

O'Neill is on verge of dream

MARTIN O'NEILL sometimes dreams of Wycombe Wanderers "doing a Wimbledon", going from non-League to Premier League football – but not often.

Tonight, the first step of his vision could be virtually complete. Victory over lowly Runcorn will almost certainly clinch Third Division status for his Buckinghamshire team that has dominated the Vauxhall Conference all season.

Then, in the unlikely event of Wycombe winning only one of their remaining six fixtures, second-placed Slough would have to win all of their last three matches by about 6-0 to pip them for the big time.

Even dreamer O'Neill, the former Nottingham Forest and Northern Ireland World Cup midfielder, can only see that scenario as the most unlikely nightmare.

"Of course we should win it – after the two seasons we've had, we deserve it," he said.

O'Neill's main concern, though, is for his exhausted players, who are in the middle of a punishing five games in eight days.

Pressure

Last Saturday they reached Wembley by beating Sutton in the FA Trophy, on Tuesday they drew 1-1 at Slough, tonight they entertain Runcorn before meeting Altrincham on Saturday and Gateshead on Sunday.

"It's amazing the physical pressure that's on the players at the moment with this backlog of fixtures," said O'Neill. "But it's the price of success, and you have to live with it."

But what a difference a year can make. Twelve months ago Wycombe were pipped for promotion on the last day of the season on goal difference by Colchester. Then their pleas to replace Aldershot and Maidstone fell on deaf ears.

"That was particularly

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hard. We felt we had a really strong case for going up. The players, everyone, have shown great spirit by bouncing back and doing it all again the very next year."

But if the Wycombe hierarchy want to keep the man who captained Northern Ireland at the 1982 World Cup finals as their manager, they may have to act fast.

His successes have inevitably put him in the frame for top clubs – notably his old club Forest should Brian Clough finally depart – and he is open to offers.

"Any manager worth his salt has aspirations to do the job at the very highest level," he said.

"At the moment, there is no definite opportunity, but I have not yet started talking to the chairman here about next year, and my contract only covers this year.

"But if I do get a new contract, it will be a great challenge to see how far we can go through the League divisions. I really believe we have the financial and physical set-up here to go all the way."

But the prospect of League football is causing headaches for players, most of whom will be asked to go full-time and give up often lucrative and secure jobs.

Long-serving Mark West, an electrical sales engineer, admits: "If you've got a good job, you might not want to give it up because it might not be there when you finish with football."