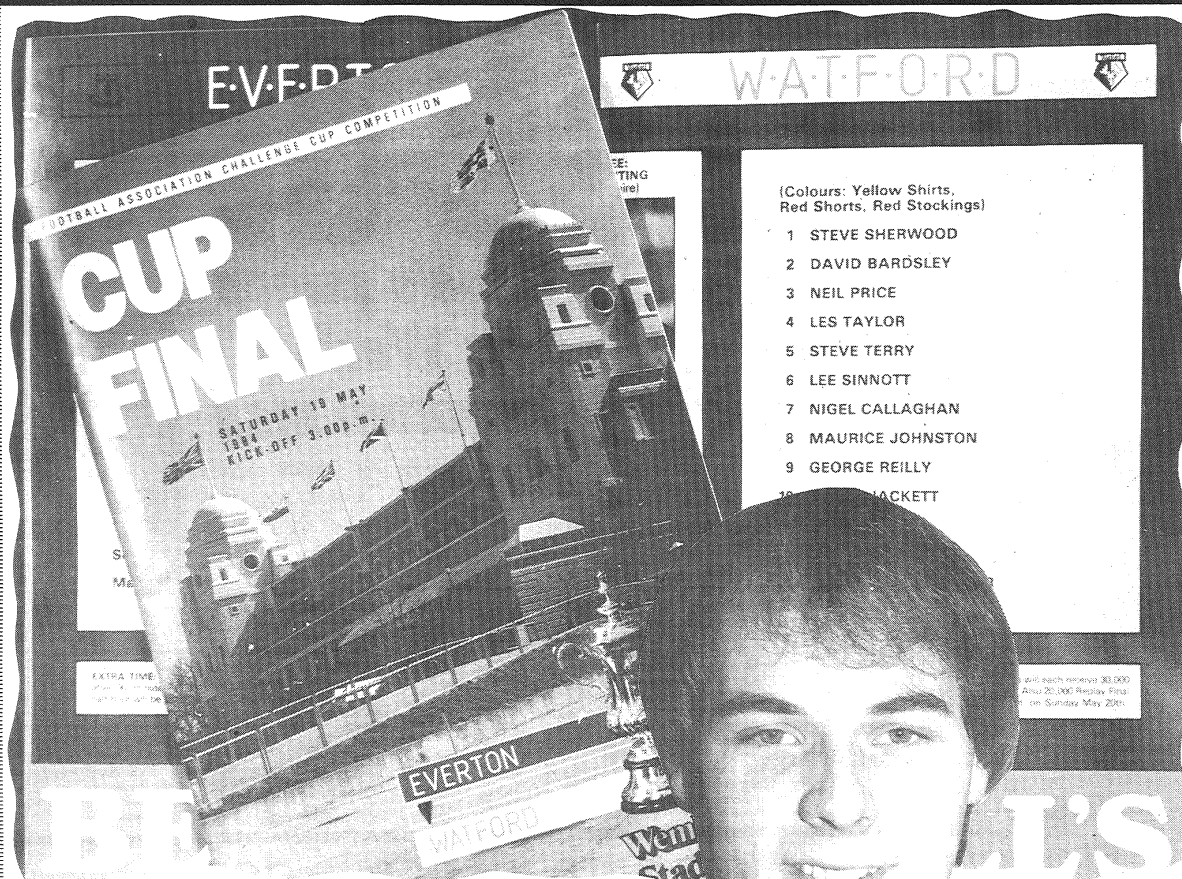


Wycombe's new signing speaks to Midweek first



Report: JIM McCANN Pics: JEFF HOLMES

Neil's life at the top swept away in just 90 minutes

ALMOST two years ago Neil Price fulfilled every footballer's dream when he walked out in front of 100,000 fans to play for Watford against Everton in the FA Cup Final.

The 90 minutes which followed changed his career, maybe permanently. "I took a lot of flak for my performance," said the amiable young defender who on Saturday celebrated his 22nd birthday by making his debut for new club Wycombe Wanderers at dreary Boston in the Gola League.

"I didn't play as well as I know I can in the Cup Final but then neither did many Watford players, some of whom were established international players.

"I was a 20-year-old who had never had a long run in the first team but the criticism from the media seemed to stick."

Everton compounded the misery on Price, who was playing in place of suspended Watford captain Wilf Roston, by winning 2-0.

From then on it was all downhill for the young man who had made his first team debut the previous season in the hostile atmosphere of Bulgaria against Levski Spartak.

"Manager Graham Taylor obviously did not see me as a first choice," explained Price.

"I could have stuck it out because it wasn't a bad contract at Watford but I could not bear playing reserve team football.

"It's difficult to explain if you haven't been in that position but playing for the reserves is a real downer."

Seven years at Vicarage Road ended at the end of the 1984 season when Price was farmed out on loan to Blackpool where he helped the seaside club gain promotion to Division 4.

Watford's forgotten man would have jumped at the chance of a two or three year contract at Blackpool — but it never came.

"That was a real shame because me and my fiancée Sandra loved it up there," revealed Price at his Hemel Hempstead home.

If life could get worse it did for Price when smooth-talking, cigar-smoking John Bond persuaded him to sign a two year contract at Swansea where there seemed to be more debt collectors than fans!

"That was an awful time..." admitted Wycombe's newest signing. "Things got so bad that we were getting paid expenses in £1 coins."

"One time some of the players went to a local snooker hall and we were asked to pay in advance because they knew we were Swansea players."

"That was just a joke but it doesn't do much for your ego."

Finally, after six months, enough was enough.

Price told boss Bond that he wanted to be released or he would just walk out on

the Swans.

"One Monday I just came in and said I'm off to Bondie," said the young defender.

"Luckily he didn't stand in my way."

That was back in December of last year and since then the former Watford FA Cup finalist has had enquiries from other clubs including Preston, Cambridge, and Gola League Barnet and a concrete one-year contract offer from Blackpool.

So why did he plump for Wycombe?

"I'm getting married in July and my fiancée Sandra

comes from Watford," explained Price.

"Also I'm going into partnership in my dad's haulage firm."

"So I wanted something reasonably local and Wycombe is only half an hour away."

Alan Gane also impressed me and the club seems friendly."

"I just want to enjoy my football again after a few bad times."

"I couldn't uproot myself and Sandra for only one year at Blackpool. That would have been financially impossible."

Price, who is certainly no

prima-donna, freely admits that he harbours hopes of returning to the Football League.

"I'm not making any promises but for the moment I just want to play it by ear and enjoy myself at Wycombe."

Price also admits that he misses the good life which football can bring.

And who wouldn't when they've played at Wembley and been on the guest list at an Elton John garden party!

Price, who is certainly no

But he is a born realist. "Football has brought me a lot but you never know what is around the corner," mused Price.

Price believes that if he had produced an outstanding performance at Wembley that day in May 1984, when he marked the now England international Trevor Steven, he would be made.

"I would probably still be at Watford," he insisted.

"But I didn't and that 90 minutes seems to have changed my life."

I do sense that Price wants another bite at the cherry but for now he will put every ounce of sweat into doing his bit for Wycombe.

He might even make a return visit to Wembley this season — if Blues reach the FA Trophy Final!

PRIZED POSSESSION... Neil Price shows off the FA Cup runners-up medal he gained at Watford in 1984.

FROM WEMBLEY TO WYCOMBE!

'My other claim to fame' - more about Neil Price in Friday's BFP



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