

SPORT 2

Wanderers started 1999 by sacking Neil Smillie, in came Out with the old, in with the new

A SACKED manager, the arrival of Wimbledon hero Lawrie Sanchez, a relegation dogfight, second division survival, a £20,000 suspended FA fine and a three-match FA Cup drama – it's been quite a year for Wycombe Wanderers.

And here, the BFP takes our readers back over the highs and the lows that have made up Blues' 1999.

January

Neil Smillie's short reign as Wanderers boss came to an end as he kicked off the New Year with three defeats.

He dug a hole for himself after admitting he sent the Blues out to face York on New Year's Day knowing they weren't motivated for the task.

A 4-1 home defeat against Brentford in the Auto Windscreen Shield lowered the guillotine which finally fell three days later as Blues had two players sent off in a 3-1 defeat at Luton. That result left them second-from-bottom in Division Two.

Blues finished the month still without a win and managerless as Micky Adams and John Ward turned down the chance to manage Wycombe, while Wrexham refused Wanderers permission to talk to Brian Flynn.

February

The 28-day search for Smillie's successor ended as Blues appointed Lawrie Sanchez.

In less than 24 hours he transformed them from a team of no-hopers into one which bridged a £9.5 million price difference to draw 1-1 with Kevin Keegan's Fulham in his first game in charge.

On his arrival the former Wimbledon player said he wasn't going to turn Wycombe into the Crazy Gang Mark II, but he did a good Vinnie Jones impression in his second game as he was sent off at Preston and escorted away from the pitch by two policemen.

Sanchez also brought in former Olympic champion Daley



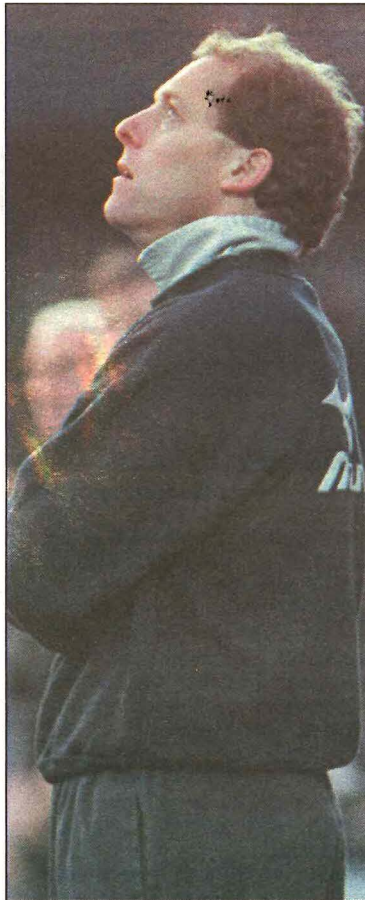
IN: New boss Lawrie Sanchez joined the Blues in February when they looked set for the drop, but he turned it around

Thompson as a fitness instructor after saying his new charges weren't fit for the battle. He also brought in Terry Gibson as his assistant.

March

Wanderers' survival hopes took a real battering as fellow strugglers Colchester grabbed an equaliser in the ninth minute of injury time and Northampton won at Adams Park the following week.

Nicky Mohan and Mark Stallard were off-loaded as Sanchez carried out his instructions to cut £200,000 from the wage bill.



OUT: Former boss Neil Smillie had an unhappy start to the New Year when he was sacked by Wanderers

But 'Devine' intervention arrived as forgotten striker Sean Devine joined on-loan from Barnet's reserves.

He opened his Wycombe career coming off the bench to score a stunner at Reading in a 2-1 defeat which left the Blues bottom of the table and 12 points adrift of safety.

Blues finished the month by grabbing themselves a lifeline with a long-overdue first away win of the season, 2-0 at Bristol Rovers.

But the joy was tarnished 48-hours later by the deadline day sale of leading scorer Keith Scott to Reading for £250,000.

