

Sofia baptism

By BRIAN SCOVELL

WATFORD are ready to pitch 19-year-old defender Neil Price into a first-team debut for tomorrow's UEFA Cup-tie in Bulgaria.

Price, a member of Watford's FA Youth Cup-winning side last season, faces a tough baptism against Levski Spartak in Sofia, with the teams level at 1-1 after the first leg.

Experiment

He is likely to play at left-back because skipper Wilf Hooton is needed to bolster the midfield. Manager Graham Taylor said: "We have four midfield players injured—Paul Atkinson, Les Taylor, Ian Loshman and Kenny Jackson—and that leaves only

Price gets Watford Euro-call

"I look on the midfield as the most important part of my side, whatever people say about our style of play."

Taylor experimented with a 4-3-2 formation against West Ham on Friday in the unlikely event that one of the wingers, centre-back Ian Bolton pressed into service as a temporary midfielder.

The experiment is not expected to be continued in front of

Wimbledon, who need to that they are in position against it in the derby.

Reynold Green, 20-year-old Welsh striker, is a candidate for the left-wing position. Ian Rush, who scored twice in the previous round against Rangers, could be selected to finish off the attack as John Barnes's partner in the middle.

Candidates

With injuries continuing to plague the squad, Taylor promises to have members of his youth side, Alan Parry and Francis Cassidy, both of whom are candidates for roles among the substitutes.

Levski came back to draw the first leg at Vicarage Road, but Taylor feels his side should be taking a three-goal lead with them to Sofia today.



PRICE... debut



Neil Price with fiancée Sandra and his FA Cup Final runners-up medal.



by STEVE STAMMER

NEIL PRICE'S FA Cup story has a real twist.

The Watford footballer will play in tomorrow's final at Wembley to bring his number of first-team appearances up to 11, but behind that could be a remarkable sequence of events.

For in the 10 years to date, Price's life has been a roller coaster. He has spent most of the season on the fringes of the first team, but in the last few weeks he has been in the front of the Watford team in the FA Cup.

He has also played twice against Arsenal in

NEIL Price has one major claim to fame — he played for Watford as an inexperienced 20-year-old in the 1984 FA Cup Final against Everton.

But Price, who signed last week for Wycombe Wanderers, is also down in football's record books with a less laudible statistic against his name.

The 22-year-old defender was the last player to be sent off by outspoken referee Clive Thomas before he retired from the game.

His dismissal came in November 1983 at Highbury against Arsenal, only weeks after he had made a dramatic first-team debut for Watford as a 19-year-old in Bulgaria against Levski Spartak.

"I was booked for fouling Charlie Nicholas and later Clive Thomas decided that I had deliberately fouled Tony Woodcock," recalled Price.

Rocky career

"I thought he was wrong but I became the last player ordered off by Clive. It's pretty funny looking back seeing as I was so young and had played so few games for Watford."

Price's rocky career — documented exclusively this week in our sister paper MIDWEEK — has taken him from Wembley to Mangotsfield, near Plymouth, where he played in front of 25 farmers and a few dogs!

That was when he was loaned from Watford to Plymouth and dropped into their reserve side. Price remembers the occasion, in March 1984, very well.

"It was in the Great Mills Western League and it was a nightmare," he said from his Hemel Hempstead home which he shares with fiancée Sandra.

After that it was back to Vicarage Road where from out of the blue, he was called up to play at Villa Park in the FA Cup semi-final against Plymouth.

His story took on fairytale proportions weeks later when he walked out at Wembley to face Everton in the FA Cup Final — something many of England's top players past and present have never experienced.

"The atmosphere was great, something I'll always remember," recalled Wycombe's shock new recruit.

"The way I played was a bit of a let-down but a lot of our players did worse and some were internationals."

As Midweek revealed, Price felt his Watford career ended that day.

He was literally overlooked from then on by boss Graham Taylor, who farmed him out again, this time to Blackpool where he helped the seashore gain promotion to Division 3.

A financially desirable contract never came from Blackpool and he left Watford permanently when he signed for cash crisis club Swansea on a two-year contract.

"John Bond, the manager, wanted to make it three but I said two would do," revealed Price.

Words: JIM McCANN
Pic: JEFF HOLMES

But six months later the young man who had tasted life at the top left Swansea, claiming he could not take anymore.

Swans were sinking and Price did not want to go down with the ship after experiencing six nightmarish months.

He has had an offer of a one-year contract from Blackpool since but he turned that down because it would not make financial sense to uproot everything for only 12 months.

Price has also had enquiries from other league clubs, but when Alan Gane found he was at a loose end he jumped in.

Perhaps, to many people's surprise, Price signed on the dotted line for Blues.

"I just want to enjoy my football again," explained the defender who made his debut in the Gola League last Saturday at Boston on his 22nd birthday.

"Wycombe seems like a friendly club and the players were great last Saturday. Alan Gane also impressed me."

Price, who marries in June and is currently going into partnership with his father's haulage firm, would like another shot with a Football League club.

But at the moment he will content himself with the memories.

These include garden parties at Watford chairman and pop multi-millionaire Elton John's home.

The pop mega-star impressed Price. "He's a real nice down to earth guy," revealed the former Vicarage Road full-back.

"He used to remember all the names of the players' wives or girlfriends and buy them a drink."

Despite his rough ride at Watford, Price also has not a bad word, at least publicly, to say about Graham Taylor.

"You can't argue with his record," he said. "We still get on well when I go back."

Rough ride

Price has played at Loakes Park before, as a 16-year-old schoolboy and he has also faced new teammate Mark West.

"That was when I was in the Watford Reserves and Mark was playing for West Ham Reserves," recalled Price.

He has also turned out at Old Trafford and some of the other top English grounds — excluding Anfield.

But nothing can compare with Sofia, home of Levski Spartak, for an unfriendly welcome.

Price recalls the day he was thrown in at the deep end for his Watford debut in Eastern Europe.

"The occasion simply went over my head," he said. "But I can remember the crowd being very hostile."

"We thought they were going to break down the dressing room door at the end to get at us."

At least there will be nothing like that in the Gola League over the next few months!