

WANDERERS

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'It's been a magical season'



Blues striker Steven Craig.

'MAGICAL' was the word Steven Craig used when asked to sum up Wycombe Wanderers' run to the League Two play-off final.

A visibly emotional Craig was still coming to terms with the fact that Blues had fallen at the final hurdle as he described losing on penalties as a "brutal" way to end the season.

In the build-up to the match the 34-year-old said the team's performance en route to finishing fourth in the league was beyond his and the rest of the squad's expectations following the season of struggle which preceded it.

"I said before the game that regardless of what happens it's been a successful season," the striker said.

"It's been magical stuff compared to last year and once you get there you want to get over the final hurdle and we just fell short.

"If that group of players in there show the same grit and determination next season then we won't be far away."

A hamstring injury sustained just minutes after the forward's goal in the play-off semi-final first leg against Plymouth ruled him out of the second leg, and may have influenced Gareth Ainsworth's decision to start with him on the bench at Wembley.

The Scotsman entered the action after 85 minutes in place of Hogan Ephraim and came close to creating a winning goal in normal time when Aaron Pierre headed his cross goalwards, only to see it tipped over the bar.

Craig admitted that he thought Wanderers had done enough to win the match before Joe Pigott's late leveller, and revealed that Ainsworth had only positive words for his team in the dressing room afterwards.

"He said that none of us are entitled to be down about what we've achieved this year, the way we've conducted ourselves over the 46 league games, in the two play-off games and here at Wembley. We should be proud of ourselves and I'm proud of the boys," said Craig.

"I know we're beaten finalists but I still feel that it's a remarkable achievement.

"For us to be in top three for seven months, to finish fourth in the league and with the way we've conducted ourselves over the two legs against Plymouth and the final the staff have got to take massive credit for that."

Penalty pain at Wembley as Blues miss out on promotion

Injury time leveller denies Wycombe before shoot-out agony

Wycombe Wanderers 1, Southend United 1, (Southend win 7-6 on penalties) GREG STYLES reports

FAIRYTALES aren't supposed to end like this. You could almost hear the hearts of those in light and dark blue quarters breaking as Sam Wood's penalty was tipped onto the post.

The midfielder lashed the ball away in fury as it fell back to him while a hoard of delirious Southend players ran past him and mobbed goalkeeper Daniel Bentley.

Wood collapsed on the turf, his team mates sunk to their knees and Wycombe fans looked on in despair as the mass of yellow shirts revelled in their victory.

Wanderers' despair was compounded by the knowledge that they were just 24 seconds away from winning the game. Just 24 seconds.

Southend had seemingly run out of steam, run out of ideas and a handful of their fans were even caught on camera leaving early to run for the train, only to come sprinting back up Wembley Way when a roar went up from the West end of the national stadium.

Anyone who has watched the Chairboys this season knows you leave a game involving Gareth Ainsworth's side early at your own peril.

Just ask those who missed Paul Hayes' 102nd minute penalty against Exeter, Alfie Mawson's winner on the final day against Northampton with the final kick of the game or Matt Ingram's last gasp penalty save against Stevenage.

Ainsworth has watched his side produce late heroics on a number of occasions this season but at Wembley he saw his team fall foul of a cruel late blow.

The momentum was with Blues, they had seemingly snuffed out what little threat the Shrimpers weary legs could muster and they stood on the cusp of a return to League One after a three-year absence.

Joe Jacobson had stepped up and



Blues celebrate the opener.



Sam Wood's penalty was saved leaving him inconsolable (inset).

grabbed a tense game by the scruff of the neck when he broke the deadlock with a curling, dipping free-kick which struck the underside of the cross bar before rebounding down, clipping Bentley on the back and rolling into the net.

Cue pandemonium among the blue half of Wembley. Jacobson found himself at the bottom of a mound of Wycombe shirts as he stared through the open roof with delight at what he'd just done.

The left-back had missed out on playing at the home of English football twice before in his career, both through the terms of loan deals, but he looked destined to be the match winner on this occasion.

After the delight of scoring had sunk in the supporters in the stands turned to their watches as every second began to feel like a minute and every minute like an hour.

The half-time whistle came and went, play restarted for the final time and soon after the whole crowd rose to their feet as a chance presented itself for the man of the moment, Aaron Holloway, to rubbustamp his team's promotion.

The striker has come into his own in the final two months of the season and his ability to produce moments of magic was exemplified in the final minutes of extra-time.

Facing his own goal and just inside his own half, the striker shrugged off the attentions of Southend captain John White and burst past Cian Bolger as he galloped towards the penalty area amidst an almighty roar from the



Pictures by ANITA ROSS MARSHALL

Chairboys support.

The far corner was gaping as he reached the edge of the box but his delay in unleashing a shot allowed the covering Ben Coker to make what proved to be a crucial tackle.

That reprieve sparked a renewed sense of hope for Phil Brown's side although the man who ultimately hauled Southend level admitted that even he was "starting to think it was over".

As Myles Weston stole a yard on Marcus Bean to whip a cross in from the left-hand side the match was in its dying embers – the 122nd minute of an absorbing contest.

The winger's cross met the head of Barry Corr, who directed it into the path of substitute Joe Pigott. The striker had his work cut out with four Wanderers players lining the way to goal but his left-foot shot somehow found its way past them and Alex Lynch before nestling in the bottom corner.

Despair for fans, players and manager alike ensued as victory was snatched from their grasp in the final throws of the match.

Ainsworth rallied his players and marched them over to their fans as he sought to rouse one last effort from a season which has proved so fruitful compared to the horror of last season.

Wanderers kicked second in the shoot-out and their destiny was back in their own hands when the feet of Lynch kept out Coker's penalty with the score at 1-1.

Alfie Mawson signed off his loan spell with an emphatic spot-kick to press their advantage home before

Ryan Leonard responded in kind.

The ever reliable Paul Hayes buried his effort with aplomb before Jack Payne kept the heat on by sending the ball past Lynch.

Matt Bloomfield, who replaced the injured Sam Saunders after just two minutes, strode up next. Bentley guessed right and parried the midfielder's spot kick away as the pendulum swung back again.

Bean took the shoot-out to sudden death before Jacobson and Holloway converted, leaving Wood as the next man under the spotlight following Bolger's successful conversion.

The two managers painted a picture of respect on the touchline as they stood side-by-side, revealing afterwards that they had not wanted to celebrate in front of each other.

True to his word, Brown embraced his opposite number and consoled him after Wood saw the 16th penalty of the shoot-out saved.

The reaction of the Wycombe fans was one of immense pride, despite their obvious disappointment, as they recognised the achievements of a season which were beyond their wildest dreams before a ball had been kicked in August.

Wanderers: Lynch, Yennaris (Murphy), Mawson, Pierre, Jacobson, Wood, Saunders (Bloomfield), Bean, Ephraim (Craig), Holloway, Hayes

Subs not used: Horlock, McClure, Kretschmar, Onyedinnma

Goals: Jacobson 95

Man of the match: Joe Jacobson.

Attendance: 38,252