

# O'Neill targets Carter to boost title hopes



**PETE LANSLEY**  
reports

**AMBITIOUS** Wycombe Wanderers manager Martin O'Neill has emerged as favourite to sign England semi-professional international Mark Carter from Runcorn.

O'Neill set out for Runcorn yesterday ready to smash the Blues transfer record in a bid to bring the Conference's most renowned goalscorer to Adams Park.

Although Runcorn's asking price was initially £50,000, O'Neill's lower offer has been accepted and he was scheduled to brave the weather and meet Carter in Liverpool at 4pm yesterday afternoon.

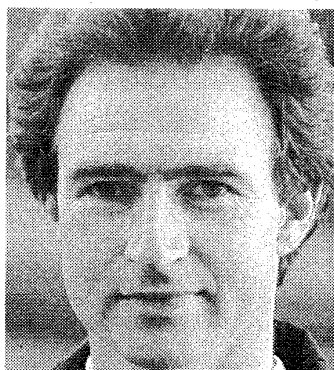
Stafford Rangers have had a bid rejected, Altrincham's offer is near the mark while Barnet — evidently looking to put out a whole team of centre forwards — are also in contention for the 30-year-old striker who has ten caps for the England semi-professional side.

O'Neill's offer is certain to be higher than the £32,000 paid for Nicky Evans, but Altrincham and Barnet are also due to talk with Carter.

O'Neill has already spoken with Carter by telephone and broke the news to the Bucks Free Press when he indicated Carter was keen to play for Wycombe under the Irishman's managership.

O'Neill said: "It will now depend on personal demands. I'm interested in Mark Carter; he's a proven goalscorer, and a player with ability.

"I'm not into these situations



**Martin O'Neill**

dragging on. With the likelihood of games being off, he'll probably want the weekend to think it over."

Runcorn manager Peter O'Brien said of his departing striker: "He guarantees you goals, and I was hoping to build a side around him. But he made his decision a fortnight ago, and feels he needs a change."

The prospect of the top two Conference goalscorers linking up for Wycombe Wanderers will both warm Blues' fans and send a chill through the other title contenders.

For while 33-goal Mark West leads the Mail on Sunday goalscorer of the year table with 22 Conference goals, his nearest rival is Carter, whose tally of 18 includes one at Adams Park in September when he earned Runcorn a point.

Last season, Carter — again with one against Wycombe — scored 23 goals in all for Runcorn as well as three in three games for England. To the start of the season, the man who started his career at Anfield has totalled 183 goals in 324 appearances for Runcorn.

Wanderers' assistant manager John Reardon was quick with his praise of the England striker. "They write his name down, then pick ten others," quipped Reardon.

At Barnet, manager Barry Fry re-

vealed he has clubs chasing Andrew Clarke, Roger Willis and Gary Bull and needs to insure against having no strikers left to partner Nicky Evans.

"I think Carter's one of the best players in the league," Fry told the Bucks Free Press. "His goalscoring record speaks for itself in a team not renowned for attacking.

"He'll score more goals for Wycombe or Barnet because we create more chances. On the law of averages, he's bound to score more."

Fry added that while he had spoken to Runcorn chairman Alan Littler, Barnet had not tabled an actual bid. Fry values Carter at £35,000, but thinks Carter's personal demands could scupper any transfer deal.

Now O'Neill, with the backing of chairman Ivor Beeks, hopes this will not prevent him adding a vital extra piece in Blues' championship jigsaw, his team having accumulated around £50,000 from their FA Cup run.

"This would prove to the Wycombe public we are in the market for quality players. It's about time Wycombe were competing with the likes of Barnet, Kettering and Colchester," said O'Neill, who to date has balanced his books in transfer deals. The purchases of Simon Hutchinson and Mickey Nuttall have still left change from the sale of Kevin Durham.

"We'd be paying extra for a guy two years younger than Nicky Evans," added O'Neill.

"We're second-leading scorers without Carter kicking a ball for us. If we can't keep a clean sheet, we might as well win 5-4. It's only right for Wycombe Wanderers to be interested if a player of his calibre becomes available."

Carter, who has been with Runcorn for seven years, has decided the time is right for a fresh challenge. His business commitments led him to reject Chester City's approach last year, but O'Brien said that the player was prepared to go anywhere if the move was right.