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O'NIEN: 'To get to the top of any game you need to work' Skill is more than a fluke for Luke

By Dave Peters

LUKE O'Nien helped Wanderers to a 3-0 opening day win over York City and then said: "I'm off to practice some more."

The self-confessed football nut, who can juggle a tennis ball with his feet more than 1,000 times, planned to spend Sunday's rest day in his nearest field brushing up on his technique.

It may not be a routine manager Gareth Ainsworth would have been too happy with as he sought to keep his players fresh ahead of Tuesday's Capital One Cup tie against Fulham, but it is just the kind of enthusiasm he loves and he has got that in spades in the midfielder he has signed from Watford.

After spending last season in the Conference South on loan with Wealdstone, O'Nien is determined to build on his first start for Wanderers.

He said: "I found out on Friday I was playing and it really helped playing alongside some of the experienced players who were giving me advice. I'm still learning and will always be learning."

"My dad Terry was a professional golfer so he knows what it takes to get to the top of the ladder. He practised eight hours a day."

"To get to the top of any game you need to work. The more hours you put in the better you get."

"For example, tomorrow some people will be resting, but I will put some more hours in so I can gain an advantage on these people."

"I love the game and as a kid I wanted to play 24/7. If I wasn't a professional I'd still be playing all day every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday."

It is down to his dad though that O'Nien is such a whizz at keepy-uppy with the tennis ball.

O'Nien said: "I started juggling with the tennis ball one Christmas a few years back."

"It was snowing and I couldn't go out and play football so my dad told me to get a tennis ball and do it indoors."

"I thought it would be a bit difficult, but he set me a challenge to do ten on the right and I got that and then ten on the left and a couple of



Self-confessed football nut Luke O'Nien made his Wycombe debut in Saturday's convincing victory over York City.

Picture: ANITA ROSS MARSHALL

days later I got that. Then he said 'get up to 100'.

"When the snow cleared I was up to 100 and something, and I've kept it going since."

"I did it in the garden and got into four figures, but I had no witnesses for that so you are going to have to take my word for it, but I'm happy to do it again."

Although the thousand isn't recorded, there is YouTube evidence of O'Nien's ball juggling skills and he holds the tennis ball juggling record up the road at Premier League-Watford, smashing his old club's previous record of 39 into oblivion with his jaw-dropping 478.

He said: "I also did 150 with a golf ball and I've got that on video as proof. I did it at Top Golf in Watford

with my friend and then I booted the ball away."

"I always have a tennis ball with me, I've got two in my bag now."

"There is always a time when you need a ball and I don't want to be without one because there is always a situation where you can practice."

"It gives me extra confidence on the field and in matches because if you can control a tennis ball then a football is even easier, because it is so much larger. If my touch starts getting a bit heavy, I will go straight back on the tennis ball."

"I just like playing football all the time. I always go through the game in my mind and think of the areas I can improve on and see what I need to be working on."

"All I need is a field and a ball and

that will do me. If anyone comes along it's a bonus, if not it's just me."

"As long as I'm still fresh when Tuesday comes around I'm sure the gaffer won't mind."

Wanderers boss Ainsworth said: "Luke O'Nien just gives you total energy, commitment and forward runs and would be horrible to play against because he never stops."

"He is amazing. Both him and Ryan Sellers epitomise what I'm trying to bring to this club."

"They have an exuberance and a youthfulness about them that is incredible."

"They will play every game like it is the only game they are going to play in the Football League."

"It is fantastic to have that enthusiasm in the football club and it has

been infectious even for the older boys."

"The senior pros love them because they have really fitted into the culture we have got here."

But O'Nien, who was on the bench on Tuesday, will face a battle to nail down a place.

Ainsworth said: "We have got so many options in midfield. Marcus Bean just destroys everything and he's had a fantastic couple of opening games."

"Stephen McGinn, Matt Bloomfield, Danny Rowe and Michael Hariman, can all play in there and are good solid performers."

"There are plenty of options and everyone will play around 30 games this season. That's what happens with a small squad."



Matt Ingram has praised the quality of Wycombe's new pitch.
Picture: ANITA ROSS MARSHALL

Ingram praises relaid pitch

GOALKEEPER Matt Ingram missed out on Wembley last season – but he reckons he's playing on the next best thing now.

