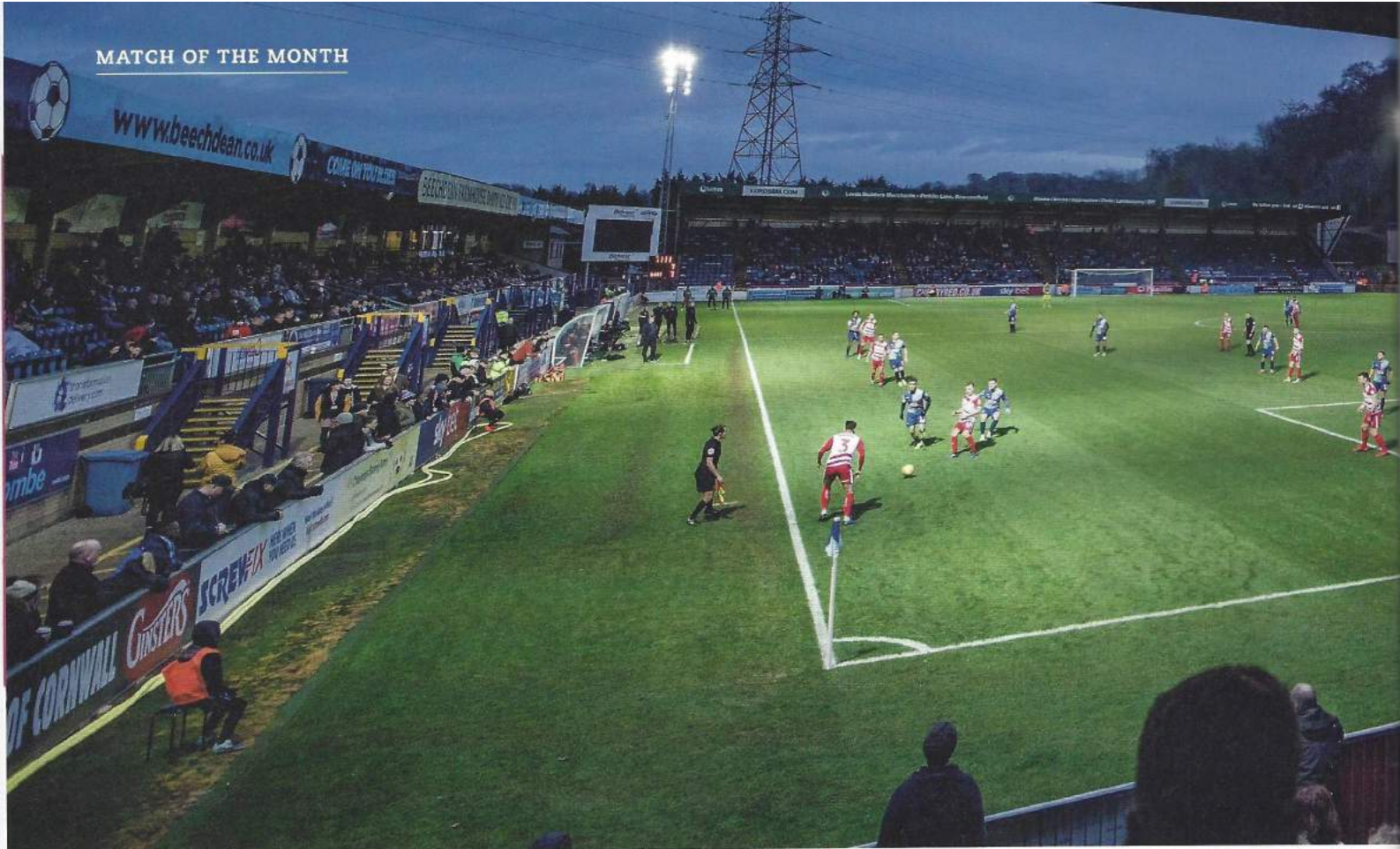




Wycombe Wanderers 3 Doncaster Rovers 2

Once one of the “new breed” of ex-non-League teams, Wycombe’s long-serving manager, veteran squad and recent promotion screams of stability – but the supporters in charge now face a difficult decision about the direction they want their club to take

Date JANUARY 12, 2019 Words HUW RICHARDS Photos SIMON GILL



Even in mid-January there is an unaffected warmth about Wycombe Wanderers. The smiles in reception at Adams Park are genuinely welcoming, while a framed shirt signed by Alfie Mawson shows how much a single-season loanee enjoyed his time here.

If High Wycombe has a capacity for venom, it is elsewhere. Owned since 2012 by their supporters’ trust, they cheerfully brandish the least trendy, most un-focus-grouped of nicknames, Chairboys, an echo of local history that in a better-ordered world would earn regular friendlies against Los Colchoneros (the Mattress Makers, aka Atlético Madrid).

