



WANTED: Gareth Ainsworth

GARETH CHATTER DOESN'T SURPRISE

GARETH Ainsworth may have rejected the advances of Sunderland - but speculation about his future is not going away.

Ainsworth, 46, recently turned down a two-year deal at the Stadium of Light to extend his seven-year reign at Adams Park. But having propelled Wycombe from the brink of relegation to the National League into the upper echelons of League One, Dominic Gape reckons the former QPR winger will be a target for every Championship club.

"We weren't worried about the Sunderland links," says Gape. "Gareth is a pretty honest guy, and if anything was happening we'd be the first to know. But it's something we'll all have to get used to now. If we're going to perform well and get noticed, it's only natural that the gaffer will get offered jobs."

"The culture in football now, managers get sacked all the time. With everything he's achieved here, it's an obvious name to put towards any job in the Championship and League One."

"You saw it with the Cowley brothers - young English managers who'd done an outstanding job in the lower leagues. They were deservedly linked with pretty much every job going and I think you'll now see the same thing with Gareth. All we can do is keep our heads down and ignore it."

Ainsworth, though, could yet be tempted to remain at Adams Park long-term by the arrival of ambitious new owner Rob Couch. The American lawyer - who has bought a 75 per cent stake in the club - will invest £2.2m to settle Wanderers' existing debts and make an additional £1m available. His company will also fund a new 15-year lease on Adams Park at £150,000 a year.

"I want to commit to you every day that we will be making this the best club in England both on and off the pitch," he said. "I can't wait to get started."

BIG INTERVIEW:

'WE'RE A SMALL CLUB BUT WE'VE GOT HUNGER TO



By Chris Dunlavy

DOMINIC Gape was 14 and a hot prospect at Southampton when he made a deal with his parents.

"From my home in Dorset to training at Staplewood was a three-hour round trip," explains the Wycombe midfielder, now 25.

"My parents drove that for me four times a week for three years. They never complained. All they asked was that, in return, I take my education seriously."

Gape proved a man - or boy - of his word. Straight A's in his GCSEs. A diploma with distinction as part of his scholarship at Saints.

And ten years on, he continues to hold up his end of the bargain by studying for a degree in business management with the Open University.

"I'm in my third year of six, so it's a bit of a slog," laughs Gape, who has made more than 100 appearances for the Chairboys since arriving from Southampton, initially on loan, in 2016.

Recovery

"But I'm enjoying it, and I think it's the right thing to do. You look at Juan Mata, who has multiple degrees. Vincent Kompany has a masters in business administration. They are both players I look up to."

"It was an obvious step for me. As a youth team footballer, your days are full. Then you go into the first-team, where there's a lot more games and therefore a lot more recovery. You have a lot of down time and need to be off your feet."

But doesn't that mean jumping in a golf buggy or settling into a lengthy session of FIFA or Fortnite?

"For some people, yeah," says Gape. "And that's fine. If people enjoy playing video games and that takes their mind off football, great. But personally, I do need to be stimulated in a way that challenges me a little bit."

"As a footballer, I want to be able to come away from training and still feel like I'm progressing. If you're just sitting at home - especially



if you're injured - it can feel like everybody else is moving forward and you're just stagnating. This way, I can take my mind off football but still feel like I'm using the time wisely."

"The degree I'm doing is very broad. It covers several different aspects. But I'm fascinated by how businesses work, so it's not a chore."

"In that sense, my mindset about education now is completely different to what it was when I was 16 or 17 and had to do it."

"It's interesting. It's stimulating. You want to do it, and you're doing it for yourself. It takes away that thought process of 'I've got to do all this work' or 'I've got to give up three hours'."

"Speaking to the older boys here, they quite often wish they'd spent their time more wisely. I find a lot of older professionals doing what I'm doing, but it's a bit of a race against time. I'll have my degree by 28, so I'll hopefully be well set."

On the pitch, too, Gape has proved an apt pupil. A callow novice when he arrived on a six-month loan from Saints in August 2016, he swiftly

adapted to the hurly burly of League Two and proved so impressive that Wanderers signed him on a permanent deal the following January.

He has since become a mainstay of the side that won promotion from League Two in 2018, scrapped to survival last term and are now battling the likes Ipswich and Sunderland for promotion to the Championship.

Asked why he has succeeded where so many top-flight starlets fail, Gape initially cites his own adaptability.

"Coming out of a Premier League academy, the technical aspects of your game are not in question," he says.

Toughness

"What people want to see is your mental toughness. Your willingness to do the ugly side of the game. I recognised that, and made sure I showed it."

"I'm not the biggest central midfielder, but I won more headers than I should. I was very aggressive and tenacious. I knew it was a

make-or-break six months, and I did everything to impress."

Of equal importance, however, was the education provided by a squad of veterans frequently dubbed Dad's Army.

Gaffer Gareth Ainsworth - now with seven years as a manager at Adams Park under his belt - retired at 39 and in seasons past often fielded teams with an average age north of 30. Even now, skipper Matt Bloomfield (35) and striker Adebayo Akinfenwa (37) are first-team regulars.

"I often speak about the culture of this club and I can't emphasise enough how important that was for me," says Gape.

"The older professionals at the club - it's not just what they say, it's the example they set. When you're a young kid and see a 35-year-old guy staying after training until 3 o'clock doing his prep and his stretching just to get himself right - how can you go home at 12 and look yourself in the mirror? It makes you realise that if you don't follow that level of dedication, you're never going to stay in the race."

"Look at Ebere Eze, who is

doing brilliantly at QPR. We had him on loan a couple of years ago and straightaway we were like 'Wow, this guy has got something special'."

"But he also got a similar education to me by coming here and, if you ask him, I'm sure he'll tell you just how important that was."

And that culture, says Gape, is the secret to the Chairboys' unexpected promotion charge.

"Going into the season, we were odds-on favourites to go down," he says. "When you see that, it does put a bit of fire in your belly. You want to prove people wrong."

"Yes, we're a small club, and you've got teams in the league like Sunderland who aren't remotely comparable to Wycombe in terms of resources. But there's more to football than history, size and budgets. People don't consider that we've had the same manager, the same spine and identity for several years."

"Sheffield United are the perfect example. They've got a settled team, an identity and a culture. Everybody knows their role, and what's expected. That counts for a hell of a lot."

DOMINIC GAPE CLUB BUT WE'VE UPSET THE ODDS'

EXPERIENCE: Wycombe striker Adebayo Akinfenwa and, left, midfielder Matt Bloomfield



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Dominic Gape

Coming out of a Premier League academy, what people want to see is your mental toughness

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