The former John Hampden Grammar School pupil says Wycombe's new pitch is comparable to the hallowed turf in north London now that last year's "concrete-like" surface has been relaid.

Blues dug up their old pitch within hours of their play-off semi-final second leg victory over Plymouth Argyle last season and removed truckloads of

compacted soil which had made the surface as hard as if it was frozen.

Ingram, who missed all of the play-off drama with a knee injury, has been beaten just once on the new surface in the two games since he returned to the side – and that was by Championship player Alex Kacaniklic – in Tuesday's narrow 1-0 cup defeat against Fulham.

He said: "Our pitch is a lot better now. "If a ball is coming through now you can predict what it's going to do and not be

fearful that it is going to go over your head."

"It's a million times better and is almost as good as the pitch at Wembley."

Ingram has been well protected by his defenders so far this term but is expecting a different test when Wycombe visit Barnet.

He said: "We played Barnet last year and they are very direct. They have a lot of big players so it is going to be different from what we faced against Fulham."



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Wanderers come close to giant killing as Fulham scrape to narrow cup win

Plenty of positives as Wycombe give real test to Championship side

By Dave Peters

WANDERERS boss Gareth Ainsworth was proud of his troops as they went out of the Capital One Cup to higher league Fulham despite having the better of the tie against their Championship opponents on Tuesday night.

He said: "Fulham had millions of pounds worth of talent on the pitch and I thought we showed what we were all about in a really good way. If we play like that in the league week in, week out we won't go far wrong."

Wanderers were beaten by a single second-half Alex Kacaniklic strike and even Fulham boss Kit Symons admitted his team had been in a real tussle after their 1-0 win.

It was harsh on Wanderers, who went toe-to-toe with their opponents and they might have won it had it not been for a glaring first-half miss from striker Garry Thompson, a former Wembley finalist in this competition with Bradford City.

Ainsworth said: "It was a great chance and he will be disappointed he's missed that, but it happens. But if we keep creating like we are and have the energy and press like we are I'm pretty sure we will win more than we lose."

In front of a crowd of 4,012, Wanderers' biggest cup gate since Chelsea's visit in the League Cup semi-final of 2007, Wycombe did themselves proud.

They always looked capable of causing an upset and were well on top when their rhythm was broken by a lengthy second-half injury break when Fulham's Jack Grimmer left the field on a stretcher.

Ainsworth said: "The injury disrupted us. That happens, you've got to concentrate and one counter attack has undone us. It was a disappointing goal to concede but going forward I thought we did very well."

"We gave Fulham a real test. They had one shot in the second half and I lost count of how many crosses we put into their box."

Ainsworth took solace in the way his team matched a team that has had millions spent on it.

He said: "There are Fulham players that are ten years my budget so it's great to see my boys match



In close attention: Danny Rowe in action for Wycombe on Tuesday night. Picture: ANITA ROSS MARSHALL

them and then some.

"We matched a team way above our league and gulfs apart when you look at the structures of the clubs."

Wanderers made three changes from the side which beat York. Out went skipper Paul Hayes, midfielder Luke O'Nien and the injured Aaron Pierre and in came Danny Rowe, Michael Harriman and Stephen McGinn for his Wanderers debut while Fulham made five changes.

Fulham began with a spell of keep ball but Wycombe soon knocked them out of their stride and could have caught them cold with their first attack. Thompson escaped down Fulham's left but his cross was just too high for Aaron Amadi-Holloway to get any purchase on.

It was an indication that Wanderers weren't going to be overawed by their opponents and they restricted the Londoners to long range pot-shots which, apart from one effort from Ross McCormack, rarely troubled Matt Ingram.

At the other end Thompson and Amadi-Holloway, switching effortlessly into a front two after operat-

ing with a third man on Saturday, were willing runners but it was midfielder Harriman who got the next chance, fluffing his shot.

Fulham's discomfort increased when their keeper Marcus Bettinelli fumbled Joe Jacobson's free kick and the visitors' luck was in again on the half-hour mark when the unmarked Thompson botched a chance he would normally bury.

