



Matches – 25 May 2008 – Doncaster Rovers 1 Leeds United 0

League One Play-Off final – Wembley Stadium – 75,132

Scorers: None

Doncaster Rovers: Sullivan, O'Connor, Mills, Hird, Gareth Roberts, Green, Stock, Wellens (McCammon 71), Coppinger (Guy 86), Price (Lockwood 80), Hayter

Leeds United: Ankergren, Richardson, Huntington, Michalik, Johnson, Kilkenny, Howson, Douglas, Prutton (Kandol 69), Beckford, Freedman (Hughes 77)

Jonny Howson was not even a twinkle in the eye when a Leeds United side managed by Billy Bremner appeared in the first series of Football League play-offs, losing to Charlton Athletic in a replayed final in May 1987. But it was Howson's two goals that saw United through to the League One play-off final in 2008 after a thrilling fightback against Carlisle United in the two-legged semi final. In the week of the final the midfielder turned 20.

It was United's first appearance at the new Wembley Stadium, and they were determined to make history as the first Whites side to win a play-off final after unsuccessful attempts in 1987 and the 2006 debacle against Watford.

Dougie Freedman had played a major part in United's late run to the play-offs and his contribution was recognised by Phil Hay in a preview of the final for the Yorkshire Evening Post: "With three play-off finals lodged in his memory bank already, Dougie Freedman does not need instructing on the unforgiving nature of the game awaiting Leeds United at Wembley on Sunday. A beaten finalist in 1996 but subsequently victorious on two occasions with Crystal Palace, Freedman might be tempted to say that second chances come to those who are prepared to wait long enough. But in London this weekend, the 33-year-old knows the danger of expecting the reprieve offered to Leeds by the return leg of last week's semi final against Carlisle United.



Jonathan Howson celebrates scoring the second goal at Carlisle which took United to Wembley

"Of all the lessons taken from a scintillating two-legged tie ... the most valuable may be the warning of what will happen if the form and confidence of Gary McAllister's players deserts them against Doncaster Rovers at Wembley.

"United's performance at Brunton Park on Thursday amounted to their most impressive of the season, produced under the extreme pressure of the 2-1 deficit they were carrying from the first leg and the knowledge that their entire campaign rested on one 90-minute fixture. Jonathan Howson's goal in the first minute of injury time completed the 2-0 victory which saw Carlisle beaten 3-2 on aggregate, and the display witnessed in Cumbria was seen by both Freedman and McAllister as a direct response of the extent to which Leeds under-performed in the first leg in Yorkshire.

“Freedman, whose 96th-minute goal at Elland Road turned the tie in United's favour, said: ‘You never have a divine right to turn up and win games. Carlisle showed us that on Monday. I felt we were well beaten but the fortunate thing was that we had another opportunity on Thursday. From the reaction we got there, I think it was pretty obvious that the players had taken on board the seriousness of the situation. That was one of the things I said to the younger lads after Monday - that the most important factor was learning from the defeat and from their own performances. We still had the chance to put it right and they rose to the occasion. A few of the players are at the very start of their careers, and this will all be a bit eye-opening for them. You can give them advice about what to expect but they can never understand what play-off matches are like until they're out there in the thick of it. The best lesson from the semi finals will probably be that we won't get a second chance at Wembley. I'd expect the younger guys to look at the first leg of the semi final and realise how crucial it is to be on our game from the word go. You've got 46 League games to get to the play-offs, but the team who win promotion are always the team who raise themselves for the last couple of games - and especially the play-off final. As tough as the semi final was, I do think it's given our squad the best possible preparation for Wembley.’



Dogie Freedman celebrates scoring a dramatic late goal against Carlisle in the first leg at Elland Road

“McAllister's decision to retain all 11 of the players who started Monday's 2-1 defeat during Thursday night's victory at Brunton Park was a defining moment in the two-legged tie, and United's manager has another difficult call to make before Sunday's final. Alan Sheehan missed both matches against Carlisle through a three-match suspension, but the ban concluded after Thursday's game and he is available to feature at Wembley should McAllister consider recalling him. The Irish defender, who has been offered a new deal at the Walkers Stadium but is likely to be on Leeds' list of possible signings this summer, is the only recognised left-back in United's squad, but Bradley Johnson has operated as a makeshift defender for the last three matches and McAllister may find it impossible to justify removing any of the players who eliminated Carlisle from the play-offs.”

