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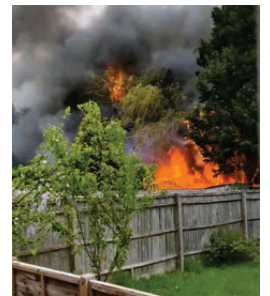
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SPORT

Praise for backroom staff



Backroom staff (Carol Mason)

WYCOMBE manager Gareth Ainsworth has praised his backroom staff following speculation that he has been linked with other managerial jobs.

The 48 year old is reportedly on the shortlist for Queens Park Rangers and Blackburn Rovers respectively, with both Championship sides looking for new managers this summer.

The London club revealed that they will part ways with current boss Mark Warburton when his contract expires in June, whilst Rovers are increasingly likely to not extend Tony Mowbray's deal this summer.

Ainsworth, when speaking to the press on May 3, reiterated that whilst he was flattered with the speculation, he has no intention on leaving Wanderers, and that him being linked to both outfits is down to his backroom staff.

Wycombe ended the current League One season in sixth place, and face Milton Keynes in two play-off matches: the first took place yesterday (Thursday) and the next is on Sunday (May 8).

'Fans are what makes football'

WYCOMBE midfielder David Wheeler believes witnessing the fans celebrate Jordan Obita's goal which he assisted against Burton Albion is what 'makes football'.

The former QPR man battled well in the six-yard box to win the ball back and square it to an unmarked Obita, who tapped-in from close range.

The goal won the Chairboys the match 2-1 at the Pirelli Stadium, which booked a place in the League One play-offs.

He said: "It was incredible. "It's what makes football, especially after last year.

"It is such a contrast to having no fans at all.

"When you get those moments and you get those goals, you can really feel the energy and see a sea of blue.

"It's great and those are the memories that make football."

Boss praises his biggest fan - his dad

By Taylor Toney-Green

WYCOMBE boss Gareth Ainsworth was emotional after his side secured a place in the play-offs.

The Chairboys cemented their place in the League One play-offs after beating Burton Albion 2-1 at the Pirelli Stadium, with Sam Vokes and Jordan Obita getting the goals.

Following the final whistle and post-match celebrations with the travelling supporters, the boss took a seat in the dugout to reply to a flurry of congratulations from his friends and family.

Taking a stroll onto the pitch, he spoke to his biggest supporter on the phone.

Ainsworth said: "I rang my dad after the game and that was really special for me.

"He's been there right through and I'm getting a bit emotional now because he's backed me as a player and a manager unbelievably."

From the highs of the last time Wanderers were at Wembley, to the lows when the Chairboys went to Torquay with hopes and prayers, there is no doubt that his father has been there every step of the way.

Especially before his days in the dug-out, and back to May 10 1991 when the rock n' roll midfielder thought that his career was over before it had begun.

Speaking in 2013 after announcing his retirement, he said: "I'll never forget the day I was released from Blackburn Rovers.

"It was on my 18th birthday.

"I remember holding it together in Don Mackay's office as best I could, walking out of the stadium into the road and breaking down in tears.

"My dad said to me the words I'll never forget - 'You'll make it'.

"I'll never forget that.

"To have something like that has been outstanding and I'll do the same for my son.

"There's more important things than football in the world and family's one of them - that proved it."



Wycombe legend Gareth Ainsworth (PA)

His father, Bill, acted as his agent during his playing career and helped him bounce back from his Rovers release.

He even wrote letters to Blackburn to get his son a trial in the first place.

A bond born on the Riverside at Ewood Park watching his hero and Wycombe legend Simon Garner, to a call on the centre-circle at the Pirelli Stadium moments after his Wycombe had

clinched a play-off spot.

Much of Ainsworth's emotion usually came through his actions. Heading every ball, applauding every tackle and roaring on every chant.

Yet, a post-game chat with his Dad was where the emotion of an untouchable father-son relationship came through.

"It's not an easy job and it was great to hear his voice and that he's so proud

of us," Ainsworth said.