It was a miss that keeps strikers awake. The ball was headed into his path by Anthony Stewart and with the goal gaping Thompson fired off target and the feeling was that Wanderers might regret their profligacy in a game of such few chances.

Wycombe's defence certainly weren't giving much away but they were unpicked in the 40th minute when McCormack latched onto a through ball to lift the ball into the net only to have his celebrations cut short by the linesman's flag.

Wycombe began the second half well but the injury broke their flow.

Fulham used the break to regroup and substitute Ashley Richards warmed Ingram's hands as he fired



Aaron Amadi-Holloway dovetailed well with Garry Thompson in attack.

the first shot on target for either side on 65 minutes.

It wasn't enough to appease Fulham boss Symons and he brought on attacking ace Matt Smith.

But before Smith could even jog into position, Fulham snatched the lead with a classic counter attack. Ben Pringle broke clear and cut

back a low ball for Kacaniklic to sweep home.

Wycombe responded with a barrage of dangerous crosses and they camped on the edge of Fulham's 18-yard box but the visitors stood firm to ensure there was no repeat of 2006 when Wanderers dumped them out of the competition.



Anthony Stewart celebrates.

Defender Stewart quickly wins fans over

ANTHONY Stewart wasted no time in endearing himself to Wanderers fans again after scoring inside eight minutes of his return in the 3-0 win over York City on Saturday.

The defender could have been forgiven for fearing the welcome he might get after snubbing Wycombe's offer of a contract 12 months ago and walking out on the club.

But he received a great reception

before kick off and minutes later wore a smile as big as the divide that once separated him from Wanderers after putting them ahead.

He showed striker-like qualities to clip the ball over advancing keeper Scott Flinders in a dream start to his second spell at the club.

Boss Gareth Ainsworth said: "It was the perfect way for him to do it. I brought Anthony here just look-

ing forward. There's no past, no history as far as I'm concerned. Anthony left a boy, but he's come back a young man and sometimes you need those experiences to mature. I believe he'll be turning the heads of bigger clubs again soon.

"There's no influences around him, he's totally focused and committed to Wycombe. He's moved over this way and sometimes you

need that era of hardship to really know where you want to be."

Stewart played his part in defence as Blues kept a clean sheet.

The outcome was not in doubt once Aaron Amadi-Holloway doubled the lead inside 30 minutes. It was their desire to chase everything that brought a bizarre third goal, presurising York's Stephane Zubar into lobbing his keeper from 25 yards.



WANDERERS: Striker's special cup memories 'It is something nobody can take away from me'

By Dave Peters

GARRY Thompson admits he has had his day in the sun.

The 34-year-old lower league striker has scored against Arsenal in a cup quarter-final and was part of the League Two Bradford City side that wrote its own football fairytale by reaching the final of the 2013 League Cup final at Wembley.

He admitted: "I've had the pinnacle of my career. It is something that I will probably never do again and it is something nobody can take away from me no matter what happens.

"That cup run with Bradford was very special. When you walk out at Wembley with the fireworks going off and everything you know it something that you will probably never match."

With all that behind him why would Thompson offer himself up as a human battering ram for Wanderers' battle at Barnet tomorrow and all their other games in the bruising playground of League Two? Because that's just what he's done.

He said: "It's the love of football that keeps me going. I have played football since I was a little kid and as long as I'm able to play football I will always give 110 per cent every game and if that means me crashing into a big centre half to create an opportunity for one of my teammates then I'm prepared to do that."

Thompson, who scored 12 goals in the league above for relegated Notts County last term, has slotted straight away into his new team's amazing ethic despite being the senior statesman of the squad.

He said: "I've walked into a squad with an unbelievable work ethic and a willingness to do the ugly things



Garry Thompson spurned a great chance to score for Wycombe against Fulham on Tuesday night. Picture: ANITA ROSS MARSHALL

and when you do those things you get the rewards. The harder you work the luckier you get.

"It's non-stop playing for Wycombe. It's such a high tempo. Right from the first day it was straight down to hard work and I knew what I had let myself in for."

Thompson has embraced the challenge head on, impressing everyone at the club with his work rate and attitude, first of all slotting into a front three and then adapting to a

front two in the cup on Tuesday and working his socks off in both roles.

