

UNIBOND LEAGUE PREMIER DIVISION – PLAY OFF FINAL

2nd May 2009

ILKESTON TOWN 2 (Pringle 10, Weaver 94), **NANTWICH TOWN 1** (Lennon 31)

After extra time

Nantwich's dreams of a third promotion on the trot were left in tatters after 10 men Ilkeston clinched extra time victory in the UniBond Premier show down.

Simon Weaver's header four minutes into extra time proved the difference and the disappointed Dabbers could have little complaint in a game where they struggled to find their best form. The Derbyshire outfit took an early stranglehold on proceedings and, despite having Anthony Church sent off for throwing a second half punch at Charlie O'Loughlin, they deserved their step up to the Conference North.

Both sides had made a nervy start on a tense and sunny afternoon but Ilkeston took control once they nosed in front with their first real attack on 10 minutes. Danny Sleath drilled through a sea of legs from the edge of the area and although Lee Jones got down well to block, Ben Pringle was first to react and bundled the ball home from close range.

Ilkeston's well-marshalled midfield snuffed out the Dabbers attacking options and it took a glaring error from right back Simon Harrison to get Nantwich back in the game on the half-hour. Under no pressure, Harrison's back pass was woefully short and was seized upon by the alert Michael Lennon. The UniBond's leading marksman gleefully skipped past keeper Chris Adamson before rolling the ball into an empty net for his 34th strike of the campaign.

Sleath had a diving header wide of the mark but it was Nantwich who could have gone in a goal to the good at the interval. Lennon's neat step over from Dave Walker's square cross wrong-footed the home defence but Dave MacPherson was unable to connect properly just eight yards out.

Ash Carter swiveled and shot wide early in the second period but Nantwich continued to struggle to contain the influential Pringle whose foraging runs were a constant threat. There was a let off when the former West Brom trainee shuffled past Phil Parkinson and whipped in a tantalising cross from the left but there was no one on hand to capitalise.

The tie looked to have swung in Nantwich's favour when Church was red carded for a blatant strike at O'Loughlin but, if anything, it seemed to galvanise the ten men. Nantwich themselves were having to give extra cover to keeper Jones who, suffering from severe back spasms, bravely continued between the sticks despite being in considerable pain.

The Welshman was called on to claim a header from Sam Duncum after man of the match Pringle had again caused havoc down the left and both sides had last gasp chances to win the match in normal time.

Ilkeston substitute Amari Morgan-Smith put a free header over the bar from 6 yards and, at the other end, Glyn Blackhurst's curling shot was finger tipped onto the bar by Adamson

It took the tie into extra time but, sadly for Nantwich, the home side again struck early. Dave Tickle tripped Harrison on the right and from Pringle's swinging free kick, Robins' skipper Weaver planted a header past Jones.

Morgan-Smith ballooned over when he should have increased Ilkeston's lead but Nantwich responded, forcing Adamson into another top drawer save from Danny Griggs' free kick. The Nantwich winger then clipped a cross into the danger area only to see Blackhurst miscue from close in.

As the game went into the second period of extra time, Nantwich were lacking the guile and imagination to unlock Ilkeston's resolute defence and it was the home side who should have sealed victory three minutes from time. Morgan-Smith dispossessed MacPherson and charged into the box where he was adjudged to have been tripped by Darren Tinson. The luckless substitute got up to take the spot kick himself but Jones heroically dived to his right to beat it away.

A late snap shot from Lennon lacked venom and, at the final whistle, the New Manor Ground erupted as the Ilkeston team and fans celebrated the club's rise to Conference football for the first time in their history.

Nantwich, and their traveling army of 500 fans, were left to reflect on what could have been. At the end of a long season, Steve Davis' men had put up a hard working performance in a Play Off Final that few could have contemplated last August. On the day, though, they could have few complaints that the better side won but can be rightfully proud of having come so far in their first ever campaign in UniBond Premier football.

Ilkeston: Adamson, Harrison, Hurst, Church, Weaver, Murphy, Sleath, Pringle, Cahill, Newsham, Duncum. Subs: Douglas (for Duncum, 104 mins), Morgan-Smith (for Cahill, 69), Istead (for Newsham, 79).

Nantwich: Jones, Parkinson, Tickle, Tinson, O'Loughlin, MacPherson, Carter, Blackhurst, Walker, Lennon, Griggs. Subs: Whittaker (for Walker, 80), Hawthorne, Kinsey (for Blackhurst, 110), Smith (for Parkinson, 86), Mahmood.

Attendance: 1794