

SELHURST PARK PLAY-OFF GAME THAT FAILED TO MAKE ITS MARK

Words // David Prentice

"And who cares who's third?... it doesn't matter," hollered beloved BBC commentator David Coleman, as David Hemery raced to gold at the 1968 Olympics.

The commentary was quickly added to the list of 'Colemanballs', the verbal gaffes of the legendary broadcaster, because on this occasion it did.

Coleman was embarrassed to discover that the bronze medallist was actually another Briton, John Sherwood, one of only four athletics medals won by Team GB in Mexico. But Coleman had a point. In football, especially, few care who comes third.

Which is what made the FA's decision to stage an FA Cup third/fourth place play-off, on the eve of the Cup final, so odd.

The thinking was that football fans heading to the capital for the final would gleefully take in another competitive game the night before. Which is why Everton faced Stoke City on Friday 7 May 1971 – at the home of today's visitors, Crystal Palace.

Everton had faced Palace at Selhurst Park just five days earlier in their final First Division match of the season. More than 21,000 turned up, a little on the low side for Palace, who averaged 28,768 gates in their home matches that season.

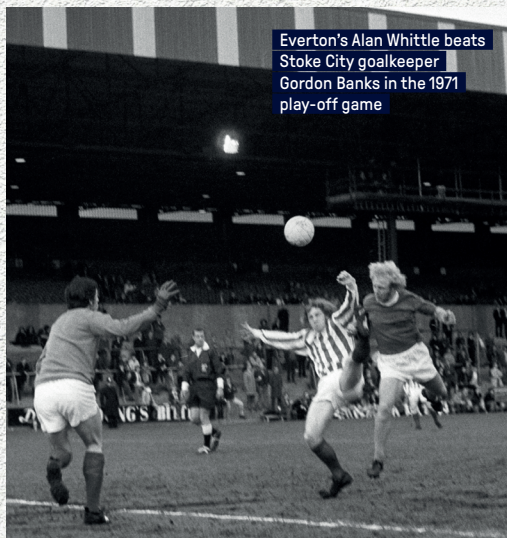
The paltry 5,031 who attended the 'showpiece' game was comfortably the lowest gate Selhurst Park had hosted that season.

The Cup finalists in 1971 were Liverpool, conquerors of Everton in the semi-final, and Arsenal, who had scraped past Stoke City after a replay.

Liverpool and Arsenal fans couldn't be bothered travelling to south-east London to see teams they didn't actually support – and it seemed that Everton and Stoke supporters felt exactly the same way.

The maiden third/fourth place play-off had been staged the season before, at Highbury, between losing semi-finalists Manchester United and Watford. Just 15,000 turned up.

The year after Everton's tumbleweed turnout, the play-off was moved to August, when Wolves beat Arsenal 3-1 at Highbury in front of 21,000.



Everton's Alan Whittle beats Stoke City goalkeeper Gordon Banks in the 1971 play-off game

Legendary *Sunday Times* sports writer Brian Glanville memorably quipped: "Wolves, for what it's worth, take third place in last year's FA Cup. If the sentence makes little sense to you, it is nonetheless factually impeccable."

In 1974, the last third/fourth place play-off saw Filbert Street's lowest-ever gate of 4,432 watch Burnley beat Leicester 1-0.

The play-off was shelved. Now the FA website, which claims to list every result in their famous competition's history, does not include the results of the third/fourth place play-offs. But they DID happen.

In 1971, Alan Whittle and Alan Ball gave Everton a 2-0 lead at Selhurst Park, before future Blue Mike Bernard reduced the arrears. Then John Ritchie scored two more for the Potters.

The FA had originally decided "to recommend that suitable mementoes be made available to the players and substitutes taking part in the match".

A tankard awarded to one of the Everton players after the match currently sits in the Everton Collection. Perhaps fittingly, it has a dent in it.