Freedman: "The first game against Carlisle showed us the danger of under-performing, but I feel that we had that little bit more desire and hunger at the end of the day. We scored in the 96th minute at Elland Road and the 91st minute at Carlisle, and it's the same old story - if you fight to the death, you get your reward. I don't think this set of players know when they're beaten.

"Carlisle are a very good team but I'd say we wanted it slightly more. That's a small difference but a very important one. It needs to be the same at Wembley.

"I didn't come up to Leeds and leave my kids in London at a young age to mess about, I came up here for a really serious reason - to help the team get promotion. It's one thing to play at Wembley but I don't think you'll remember it with much pleasure if you don't come away with winners' medals. That's what it comes down to."

Gary McAllister chose to stick by the eleven men who had been on duty in the semis and was hopeful they would do the business. He told BBC Radio Leeds, "We are 90 minutes away from what I believe would be a fantastic achievement by this group of players. The players have worked hard to buy into anything we have tried to get across to them. The work rate and enthusiasm is something I knew was already here and I haven't been let down by that.

"It's been a very hard season for the players. The 15 points was a major blow to the lads, and then they've had to get used to a new guy coming in and they had to buy into that. But I've never heard one word of complaint from them and they've never felt sorry for themselves. They've just got on with it. The players have realised over this season what the ambition of the club is. It comes with the territory, if you want to be a player at Leeds this is part of it.

"We have worked very hard to get to this week. So as much as we have to enjoy it we have to realise Wembley is a place of work. I'm proud of taking the team to Wembley, but the proudest moment will be if we get the right result."

Doncaster Rovers, who had finished third in League One, were United's opponents at Wembley, following a 5-1 demolition of Southend United in the semi final second leg and were fearsome opponents.

They were widely regarded as the best footballing side in League One, earning a reputation for neat possession and a wonderful passing game. They had been in the top three since the end of January and only a shock defeat at Cheltenham on the closing day of the League campaign that saw them miss out on the automatic promotion spot to Nottingham Forest.

United's fans heavily outnumbered those of Rovers in the crowd. Rovers had been forced to suspend sale of tickets at their ground because of Leeds supporters besieging the Keepmoat Stadium in search of spare tickets after United's allocation quickly sold out. Doncaster chairman John Ryan: "The situation is both



United fans dominate Wembley

clubs were given 36,000. We were given too many and Leeds too few. They've got a fantastic fan base. I think we sold 24,000 tickets, which is a good effort with us only having average gates of 8,000 this season. I would gladly have given Leeds the balance, or most of the balance, but the Football League wouldn't let us because of segregation issues which is a shame because part of Wembley will be empty when it should be full, really, of Leeds fans."

It was estimated that the Whites fans had a 10,000 advantage over their opposite numbers and they made themselves clearly heard when Football League chairman Lord Mawhinney came out to be introduced to the players before the kick off. The chorus of whistles, boos and jeers was ear-shattering as he went along the lines.

Leeds kicked off to tumultuous cheering, but could easily have been out of it in the first fifteen minutes. Doncaster's players were sharp early on, though Leeds had the first shot in anger when Johnson got in a long range effort after Freedman had won a throw on the right. However, Rovers quickly got their short passing movements going and started picking holes in the United rearguard.

Richie Wellens had been forced to leave the field for treatment during the warm up and United had singled the playmaker out for some rough handling early on. Douglas was lucky to escape without a booking when he clattered into him on the left touchline in the fifth minute, but that only seemed to provoke Rovers into upping their game.

