

The managerial duo who struck rich

Bence turns a near-disaster into glory story



PAUL BENCE . . . trauma to triumph.

IT was only a small band of supporters, but their bitter 're-sign' call got over so loud and clear that Paul Bence was, privately, on the verge of quitting.

That was last year on November 2, Wycombe had gone down 2-0 at Leytonstone in the Isthmian League Premier Division.

Three days previously the club's proud record of reaching the FA Cup 1st round proper for 11 successive years had gone up in smoke despite a brave performance in a 2-1 replay defeat at Burton Albion.

Manager Bence was in the depths of despair. He had arrived at Loakes Park in May, a surprise choice to lead Wycombe into the centenary season and with the job of obliterating the painful memories of the last, unsuccessful, campaign which saw manager Mike Keen sacked.

It started disastrously; Blues lay at the foot of the table with not a league win in their first five games.

It was still going terribly wrong and, although Bence had made it clear that success could take two or three years, some of the Wycombe fans, bred on past glory, were calling for his head.

Those dark days seem light years removed from the joyous scenes last week when Wycombe lifted the Hitachi Cup after drubbing Farnborough 5-1 on aggregate in the final.

That was the climax to a remarkable transformation which saw Blues rise from also runs into third place in the Isthmian Premier Division — enough for them to lay claim to a place in the Gola League next term.

Ironically, the fairytale success story started with another defeat, this time at the hands of Wealdstone in the second round of the FA Trophy back in February.

Blues went down 2-1 after Gary Lester had gifted the Gola League side a winner. Most observers admitted that Bence's men were unlucky to go down.

The Loakes Park squad, which had

been carefully and slowly blended together by the new boss, thought the same way.

That bitter defeat spurred them into a winning streak which saw them go 18 games without defeat. After a few late hiccups Blues scored a 2-1 win over Croydon to secure third spot in the league.

That must have been the sweetest night of a long, topsy-turvy season for Bence.

His policies had been vindicated. The signings of hot-shot strikers Declan Link and Simon Read could be seen in their true light, as inspired moves.

Finding Dave Burgess and moulding him with new captain Anton Vircavs was another shrewd ploy.

Bence and assistant Alan Gane never thought for one moment that the centenary season would be a bed of roses.

The loss of men like Mark Hill, Terry Glynn and Steve Perrin did not help.

Defeat at Wokingham — Bence's old club — in the first league game was a sign of things to come.

Even the big centenary gala night in October — when Leicester brought their full first team to Loakes Park — fell flat when little John Richardson broke his ankle.

October was a really bad month with a 4-0 home league defeat by Windsor and Eton followed hard on the heels by a disastrous exit from the Berks and Bucks Senior Cup at the hands of Burnham.

But Bence kept his calm and, after an enforced lay off because of bad weather, a 6-1 thrashing of Dartford in the FA Trophy first round showed that his team was growing in confidence.

Even the departure of Steve Long and transfer requests from Trevor How and Bob Dell could not break Bence's strong resolve that things were coming together.

But the glory run of 18 games without defeat must have surprised even the expectant Wycombe boss.

Six wins in the last seven matches crowned the centenary season.

It also ensured that Bence's ambitions of keeping Wycombe at the top of the non-league tree are still burning brightly.

Dave Burgess, the lynch-pin of Wycombe this season, collects the 'Player of the Season' award from Tom Pink of Norman Reeves (Slough) as Blues chairman Brian Lee (second left) and deputy chairman Dick Hutton look on.



