

Stewart is welcomed back with open arms

PLAYER FIRST ON MANAGER'S LIPS DESPITE ACRIMONIOUS DEPARTURE

ANTHONY Stewart was the first name on manager Gareth Ainsworth's wish-list to replace fans' hero Alfie Mawson this summer – despite his acrimonious departure from the club 12 months earlier.

That is why the Blues boss had no problems offering the olive branch to the 22-year-old who just the previous summer had snubbed Wycombe's offer of a new contract.

But Stewart quickly found that the grass wasn't greener on the other side. Reputed interest from Championship sides did not turn into offers and it wasn't until November that he finally landed a club, signing for League One Crewe. He only made ten appearances for The Railwaymen, however, and at the end of the season he was left looking for a club again.

But Ainsworth wasn't going to let the past cloud his judgement and when loanees Mawson returned to Brentford in the summer clutching his Wycombe Wanderers Player of The Year trophies before signing for Barnsley, Stewart was the man he turned to.

He said: "There was no doubt. As soon as I knew Anthony had become available he was the one who I wanted to go for.

"He left here under some bad advice with a chance to play at a higher level and I don't think anybody wouldn't take that opportunity, it was just the advice he took.

"He's learned a lot and he has matured so much as a young man. He left as a boy and he really has come back as a young man and we will help him with that development away from football which we do with a lot of young players. We have this life academy that the chairman came up with and I think it's great.

"Some of the boys are learning how to cook and how to iron and stand on their own two feet, paying bills and stuff like that.

Anthony is part of that development group off the pitch and I think that will also play a part in improving him on the pitch."

And he reckons that the new Stewart is the perfect replacement for Mawson and an ideal partner for central defender Aaron Pierre.

He said: "We knew what Alfie was and we knew what he could become, but there was no way we thought he would get there in one season but he did. Anthony also has huge potential to be a good player.

"There were Championship clubs looking at him two years ago and we intend to get those Championship clubs back looking at him. He's got to work hard. He's had a bit of a reality check, but there's no looking back at Wycombe Wanderers, he's got to look forward.

"He's got a fresh hunger and Anthony Stewart is going to be a big part of my squad. He was a big part in keeping this club in the Football League two years ago and then he went off for a year.

"But I'm sure he's loving being part of this group again and Anthony Stewart and Aaron Pierre at the back are two guys you would not want to come up against. They complement each other very well."

Stewart's defensive partner Pierre is equally excited about the partnership.

He said: "He's a brilliant defender. I played with him only a handful of times when I was on loan here but our partnership was good.

"Hopefully we can excel like me and Alfie did last season. I think we've got a decent understanding of one another, so I don't think it will take too long to get to the same sort of place where me and Alfie got to during last season."



Anthony Stewart has returned to Adams Park
Picture: Anita Ross Marshall

CAUTION Club is a 'small fish in pond', says boss Wanderers' points target is 'realistic'

CHAIRBOYS chief Gareth Ainsworth says setting his team a target of 61 points for the new season – a whopping 23-point deduction on last season's total – is simply being realistic.

Last year's league table said Wanderers were the fourth best team in the division with a club record 84 points, but this summer has seen an unrivalled spending spree from many of their League Two opponents.

Ainsworth told the *Bucks Free Press*: "If the fans want something more sexy, they are not going to get

it from me.

"I am going to give them realism and a base target that I believe we can achieve. Anything after that will be a big success.

"Sixty one points last year would have been 12th in League Two and I think that's a realistic target for us next year for a club of our size.

"There are teams that we are up against who are paying ridiculous amounts of money this season and there are clubs with ridiculous squad sizes. We are a real small fish in this pond.

"I use the analogy of the apple

tree when I'm signing players. I'm not the one who can pick the shiny ripe ones.

I've got to look on the floor and pick the fallen ones that escaped everyone else and who I know can become those shiny ripe fruits that everyone wants."

"We can't wave a magic wand, and I think we over-achieved last year and had a little bit of luck along the way as well."

Wanderers fans fuelled by the enthusiasm of their club's meteoric rise over the previous 12 months, where their team went from being a

whisker away from relegation into the non-league circuit, to Wembley play-off finalists, will not be shocked by the club's modest points target for this campaign.

Even when Wanderers were leading the table last season, the club insisted their only target was to hit the safety mark and to survive in the division.

But Blues supporters will know from last year's experiences that Ainsworth and his team are not the kind of men who will settle for a campaign played out at anything less than full throttle.