Non-League heritage is cherished. A well-maintained honours board gives multiple Berks & Bucks Cups and Isthmian League titles the same weight as more recent triumphs, tidily framed cuttings on the press room wall tell the story of their 1931 Amateur Cup win and the

Oxford- and Cambridge-blue quartered shirts echo amateur days much as Doncaster’s red and white hoops have a whiff of rugby league.

Yet none of the clubs who have made it to the League for the first time since automatic promotion was introduced in 1987 have put their old status more decisively behind it. “It’s between us and Burton Albion,” says club and Trust chairman Trevor Stroud, musing who has been most successful.

Burton’s two Championship seasons were a step just beyond Wycombe, whose early shooting-star trajectory topped out at sixth in League One (then called Division Two) in their second season. But they can now point to 25 unbroken years of League status, jeopardised only once, in 2014. They reached League and FA Cup semi-finals, crowds averaging around 5,000 are the best among the “new” League clubs and after last season’s promotion

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they are jostling with Fleetwood, Burton and Accrington in League One's mid-table.

Characteristically of Trust-owned clubs they have given manager Gareth Ainsworth what Brian Flynn once termed "the most valuable commodity you can give a manager – time". Appointed in November 2012, Ainsworth trails only Morecambe's Jim Bentley for continuous service.

But the financial constraints on small Trust-owned clubs – Stroud reckons their budget is among the four smallest in League One – have prompted a search for fresh capital, with momentous choices imminent. A five-match unbeaten charge towards the play-off fringe has been followed by four consecutive defeats, redirecting attention towards the relegation zone only five points below.

Paths that have rarely crossed may be diverging again. Doncaster arrive for only their third League visit to Wycombe as League One's form team, sixth with 20 points from their last nine games. John Marquis's seven goals in that time make him the division's top scorer with 15. On a mild afternoon a crowd of 4,747 half-fills Adams Park, a tidier, more attractive arena, shoehorned between tree-lined ridges, than the approach through an industrial estate promises.

Veterans abound. There are few league matches in which both teams field their all-time League appearance record holders –

*Above The floodlights kick in at Adams Park
Below Colourfully dressed fans purchase their tickets for the game; a Doncaster player signs autographs on the short trip between team coach and changing rooms*

the venerable James Coppinger, 38 two days before and with more than 600 games in all competitions for Rovers, faces Wycombe's Matt Bloomfield, roughly three years and 100 matches behind. Still fewer also feature an all-time leading scorer. Nathan Tyson's 50 goals for Wycombe inspire respect rather than awe, particularly compared to Tony Horseman's 416 in Isthmian League days, but are nevertheless their League record.

Ainsworth defines himself post-match as "more an emotional than a coldly analytical manager", but is clear-eyed in reckoning his team had the better of a goalless first half. Nick Freeman's deft footwork catches the eye in midfield while wing-back Jason McCarthy works hard and purposefully down the hosts' right flank.





continued

Yet Doncaster's virtues are evident. Resolute defence marshalled by centre-backs Andy Butler and Tom Anderson forces Wycombe wide and denies penetration nearer goal, while they hit ferociously fast on the break. That pattern is epitomised around the quarter-hour. Played in on the right by McCarthy, Paris Cowan-Hall's cross-shot is tipped over by Rovers keeper Ian Lawlor.

From the corner Rovers midfielder Matty Blair wins possession, exchanges passes and hares into the Wycombe half, going box to box in around eight seconds. He befuddles defender Sido Jombati into falling, and is clear on goal. As Blair prepares to shoot, Dominic Gape interposes a deeply risky but impeccably timed foot, and the ball shoots wide for a corner.

Mostly reactive in the first half, Rovers impose their tempo in the second. Marquis, proclaimed "some player" by the generously appreciative Ainsworth, moves with an awareness rare among lower-league poachers. Pacy Leeds loanee Mallik Wilks is foiled twice in rapid succession.

Faster and more incisive than Wycombe, Rovers are rewarded on the hour. Adam El-

Abd, yet another Wycombe veteran, clears no further than a lurking Rover. His crisp first-time pass finds Coppinger who curves in a cross which Marquis, escaping his marker, slides calmly into the corner. Ten minutes later Marquis turns provider, laying a pass back for David Rowe to strike home from close range.

"Four losses on the spin and two down to the league's form team," as he says later, Ainsworth recognises his team's predicament and responds quickly. Tyson gives way to Adebayo Akinfenwa, like him born in May 1982. Forward Scott Kashket, whose slight, athletic build contrasts almost comically with his massively muscular team-mate Akinfenwa, replaces Bloomfield.

