

QPR boss backs O'Neill for Rovers

WANDERERS boss Martin O'Neill is the man wanted by Bristol Rovers in this week's stakes of the managerial merry-go-round.

And Queens Park Rangers supremo Gerry Francis has advised his old club to plump for O'Neill.

With Blues chairman Ivor Beeks on holiday, however, any decision will now be made next week.

Rovers chairman Denis Dunford would only admit: "We're anxious to make an appointment as soon as possible. We would observe the proper way to approach people."

When asked if O'Neill was his choice, he told me: "It's possible."

Francis, having swapped Rovers for Rangers, has been asked by his former bosses his verdict on O'Neill.

The ex-England skipper's reply is unequivocal: "They did speak to me — and I said his record speaks for itself. In terms of success, he's done very well. They went and won the Trophy, and did extremely well in the league."

"The game in general is very short of up-and-coming managers. That's why the clubs are after the same old names."

PETE LANSLEY reports



On Tuesday this week, two well-travelled managers found themselves back in the First Division spotlight despite having local and recent failure in common.

Ian Branfoot, appointed by Southampton, and Ian Porterfield, in at Chelsea, are the two managers most recently sacked by our neighbours Reading, ailing in the Third Division.

Stories emanating from within Bristol Rovers have also confirmed O'Neill as the number one on a short list of four.

The others are believed to be Rovers skipper Geoff Twentyman, nearing the end of his playing days and the PFA representative at Twerton Park; former Bristol City and Rovers coach Clive Middlemass, sacked by Carlisle United last season; and Kenny Hibbitt, currently managing Fourth Division Walsall after his spell as player-coach at Rovers.

O'Neill told the Bucks Free Press, simply, that he had not applied for the job. He was speaking with Francis, whom he knew in his playing days, on Monday,

turning down QPR's offer of a friendly.

Francis has been a regular visitor to Wycombe as Bristol Rovers' manager. Having led the West Country club high into the Second Division with a squad costing less than £100,000, Francis has been scouring the Conference for more bargains. Of Wycombe's players, Francis said: "The boy Kerr at the back has done very well, and West got a lot of goals and they both did very very well."

"I think Martin would find it quite a different prospect at Bristol. The facilities he has at Wycombe are far superior to those at Bristol Rovers, where you're working out of portacabins."

O'Neill has been happy to work at Wycombe without a contract so far, and has already rejected the advances of at least one Fourth Division side.

But the decision he faces when Rovers make their official approach early next week will be the toughest in his managerial career to date.

O'Neill is ambitious and wants to manage a top Football League club. Rovers are a rising if meagre Second Division club. Whether they represent a better stepping stone to the top than the Conference title favourites, where he enjoys a superb working environment, remains to be seen.



O'Neill: what next?

Norman waits on Barnet call

PETE LANSLEY reports

CHESHAM United's star full back Sean Norman is hoping his move to Barnet will go through — at the third attempt.

The former Wycombe player had all but signed for the Underhill club earlier in the season, but the deal fell through over the final price. Now Norman, who played Fourth Division football before, with Colchester United, trusts a player-exchange may be the answer.

Norman played for Barnet in their late-season friendlies with League champions Arsenal — in front of 7,500 — and Peterborough. Yesterday he told the Bucks Free Press: "All George wanted was a couple of players. Barry Fry's very keen and needs a left back."

Chesham boss George Borg said he was still waiting for an offer from Fry, adding: "Sean's a very good player, and I'd like him to stay. But I wouldn't stand in any player's way if they want to better themselves."