

Blues boss banishes thoughts of Wembley

Ainsworth has eyes on play-off semi-final against Plymouth

by **GREG STYLES**

gregory.styles@london.newsquest.co.uk

WYCOMBE manager Gareth Ainsworth believes he would be “stupid” to have thoughts about leading his side out at Wembley on May 23.

Plymouth stand between Wanderers and a trip to the iconic stadium with the two sides doing battle in the League Two play-off semi-final first leg on Saturday before Adams Park hosts the reverse fixture five days later.

Despite finishing four places and 13 points higher than the Pilgrims, the Blues boss believes John Sheridan’s team will be favourites to win when the sides take to the pitch at Home Park.

“I’m thinking about both legs but Wembley hasn’t crossed my mind at all,” insisted Ainsworth.

“You hear it and you hear it banded about, but I’d be very stupid to get carried away and think about Wembley before we’ve even played Plymouth, who are a big team and it will be a tough game.

“They’re going to have a big crowd down there, they’ve got plenty of money down there, they were in the Championship not so long ago and we are truly the underdogs in this game, although the league position would say otherwise.”

Southend, who finished fifth and play Stevenage in the other semi-final, have been installed as the bookmakers’ favourites to win the play-offs with Wycombe and Plymouth joint second favourites.

The Blues boss has already seen his team written off once this term when they were a short price for the drop at the start of the season, and he isn’t fazed that his team are once again being underestimated.

“This is not about form now. I don’t know how people can put odds on the four teams because it’s not quite a lottery but it has a real tournament feel to it. It’s not the league – you’ve got to forget what’s gone,” he said.

“You really do have to forget what’s gone and you have to forget what could potentially come. It’s all about the now. We have a team in



Gareth Ainsworth will get his first taste of the play-offs as a manager when Wanderers go head-to-head with Plymouth Argyle in the semi-final first leg on Saturday.

front of us that we’ve got to outdo over two legs to get to the final of the play-offs, which would be fantastic.”

Wanderers took the most points on their travels in the Football League this season – amassing 46 points – with three of those coming via a 1-0 win at Home Park in September.

Ainsworth’s team will make the 440-mile round trip to Devon first up before returning to Adams Park for the second leg, with the Blues boss believing his team have no discernible advantage by playing at home second.

“I was at Preston when we played our second leg at home to

Torquay, and I was at Cardiff when our second leg was at home to Bristol City and we managed to get through to the final on both occasions, so it would be great if it’s third time lucky,” he said.

“It really doesn’t matter for me. People would say our away form is better than our home form this year and if there is an advantage we can’t visibly see it at the moment.”

It will be Ainsworth’s first experience of the play-offs as a manager and a victory would be the perfect present for his 42nd birthday, which he celebrates on Sunday.

The Wycombe boss said there would be no celebrations on his

actual birthday as he will be travelling straight from Devon to watch Southend play Stevenage at Broadhall Way – a journey which he hopes to be making having seen his side take a step closer to Wembley.

He said: “The prize is there for whoever can get through the play-offs but these are big games against Plymouth. Like I’ve done in the season I will take it one game at a time.

“You think about both legs because you know they’re both happening and if, tactically, you want to do anything different for both games you can do so. We’re looking forward to giving it a right go down there and seeing what we can get.”

Gaz coy on Ingram injury

GARETH Ainsworth remained tight lipped on whether ‘keeper Matt Ingram will be fit to face Plymouth tomorrow.

The Wanderers boss said he would not comment on the status of his injured players, instead stating that he will give “every-one every possible chance to play on Saturday”.

Ingram had played every minute of every game this season before a collision with his own player Sam Wood against Northampton on Saturday forced him to limp off with what looked to be a knee injury.

The 21-year-old was replaced by Alex Lynch, who made his professional debut having previously spent time on loan at Southern League side Burnham this season.

Ainsworth’s other options to replace Ingram are 45-year-old Barry Richardson, who hasn’t played a professional game since 2005, and 20-year-old Charlie Horlock, who is yet to make his debut for the club.

“If called upon I’m sure Alex can do a good job,” said Ainsworth.

“That’s what professional footballers are. They wait for their chance and if Alex gets it I’ll have no worries about sticking him in, but we’ll see where Matt is first.”

Matt McClure and Sam Saunders have missed the last two game through injury, although the latter was cleared to play a part for Blues in the play-offs after a loan extension was agreed with Brentford.

Deals were also struck with the Bees to allow Alfie Mawson and Nico Yennaris to stay at Adams Park while Millwall gave their consent for Fred Onyedinma to stay at the club.

Ainsworth said: “We’re stretched to the limit again, so without our loan players we wouldn’t be able to field anything like a competitive team.

“I’m thankful to the loan clubs that have let us have them and it’s a real boost.”