First Green danced past Douglas on the byline but Price's effort was blocked at the near post. Then Wellens jinked along United's right goal line and shot into the side netting with Leeds expecting a cross. Another smart interpassing combination in the area nearly put Price in and then Ankergrén had to save one-handed at the feet of Coppinger as the ball came back in. A minute later the keeper saved United again as Hayter was allowed to run clear on Rovers' left with the back four appealing for offside. Ankergrén was called into action again in the twelfth minute as Hayter moved through on their right.



Ankergrén about to make the first of a number of early saves against Doncaster, denying James Hayter

The Danish goalkeeper was putting on a great exhibition and his saves in that opening quarter of an hour marked him out as man of the match.

At this stage, United just couldn't get out of their own half. They started to find some of their long passing across the defence and midfield but as soon as they tried to make more aggressive forays into the Doncaster half the Rovers defence were swallowing the ball up easily.

Finally, after the game reached the fifteen minute mark, Leeds managed to work their way into the contest and centre-back Mills became the first name in referee Andy D'Urso's notebook when he hammered through Jermaine Beckford on the edge of the area as the forward held the ball. Kilkenney's free kick was into the wall and ran clear, with Huntington heading weakly wide when Howson lifted the ball back in.

In the 18th minute a loose ball out of defence by former Leeds trainee Sam Hird only found Beckford. The striker made ground to the edge of the area but his shot was easily gathered by Sullivan.

Wellens was continuing to feel the full force of United's tackling and first Kilkenney and then Richardson left their marks on him as he tried his tricks on the left wing.

Jonny Howson brought the ball out of defence after 21 minutes and found Beckford, but with two men moving wide down the right the forward picked the wrong ball, to Douglas on the left, and his

pass ran tamely dead.

Leeds were having more joy now, though Rovers were always confident with their neat and controlled short passing game, patiently playing through and round United, seemingly always with more direction and control.

Freedman weaved his way through the defence on the half hour but Rovers cleared as the ball reached their box. Then Johnson picked the ball up on the left and cut in to play a one-two with Beckford in the area. The ball ran back to the striker who shot as he was falling, but Sullivan fielded the weak effort.

When Jonny Howson won the ball and passed to Beckford on the edge of the area. Freedman made space by dragging defenders across to the left with his decoy run. This gave Beckford a clear opening but he fired wide. Moments later both Beckford and Howson tried to dribble through but ran into defenders.

As if to remind Leeds that they were still in the game, Rovers broke a couple of times in the five minutes before the break, Hayter turning and shooting well over and then receiving a long ball into the area, but allowing it to run wide and giving Ankergrren the chance to kick away for a corner.



Dougie Freedman suffered a miserable afternoon against Doncaster

United broke away sharply after the flag kick with Johnson and Beckford combining cleverly down the left. The striker held the ball up well in the zone between penalty box and corner flag and fed Kilkenny who shipped it on to Howson on the edge of the area. He attempted to curl it into the top corner, but it faded just too late and went over.

It was probably the best movement of the half and certainly merited a goal, but it was the last chance before the break.

United had come back strongly into the game after Rovers' opening blitz and had enjoyed some decent possession, but Doncaster had finished back on top and could count themselves unlucky not to go in ahead at half time.

Gary McAllister spent the interval encouraging United to keep up the football that they had managed to find late on, but he was gutted when his men almost instantly let Doncaster in.

In the first ten seconds of the second period, Michalik sent Stock crashing to the ground as he made his way to the edge of United's area. Coppinger's free kick was blocked and the follow up was deflected for a corner, but Rovers made the most of their chance. James Hayter was left unmarked on the penalty spot as he dived to head home the dropping ball with Ankergrren and Kilkenny unable to get a block on it. United were 1-0 down with barely 90 seconds of the half gone.

That was always going to make it difficult for Leeds, and Doncaster had the perfect containing game, setting up two banks of four and retaining possession to keep their opponents at bay. It might have been a critical misjudgement, but they started holding a deep line and inviting Leeds on to them, waiting to catch them on the break. United lacked the penetration to find the chinks in a

packed midfield and final third and they started to look laboured and anxious.