He should have registered his first goal in Wanderers' colours against Fulham on Tuesday night but spurned a glorious chance to open the scoring when he smashed a volley off target just as the net was asking to be filled.

He said: "I was disappointed and I'd like to think nine times out of ten I would hit the back of the net."

But with goals against Arsenal and

the like under his belt, Thompson will continue to put himself in the positions to miss them.

He said: "I always fancy myself for a goal and I'm chomping at the bit to get my first one. Unfortunately it didn't come for me against Fulham but I move onto the next game and hopefully it will come then."

"I haven't set myself any targets for the season, I never do. I'm realistic and I like to think if I can get into the right positions goals will come."

Plea for fewer Tuesday fixtures

AINSWORTH 'CAN'T STAND'
MIDWEEK GAMES AS A MANAGER

GARETH Ainsworth has slammed the fixture computer for sending his team up to Morecambe next Tuesday and says the Football League should extend the season rather than dish up midweek trips like that.

He said: "It's tough in League Two, the 38 games in the Premier League seems very forgiving on the players up there. We've got the smallest squads and the tightest budgets yet we have the most fixtures."

"It's crazy the amount of games we have. I used to love Tuesday games as a player because you got to do less running in training but as a manager I can't stand them because they really put pressure on a small squad."

"The fixture computer does what it does but I'd be well up for making the season start one week earlier if it meant avoiding one or two Tuesday games. It would be well worth it. If it started a week earlier or went on a week later it would help us and likes of the Accringtons, Morecambes and Dagenhams who also operate on small squads."

Blues will travel to Morecambe and back in a day on Tuesday.

An end to the misery

BLUES' PLAY-OFF DISAPPOINTMENT
WAS RAPIDLY FORGOTTEN

JOE Jacobson says Wanderers got their play-off hangovers out of the way on the first day of pre-season training.

He said: "We talked about it then and that was it. We've got a lot of new players and that has helped because they weren't part of it and didn't have a season like that."

"The gaffer just came in and said 'we had a good season last time, let's try and replicate that. Let's go again and play how we want to play and hopefully the results will follow'."

"There's never any negativity allowed around here regardless of the result."

Wycombe swept to a 3-0 win over York City on the opening day.

PIERRE: No fear of 'ultimate battle' against Bees Defender desperate to be fit for Barnet clash



Hoping to be fit: Aaron Pierre. Picture: ANITA ROSS MARSHALL

AARON Pierre is desperate to be fit for tomorrow's clash at Barnet after missing Tuesday's cup tie against his old club Fulham.

He sat it out after being kicked on the calf by ex-Wanderer Dave Winfield in Saturday's victory over York.

He said: "It's improving and I'm hoping to be ready. I wanted to play on Tuesday but the gaffer said I wasn't fit enough to have the best interests of the team at heart playing at only 60 or 70 per cent."

With Pierre out, stand-in Danny

Rowe did an excellent job but Pierre is hoping to return tomorrow for the type of game he loves.

He said: "Barnet are a physical side, they've got John Akinde and he's a big physical animal. It would be the ultimate battle to play against him."

"Playing against people like Akinde is different. It is the ultimate battle but we don't fear that. We've got about seven players who are six foot or above and last year we had four so we know we can rise to the occasion on the physical side as well."

Pierre has been studying his opponents' strengths and weaknesses.

He said: "You can't expect to turn up and have a field day if you don't know all about who you're playing."

Pierre played and scored against the Bees in the FA Cup last season and with fellow defender Anthony Stewart getting off to a goal start in the pair's wager to get the most goals this season, Pierre is desperate to catch up. But his main business is keeping goals out at the other end.



SPORT

Still in hunt
Draw keeps title hopes alive for Wycombe **P106**



Close to upset
Wanderers push Cottagers all the way in cup **P110**



WANDERERS: Selection quandaries to face Bees

Ainsworth admits he doesn't know best 11



'I don't know my best 11': Gareth Ainsworth on the touchline for Wycombe's season-opening 3-0 victory over York City last Saturday. Picture: ANITA ROSS MARSHALL

GARETH Ainsworth will keep tomorrow's opponents Barnet guessing over his line up – because even the Blues boss admits he doesn't know who to pick.

