

O'Neill seeking to cement reputation

By Peter Lansley

THAT only Alex Ferguson and Neil Warnock have orchestrated more domestic Wembley triumphs than Martin O'Neill in the 1990s should give succour to Leicester City supporters making their near-annual pilgrimage to the First Division play-off final today.

While Ferguson has achieved six Wembley victories this decade, beating Crystal Palace today would take O'Neill level on four with play-off master Warnock. The Leicester manager, after winning the FA Trophy twice and the Third Division play-off final with Wycombe Wanderers, has cemented a reputation as one of the coming men of management, despite a tumultuous winter at Norwich and, since Christmas, Filbert Street.

After imposing his aura at Wycombe, O'Neill, on finally accepting an offer to move up the career ladder last summer, found managing Norwich, one of his former clubs, rather more restrictive.

His relationship with Robert Chase, who recently resigned as chairman, ran aground when team-building plans went unfulfilled. "I

wanted to manage the football club," said O'Neill. "Having spent five years at Wycombe running the show, I wanted to manage Norwich City in similar fashion. For the long-term betterment of the club, if pressure was put on the chairman to think about where Norwich were going then my resignation may have done some good. But leaving the Norwich fans will remain a disappointment."

Not that joining Leicester has been a bed of roses either. Poor early results turned supporters' resentment towards the new manager. "I told them 13 weeks didn't seem an awfully long time to be judging anyone and if I was serving up the same drivel they watched that day one year into the job, they wouldn't have to demonstrate, I'd walk away."

O'Neill will today settle for being cheered on to another Wembley victory — then he can start competing at the highest level.

Today's football

DIV 1 PLAY-OFF FINAL

Crystal Palace v Leicester (Wembley, 2)

RUGBY LGE.—Stones Super Lge: Paris v Halifax (11), St Helens v Castleford (6).

Leicester hero Claridge has revealed he could have been playing at Wembley for **PALACE**.

The striker had a trial at Selhurst Park after being given a free transfer by Weymouth eight years ago.

Claridge, 30, said: "I didn't get on too well with Alan Smith, the reserve-team manager, and as Palace had Mark Bright and Ian Wright in the first team, I couldn't see myself making progress there."

"I played a few reserve games and then left after a couple of months."

Leicester boss Martin O'Neill has been handed £5million to keep his newly-promoted side in the Premiership.

As Chelsea welcome £20,000-a-week Gianluca Vialli and Manchester United prepare to smash their £7m transfer record, O'Neill's target is Norwich's Darren Eadie.

O'Neill has been told he must spend wisely because Leicester simply cannot compete with the huge salaries elsewhere. Chairman Martin George explained: "There is money to spend but we must not be silly."