

Aaron Moore



WINNER TAKES ALL

The History of the Championship Play-Off Final
World Football's Richest Game

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The 1990s

1992/93

First Division play-off final

31 May 1993

Leicester City 3 (Joachim 57; Walsh 68; Thompson 69)

Swindon Town 4 (Hoddle 42; Maskell 47; Taylor 53; Bodin 84 pen)

FOLLOWING THEIR semi-final disappointment in 1988/89, Swindon Town were condemned to the Second Division once again but, despite a turbulent season, they found

themselves in the play-offs alongside Newcastle United, Blackburn Rovers and Sunderland in the spring of 1990. Their first win of the season hadn't come until 26 September when the Robins defeated Plymouth Argyle, but it was a win enough to spark a little bit of form: further wins over Hull City, Ipswich Town, Oxford United, Brighton, Stoke City and Middlesbrough and a draw against Bradford City saw Swindon lose just once in a run of nine games before they faced a 2-0 defeat to Port Vale.

Mid-December to mid-March had seen Swindon win nine, draw three and lose one, boosting their position in the table. That impressive run had been ended by a defeat to Hull with the loss to the Tigers knocking Swindon slightly off-course. Back-to-back defeats were followed by just two points over the next two matches before a win on the road against AFC Bournemouth had looked

to be the springboard to another good run of form, but it wasn't. The Robins beat Watford and West Bromwich Albion at home but only managed to pick up nine points in seven games: losses to Brighton & Hove Albion and Blackburn with the other three points coming in three consecutive draws in the final three matches of the regular season, against Newcastle, Middlesbrough, and Stoke City. The final league positions meant the play-offs would see a north-east derby between Newcastle and Sunderland in one semi-final and a matchup between Blackburn and Swindon in the other.

Swindon's first leg was played on 13 May at Ewood Park. The table had suggested a dogfight between the three sides below Newcastle, with only goal difference separating them. Swindon knew they needed to make the most of finishing fourth, but the play-offs were a completely different prospect.

A goal from Steve White had given the visitors the lead after 30 minutes. Swindon continued to dominate, and their advantage was doubled in the second half with Peter Foley's volley from 25 yards in the 55th minute. Blackburn managed to get themselves on the scoresheet as Andy Kennedy scored on 73 minutes, but it didn't spark a comeback and Swindon led going into the second leg three days later. The Robins used being at home to their advantage and extended their aggregate lead. A weak back pass from Rovers defender David Mail allowed Duncan Shearer to intercept and score before he doubled their lead on the day minutes later. He charged down the left and saw his pass converted by White from close range. Again, Blackburn pulled one back with a goal midway through the second half as Howard Gayle's 30-yard strike was deflected by Ross MacLaren past Fraser Digby. That only proved to be another consolation as Swindon progressed to the final.

The north-east derby didn't prove fruitful; the first leg at Roker Park in Sunderland had been ill-tempered but produced nothing in the way of shots on target, meaning it finished goalless. However, the tie at St James' Park was different. Eric Gates opened the scoring when he converted a low cross from Gary Owers to give the visitors the lead before the only other goal of the game came in the 86th minute. Again, it went the way of the visitors, to the despair of the home fans who invaded the pitch, with Marco Gabbiadini netting. With the second leg finishing 2-0, it was Sunderland fans who were making their way to Wembley for the play-off final.

While the football had been played on the pitch, behind the scenes Swindon Town's owner Brian Hillier was under investigation. He had been arrested in January 1990 under suspicion of defrauding the Inland Revenue as well as placing bets against his own team

losing in the 1987/88 FA Cup but, despite these allegations, the Robins continued in their quest for promotion to the First Division.

Over 70,000 supporters made their way to London on 28 May 1990 to see Swindon face Sunderland, and whether people expected either of these sides to be at Wembley for the play-off final was up for debate, but nobody cared about that. The Black Cats made a better start to the game but Swindon were the more dominant team, and missed a few good chances before they took the lead midway through the first half when Alan McLoughlin scored from a deflected effort off Gary Bennett from just outside the box, a large deflection taking the ball beyond Tony Norman in the Sunderland goal. Swindon had further chances to extend their lead in the second half, but they couldn't take them, and the game finished 1-0. The result saw them promoted to the First Division for the first time in their history and earned

them their third promotion in five seasons to join the top flight.

The celebrations didn't last long as Brian Hillier appeared in court shortly after their triumph at Wembley. Having been up for 36 charges for financial irregularities, he was found guilty and, as a result, Swindon were demoted two divisions. That had taken them from the First Division to the Third Division, but on appeal it had been reduced to one division and they returned to the second tier ahead of the 1990/91 season. In their place, Sunderland were promoted to the top flight, although Newcastle had argued it should have been them, with the Geordies finishing third and higher than the two sides who had competed in the play-off final.

The following season hadn't been a repeat of the previous as Swindon had felt a hangover effect and it had become apparent they were facing a relegation battle rather than

competing for promotion again. Their form remained inconsistent throughout the season, but the Robins managed to narrowly avoid relegation at the end of 1990/91 with 50 points, ahead of Hull and West Brom, who both went down, with only two teams being relegated that year. Swindon manager Ossie Ardiles had resigned to take charge of Newcastle United, so the club had turned to Tottenham legend Glenn Hoddle, who took over in April 1991. Hoddle guided the Robins to safety before his first full season in charge saw a change in the Wiltshire side's fortunes. A record of 18 wins, 15 draws and 13 losses saw them finish five points off the play-offs, but it was something to build upon.