In the 49th minute Howson found Beckford in the area but he couldn't get any power into his shot and Neil Sullivan collected. Nine minutes later Douglas and Howson combined well to allow the youngster to break away from defence. He played a one-two with Freedman round the edge of the box but saw his shot deflected over. Then Freedman pressed the defence down the left and a poor back pass let Beckford in, but his fierce shot was straight into Sullivan's midriff.

That was fairly typical of this period with United pressing but the final ball found wanting. After 68 minutes they kept possession well round the edge of the Doncaster box but Johnson lost patience and boomed his shot high, wide and handsome with Prutton in space on the left. Seconds later, it was Prutton who was withdrawn as McAllister introduced Tresor Kandol his first change.



James Hayter celebrates scoring Doncaster's winning goal

United were throwing everything into attack now and there was always the chance of a Rovers breakaway. In the 70th minute Coppinger sprang the offside trap down Doncaster's right and it required a desperate chase and last ditch tackle from Douglas to save the day and allow Ankergrén to collect the ball.

After 71 minutes, Doncaster brought striker McCammon on for Wellens, who was suffering with a recurrence of a stomach injury. The move was as much to introduce someone who could compete with Kandol in the air as to protect Wellens.

The arrival of Kandol led to some route one football from United with the inevitable goalmouth scrambles, but former Leeds keeper Neil Sullivan was faultless in his handling and composed under pressure. There was simply too much anxiety about the United thrusts as they felt time slipping away. On too many occasions they either ran up blind alleys or made life easy for Sullivan with aimless high balls.

The introduction of Hughes for Freedman after 77 minutes was seen as a retrograde step, but the midfielder brought some much needed urgency if little composure down the right flank. He found some decent space, but his driven crosses were normally easy enough for Sullivan to cope with.

United's best chance came after 85 minutes when Michalik's presence in the area caused panic after a throw from the left. The ball ran out to Douglas on the edge of the area. Space was limited but he sailed into a fierce shot, only to see it swing narrowly wide of Sullivan's left hand post.

Michalik was almost an auxiliary striker now, with Howson defending alongside Huntington while Richardson and Johnson constantly overlapped. The young midfielder was cautioned in the closing minutes for a desperate late tackle when it looked like substitute Lewis Guy was going past him down the wing with no cover behind him.

Time was ebbing away but in the third of four injury time minutes a headed back pass to Sullivan offered a slight chance to Beckford but the keeper held the ball despite a wild swing from the striker.

That was the final opportunity and the waves of clumsy United attacks simply broke on the rocks of a well organised Doncaster defence when they managed to evade smothering midfield cover. The thousands of Leeds fans never abandoned hope but were left ruing another example of their favourites coming up short on the big occasion when the referee whistled to end the game.

It had been a remarkable season, but Leeds United were condemned to another year in League One.

A reflective Gary McAllister commented: "We huffed and puffed, and we gave it every ounce of our energy. But in the final third, our final ball or effort on goal lacked quality. I didn't think we chose the right execution of crossing, passing or shooting.

"It goes without saying that it's very disappointing. But what I've tried to impress on the guys in the dressing room, who are obviously very low, is that each of those individuals should be proud of what they've done. Myself and the coaching staff are very proud of what they've achieved, and I think the Leeds fans are as well. To start a campaign with such a hefty handicap and to get right to the final play-off match deserves to be applauded. They've continually got up and got on with it, and it's quite simple – that group of players won 27 games, gained 91 points and barring the handicap they would have been promoted.

"I've got to say that I think the players have got the stomach to come back. They'll go away this summer and regroup, and there's going to be a hardcore of these guys back at Leeds United next season. It's going to be busy for myself and the chairman over the summer trying to recruit people that can make us better. I'm better off myself after 20 games at this level of football.

"We've got to go into next season positive. I know it's difficult to say that at the moment, but we will.

"The fans here are superb. They are second to none, they have backed us all season long ... Our average crowd is over 26,500 and there were well over 36,000 at Wembley, and that speaks volumes. We'll be back."



Gary McAllister tells Bradley Johnson to show his appreciation to the United fans