

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Happy in the hot seat as football's longest-serving manager



Gareth Ainsworth is still working wonders with Wycombe Wanderers, reports **Simon Hart**

November is a month of anniversaries for Gareth Ainsworth and Wycombe Wanderers. Friday the 8th marked seven years since his appointment as manager was made permanent. Yesterday was 10 years since his first match as a player after arriving, initially on loan, from Queens Park Rangers. If that debut at Millwall was a day to forget – “I went to overhead-kick the ball, Tony Craig went to head it, and I ended up breaking his cheekbone” – there have been many to remember.

A new addition, he tells us, featured Pete Couhig, nephew of the club's new American majority shareholder Rob Couhig, and Ainsworth's 13-year-old son Kane, and it followed a recent home fixture when the manager's recording of “The Wanderer”, backed by his band The Cold Blooded Hearts, got an airing at Adams Park.

“Rob turned around to Kane and said, ‘Can you hear that? That’s your dad’. And Kane’s face just lit up. That was a fantastic moment. It’s probably semi-embarrassing but not like holding his hand and going to school – semi-cool and semi-embarrassing.”

For Wycombe supporters, English football's longest-serving

manager is more than just semi-cool, and not only for his impressive coiffure, curling around the collar of his lucky blue shirt on the afternoon we meet. Wycombe sit top of League One, a club re-energised by Couhig's takeover, approved by the club's Trust members last month. And Ainsworth, 46, is enjoying the fresh impetus.

“The club was on the brink, honestly,” he reflects. Yet from having to “release nine because of budget cuts” last May, he received a near-£2m budget from the “genuine” Couhig to rebuild. The League One table suggests he recruited well. When analysing what he does best, though, Ainsworth cites something else. “Some managers are tactically brilliant, some are fearsome. I’d hope mine is relationships,” he said. “I’ll get players to do things they might not necessarily be 100 per cent about but will do it and believe in it by the time that whistle blows.”

A culture of openness helps. “I never want to be that manager who somebody's afraid to speak in front of because they're not sure if they're getting it right or wrong.” This applies as much to Josh Hart, his 23-year-old video analyst (Wycombe's first), as it does to goalkeeper Ryan Allsop, whom he commended last Sunday

Long servants

Gareth Ainsworth (Wycombe)

Seven years, 59 days

Eddie Howe (Bournemouth)

Seven years, 41 days

Sean Dyche (Burnley)

Seven years, 23 days

John Coleman (Acc Stanley)

Five years, 65 days

Jürgen Klopp (Liverpool)

Four years 45 days

Nigel Clough (Burton)

Three years, 350 days

Lee Johnson (Bristol City)

Three years 289 days

John McGreal (Colchester Utd)

Three years, 202 days

Mark Cooper (Forest Green)

Three years, 197 days

Chris Wilder (Sheffield Utd)

Three years, 194 days

for being “brave enough” to report a spectator's alleged homophobic abuse during the win at Tranmere.

The jigsaw also includes a “great tactician” alongside him in assistant manager Richard Dobson. A shared interest in the psychological side has prompted Dobson's introduction of on-field “power posturing” and their use of “trigger words in games”. More than one career has been revived at Adams

Park as a consequence: witness Adebayo Akinfenwa, released by Wimbledon at 34, but Wycombe's leading scorer in League One at 37.

His own fortunes as a manager, he believes, hinged on the 3-0 win at Torquay United on 3 May 2014, which preserved Wycombe's Football League status. “That day was the greatest learning curve of my managerial career,” Ainsworth said. “I was still learning what not to do, but on that day the power of the mind became apparent to me.

“The first 18 months I was horrendous, but I've learned a hell of a lot. What you see now is a product of that learning curve.”

A manager now comfortable in his own skin. “I used to think so much about team selection and it used to keep me awake,” he admits. “Now and again I'll have the odd dream but I sleep much better now.”

And a manager increasingly admired elsewhere, with Lincoln City, Millwall and Sunderland all linked of late. “This season there have been some solid approaches,” he says, “and, yeah, there have been decisions to have been made.”

Yet drawing inspiration from “Eddie Howe, Chris Wilder, Sean Dyche, [who] went up with their teams,” he sees Championship football as “not beyond the realms of reality now” for Wycombe.

He adds: “How many managers have moved on and failed in the first six months and dropped back down? OK, they might have a few more quid than me, the experience might have been great for them, some might have gone through bad times, but taking stock and looking around at what you've got and being happy is really big for me. In this world there's a big envy thing where we look at what other people have got and say, ‘I want that’ without really thinking about what you've got and how good it is.”

Family matters, too, for the father of three. “Having a South American missus [Donna, who is from Venezuela] has had a big effect on me. Everything is family and it's so important to have that balance.”

Balanced enough to still manage the odd midweek outing for 10th-tier Woodley United but not, he laments, to have found the time to watch the Michael Hutchence documentary, *Mystify*.

“I'm in the INXS tribute band, so it's a big one on my list,” he grins. “Never Tear Us Apart” might not always be the mantra for a manager eager to work “at a higher level”, but it fits right now. “People say managers move clubs for the challenge. Come and manage Wycombe Wanderers, it's a challenge.”