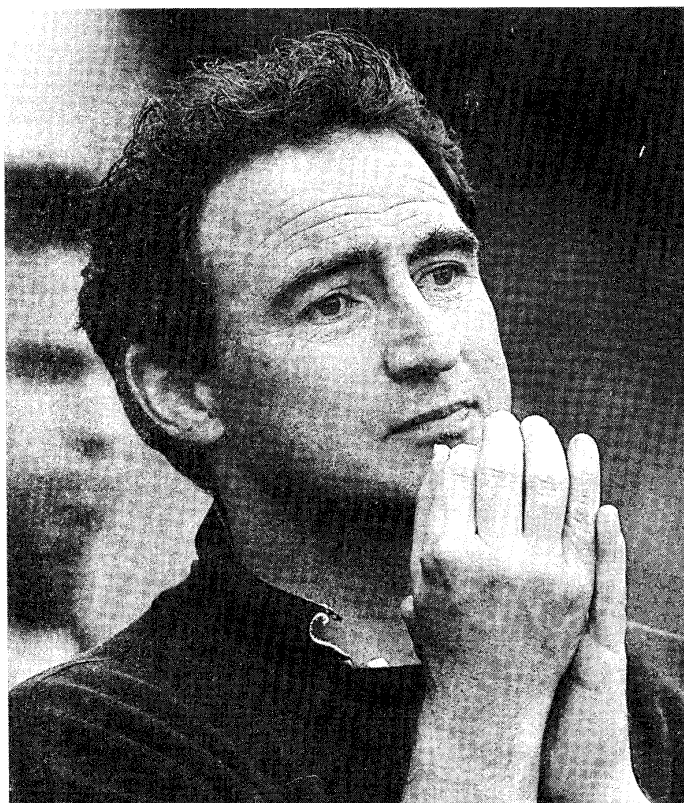


HIS FACE SAYS IT ALL



The long and winding road: Martin O'Neill contemplates the play-offs

O'Neill's Blues face play-off battle after Crewe win war of nerves

WYCOMBE Wanderers' season continues in the play-offs.

By **CLAIRE NASH**

They drew 1-1 with Preston on Saturday. They would not have clinched automatic promotion even if they had won. That was earned by Crewe with a 2-1 victory at divisional runners-up Chester.

The victory took Dario Gradi's side three points clear of Wanderers who must now travel to seventh-placed, and in-form, Carlisle in the first leg of the play-off semi final this Sunday (ko 3pm).

The home leg, to decide who reaches the final at Wembley on Saturday, May 28, is at Adams Park next Wednesday, May 18 (ko 7.45pm).

Disappointment was etched on the Wycombe players' faces as they walked off the pitch, heads bowed, after the final whistle. They had, in the words of manager Martin O'Neill three weeks back, been in pole position.

But various factors – some self inflicted, some out of their control, some cruelly unlucky – conspired for it to slip from their grasp during a nerve-racking end-of-season run-in.

O'Neill dwelt on his disappointment only long enough

to put it into matter-of-fact perspective before setting his, and his side's, sights on a daunting Wembley trail.

"We would have felt a lot worse had we won. Crewe won, which in one aspect lessens the blow."

He continued: "We had a couple of chances during the last couple of games, chances we did not take, a couple of decisions went against us."

He added: "Those who went up, automatically deserved it."

Pressed as to whether Wycombe had wobbled at the death, O'Neill said: "I think the Third Division is very tight. We had a couple of big, big games here."

"Against Rochdale, we had chances to win the game. Against Scunthorpe, there was a dodgy penalty. In a week we lost four points when they were there for the taking."

Looking ahead to Carlisle, who have barnstormed their way into the play-offs with four consecutive wins, O'Neill remarked: "Carlisle are in a very good run. They have just sneaked in to the play-offs. If you sneak in, it's the best way

to do it. Perhaps they thought two or three weeks ago their season was dead and buried."

But he added: "We are up for it, we really are."

Blues' season has indeed turned full circle with a trip to Brunton Park. They began their baptismal Football League season at Carlisle last August. Sunday's match is not all-ticket. Next week's home leg is.

General sale of tickets is on Saturday between 10am and noon, at the Adams Park commercial office and if there are any left, between 9am and 5.30pm next Monday, May 16, and Tuesday, May 17.

Vice presidents, terrace and seat ticket holders can claim theirs every day this week between 9am and 5.30pm until Friday, and up to 7.30pm on Thursday. The maximum is one ticket per person.

Family stand tickets are on a first come, first served basis between these times.

Coach bookings are being taken for Carlisle. Contact Rena at the commercial office on (0494) 472100. Fares are adult £18, senior citizens £17, children £16. Coaches leave at 7am.

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