

Club Ownership



WYCOMBE'S UPPER CRUST

Colin Mafham pays a visit to Adams Park to find out how Wycombe's new US owners Rob and Pete Couhig plan to overhaul the fan experience and build a sustainable future at the club pushing for promotion.

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What do Wycombe Wanderers, Ryan Giggs, and Gary Neville have in common? Believe it or not it's Tom Kerridge's pies!

The celebrity chef's staff serves them up at the Bull & Bear bar Kerridge operates in the Grand Exchange Hotel those former Manchester United legends own in the city. As far as the League One minnows are concerned, what's good enough for the aforementioned famous Reds pair is good enough for their Wanderers.

Strange though it may sound Kerridge's upper crust savouries, along with a vegan alternative, a pint or two of Rebellion beer, and a few hours of States-style family fun, are at the forefront of a commercially based initiative being launched at Wycombe's rather less salubrious Adams Park by the club's new American owners.

On the pitch Wycombe Wanderers are doing a lot better than anyone realistically expected at the start of the season when they kicked off with one of the lowest budgets in League One after dodging relegation by the skin of their teeth last term. And Rob Couhig and his nephew, Pete, (pictured right) have no complaints on that score. What they hope to change considerably, however, is what happens off the pitch with a trademark US blueprint, tried and tested back home, but nowhere near a success story here. So far.

The Couhigs, including Rob's wife, Missy, are nothing if not ambitious and enthusiastic all rolled into one, and no one can accuse them of not putting their money where their mouths are. At the last count it was around £2.5million to clear the club's mounting debts and buy a 25-year lease on a stadium which the



Community Trust that had previously run it for seven years will, somewhat surprisingly, still have ownership of.

To be brutally honest indications that the well meaning members of that Trust had operated the club more like a friend's provident society than a profitable football business are there for all to see. Member patrons in a carpeted lounge, with a fully stocked bar and one of the best views in the ground, are charged a mere £4 per match for the privilege. Meanwhile, the floodlights aren't the brightest, one of the stand's roofs needs attention, and Wi-Fi hadn't seriously been thought about!

But after first looking at the possibility of buying Yeovil Town, Bolton Wanderers, and poor old Bury (among others) Rob and Pete took the view that Wycombe Wanderers, with all its eccentricities, was worth a go. An affluent town and closeness to London and Heathrow Airport were, apparently, significant deal sealers.

It also helped, of course, that Pete, 47, has been a 'soccer' fan since he was six, and after

selling a successful environmental business back home in Louisiana took three years off to decide what to do next. With the help of Uncle Rob, a successful lawyer and entrepreneur in his own right, League One's present over achievers are that 'next' business.

Commitment, if commitment was ever needed, came early when Couhig Jnr left his wife and three kids back home to devote 100% to giving Wycombe Wanderers the kiss of life - off the pitch at any rate. And he's thrown himself into the job with a passion that sees him watching games alongside fans in the stand rather than having a complimentary tippie as the club's chief financial officer in the boardroom. Couhig Snr, aged 70 last birthday, hopes to join him in March - pending his doctor's permission to fly so far so soon after having a new hip.

And no matter where Wycombe Wanderers stand in League One that is when, and where, the real revival business will begin - and where those Tom Kerridge pies will be put to the test ♦





to see if there are enough people in Wycombe with the appetite for what the Couhigs plan to provide.

A new 'Chairboys Village' complete with live music, that local Rebellion beer (also available to order via a cashless app) and a vegan barbeque, the first of which sold out on its debut day are already up and running. So the early signs are good.

But it won't be easy long-term. Realism has to kick in, and persuading fans to pay a fair price for what they have mostly had on the cheap for years is going to take a major charm offensive by the new owners. The proof, as they say in our part of the world, will be in the pudding!

If, against all conceivable odds, Wycombe Wanderers go on to win promotion to the Championship come May, the league money the club can expect will rocket from around £1.8m a season to close on £12m. But the Couhigs aren't banking on that. As it stands their main goal is to achieve modest off field profitability by the end of next year, come what may.

A vigorous campaign to attract significantly more sponsors is already planned, as are moves to actively engage with the local authority and the town's residents. Plans to stage end of season concerts by some of music's superstars are also on the 'to do' list. But if Rob and Pete's grand plan is to work they acknowledge they will have to overcome cultural differences they have mostly never experienced before.

"There is no doubt there are some differences," Rob admits. "There is tribalism, but everyone has parochial pride, particularly English people about football. But 25% of those we expect our fans to be are made up of those folks, another 25% are fair weather fans

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who come if the team is winning, but 50% are people wanting a fan experience, having a great time at a communal event where they meet friends and have a great time together.

"People who come a few hours before the game starts and stay a couple of hours afterwards. Those are the people we are going for. But we don't put all our eggs in one basket. We have to produce a highly competitive team, but we're not going to try to buy our way to promotion and mortgage the club to do it."

That, needless to say, is all well and good, and Pete Couhig has been on the job here long enough to realise that. For instance, he recalls the day not so long ago when they invited a woman trader who sells vegan burgers for a living to set up a food truck outside Adams Park.

"It was a very good test," he says. "Because although people complained about the price she sold out. It showed that if you put quality products out there and charge appropriate prices for that quality people will buy it. It was more expensive, but value wise it blew away cheaper burgers you could get. We don't just want to market football we want to create experiences that enable fans to enjoy the day whether we win or lose."

"Rob has always said 'don't discount'. If you come up with appropriate pricing you

shouldn't need to discount. We will have to balance appropriate pricing without p.....g people off!"

In the meantime, the locals aren't the only ones taken by surprise by Wycombe Wanderers unexpected promotion charge.

"We didn't expect to be in that position when we took over. 100% not," Pete admits. "When we restored the manager's budget to what it was before all Rob said to him was 'Don't make me sweat in April'."

"The core message is that all we want to do is improve on last year. Every club with this budget should be in a relegation battle. If we were to go up the Championship money would go up from £1.7/8m to £11.9m. We have a plan if that happens about achieving sustainability sooner and doing our best to avoid relegation from the Championship for another year. No further than that."

"It's not a crazy dream to think a smaller club can't make it in the Premier League either - look at Bournemouth and Sheffield United. Look at Sheffield's team right now. They still have players who were starting in League One. Our guys would relish fighting in the Championship. They are warriors."

Some would say, so are the Couhigs. ■