The victory on the day, benefitting from results elsewhere, allowed Wycombe to finish in sixth place setting up an all-Bucks clash for a spot at Wembley.

No stranger to the hallowed turf, he'll be hoping that he can take his club there for a third time with his dad watching on, as always.



Gareth Ainsworth (PA)

'Flattered' about links with QPR & Blackburn

WYCOMBE Wanderers manager Gareth Ainsworth has spoken about being linked to two managerial jobs in the Championship.

The 48 year old is reportedly on the shortlist to take over at both Queens Park Rangers and Blackburn Rovers respectively, which are two clubs that have played a big part in his footballing life.

He began his playing career with Rovers, the team he supports, as a schoolboy before being released

by the club on his 18th birthday.

Ainsworth would then go on to have seven successful years with QPR between 2003 and 2010, becoming a fan favourite as well as a caretaker manager on two occasions.

The Wanderers boss has been linked to both outfits after QPR revealed that their current manager, Mark Warburton, will leave his role this summer whilst Tony Mowbray, who is in charge of Rovers, is out of contract in June.

Speaking to the local press on May 3, Ainsworth said: "I'm humbled and flattered to be linked with jobs like that as they are obviously big clubs, but I am at a big club as well, and we've got plenty of time to do things here.

"Nothing is going to distract me from these play-offs and for me, it's all about the play-offs and Wycombe Wanderers.

"I've been here before as it's not like the first time so that's probably a good thing."

Stockdale takes trophy

WYCOMBE Wanderers goalkeeper David Stockdale has jointly won the League One Golden Glove award.

The 36-year-old shot-stopper picked up the prize along with Plymouth Argyle's Michael Cooper, as the two keepers kept 18 shutouts this league season.

The former Fulham, Leicester City and Brighton & Hove Albion man played every minute of the Chairboys' League One campaign, and he is expected to be in between the sticks for when they face Milton Keynes in the play-off semi-finals on May 5 and May 8.

It is the first time a Wycombe player has won the trophy. Now in his third spell with the club, Stockdale has become an

integral part of the Wanderers squad, as well as being a fan favourite.

Previously, he played twice for the Chairboys in an emergency loan spell in the 2018/19 campaign.

He then re-joined the Adams Park outfit in January 2020 on loan from Birmingham City, before signing a permanent contract with the club in September of that year.

Occupying the bench for most of his last season, Stockdale deputised for the injured Ryan Allsop in February 2021, before making the position his own.

This season, he has faced the most shots (185) in the league, yet has kept the third-best save percentage across the division (73.2 per cent).

'Express yourself' exhorts Ainsworth

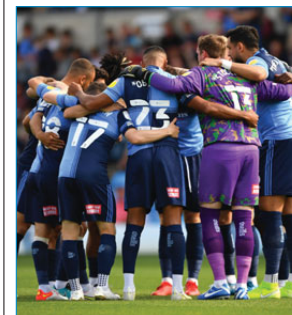


Photo: (PA)

GARETH Ainsworth revealed that he wanted his players to 'express themselves' when Wycombe take on Milton Keynes in the League One play-off semi-finals.

Wanderers are currently the division's in form team with eight wins from their last 12, whilst MK have only lost three times since January 1 in the league.

In recent weeks, the Chairboys have blown teams away with a positive early start, most notably in the two wins against Cambridge United, Plymouth Argyle and Plymouth Argyle.

In those 12 fixtures, the Chairboys have scored 20 goals and kept seven clean sheets.

Speaking ahead of MK's visit to Adams Park on May 5, Ainsworth said: "I want my players to express themselves and show everyone what they can do."

"My boys are part of a brilliant team, but it's all about being you and if they can be themselves on that pitch and connect like that have been connecting, then we will have nothing to fear."

Ainsworth: 'No-one can touch us on form'

WYCOMBE Wanderers manager Gareth Ainsworth believes that 'no-one can touch' the club's current form, following their 2-1 away win at Burton Albion.

