

Summer storm clouds give way to a brighter outlook for the Blues

Sports editor Dave Peters takes a look at the way the mood has changed at Wanderers' HQ during the past three weeks as Blues prepare to embark on another ten-month adventure

LAST SEASON'S gloom has turned into pre-season optimism as Wanderers take to the pitch for real tomorrow.

Blues lock horns with former England international Carlton Palmer's Stockport County side after their most impressive pre-season programme for several years.

Wanderers finished last season with a meagre three points from 24, fuelling fears of relegation, but those fears have turned into cautious optimism.

First division sides West Ham and Watford have been seen off in pre-season, while Ryman League Aylesbury were also convincingly put to the sword.

While other teams were busy topping up their tans, manager Lawrie Sanchez and his coaching staff have been developing an effective system of play which has transformed the club's fortunes.

The traditional 4-4-2 shape has been widened to incorporate two wingers.

The new style has brought the best out of Darren Curie and Jermaine McSparran, with Stuart Roberts and Lewis Cook supplying able back-up from



Deep thinker: Lawrie Sanchez has devised a new style of play for the new season

the bench.

The quality of crossing to the forwards has been first class and Wanderers have breezed through their warm-up campaign scoring ten goals and conceding just five, despite having main strikers Craig Faulconbridge and Jonny Dixon on the treatment table.

The new attacking edge has

been achieved without harming the defence as Joe Cole and his West Ham colleagues discovered when they found the Wycombe rearguard in uncharitable mood.

With the wingers concentrating on doing the attacking, it has allowed last year's crossers, full backs Danny Senda and Chris

Vinnicombe, to concentrate more on the defensive side of the game, giving the team a much more solid foundation.

Only Tottenham have managed to beat Wycombe so far and that was only achieved by the odd goal in five.

The upbeat mood has been achieved despite the cash-strapped club only bringing in one player – Charlie Mapes from Berkhamsted – during the summer while several high profile but ageing stars have left.

The new mood is a far cry from last season when boss Sanchez fell out with the fans.

He clashed with them publicly over the team's direct tactics and the heady days of the 2001 run to the FA Cup semi-final seemed long gone as both the money and the feel-good factor disappeared.

The supporters had a go at Sanchez's tactics at a fans' forum and he said, 'Okay, I will play it your way.'

Then they got beaten 4-2 by Brentford in the Cup with Brentford playing the long ball game and Sanchez got his own back by saying if they had played like Brentford, they would have won.

The clouds got darker as Wanderers went on a dramatic end of season nosedive as they bore all the hallmarks of a relegation side by taking just three points out of 24 on the run-in.

To make the situation even worse the club then sold the ground name to sponsors in the summer.

The three-year deal is worth

less than £100,000 a year and supporters have accused the club of selling their heritage down the river while threatening to turn their backs on the club.

But loyalty to the club will be very hard to ignore, especially if Wycombe come out all-guns blazing with a good start to this year's campaign beginning with Stockport tomorrow and then at home to Wimbledon in the first round of the Carling Cup on Tuesday.

Boss: We're a safe bet

LAWRIE Sanchez says his young guns will steer clear of relegation danger this season and finish higher than last year.

He said: "The work we have done in pre-season has been very good and we think we can improve on it still.

"The lads are buoyant. Now we need to go and beat Stockport and take that form into league games."

Assistant boss Terry Gibson believes Wanderers will surprise a few people.

He said: "It's a new start and I think we can exceed expectations this year. I think we can threaten the play-offs. If we are in a position to do that with ten games to go it will have been a good season for us."