

Norman and Cousins enjoy new roles with Blue

Alec aims to play it smart at Wycombe

ALEC Norman's story so far is already taking on that of boy's own proportions, with the High Wycombe-based teenager being signed up by Wycombe Wanderers as their newest, and youngest recruit.

That the 18-year-old has been given a full-time one-year contract by Martin O'Neill indicates the club's capability of grooming raw talent from its youth side into first-team squad contenders.

And the fact that the fledgling forward's rise signals that of a local lad on the road to making good, just as Mark West's star is fading, is an added bonus for Wycombe fans who have a soft spot for one of their own.

One is all they have had for the last nine seasons, although Blues' faithful have always been diligent respecters of skill, no matter where it hails from.

The teenager, who spurned the advances of Luton Town last season, is aware he has been given a chance of a lifetime to make his breakthrough with Blues.

"I have to keep working hard in training to get as many reserve games as possible to give myself a chance. If Scotty keeps scoring and Langford keeps scoring, I have no alternative but to keep working harder.

"When I was younger I thought it was daunting in the reserves. But now I just think of myself as part of the squad. I am young and have as good a chance as anyone," he says.

Norman, of Partridge Way,

CLAIRE NASH asks Wanderers' new signing Alec Norman what he thinks of being given his big chance

Downley, showed early signs of potential as a 12-year-old playing for his village side Hithcroft. He trained with Watford between the age of 13 and 15, but joined Wycombe's youth section in 1990, just as it was being reorganised by Jim Melvin.

Success with the district side and his school John Hampden Grammar, the English Schools' runners-up two seasons ago, ran parallel with his progress at Wycombe.

He earned a regular spot in the youth side in his first season in an almost Chorus-Line manner when he filled in for injured first-choice centre forward Gareth Wood in an FA Youth Cup qualifying game.

"I played every game after that," he recalls. Norman went on to score 38 goals for the youth and reserve teams during the following 1991/92 season.

By this point the youngster harboured a strong desire to further his career with Wycombe. But had the main man noticed? "I think Martin had seen a couple of FA Youth Cup games. He said he was quite impressed. It was the first time I was aware of his interest. He said I had done quite well, which boosted my confidence."

O'Neill illustrated his faith in the club's up-and-coming young charge by putting him on the substitutes' bench for

Wycombe's FA Trophy third-round tie and replay against Bath City in February 1992.

But Norman became riddled with injury and illness last season, pulling a hamstring which aggravated a back complaint he was born with.

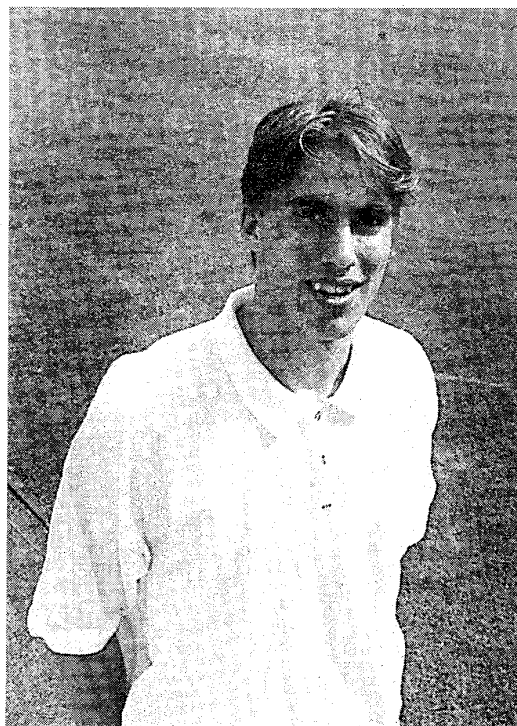
And, just after making his debut first-team appearance as a substitute against Stafford last April, he was stricken with glandular fever, an illness renowned for inflicting a lengthy recovery period on footballers.

"Martin said before the end of last season that he hoped to keep me on. He said he had seen a lot of me. But because of my injuries I was not completely sure what would happen."

But Norman was given a significant morale booster when he was asked to accompany the first-team to the FA Trophy Final at Wembley last May. "It made me feel part of the team," recalls Norman. "I get on with most of the lads. Because I am quite shy there is some mickey-taking, but it is all good-humoured," he adds.

The teenager discovered a contract was in the offing a few weeks ago and signed it last Friday. "It was a relief more than anything else," admits Norman, who was disappointed at scraping three A-levels last week in case they were needed, in the short-term, to fall back on.

Now, though, he is looking ahead with enthusiasm. "I do not think there is any more pressure on me because I am local. Hopefully more youngsters will come through, because youngsters always bring enthusiasm."



New kid on the block: Alec Norman