Before the start of the 1992/93 season got under way, the Football League had undergone a huge reshuffle. A decision by First Division clubs had been taken on 20 February 1992 to form a new league, known

as the FA Premier League. The idea behind it was to prevent the top clubs from losing income to lower divisions and to maximise their bargaining position ahead of the renewal of new television deals. It meant more revenue, improved club autonomy and increased global appeal, creating a more competitive top tier. The reshuffle meant the Second Division had become the First Division and the Third and Fourth Divisions had become the Second and Third, respectively.

The creation of the Premier League had given the opportunity for a TV deal which, at the time, was the biggest in the history of British sport. The inaugural deal had been signed in May 1992 and, under it, Sky paid £304m for the first five seasons of the league, covering 1992/93 to 1996/97. Clubs were competing for more than the standard prize money given at the end of the season based on each individual position in the table. Now they had

TV money that would boost the coffers, and this sort of finance was essential to thriving in a competitive market.

In the newly named First Division, Swindon finished fifth in 1992/93. The Robins won 21 of their 46 games while drawing 13 and losing 12. Their final league position saw them join Portsmouth, Tranmere Rovers and Leicester City in the play-offs for a place in the Premier League.

The Robins faced Tranmere in the play-off semi-final while Leicester went up against Portsmouth. The first leg for Swindon saw them welcome Tranmere to the County Ground and within two minutes Nicky Summerbee's cross had been headed into his own goal by Steve Vickers. The good start continued a minute later as Hoddle's team found themselves 2-0 ahead when Dave Mitchell made the most of a mishandled shot. A goal from Tranmere in the fourth minute

was disallowed for a push on Hoddle, but they did find themselves back in the game in the 27th minute as John Morrissey was on target for the visitors. It hadn't been enough for a fightback as Swindon added a third in the second half with Craig Maskell scoring. The second leg at Prenton Park also saw Swindon take the lead, this time on the half-hour mark; Martin Ling played a ball through to John Moncur, who dispatched his shot well. The game was level just before half-time as Mark Proctor scored a volley before Pat Nevin added a second for the hosts after Fraser Digby dropped a cross. Maskell equalised, making it 5-3 on aggregate, but Tranmere added a third of the evening with Kenny Irons scoring from the penalty spot. Although they lost the second leg 3-2, the Robins had edged the tie on aggregate and progressed to the final.

Leicester's Filbert Street ground was under redevelopment so the first leg of their semi-final

with Portsmouth was played at Nottingham Forest's City Ground, but it hadn't been an exciting affair and was described as dreadful by Paul Weaver in *The Guardian*. The only thing saving the day was a stunning strike from Julian Joachim, with the game finishing 1-0. The second leg was three days later, and the first half remained largely uneventful. Portsmouth levelled the tie on aggregate six minutes into the second half as Alan McLoughlin scored from a George Lawrence header but Leicester immediately responded to put the score back into their favour with a goal two minutes later when Ian Ormondroyd found the target after getting on to the end of a deflected effort. The 69th minute saw Leicester take the lead on the night through Steve Thompson with a shot from the edge of the box but, again, it was extinguished fast. Bjørn Kristensen curled an effort into the far corner from 18 yards for Pompey but the draw wasn't good enough and Leicester progressed on aggregate.

The final was right at the end of May, and it didn't disappoint. Leicester had hoped to change their fortunes in their second final in as many years while Swindon sought promotion to the top division after missing out in 1990. Swindon raced into a 3-0 lead with Glenn Hoddle, Craig Maskell and Shaun Taylor scoring. Leicester had looked dead and buried, but they had other ideas as Julian Joachim pulled one back before a quick-fire double from Steve Walsh and Steve Thompson brought them level. With the Robins pushing to put themselves back ahead, they had the chance to do so in the 84th minute when Steve White went down in the box. Paul Bodin stepped up and tucked the ball beyond Kevin Poole in the Leicester goal. That proved to be the winner as Town were promoted to the Premier League for the first time in their history.

After securing promotion, player-manager Glenn Hoddle left to take charge of Chelsea

with his assistant, John Gorman, accepting the club's offer to become the new manager. The Robins had seen Colin Calderwood move to Tottenham for £1.35m and looked to strengthen the team with the signings of Luc Nijholt, Adrian Whitbread and Jan Åge Fjørtoft for a combined total of £1.175m. The following season didn't see Swindon win until late November with a victory at home to Queens Park Rangers. That was the first of only five wins throughout the entire season with the Robins picking up another 15 points from draws, but it wasn't enough to keep them in the top flight. With 30 points, and having conceded 100 goals, Swindon were relegated back to the First Division and haven't returned since.

* * *

Martin Ling had played in all but two games for Swindon during the 1992/93 season so I

spoke to him about the club's promotion to the Premier League.

You joined Swindon Town in March 1991, two years after their disappointment of not being admitted to the top flight. When you joined was there still a consensus to achieve promotion?

ML: The players that were there still had a bugbear about it. There wasn't masses of players still there from that season, but the ones who remained continued to talk about the injustice. As players you are always going to feel that you've done the job in the playing sense, but then to have it taken away, that feeling is always going to be there.

After finishing 21st in the 1990/91 season, the club massively improved and finished eighth in the Second Division. What changed to achieve a huge jump?