

**TENSION AT WEMBLEY**  
**LONDON, MAY 1998**

The stakes were high when Charlton Athletic and Sunderland met in the 1998 Division 1 play-off final. Promotion to the Premier League would guarantee an additional £7 million in television revenue plus extra attendance receipts and merchandising sales.

Sunderland had missed automatic promotion by one point, while Charlton had finished two points further behind in fourth place. Charlton arrived at Wembley having not conceded a goal in their last nine games, including two 1-0 victories against Ipswich in the play-off semi-final. Sunderland has beaten Sheffield United 3-2 on aggregate in their semi-final. Everyone was expecting a close game – Charlton and Sunderland had played two League draws that season – but no one forecast just how close.

Viewed from a long-term perspective, the idea of a play-off final was still fairly strange. And what would previous generations have made of all the trimmings? There were flame-throwers and ticker-tape welcomes for the teams as they left the tunnel; the players walked past ubiquitous advertising boards and a sea of red-and-white striped replica Sunderland shirts decorated the area behind the tunnel.

The sponsor's portable centre-circle carpet- it pays to decide NATIONWIDE – was peeled away and the two teams began their 49<sup>th</sup> League match of the season. The most significant feature of the first 18 minutes was three cautions. The Charlton's Clive Mendonca turned his marker and shot right-footed past the falling Lionel Perez. It was Mendonca's 26<sup>th</sup> goal of the season and put Charlton ahead at half-time. The irony was that Mendonca had supported Sunderland during his childhood. He had gone to the same school as Sunderland's Michael Gray and had played for Sunderland Schoolboys.

Sunderland turned the game their way with two goals in seven minutes early in the second half. Niall Quinn met Summerbee's corner with a powerful low header which went in at the near post and then Kevin Phillips scampered free to finish with a gentle flick over goalkeeper Ilic for his 35<sup>th</sup> of the season.

Clive Mendonca produced three superb touches when he equalised in the 71<sup>st</sup> minute. He guided a long ball from Keith Jones past the nearest defender, controlled it with the sole of his boot and then steered it past Perez. But Niall Quinn emulated Mendonca's two goals when he put Sunderland 3-2 ahead two minutes later, chesting down a long cross from the right and then scoring at the near post with his left foot. Substitute Daniel Dichio might have made it 4-2 shortly afterwards but miscued his shot from Summerbee's pass. Instead, after Perez had made a brilliant reflex save from Bright's deflection, Richard Rufus scored his first goal for Charlton (in 145 games) when he headed in a corner with only five minutes left.

The excitement continued into extra-time as tension rose among the 77,739 crowd. Or those who had stayed. One Charlton fan later confessed he had walked out at 3-2 because he couldn't take any more.

Quinn's lay-off allowed Summerbee to shoot Sunderland's fourth from the edge of the area (99 minutes) but Mendonca scored Charlton's third equaliser when he met a Steve Jones cross with his back to goal and turned sharply to score (103 minutes). Mendonca's hat trick was the first in a play-off final, and Charlton fans would later debate which was the best goal of the three.

Tired legs played out the remainder of extra-time.

Charlton Athletic 4 Sunderland 4.

And so to a penalty shoot-out.

Back to 0-0

Mendonca scored for Charlton from the first penalty

Summerbee scored for Sunderland.

1-1

Steve Brown scored for Charlton.

Johnston for Sunderland

2-2

Keith Jones for Charlton

Kevin Ball for Sunderland

3-3.

Makin scored for Sunderland... but only just as Ilic dived low to his right and palmed the ball into the net.

4-4

again.

Bowen for Charlton

Alex Rae for Sunderland

5-5.

Sudden death.

Robinson for Charlton.

Quinn for Sunderland

6-6.

Charlton goalkeeper Sasa Ilic had found a twopence coin on the pitch at the start of the shoot-out and was tossing it between kicks to keep busy. Now he threw it away. It wasn't working.

Shaun Newton scored for Charlton.

And then, after 13 right-footed penalties in the shoot-out, Sunderland's Michael Gray stepped forward with the first left-footed kick, low to Ilic's left. The goalkeeper dived and kicked it out. Seconds later he was buried under a pyramid of colleagues as Charlton Athletic celebrated promotion to the Premier League.

It was now 5.50pm, three hours since the teams had first come out.

There were claims that this was Wembley's greatest game but a few other 4-4 draws are candidates. England shared eight goals with a team representing the Rest of Europe in 1953-54, and Guiseley and Gresley Rovers drew 4-4 in the 1991 FA Vase Final. I watched the latter and can couch for its entertainment. Gresley and Guiseley were so closely matched that the amalgam "Gruisly" appeared on the Wembley scoreboard during extra-time. Gresley came back from a 3-0 deficit to equalise in the last minute of normal time and the Guiseley equalised in the dying moments of extra-time. Guiseley won the replay 3-1.

The Charlton-Sunderland game is a strange game for two reasons other than a 4-4 draw at Wembley. The penalty shoot-out scoreline of 7-6 is what Anthony Fowles calls 'a scoreline of mystical significance to Charlton fans' in his book *Welling to Wembley*. Charlton, of course, had once beaten Huddersfield Town 7-6 in a 1957 League game.

The second oddity is that so many millions could rest on one penalty-kick when the two teams were so obviously equal.