FACTS AND FIGURES

FIRST TEAM APPEARANCES

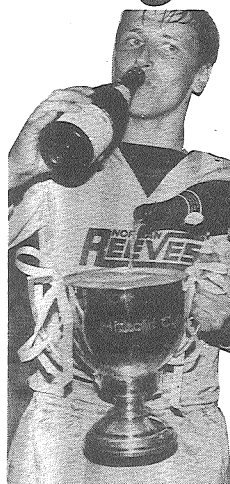
(Players still at club)
Lester 62, Burgess 61 (2), Dell 58 (1), Tilley 58, Pearce 57, Link 56 (3), Read 51 (2), How 41 (2), Collins 38, Vircavs 34 (2), Wilson 29, Fairchild 22 (4), West 15 (7), Richardson 13, Herman 11 (3), Mikurenda 11, Wanklyn 4 (1), Riley (3). (Substitutes in brackets)

SCORERS

Isthmian Premier Division: Read 23, Link 22, Burgess 4, Wilson 3, West 2, Fairchild 2, Richardson 2, How 1, Pearce 1, own goals 2.
Cup: Read 10, Link 8, West 2, Vircavs 2, Burgess 1, Fairchild 1, How 1, Pearce 1, own goals 2.
Total (including friendlies in brackets): Link 36 (6), Read 33, Burgess 31, West 5 (1), Fairchild 3, Wilson 3, How 2, Pearce 2, Richardson 2, Vircavs 2, own goals 6 (2).

GARY LESTER . . . most appearances

JIM McCANN reviews a centenary season which started so badly for Wycombe but ended in a tide of triumph.



Manager Bence helps captain Anton Vircavs celebrate their incredible centenary season which at one point threatened to turn sour.



Assistant Alan Gane . . . vital influence.

Burgess was head and shoulders above the rest of the heroes

ROLF NIVEN spotlights the players who found a winning blend.

EVERY successful team in history has revolved around a key player and for Wycombe that role was captured by central defender Dave Burgess.

The 27-year-old, signed from Oxford City in the close season, has been literally head and shoulders above the rest this season.

And his influence has proved invaluable in the team's search for glory.

When 'Mr Dependable' was voted Blues' Player of the Season it was a decision which the Midweek sports team was in complete accord.

Unflappable, efficient and reliable, Burgess' priceless contribution was the main reason why Wanderers boasted the best defensive record in the Isthmian League.

When skipper Anton Vircavs forced his way back into the side at the start of the year he and Burgess formed a partnership skilful enough to defuse the most potent Premier Division attack.

The turning point to the season came when Vircavs deposited last season's player of the season Trevor How at New Year.

From then, until the end of the season, Blues lost

just four more matches — winning an incredible 23.

Kevin Tilley's aggression and Graham Pearce's speed were the other vital ingredients in Blues' defensive formula.

The confidence even brushed off on How who completed a professional job when Vircavs was on tour with Middlessex Wanderers during Wycombe's crucial run-in to the season.

Vircavs returned shortly after the arrival of Kevin Collins who partially solved the midfield problem alongside Bob Dell.

The former Staines player, who joined from Australian side Port Hacking in November, injected fresh talent into the weakest area of the team.

His dominating character left Andy Harman and Richard Mikurenda out in the wilderness.

Two other ex-Staines men provided Wycombe with a forward partnership that left many managers drooling over their incredible scoring knack.

Simon Read and Declan Link answered all the doubts about their ability to perform in the Premier Division by grabbing 63 league and cup goals between them this term.

Read won their friendly duel by netting 33 — three

ahead of his blond haired partner.

The entire team relied heavily upon their extraordinary strike-rate to keep the on course for the Gola League and Hitachi Cup success.

That much is obvious from the fact that the third highest scorer was Burgess with five.

Among the most worrying aspects of Blues' makeup was the erratic form of wide-men Kenny Wilson, Mark West and Roy Fairchild.

Wilson, a firm favourite at Loakes Park, never fully recovered from a knee operation last July, and offered only rare glimpses of his exciting wing play.

Fairchild, whose volatile temper at Flackwell Heath earned him a 'hard-man' tag, made a sparkling impact in his opening spell but faded towards the end of the season.

Ex-Wycombe schoolboy hero West, who joined Wanderers from West Ham, looks a promising prospect but a knee problem prevented him from realising his full potential this season.

At the opposite end of the park, keeper Gary Lester cancelled out the occasional schoolboy blunder with some exceptional displays.