That money was used to purchase Devine for a club record £200,000. Jamie Bates also joined on a free from Brentford reserves.

April

Blues finally found a rich vein of away form with wins at Macclesfield, Wrexham and a famous 2-1 success in front of 29,000 stunned fans at Manchester City as they became the only team to do the double over the men from Maine Road.

Victory at City was their fourth away win in five games and that represented the club's best ever away form since joining the Football League.

A 2-2 draw at Stoke, with another Devine double, kept the away run going and fans, players and the board started believing Wycombe could do the great escape under a manager chairman Ivor Beeks had now started calling Houdini.

But a 1-0 defeat at Notts County and a 2-0 home reversal at the hands of Gillingham left them still floundering in the bottom four.

May

Paul Emblen became the club's most unlikely hero. The midfielder who had not scored all season fired two winning goals in two matches in the frantic final days of the season.

He bagged the winner against Wigan which meant the survival battle went down to the final day at struggling Lincoln where the losers knew they'd be relegated.

Wycombe shelled out to lay on free coaches for 2,500 nervous fans to Sincil Bank. It looked as though it was going to be a gloomy journey back down south until Emblen headed home the only goal of the game with just seven minutes left to keep the Blues in Division Two.

But he was not the only hero. Sean Devine had fully justified his fee with eight goals in 12 games to keep Wycombe up, but the man of the moment was Sanchez who had brought in 30 points from 18 matches in charge.

He said: "I had to make an awful lot of people believe and gradually I chipped away at it until the players knew they'd get out of it."

But as the celebrations died down, Sanchez was rewarded by the boardroom telling him he would have no money for next season.

June

Paul Emblen's end-of-season heroics are rewarded by the Worthington Cup draw which hands the Wanderers a two-legged tie against his brother Neil's Wolves side.

The league fixtures are published and Wycombe's fabulous end to the previous season has fans and players dreaming of the play-offs.

Blues made their only summer signing, a wooden Indian named Comanche, who becomes the club's new lucky mascot. The players spotted him last season outside a shop on their way to Lincoln.

July

Blues' pre-season trip to Dublin is cancelled as Alan Beeton is rushed to hospital with meningitis.

The young defender said: "I thought I was going to die. It's been the scariest time of my life. I feel as if I've been given a second chance and I'm going to grab it with both hands."

The cancellation came too late for 60 fans who had already made the trip to Ireland.

Meanwhile hard-up Wanderers, with no money to spend on players, gave a trial to Sunday league pub player Andy Kinsey.

Sanchez learned he would have to watch the first six matches of the new season from the stands as a result of his spat with officials at Preston in his first away game in February. To make matters worse, Blues discovered they will play all of the forthcoming season with a £20,000 suspended fine, from the FA, hanging over their heads, the result of Blues topping the bad boys disciplinary table.



Sold: Keith Scott went to Reading for £250,000

Ref: 99-784AF33

SPORT 3

Lawrie Sanchez and the rest, as they say, is history



Hot stuff: Sean Devine became Blues' record signing at £200,000, but the investment was worth it

Ref: 99-1303F19

August

Wanderers kicked off the season with a draw at home to Burnley and an away win, at their first attempt, at Scunthorpe.

Sean Devine unveiled his hidden talents on the eve of the Scunthorpe game when he set up an impromptu barber shop in the hotel and gave his team-mates a pre-match scalping.

Reserve keeper Mark Westhead had his plea to change his unlucky number 13 shirt rejected by the Football League despite having had three injuries since he was handed the jersey.

Jermaine McSpornan became the greatest thing since sliced bread after his double at Molineux dumped Wolves out of the Worthington Cup and brought the scouts flocking to watch him.

Wanderers' cup scalp earned Sanchez the League Managers Association Performance of the Week award, his first managerial trophy.

September

Blues also ran first division West Brom close before going out 5-4 on aggregate after an unfortunate fumble by debut keeper Mark Osborn.

