of their victory , Plymouth Argyle returned to the third tier of English football just one year after being relegated to the fourth tier for the first time in its history . They returned to the Third Division two years later before being promoted as champions in 2002 , and the club followed that up by winning the Second Division in 2004 , to reclaim their place in the second tier of English football after a twelve @-@ year hiatus . For Darlington , there was to be more disappointment in the play @-@ offs four years later under David Hodgson , Platt 's successor . They reached the Third

Division final in 2000 , the last to be played at the original Wembley Stadium , and were defeated 1 ? 0 again ; on this occasion to Peterborough United .

= = Match details = =