

WYCOMBE boss is looking up after tough start to season

The top half is within reach for Chairboys

By Dave King

GARETH Ainsworth doesn't pay too much attention to league tables – not before Christmas.

Cast a glance at the current League 2 standings, and for the Wycombe boss it reads a bit like a Halloween stat horror – 21st from 24 with 16 points from 15 starts, and just a point above Leyton Orient who occupy the second of two relegation spots.

But such is the compact and crazy nature of the league, just six points separate the Chairboys from sixth-placed Notts County.

"We are at the wrong end of the table and need to get away from there," admitted Ainsworth, who is refusing to press the panic button a third of the way into the season.

"We've got plenty of games to go. We have been here before and Yeovil have shown if you put two or three wins together you can shoot up this table to the dizzy heights of the play-offs. It is a crazy league.

"To be honest, I don't look at the league table until Christmas time, when we start striving towards where we want to be.

"I know we are at the wrong end of the table and if we have to battle around there for a little bit, then so be it. We are well capable of that."

And battle they did at Doncaster last Saturday, picking up a plucky point against the League big-spenders.



Midfielder Luke O'Nien started at Doncaster and is among a crop of young players at Adams Park being given their chance

But here's the rub for Ainsworth. Unlike his Rovers' counterpart Darren Ferguson who can wave a chequebook and plug the gaps in his squad, the Wycombe boss has to work with the raw talent he has got, rubbing shoulders with a few experienced pros.

Does he give youth its head to nurture the young pros, or does he go all out for points at any cost?

"You've got to remember that we have got some young players in our team.

"Will De Havilland was making his second ever start at Doncaster, Dominic Gape is in his first season at this level, Luke O'Nien was playing his first game for three months, and then there's Jamal Blackman, Danny Rowe, the list goes on. These boys are in the first years of their

careers and it is tough that they have to learn on their feet. But that is what they have to do.

"We can't bring experienced players in like James Coppinger at Doncaster. It is where we are. But my job as manager is to coach these young lads so that one day we will be able to pick the best crop.

"But I am happy with my crop and the heart they show. You can't buy desire, heart and togetherness, and that is what we have at Wycombe and what we have to thrive off."

Wycombe are into the third year of a five year plan. One of the smallest teams in League 2, they have overachieved in the first two years and, as a result, expectation levels have risen.

So push the Wycombe manager on what a good season would be in year three, and Ainsworth modestly suggests the top half of the table.

"Yes, the last two seasons we over-achieved and raised expectation levels really high," he explained. "But there is no reason why we can't do that again. It's only six points to the play-off zone.

"We are well capable of top half and once you are top half you are talking play-offs.

"I don't want to set too many targets. My ambition is to get the boys enthused to play and really performing.

"That's why there is no reason why we can't achieve what we have done the past two seasons."

Two tap-ins keep squad happy with a vital point



Matt Bloomfield scored twice at Doncaster to secure a point

TWO poacher's goals from midfielder Matt Bloomfield put the smiles on the Wycombe squad as they headed back from Doncaster on the team coach with a 2-2 draw on Saturday.

Bloomfield owed a debt to Ross Etheridge for both goals after a pair of mistakes from the Doncaster goalkeeper.

Etheridge dropped a cross under pressure which allowed him to hook home an overhead kick and give Wycombe a nineteenth-minute lead.

Doncaster responded well and were level 10 minutes later. James Coppinger – who missed an open goal from two yards before Wycombe's opener – was played in on the right and curled a wonderful low cross which Tommy Rowe met to score.

The home side were in the ascendancy and took a deserved lead on 40 minutes through John Marquis, who weaved his way into the box and confidently finished.

But Doncaster became increasingly sloppy after the break and an equaliser looked inevitable. It came on 78 minutes as Paris Cowan-Hall drilled a low shot from 20 yards which Etheridge fumbled, allowing Bloomfield to tap home the equaliser.

As Bloomfield boarded the coach from the Keepmoat, the smile on his face was broad.

"Funnily enough, I was saying to my dad in the car home on Thursday after training that it would be nice if I could get a couple of goals which would be tap ins," he explained. "So it is funny how it happened today. I reacted to it twice and managed to get the ball in.

"Yes, I'm delighted personally, but it was more important to get a point away from home. We always believed we could mix it with the better teams in the league and we did that today."

Paris Cowan-Hall had a gilt-edged chance to grab all three points right at the death with a simple header, but it failed to hit the target.

But, 2-1 down at the break, Bloomfield admitted that the manager had asked for a reaction in the second half, and after bring on Adebayo Akifinwa straight from the re-start, Wycombe more than held their own.

"This was an important point," he added. "After what happened against Barnet, we couldn't afford to lose this one."

Gape hopes loan spell is springboard to Premiership

MIDFIELDER Dominic Gape is hoping his loan spell at Wycombe will provide the springboard to propel him into Premiership football.

The 22-year-old headed to Adams Park from Southampton during the summer. Having seen how some of his team-mates at St Mary's have thrived, the Dorset-born midfielder is confident that he can still go all the way to the top of the football summit.

"I've got some good friends at Southampton, such as Sam McQueen who has broken into the first team. He has started at the San Siro, started at Man City and was on the bench against Chelsea on Sunday. Yet last season, he was out on loan at Southend getting some experience," explained Gape.

