

Wondering where the Wanderers' future lies, O'Neill in his familiar place in the Wycombe dugout before today's FA Cup third-round visit of Norwich City

O'Neill presents right managerial credentials

Wycombe Wanderers have been taking an unusually keen interest in the managerial tug-of-war at Norwich. It is not just that the departure of Mike Walker could have unsettled their opponents nicely in time for the third round of the FA Cup today, but that Martin O'Neill, the ebullient chatter-box who has been at the heart of Wycombe's rise to prominence over the past three years, is sure to be among the candidates to fill the vacancy.

At least O'Neill, with a typically extrovert flourish, hopes he will be. "I would be deeply disappointed if my name was not among the candidates," he said.

Not that the Irishman, who turned down the chance to follow Brian Clough at Nottingham Forest, would be guaranteed to accept. He knows he still has work to do at Wycombe, who have high ambitions but are, like Norwich, a model of low-budget maintenance, and that he has a freedom to do it not enjoyed by too many managers in the country.

"Let's face it, it would be good for the ego to be considered if it came down to it," O'Neill added, "but it would seem a wee bit daft to talk, as I did last summer, about finishing the job here and then push off four months later. What am I saying? To be honest, I'm not really sure."

It is one of those twists of fortunes so central to this stage of the Cup that victory for Wycombe over one of his former clubs this afternoon would be an ideal advertisement for the claims of O'Neill as well as the growing prestige of the club he has guided from the middle of the GM Vauxhall Conference into the thick of the race for promotion to the Endsleigh Insurance League second division. Visions of those other two "Ws", Wimbledon and Watford, hang over Wycombe's spanking new ground at Adams Park, but the exploits of Norwich provide a further example of what can be done by well-run clubs determined to live within their means.

Not in their wildest dreams could Wycombe ever become a Liverpool

**Andrew Longmore on a
man with mixed feelings
about Norwich's fortunes**

or a Manchester United. But Norwich City? With the right manager, good organisation, sensible accountability and a slice of luck, there is just a chance. Wycombe are already making plans for the next decade while trying to keep a healthy sense of perspective.

"It is a difficult balance for a small club to maintain," John Goldsworthy, the long-serving secretary of Wycombe, said. "We're not wanting to rush things, but we're not going to sit back and wait until they happen either. We're ambitious and we have to plan ahead." Wycombe's constitution, set up in 1986, two years after the club's centenary, ensures that no egos will get in the way. The club has 200 shareholders, each holding the maximum of one share. Each share costs a pound and anyone who has

held a season ticket for three years is eligible to buy one. The most any of them could lose is £10.

Quite whether the foundations of support are as solid as the set-up, only a long barren spell will tell. Crowds this season average just over 5,000, an increase of nearly 3,000 over the past three years, from a catchment area estimated at 150,000, while 25,000 supporters travelled to Wembley for the final of the FA Trophy last year. However, their loyalty has not been tested yet.

"We've progressed more quickly than anyone believed was possible, but I really don't know how much further we can go," O'Neill said. "It's been a steady rise all the way, there's been no plateau, but anyone who thinks there won't be one is in for a massive awakening. When I've lost four on the trot, I'll know what the situation really is here."

Since his arrival three years ago, O'Neill has worked hard to establish a tradition that moulds the old Corinthian ways with a tougher, more professional attitude. All ex-

cept two of the staff have turned full-time this season and the ease with which the side has adapted to league football suggests that O'Neill has found the right blend.

Equally important, he has fashioned a club in the image of the community — smart, modern, cost-conscious, streamlined and, for the moment, successful. The new ground, with its low level red brick offices and neat stands, fits perfectly into its surrounds on a soulless light industrial estate on the outskirts of the town and the ill-feeling which accompanied the move from the more characterful Loakes Park has largely been submerged.

Wanderers came top of a survey carried out recently by a new local radio station to establish what the liveliest topics of conversation were on the streets and local companies have been quick to identify themselves with such a progressive club. Victory today in only the club's third visit to this stage of the Cup in their 109-year history might show O'Neill as well exactly where his future lies.