But Sanchez blew his top at the club's army of stay-away fans and accused them of letting the team down as only 5,047 turned up at Adams Park to see the Albion clash.

His comments fuelled speculation that he was on his way to managerless Reading, particularly when he said: "I know the Reading fans would turn out in bigger numbers than that."

Wanderers also reported an annual loss of £250,000.

October

Sanchez pledged his future to Wycombe despite being linked with the vacancy at Reading.

The decision looked a good one for the gaffer as Blues beat Reading 5-3 the next day. But he warned the stay-away fans that the club will never get out of the second division unless they turn out to support his side.

Steve Guppy became the first ex-Wanderer to play for England when he was picked by Kevin Keegan for the match against Belgium.

Blues' Mo Harkin was also on international duty as a non-playing substitute for Northern Ireland in

their game in Finland.

Wycombe turned to other avenues to make up their lost revenue and coughed up £20,000 to sponsor a racecard at Windsor and then sold the races off to sponsors at a profit.

November

An FA Cup saga came to Adams Park with Blues needing three games to get past Oxford City in a drama that was more memorable for its off the field events than the football on it.

Jermaine McSpornan started it by saying the game would be done and dusted by half time, Oxford continued it by banning Wanderers from playing their music over the tannoy in the replay that was also staged at Wycombe.

But that was just small potatoes compared to what happened next as, with the teams prepared to start a penalty shootout to settle the match, Blues safety officer Frank Knowles abandoned it because of a small fire and a second, unrelated, fire alarm going off.

The FA intervened and ordered a second replay at Oxford United's ground and finally Blues squeezed through only to be knocked out of

the competition by Wigan, in another replay.

Meanwhile, Wanderers chairman Ivor Beeks admitted for the first time that he'd consider changing the club's unique share-holder constitution so that it could accommodate a big-money backer who could provide funds for the club that is now losing £8,000 a week.

December

The youth team become the first team in Wanderers' history to reach the fourth round of the FA Cup, at youth or senior level, following their win at Birmingham City in the third round.

But coach Gary Goodchild told the board that for that sort of result to be a regular occurrence he needs £200,000 so he can follow the current trend and set up a Wanderers youth academy.

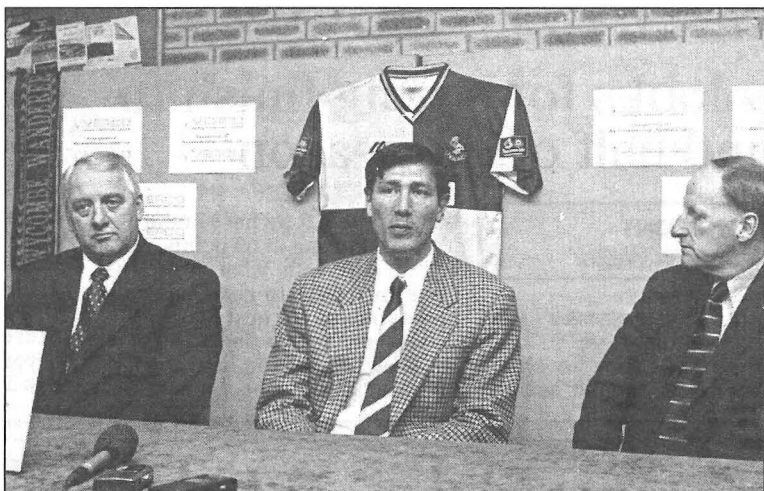
Defender Gary Ablett swallowed 11 years of hurt to help out Sanchez and signed on a month's loan.

Upon arrival he revealed that it was he who was supposed to be marking Sanchez when he popped up to score Wimbledon's winner in the 1988 FA Cup final against favourites Liverpool.



Indian sign: Indian Comanche was Blues' only summer signing. The players had spotted him on the way to Lincoln

Ref: 99-2541F37



Right man for the job: Lawrie Sanchez with chairman Ivor Beeks and director Alan Parry on his appointment

Ref: 99-377F16