Ainsworth says his squad of 17 outfield players is better than last year's and that's giving him a dilemma because he doesn't know his best team.

It is a wonderful position to be in with every squad member worthy of a starting place.

He said: "I don't know my best 11. We've got 17 outfield players of high quality that you couldn't really split.

"There's not a lot between them, they've all shown they can do it in the first team.

"I believe we have improved the squad. We made the squad this way and it's going to be tough to pick a team week in, week out. My best 11 for one game might be different than my best for another game against different opposition.

"The one thing that will come

By Dave Peters

into play is injuries and in such a small squad some places will just become available because of that, but I wouldn't be worried about putting anyone in."

Wanderers have a few injury niggles ahead of tomorrow's clash against last year's Conference champions at The Hive.

Central defender Aaron Pierre missed Tuesday's cup defeat against Fulham after taking a kick in Saturday's opening-day 3-0 win over York City and a couple suffered knocks after Tuesday's Capital One Cup defeat at the hands of Championship side Fulham.

Ainsworth said: "There were a few big tackles going in against Fulham on Tuesday when we were making a real push to try and get an equaliser so we've got a few knocks to assess but whatever team we put out will be strong enough to win the game."

Ainsworth has changed formations for Blues' opening fixtures and is keeping coy over which shape he will employ tomorrow as he expects a much different test than Fulham provided in midweek.

He said: "Barnet will be totally different. Martin Allen get his teams up for games and we're expecting nothing less than a fight, but they also play some decent stuff and we've got to be wary that it's not just going to be a scrap that people might assume when you play a Martin Allen team.

"We're not just going there thinking that if we win the fight we win the game, because it won't work like that. We're going to have to play our game as well and get the ball passed around.

"It's going to be a good test. They are on the up. They had a good win at Millwall in the cup and their tails will be up. But I'm really pleased with our performances so far and we are feeling confident."

And Ainsworth will be leaving no stone unturned in his preparation

with his spies monitoring websites, Barnet players' twitter feeds and fans' forums.

He said: "We check everything. It's amazing what you can find out off forums and websites."

Ainsworth's preparation for matches has been key already.

After picking up on the grapevine that York were likely to arrive at Adams Park with a three-man defence, he decided to match that up by surprising punters and going with an aggressive three-man strike force of Paul Hayes, Garry Thompson and Aaron Amadi-Holloway.

His homework paid off and Wanderers had the game won inside the hour as they pocketed their first three-point maximum at the first opportunity.

Wanderers visited Barnet in the FA Cup last season and although they won that game 3-1, they fell behind early on and were given a real battering for the first 20 minutes before coming through after the Bees had two men sent off.



Picture: DAVID CORNWELL

Hopes are high for 'maverick'

BOSS WANTS WYCOMBE 'TO BE A HOME' FOR NEW SIGNING BANTON

NEW signing Jason Banton has had just 16 minutes of action this season – despite being the summer arrival who captured the imagination of fans most.

They knew what he could do after seeing him almost rescue his former club Plymouth Argyle in the first leg of last season's play-off semi-final when the Devonians trailed Wanderers 3-0 before it finished 3-2 following his introduction from the bench with Banton among the scorers.

And he whetted fans' appetites further with an eye-catching display of pace and trickery when he came off the bench for Wycombe in a pre-season friendly at Wealdstone.

But despite all that, manager Gareth Ainsworth has been holding his new signing back and says he needs to adapt to his new club.

Ainsworth said: "I've got to be fair to Jason and give him a chance to learn the way we do things before I put him in and then take him out for not doing the things I want. To play at Wycombe now you've got to be part of this culture, you've got to have it in you, it's not just football.

"He's not been in an environment like this before culture-wise and work ethic-wise, he's always been that maverick forward player but he's learning fast and I love working with Jason. He's learning the way we do things really quickly and he's got that bit of magic that can win a game. He's a game winner but these players have to fit into the structure of what we do at Wycombe Wanderers as well.

"Jason Banton wants to get in and get involved. He's a fantastic talent. I want Wycombe to be a home for Jason. I want him to really enjoy it here, open up and when he's settled I think he will be a fantastic player here and somebody who could play higher."

