

Marvellous Martin

THE news that Martin O'Neill is to stay at Wycombe Wanderers will hearten all true Blues fans.

It is great to know in these money-grabbing days of football that Martin has turned down an offer from a second division side.

We are sure that Blues' chairman Ivor Beeks has re-negotiated favourable terms with the talented Irishman.

The former Notts Forest and Northern Ireland international has displayed a marvellous depth of character and loyalty throughout this affair.

Let's make sure the town and its supporters repay that loyalty next season with a tremendous turnout at all the Blues' games.

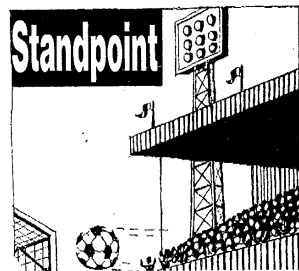
Bristol Rovers, still seeking a replacement for Francis, have failed to land Martin O'Neill, now in charge of GM Vauxhall Conference club Wycombe Wanderers.

The former Nottingham Forest and Northern Ireland mid-field man was interviewed by the Rovers board on Friday and turned down the job yesterday.

Rovers, who also failed to land Port Vale boss John Rudge, could now turn to former Brighton manager Mike Bailey, who is also a candidate for the Birmingham post vacated by Lou Macari.

Whoever takes over at Birmingham will have to appoint a new captain. Greg Downs, the former Norwich and Coventry defender, has left St. Andrew's to rejoin his former Coventry manager John Sillett at Hereford... where he will be player-coach.

Watford have joined the chase for Hartlepool hot-shot Joe Allon. Derby, Middlesbrough and Port Vale are also in for the 35-goal striker with a £200,000 price tag.



LET'S face it, Wycombe Wanderers have got themselves the best manager in non-league football. Martin would probably tell you they've got the best manager in football full stop, but his record in his first season in the Conference does take some beating.

As a player who hit the top, he's evidently destined to return there in management: as things stand at the moment, it is only a matter of time.

O'Neill could have taken three rungs up the ladder in one jump last week if he had elected to join Bristol Rovers, and he would have made himself wealthier into the bargain.

A generous three-year contract is quite some security, because even if a manager gets the push, he is entitled to have the remainder of his contract paid up. Reputations are vulnerable commodities: should Blues flop next season, Football League chairmen may be found to have short memories.

So why didn't he go? It's a question I have been asked many times over the last week, as footballing journos have had their predictions proved wrong.

The board justifiably talk of his loyalty. Just turning down more money than you currently earn would be surprising. Wycombe, Adams Park, the fans and the players have perhaps become more to Martin than he might have expected when Alan Parry persuaded him to apply for the job 18 months ago.

But he's not getting sentimental in his old age, nor complacent. Staying with Wycombe for another year should do Martin's C.V. more good than a year at Bristol Rovers.

Gerry Francis did a brilliant job with that club, and on their resources has taken them perhaps as far as they're due to go. Even if the Rovers board suggest to their new manager that consolidating their Second Division status will do for them, it would mean Rovers are on the slide. Were Graham Taylor or Graeme Souness to take over at Rovers, I wager they would come out with reputations tarnished for attempting to follow Francis.

For O'Neill, that might lead to failure, and as yet he hasn't failed in management. Around him, many of his contemporaries have already done so, and, remarkably, I cannot think of a single member of Brian Clough's European Cup-winning Forest sides who has yet succeeded in management.

If he bides his time and has a successful follow-up season with the Blues, O'Neill will surely find not only the likes of Rovers, Leicester City and Scunthorpe showing an interest, but clubs from the First Division as well.

Professionalism carries its weight as well. Coming to Wycombe to try and deliver the town Fourth Division football is a task on the way to being completed. And if Martin can land the men he is looking to add to his Wycombe squad, albeit with some ambitious investment, then becoming the first manager to earn Wycombe Wanderers Football League status will be a professional job well done.