

The Conference challenge

THE mud has hardly had time to dry on the footballers' boots and here we are on the eve of another soccer season.

The 1987-88 season opens under troubled skies for Wycombe Wanderers, when, because of their triumphs last season in finishing as Vauxhall Opel League champions, the club should be on top of the world.

Not that the club's problems are likely to be reflected on the field. The players remain full of spirit and looking forward to the fresh challenge of playing in the higher Vauxhall Conference, which gives the winners automatic membership of the Football League.

In recent years it has been the ambition of Wycombe Wanderers to bring professional football to the town and despite the club's current unsure future that ambition remains among management, playing staff and fans.

The clouds over Loakes Park will not deter endeavours to bring even greater success and honours to the club. It is the management who have the worry and ironically, it stems from

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their determination to move the Wanderers towards the professional game.

Loakes Park, the club's home for so many years, is considered unsuitable for Football League soccer. The well-known slope that has caused many a professional side problems when visiting the ground for cup matches is not good enough for the Football League, should Wycombe ever achieve that distinction.

The club has been seeking a new ground for some years and felt it was manna from heaven when two years ago developers West Bruton offered a deal that was too good to refuse.

West Bruton want to build a retail warehouse on part of Loakes Park. The proposal would enable the Wycombe Health Authority to extend Wycombe Hospital and provide much needed facilities for the elderly on to the rest of the land. In addition there would be help for Wycombe Wanderers to re-establish the club elsewhere. But where?

The club would like to

move to Sands, but the proposed ground is designated Green Belt and planning permission could not be obtained from Wycombe Council. Another factor in the council's refusal was the strong opposition by local residents to having a soccer ground, possibly, in years to come, a professional soccer ground at that.

Frustrated

The club has tried to allay these natural fears without success.

The whole issue was the subject of a four-day public inquiry last month and now there is a four month wait before the Government's inspector's decision is known.

On his decision rests the future of Wycombe Wanderers for a search for an alternative site for a new ground, by both the club and Wycombe Council, has failed to find one that is both suitable and acceptable.

Concern has also been expressed in recent weeks by both management and fans about team strength. Some of the wise heads which brought the club league honours last season have left and so far adequate replacements have not been found.

The fans fear a repetition of what happened two

seasons ago when an under strength Wycombe won promotion to the Vauxhall Conference one year only to be relegated the next. Wycombe, nurtured on success, found that a terrible pill to swallow and the scars are still felt today. Even last year's championship run have not washed them entirely away.

Yet, to be back in the Conference after only one year is something for the fans to cheer about. It was an achievement for which the club did not receive full credit. To bounce straight back after the disaster of 1985-86 was remarkable, particularly as the championship was won in a season when Vauxhall Opel League standards were considered to be much improved.

So now it's the Conference, where the playing strength also seems to improve each term. The club know what is expected and what is at stake and asks only for the full support of friends and fans to bring even greater honour to the town.

The campaign opens with a home match against Stafford Rangers next Saturday, August 22.

See you at Loakes Park. Up the Blues.