



ALAN FRASER
on the boss with
hard acts to follow

IT was one of those throwaway lines prompted by the fact that the two hottest managerial properties in English football, John Gregory and Martin O'Neill, had each served their apprenticeships at Wycombe Wanderers.

There must be something in the water at Wycombe, *Sportsmail* suggested.

'Maybe I should start drinking it,' groaned Neil Smillie after a 3-0 defeat by Gillingham which left the Wanderers anchored at the bottom of Division Two with just three draws to their name during the current campaign.

That would appear to be a safer bet than attempting to swim in it. Given Smillie's luck recently, he would most assuredly sink and drown.

Even his return to Gillingham, the club where he was once caretaker manager, was unhappy.

The plight of Wycombe is such that their latest boss is far more pre-occupied with preserving his present employment than contemplating such fantasies as the £1million-a-year contract just signed by Gregory or the seven-figure salary O'Neill would command at Leeds United.

Smillie's Saturday afternoons have become the ultimate torture.

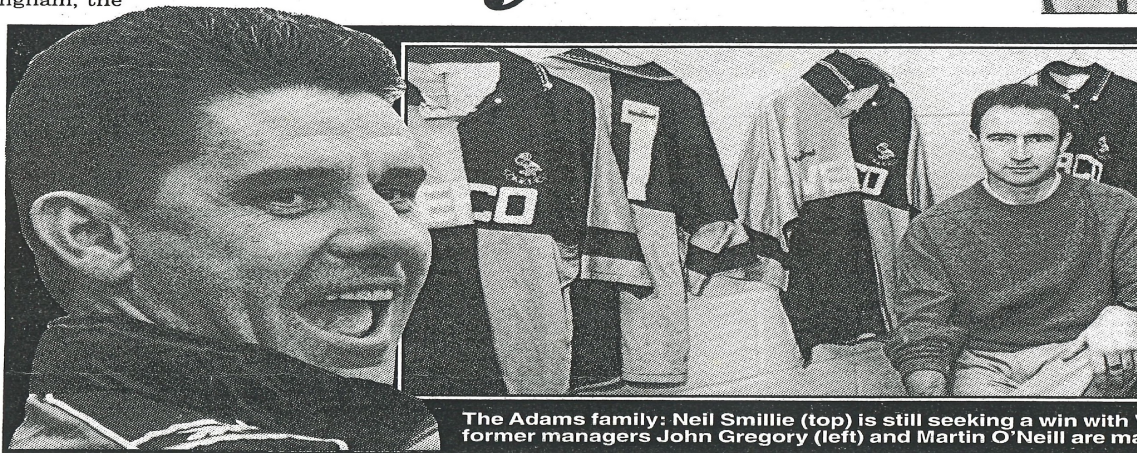
'It is like strapping yourself into the electric chair for a while,' he said of his time in the dug-out.

His Sundays, as a consequence, have disintegrated. 'It's supposed to be a time for the family. But the day's usually a wash-out. After the recent Notts County game, when we lost a goal in injury-time, I slept most of Sunday.'

The darkened room and warm duvet have served as a retreat for most managers during their bleaker moments. Even the best of coaches have experienced the worst of time.

Gregory might well look down from the dizzy heights of the Premiership summit on his failure at Portsmouth and his modest record at Adams Park. And O'Neill will not need reminding that he was initially interviewed for the man-

Sheer torture in the water for Smillie at Wycombe



The Adams family: Neil Smillie (top) is still seeking a win with V
former managers John Gregory (left) and Martin O'Neill are ma

ager's job at Wycombe and rejected in favour of Jim Kelman.

There is an answer to the question 'Jim who?' He was the man who was sacked after Wycombe lost in an FA Cup qualifying tie to the Metropolitan Police.

Smillie represents a fascinating case study of the young, emerging manager with a fine coaching reputation and a solid playing career. He learned his trade under two former England managers, Terry Venables and Graham Taylor. At Brighton he took part in the 1983 'And Smith must score...' FA Cup Final.

He is fully aware that a

few good breaks here and his career could follow the paths of Gregory and O'Neill. Equally, a few bad breaks there and he could be hurtling down the Kelman road to obscurity.

'There is a part of the management role where you entrust your future and your career to 11 other people,' he added.

'I hate what has been going on this season. It is embarrassing. You have your personal pride, but it takes a battering.'

'I do feel under pressure. I feel as if I'm at the right place at the wrong time.'

The timing is a reference to a conspiracy of fates.

Wycombe are not a wealthy club and cannot bring in quality to replace the long-term loss through injury of several key players.

Gillingham could boast two £500,000 strikers in Carl Asaba and Robert Taylor, while Wycombe's record £140,000 signing Steve McGavin was an absentee.

So Smillie spends every waking moment attending all manner of minor matches in the search for a nugget among mountains of fool's gold.

And on Saturdays he trots out the excuses: 'I have never known a 3-0 defeat when under so little pressure...the first goal was a

terrible def the referee given us a second go never a co think the r whistle for t free-kick fo And so on, (

He declar haven't fal with footba blood. But, all the enjo is being tak

'Having lo in injury-tir we will hav three goals relax.'

It is a lo