"Sam wasn't doing too much at the start of the season. Then an opportunity came along to get into the first team, which he grasped with both hands, and he is now a first team player playing week in, week out in the Premier League."



Dominic Gape is enjoying life with Wycombe after his loan move

Gape's loan deal ends in January and then he will have to discuss with both Southampton and Wycombe what the future holds. The youngster said that he would like to stay at Wycombe, his aim is to pack in as much first team football

as possible.

He has also been picking up tips from some of the more experienced pros, such as skipper Paul Hayes, on how to handle himself at League 2 and not get sucked into some of the gamesmanship on the field.

Standing at just five feet seven inches, Gape has had his fair share of injuries while graduating through the Saints Academy, something he puts down to his body adapting to the transition from youth team to senior football.

But whether it's Premiership at St Mary's or fourth tier at Adams Park, football is football.

"Obviously it is going to be a different style of football from Southampton to Wycombe, but at the end of the day it is still about 11 players on the pitch, there is still the same goal and everyone wants to win," added Gape.

"There are two styles of football, but having the two styles under my belt that is going to be beneficial to me.

"I'm really enjoying my time at Wycombe. I have been here a couple of months now and I am feeling really settled.

"I just feel if you concentrate on the present on what you are doing now, the future takes care of itself."

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FA CUP: Can Chesham spring another upset?



Do you dare to dream?

THIS was the scene in the FA Cup almost 12 months ago when Ryan Blake scored non-league Chesham United's winner to knock out league side Bristol Rovers.

Now the Generals will be daring to dream when they travel to League One side Peterborough United for their first round tie tomorrow.

"For teams like us, the first round of the FA Cup is like the Holy Grail," admitted boss Andy Leese. "It's our opportunity to pit our wits against the professional club. And with it it brings a huge profile for Chesham United, a boost to the club finances and I know there has been a huge interest in this game in the town."

Chesham are expected to take up to 700 fans to the ABAX Stadium tomorrow, and the team will have an early team meeting before making the 90 minute coach trip to Cambridgeshire.

Last November, the Southern Premier Division team pulled off one of the biggest first round cup upsets by defeating Bristol Rovers at the Memorial Stadium, before bowing out at Bradford City in the second round.

By coincidence, the Grant McCann-managed Peterborough,

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who have the enigmatic Barry Fry as director of football, won 2-1 at Bristol Rovers last Saturday to lie seventh in League One.

Chesham go into tomorrow's tie as underdogs, but on a great form and on a run of 11 matches unbeaten.

A 3-2 win at Leatherhead in the FA Trophy last Saturday avoided the need for a midweek replay, allowing Leese to organise two good training sessions with the first team squad. Defender Brett Longden, who has been out with a long-term ankle ligament injury, remains The Generals' main injury doubt.

As for Posh, the Chesham chief revealed they have had the League One outfit scouted a couple of times since the draw was made. "We are very methodical with our preparations for games, but more so for Peterborough because it is easier to find out about them," he explained.

"But we learnt a lot from our experience last season in the cup, and several of the players who featured a year ago are still in the side, with the addition of some experienced



Chesham boss, Andy Leese will be hoping for similar celebrations at Peterborough tomorrow to those following Ryan Blake's goal at Bristol Rovers in the FA Cup a year ago. Photos: Trevor Hyde.

players over the summer."

Chesham lie more than 90 places below their full-time opponents and Leese acknowledged that for the non-leaguers to get a result tomorrow his team will have to be on top of their game, hope some of the Posh players have an off-day, with a touch of Lady Luck on their

side.

He added: "We are under no illusions that this is going to be really tough, but we have gone through many qualifying games as favourites, so for once it will be nice to be the underdog."

"I guess the perfect result from a finance point of view would be

Ainsworth a veritable follower of fashion



WILL it be the tracksuit or the smart shirt for Wycombe boss Gareth Ainsworth in the FA Cup tomorrow?

The superstitious manager once changed his shirt at half-time during the 2015 play-off final against Southend United.

And the 43-year-old was up to his changing room antics at Doncaster last Saturday, trading the smart shirt he has worn all season for a stylish tracksuit to prowling the touchline.

It worked, since the Chairboys managed to pick up only their second away point of the season in South Yorkshire at high-flying Doncaster.

Ahead of tomorrow's FA Cup first round tie at Portsmouth, which will it be - the tracksuit or the natty shirt?

"Call it superstitious, but no-one noticed at Doncaster that I had changed to a tracksuit. Not even the players," he said. "If it is a way of getting decent results, then so be it."

"As for Portsmouth, tracksuit or suit, we'll see. But I'll definitely be wearing a poppy."

Ainsworth reported that he has a couple of players with knocks ahead of the trip to Fratton Park where they lost in the league 4-2 in September.

He described Portsmouth as a well organised side who like to knock the ball around, but he characterised the tie as "David vs Goliath".

"There is no pressure on us,"

insisted Ainsworth. "Nobody expects us to win, but we want to go on a good cup run."

"Last year we got to the third round, and we'd love to get there again."

He added: "I am a huge traditionalist and love the FA Cup. One of my first memories at home in Blackburn watching the FA Cup Final. For me the FA Cup is massive and I'm proud to be a part of it. I hope everyone is."