

## Four players missing for crucial opener with title favourites



Out: Keith Ryan



Out: Dave Carroll



Out: Sean Devine



Out: Paul Emblen

# Blues start with an injury crisis

WANDERERS go into the first game at Stoke tomorrow with a major injury crisis, but Michael Simpson appears to be winning his battle to be fit.

The midfield dynamo has made a remarkable recovery from the thigh strain, which ruled him out of last weekend's 3-1 win over Crystal Palace, and now stands a good chance of returning three weeks ahead of schedule.

But as Simmo is poised to return Blues will be with five key players - including last season's top scorer Sean Devine, who won't

be fit for at least two months with his complex knee injury.

Devine is joined on the sidelines by Dave Carroll, Keith Ryan and Paul Emblen as Blues bid to topple a Stoke side who are the bookies second favourites to lift the second division title.

Car crash victim Alan Beeton joined the casualty list this week. He injured his knee when, as a passenger, he was hurt in a road accident. He misses Stoke, but may return for the Bank Holiday double header against Northampton and Millwall.

But new signing Steve Jones has

recovered from his ankle strain and is competing with Andy Baird for a place up front alongside Jermaine McSparran while Mark Rogers, Chris Vinnicombe and Mo Harkin should all recover from the minor niggles they have been nursing.

Ring-rusty Stewart Castledine looks as though he will have to settle for a place on the bench. He has struggled to discover his form since switching from Wimbledon in the summer and boss Lawrie Sanchez says patience is the key.

He said: "Stewart only played three matches last year and it'll take him time to get into the swing. I've no doubt he'll be a good signing but if we get 30 games out of him this season I will be pleased. He's only played about 50 games in his career, we play that in a season."

Blues have only won one of their opening-day fixtures since joining the League eight years ago. The last time they were away on opening-day they crashed 5-2 at Wigan.

But Sanchez says statistics mean nothing tomorrow and is happy facing Stoke before the season gets up.

Stoke inflicted Wycombe's heaviest

defeat of the season with a 4-0 savaging at Adams Park, but it was a different story in the return when an understrength Blues side had the better of a 1-1 draw.

Stoke also have problems ahead of the clash, and are still trying to land a striker on loan.

Last season's top scorer Peter Thorne is ruled out with a knee injury while Icelandic international striker Rikhardur Dadason won't be released by his club Viking Stavanger in time.

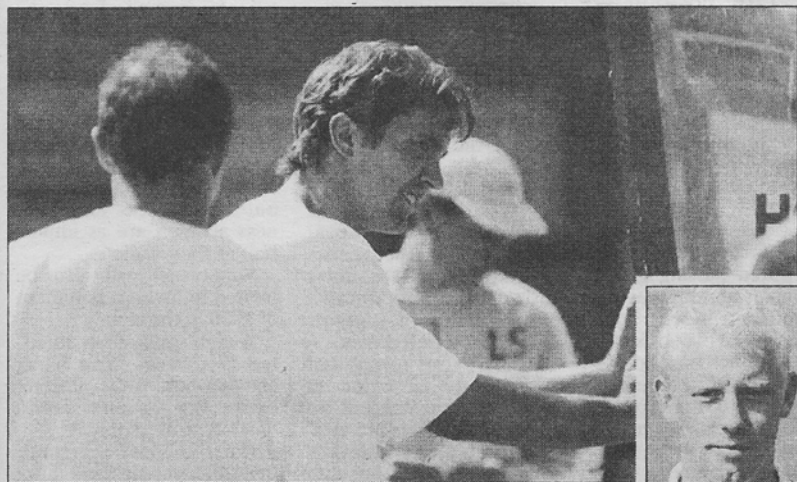
The Potters are also rocked by suspensions. Midfielder Graham Kavanagh and left back Clive Clarke are both banned following their sending offs in City's play-off defeat against Gillingham.

Last season, Blues would have worried about going away without Devine and the other injured players, but Sanchez is not fazed now.

He said: "We've shared goals around in pre-season and scored a few from midfield. I'm happy that if someone is injured we've got someone else who can come in and do a good job. It's a smaller squad than last year but we've cleared out the deadwood."

Blues are taking no chances in their preparation and are travelling to The Potteries today after last year's day trip brought more drama than EastEnders.

Then, Jermaine McSparran missed the team bus and Steve Brown and Mark Osborn broke down and had to push their car off the motorway.



Easy does it: Stewart Castledine looks as though he will be sub tomorrow, while Alan Beeton (inset) won't make it