

Gareth Ainsworth: ‘It’s a unique model but it works for Wycombe’

Wycombe Wanderers have no academy, reserve team or goalkeeping coach but the club have gone from turmoil to second in League Two

[Ben Fisher](#)



Wycombe’s Gareth Ainsworth would like to manage at a higher level but ‘I wouldn’t be able to just ... leave’. Photograph: Christian Sinibaldi for the Guardian

It is Tuesday, just after midday at the [Wycombe](#) Wanderers training ground, where an end-of-session shooting drill is coming to a climax. Gareth Ainsworth, the manager wearing a pink bib, smiles after missing the target. “I still join in,” he says at ease in his office before lunch in the canteen. “But I’m way gone now of keeping up with the boys.”

At 44, Ainsworth, technically, is the player-manager but the success of his small squad, moulded over five years, means his swansong at Northampton 18 months ago is likely to be permanent, though he would play if he “had to”. Ainsworth’s team is a hybrid of “generals”, seasoned professionals and youngsters, many enjoying their first taste of regular football. Wycombe are second in [League Two](#), unbeaten in eight games and have scored 21 league goals this year, more than any team in the country.

“This is probably the first year where I have had to think: ‘Do I really need to be registered now’ next year?’ The answer is ‘no’ because we really have built this club up from a position of real chaos to a solid base, which we are really proud of.”

Ainsworth is not your typical manager, a part-time rock star, the lead singer of the [Cold Blooded Hearts](#) – and nor are Wycombe an ordinary club. They have no academy – they scrapped it in 2012 – reserve team or goalkeeping coach and Ainsworth's right-hand man, Richard Dobson, is the only other member of first-team coaching staff. "The amount of people who come up to me around the area and say my son's a decent player, do you have an academy?" he says, "and it hurts me big time. It hurts me."

"It's a very unique model of just the first team but it works," Ainsworth says. He sits in on meetings with the fan-owned club's board and still enjoys looking at the "P&L sheets for the stadium, and what people are spending per head" and that business brain has helped assemble a competitive squad made up of free transfers and loans. "I honestly do spend it like it's my own money and I always will do, and I think that was the upbringing I had anyway. If I can save a bit, great. It feels like it is my place but I think that is just how I am; I have never been a flamboyant sort of spender in any walk."

In the summer before the 2014-15 season, the scarcity of resources was laid bare. With no nets at their training base and a host of new signings – all freebies – about to report for the first day of the season, Ainsworth turned to eBay. He bought a couple of 'Buy It Now' £29.95 full-size nets. "I knew the club was in absolute financial turmoil. Purchase orders, they were saying please don't put them in unless absolutely necessary, and I knew if I put one in it would be put to the bottom of the pile and maybe we wouldn't have goal nets for the first day of pre-season."

The other indicative state of Wycombe's off-field troubles was when, before dodging relegation to the Conference thanks to a 3-0 win over Torquay on the final day of the season in May 2014, he believes the club "couldn't afford to sack me". That kind of situation is in the past with the club on course to achieve the goal of being "sustainable in League One", from their five-year plan set out four years ago, 12 months early.

Ainsworth's work has attracted admirers and last week Wycombe rejected an approach from Barnsley for his services. "I wouldn't be able to just ... leave," he says, pausing for thought. "I do want to manage higher but it would be a wrench, you know."

He makes captivating company, unhurried over an hour of conversation that spans getting sent off on the day Jordon Ibe made his full Wycombe debut as a 15-year-old, his pride at [nurturing Alfie Mawson](#), and the transition from tracksuit to suit, and 'Gaz' to 'gaffer'. The latter, although seemingly trivial, dawned on him on that seismic Saturday at Plainmoor.

“It was a massive, a massive change in me. I just went: ‘Right, that’s not worked. You are not a player any more, you are not one of the lads any more, you are not Gaz, you have to become the gaffer.’ The likes of Ian Holloway and John Rudge; I still call them gaffer down the phone now, and it’s just that respect thing and they’ll always be my gaffer. I said to the boys, let’s have this separation. I was too together, too mixed in with them.”

Ainsworth has more than just steadied the ship since and such achievements and a little patience, make him the fourth-longest serving manager in England. “It’s ridiculous. Five years is nothing. You get people who work in businesses for 25 years and 30 years, and they are still not longest serving. If I am with Wycombe in five years, I am assuming we have gone higher.”

The job is consuming but Ainsworth stresses the importance of being able to switch off. Monday night is band practice. “We are trying to get some stuff down on a CD – that would be awesome,” he says, shortly after his AC/DC Back In Black ringtone sounds. “It will never get into the dressing room, believe me,” he says, laughing. “Whatever I’ve achieved in football, if I could have a CD with a few songs, that would be as big as that.”

On Tuesday evenings he plays six-a-side with the dads from his children’s school. He still plays the odd Sunday League game for Finchampstead too, after they registered him without his knowledge. “I am becoming more of an off-the-pitch guy now, and it absolutely kills me. There is nothing better than playing football but management comes a close second.”