How one sees what follows is a matter of perspective. Doncaster boss Grant McCann's contention that "Akinfenwa coming on did not change the game" is less grudging than it sounds, and aimed at his own players: "We need to be more organised at 2-0 up. We'd had so much control, but we stopped doing the things that got us there." Ainsworth also prefers to talk about his own players: "The character of these boys is unbelievable."

Like Peter Crouch, Akinfenwa has much more constructive skill than stereotype predicts. As Ainsworth says, "the ball starts to stick at their end for a bit longer". In the 77th minute Cowan-Hall strikes, his angled drive sailing across a crowded penalty area and just inside the far post.



Doncaster look stunned – a home crowd naturally subdued 15 minutes earlier is now alive with a sense of possibility, roaring at every movement forward

inevitability to what comes next. Wycombe loft a free-kick into the box. Lawlor comes for it but is left stranded, and aghast, helpless defenders watch Cowan-Hall calmly loop a header into the empty net.

Cue bedlam. Ainsworth says after the match that “I almost broke down when the third went in. It was a rush of emotion you can’t describe.” There are still five minutes to play, enough for Doncaster to press without really threatening, another jostlefest post-whistle and four more bookings, so that a match which was never nasty or malicious and saw only one yellow card in the first 75 minutes ends with nine. “That happens, when it gets emotional and somebody comes from two down to win,” says Ainsworth.

McCann shows a composure which augurs as well as Doncaster’s results for his future in management. He makes his view of Kettle’s refereeing clear, while avoiding direct criticism: “I don’t want to say anything I might regret, and it was not his fault that we lost the game.” His main concern is that “we mustn’t let it happen again”, so it is as well he can’t know Rovers will give up a 90th-minute equaliser to Burton a week hence.

For Wycombe there is both the pure, unalloyed joy of the unlikely come-from-behind win and a potentially season-defining shift in momentum. Always prone to streaks, they follow with wins over Bristol Rovers and Plymouth, moving from near the bottom to close to the top of League One’s long mid-table.

Yet joyous as this is, Wycombe’s most important current events are probably off the pitch, with the Trust’s six and a half years of control possibly ending. An Electoral Reform

Society ballot of the Trust’s 811 “legacy members” – those who have had season tickets for at least three years – to sell a majority holding to American venture capitalists Jim Collis and Bill Luby, previously involved with Derby County, was postponed following the emergence of rival bidders led by former Wycombe player Andrew Harman.

But the underlying financial issues will not go away. Stroud says: “We need around an extra £600,000 per year to sustain the club at its current level. In some years we get what we call ‘football fortune’ like our FA Cup tie against Spurs, but you can’t count on that and we haven’t had it this year. There’s a choice. At the moment we’re punching above our weight, thanks not least to Gareth’s ability to persuade experienced players to play for him for less money than they might get elsewhere. We can carry on as we are, but with the likelihood that we’ll drop down the pyramid at some point. Or we can look for investment to sustain and build on what has been achieved.”

A community share issue raised significant money, but not enough to bridge the gap. Stroud says he knows and understands that memories of the previous owner, Steve Hayes, who left the club £3 million in debt, would lead some to vote against handing over to new majority shareholders.

If and when the vote comes, it will be a tough choice. To vote either way is a leap of faith, a judgment of Solomon on that most fundamental of questions: “What sort of club do we want to be?” But unlike most fans, Wycombe’s Trust members get to make that choice, rather than having it made for them, and while on an upward trajectory rather than in the crisis attending most decisions about the future of lower-league clubs.

As yet this feels more consolation than transformation. Maybe it would have been had referee Trevor Kettle sent Gape off for an 80th-minute tackle that left Rovers midfielder Herbie Kane needing treatment: McCann certainly believes it was a red-card offence and both sets of players converge angrily.

Doncaster still look likelier to score. But while the confrontations are more jostle than brawl they animate the crowd. As the clock ticks towards 90, Akinfenwa plays a deft ball out to the right, Cowan-Hall jinks back towards the centre and finds midfielder Curtis Thompson, around 25 yards out.

Thompson, today’s programme cover pin-up, takes a couple of touches and shuffles right before unleashing an unstoppable missile into the far left-hand corner. Doncaster, as well they might, look stunned. A home crowd naturally subdued 15 minutes earlier is now alive with a sense of possibility, roaring at every movement forward. With six minutes of injury time announced, there is an

Clockwise from top Wycombe defend a short corner; Gareth Ainsworth talks tactics on the sideline; the view from the top of the main stand; Adebayo Akinfenwa celebrates at the final whistle after making an impact from the bench; stopping off momentarily to catch the action on the way to the toilets

