

Ready to play in millionaires' den

REPORTS

By Dave Peters

WANDERERS take on the second division money men this season with two wet-behind-the-ears teenagers standing by to play in the millionaires' playground.

Smillie has got no money to spend strengthening his paper-thin squad while Division Two rivals Manchester City, Reading, Fulham and Wigan are all backed by multi-millionaires.

But Wanderers, who unleashed youngsters Mo Harkin and Alan Beeton to brilliant effect last season, have got two more home-grown talents waiting in the wings.

Tough striker Andy Baird and midfielder Aaron Patton have made a big impression during pre-season – and Smillie is expecting both 19-year-olds to force their way in this year.

With Keith Scott doubtful with a groin injury, Baird could well be on the bench for tomorrow's opener, while Patton's chances of immediate involvement appear to have been scuppered by the flu.

When Baird does get his chance he will have deserved it more than anyone. He has battled back from a career-threatening injury to force his way onto the brink of the first team. As a YTS boy, in the same year as Harkin and Beeton, he injured his ankle ligaments. Then, on his second game back, he shattered the same right ankle.

He was out for 15 months in total and had to go back and do another year on the YTS while Harkin and Beeton were picking up their first professional pay-packets.

He said: "I thought I might never play again. But I stuck with it and



Aaron Patton: Confidence is the key

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everything seems OK now. I was in the treatment room at the same time as Keith Ryan and he helped me a lot. I was probably lucky because being young my ankle

healed well.

"The long lay off might even have helped me. It has made me realise what I've been missing. My ambition is to get into the first

team regularly by the end of the season. Nothing is impossible.

"I got a few minutes towards the end of last season against Chesterfield and Walsall. I think Saturday's come too soon but I'd love to be on the bench and maybe as the season progresses I might get a chance.

"Mo and Alan are showing it is achievable. They have done it and I want to follow them."

Patton is equally determined to make it but for different reasons. He is one of the best footballers in the club but his shy temperament has held him back.

His first year as a pro was bitterly disappointing as he struggled to fit in with the dressing room banter and, in May, Smillie gave him six months to get fit, toughen up or else.

Patton said: "Last year I had a few problems and I didn't settle in as well as I should have. I'm quite shy naturally and found it a bit difficult. But I feel a lot more comfortable now and I feel part of it.

"I really want to make it. I've been given a second chance and I want to take it. I want to get into the first team in a couple of months and make sure that I give Neil Smillie plenty of reasons to keep me on longer than the six months."

His pre-season performance at Chesham had Smillie – who labelled some of touches 'world class' – drooling, but he has been struck down by flu this week and that could ruin his chance of involvement tomorrow.

Apart from friendlies, Patton has made one appearance in the first team coming on as a last minute sub against Walsall last year.

He said: "I was on for about a minute and I didn't even touch the ball. I told the lads that."

Patton is learning and getting his retaliation in first.