A first-half header from Sam Vokes and a second-half tap-in for Jordan Obita in front of the away fans secured the sixth and final play-off spot for the Chairboys.

They pipped Plymouth Argyle who lost 5-0 at home to Milton Keynes, which means Wanderers will now take on their Buckinghamshire rivals across two semi-final matches at the start of May.

Wycombe hosted the first game yesterday (Thursday), before they travel to the north of the county on May 8.



David Stockdale with the Golden Glove Trophy

Ainsworth: 'These are not like cup games'

By James Richings

WYCOMBE manager Gareth Ainsworth believes both semi-final legs against Milton Keynes will not 'feel like cup games', as both sides fight for a place in the League One play-off final.

The two all-Buckinghamshire battles will see the two outfits take each other on over the course of three days.

The first playoff game was at Adams Park yesterday (Thursday) after the *Bucks Free Press* went to press.

This will mean by the end of this season, both Wycombe Wanderers and Milton Keynes would have played each other five times in all competitions.

And with the regular league season now over, Ainsworth is hoping that the dream of playing second-tier football once more will get his players ready for the semi-finals.

Wycombe were relegated from the Championship last season, whilst MK have not been in the division since 2016.

He said: "They certainly don't feel like league games."

"The league is finished, and we well and truly know that these play-off games are on their own, and it's brilliant to have these in football."

"I can't wait and they are not even like cup games."

"We have to be out our best to beat them but we don't fear anyone in this league and that's really important to reiterate."

"Getting into the play-offs have



A large crowd was expected at yesterday's game

been achieve but I didn't think we would need 83 points to get there.

"The lads have been brilliant, the fans have been fantastic, and this has been a really brilliant season."

"I've enjoyed every minute of it and what an exciting finish we've got coming in."

The 48-year-old also praised the performances of Wanderers' opponents.

Milton Keynes finished the regular season with 89 points, their highest total in League One since 2015, which was the year they gained promotion to the Championship.

Ainsworth continued: "I know that MK are quite a young side with not that much [play-off] experience, but there will be plenty of energy, enthusiasm and good technique in that team."

"It's going to be a real clash and I am looking forward to it."

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Ainsworth: 'The town is behind us' for playoffs



The first leg at Adams Park was expected to be Wycombe's biggest home crowd of the season (PA)

By James Richings

WYCOMBE Wanderers manager Gareth Ainsworth said he believed that the town is behind his team as they prepared for their play-off matches against Milton Keynes.

The first games was due to take place at Adams Park last night (Thursday), kicking off after the *Bucks Free Press* went to press.

This season has seen an increase of spectators arriving at Adams

Park to watch the Chairboys play, with attendance on a regular basis reaching around 6,000 people.

The club's highest home crowd of the campaign so far was against Sheffield Wednesday on April 23, when 9,005 crammed into the Hill-bottom Road ground to see the Chairboys defeat the Owls 1-0, thanks to a late Jordan Obita goal.

It was expected that the first leg against MK yesterday (Thursday) at Adams Park is to eclipse this total.

Speaking on support Wanderers have had this season, Ainsworth said: "I feel like the town is really behind us.

"I feel like that's been building and building and we've stretched it as far as we possibly could with the trust ownership, and we needed the lifeline from the Couhigs which has taken us onto another level.

"Sometimes, you wonder what you could do with some resources and investment and I think we're proving

we're a good team.

"We've got a chance and working alongside the owners, my staff has increased and seeing the fans, this is now becoming a proper football club."

The manager also believes that the club are making 'terrific strides' in making a name of themselves in the Football League, and whilst their Non League history is something to be proud of, the future should be the main focus for Wycombe.

Wycombe were promoted to the EFL in 1993 and have been a member of the 92 club ever since.

Ainsworth continued: "It's always been about Wycombe and their Non League history which is brilliant, but, we've kept a lot of that with us, and now to be considered as a Championship outfit, we have to break some shackles off and move forward in becoming this professional team.

"I honestly believe we're making some terrific strides going forward."