



Backs to the future . . . Wycombe manager Alan Smith (right) and assistant David Kemp consider their options

Picture: BARRY PHILLIPS

Smith's back and working to rule

EARLY July down on the Thames in Buckinghamshire and an approaching holiday cruiser sends a fluffy flotilla of ducklings paddling frantically for the haven of the bank.

A typical mid-summer cameo in this pleasant part of the country. Yet it goes unnoticed by Alan Smith, walking alone and preoccupied, a few yards away in the grounds of Bisham Abbey.

It is the first day back in training for Wycombe Wanderers, the first chance the club's players will have of appraising their new manager — and the first opportunity he will have of taking a look at them.

Smith spent 11 years at Crystal Palace, rising from youth team coach to manager, before the mutual disaffection between him and club chairman Ron Noades inevitably ended with his departure.

His new working day begins at 8am, when Smith's assistant David Kemp, who was also at Palace, collects the manager from a nearby hotel. They drive to the neat, clean Adams Park stadium at the end of a Wycombe industrial estate and by 9.15 Smith is in his first meeting of the day.

Smith is businesslike from the start. Behind him, on a cabinet, are a selection of good luck cards, one from former captain and protégé Gareth Southgate, who has also moved on — to Aston Villa.

The chance of Smith continuing his predecessor Martin

KEN DYER reports on a new challenge for the former Crystal Palace manager

O'Neill's style of management, one suspects, is roughly the same as Hugh Grant deciding on a late-night drive around Kings Cross.

Smith is as meticulous as O'Neill was apparently disorganised. But the former Palace manager would dearly like to emulate the success of the man he has replaced.

It is not the first time Smith has held court in his new office. A day earlier he had told former England striker Cyrille Regis, now 37, that he was no longer needed.

Sitting opposite Smith is club secretary John Reardon and physiotherapist Dave Jones. Smith, as befits a dapper dresser himself, wants his troops to be properly kitted out.

"New blazers have been ordered for them all," Smith tells Reardon. "But I want it impressed on the players that if they lose anything — blazer, shirt, tie, tracksuit — the cost of replacements will be deducted from their wages. I want no excuses. If it goes missing, tough shit."

Smith is less than impressed to learn that five of his senior pros have reported back with long-term injuries.

Smith and Kemp are doing

their sums and the results are disturbing. "Out of a senior squad of 19, five are injured, two are goalkeepers and another couple are young lads. I think, Dave, we have some work to do." They go to Bisham Abbey for their first training session and the players and chairman Ivor Beeks are waiting for them. Beeks makes the formal introductions.

"One person stood out head and shoulders above the rest," he says. "I believe Alan Smith is the right man to take us on to the next stage." No-one is in any doubt that "the next stage" is promotion.

Smith, resplendent in sparkling new training kit, delivers his first address of many.

"These are as good training facilities as any in the country," he says. "Enjoy them but don't abuse them. Be here by 10am for training. Latecomers will be fined, amounts to be decided by myself and your PFA representative.

"Let's all enjoy ourselves. Let's look smart and behave while we're here but let's have an edge. This is Keith Power, our fitness expert. You won't see much of me or a football for the next 10 days but enjoy it all the same."

Smith watches the first session. "He looks overweight," he muses about one player. "What's he like?" he asks kitman/groundsman Jim Gardner about another.

Later, back at Adams Park, Smith talks with sales and marketing manager Mark Austin. They drive into town, where Smith wants to see the club shop. "What's the turnover?" asks Smith as O'Neill's visage smiles down on him from a video screen.

Back in his office, Smith takes a call from Steve Walford, who will join O'Neill at Norwich. "Best of luck, Steve," he says. "Make a good job of it and best regards to Martin."

Kemp pokes his head around the door from the adjoining office, where he has been on the telephone for a solid hour in a quest for new players.

"Martin Hayes has just rung," he says. "He's left Swansea and would be interested. Shall we ask him to come down and train?" Smith agrees.

Around 4pm and Smith is ready for the drive back home to Surrey for a round of golf.

"I'm easing myself in," he says. "It's a long season ahead and the trick is to pace yourself."

"First impressions here are good. Everyone seems to be keyed in and working the same way. The chairman is a nice chap but he's nobody's fool."

"Me? I've changed a bit after the experiences at Palace. I'm a bit more wary now; a little less trusting, a bit more inclined to keep my thoughts to myself. Perhaps, a bit harder."

"Yes, first impressions are promising. But I do need some more players."

“I’m a bit more wary now, less trusting. Perhaps a bit harder”