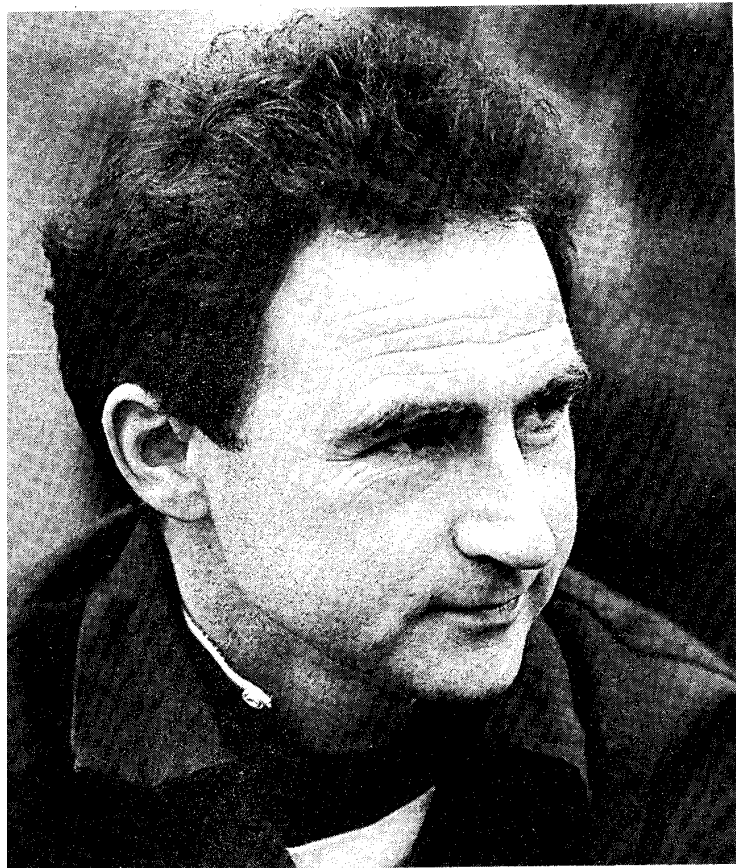


Manager O'Neill believes promotion



Hard thinker: Martin O'Neill is about to see whether his close-season decisions will pay early dividends

Picture by MATT FOWLER

MARTIN O'Neill sums up his summer in one word — awkward.

He has had a crowded schedule since his sole week off with his family following the Wycombe squad's tour to Rhodes at the end of May.

June was filled with a continuous procession of players to his office, as he thrashed out the club's first full-time contracts.

Some terms were completed sooner than others, Steve Guppy's only being finalised this week.

O'Neill showed a steely resolve not to budge if a contract-package raised objections with individuals — as Andy Kerr's dispute illustrates.

"I realised the transition would not be plain sailing, with some players tempted to stay part-time because it would be more worth their while financially," he says.

It rankles with the manager that the club did not have more money to bargain with.

Wycombe, as the promoted club, only receive half a £150,000 grant from the Football League, having to share it with relegated Halifax, while other Third Division sides receive the full amount.

"The extra amount could have paid at least four players wages," O'Neill reveals, which works out to roughly £390 a-week if the manager was being precise.

But the disappointment has not inhibited his plans.

He has made no close-season purchases, keeping faith with his squad of last year and feels, thus far, that digging into the club's healthy coffers are not necessary until he sees how the current outfit fares within the next few weeks.

July arrived with pre-season training and a nine-game programme of friendlies to provide an opportunity to pick up economically-sound free transfers.

Duncan Horton, a versatile midfielder-cum-defender from Barnet,

Report by CLAIRE NASH

is to date O'Neill's only signing, apart from verbal six-month agreements Tony Lynch and Geoff Cooper, who then decided to return to Barnet.

The lack of movement is notable, only when compared to the merry-go-round at other Third Division clubs who lacked a successful formula last year.

Non-movement by O'Neill to mount a resurgence at Nottingham Forest, rather than lead a former non-League side through its first tricky season in Division Three, attracted a steady stream of interview requests from the sports media as August dawned.

His comments in this week's national press vary little between each publication, and those he made after accepting a two-year contract at Wycombe.

"To be honest, I don't even think about it now," he says with a shrug. "I just want to get on with my job here."

The job O'Neill has is as challenging as the task he would have faced at Forest's City Ground.

He takes Blues into an unknown. The bookies are seemingly confident in O'Neill's decision to leave his side pretty much unchanged. Wycombe remain pre-season favourites for the Division Three title at 9-2.

He admits that preparing a side for an environment it has never known before, week-in, week-out, rather than one-off cup matches, is basically guesswork.

"The pessimist in me says we stay in the division. The optimist in me says we can win promotion. But it will be difficult.

"This division is a new experience for me as well as the players. But I am looking forward to it immensely and we will give it a go."