

Wycombe Wanderers

The 'rejects' behind their rise to the Championship



Darius Charles, Josh Parker and Alex Samuel (left to right) all joined Wycombe after being without a club

"It's probably bigger than Leicester winning the Premier League."

Wycombe Wanderers start their first ever Championship campaign on Saturday after overcoming financial troubles and proving everyone wrong to win promotion from the third tier.

But what are the insights behind one of the best underdog stories in English football?

Three of the players behind the club's rise have spoken to BBC Sport about how they too have fought against the odds to reach a career-high.

Dealing with arthritis and anxiety

Rewind less than two years and Wycombe centre-back Darius Charles was told he would have to retire by a surgeon with a labral tear in his hip, similar to the injury suffered by tennis star Andy Murray.

He was released by the club in May 2019 but manager Gareth Ainsworth allowed the 32-year-old ex-Stevenage and AFC Wimbledon defender back to train and the two parties found a way to manage the ailment and prolong his career.

That has earned Charles the nickname 'lower-league Ledley' - after former Tottenham centre-half Ledley King - who famously went years without training to protect his troublesome knee.

"Nothing's changed. I still have arthritis in my hip and it's something I deal with every day," he said, despite being able to make 29 starts in the Chairboys' promotion campaign.

"A bad day is getting caught up in 'will I be able to perform, will the gaffer still want me, what will the future hold?' That really is, by definition, anxiety."



Charles (second from left) said his hip injury had "stripped" him of his self-esteem before rejoining the club

While undoubtedly partly down to financial restraints, the club - spearheaded by long-serving boss Ainsworth - give chances to players who perhaps felt they had reached the end of the road, and make it work time and time again.

Leading up to last season only Bury - who went out of business - and Bolton, who started with a 12-point deduction, were more fancied for relegation from League One than Wycombe.

But after finishing in a play-off spot on points per game, the Buckinghamshire club **saw off Oxford United** at an empty Wembley to write another chapter in their amazing rise since staying in the Football League with a final-day escape in 2013-14.

"I don't know of any bigger feat in English football history than what we've achieved," Charles told BBC Sport.

"People will continue to write us off and call us lucky and it makes me laugh because at some point in time we have to be doing something right to continue being successful."

Charles accepts the Chairboys will "rightly" - based on finances - be **favourites to go down from the Championship** this season, but insists they will not go quietly.

"There are surprises and upsets every year," he added. "Someone's always spoiling someone's party. There's no reason why we can't upset and spoil some parties this season."

'God gave me vision of Wycombe badge'

A 38-year-old Adebayo Akinfenwa and 36-year-old Matt Bloomfield are among the Chairboys making their Championship debuts this season, while most of the squad have predominantly played in the lower reaches of the Football League.

Forward Alex Samuel was released by League Two Stevenage two years ago while carrying a mystery ankle injury, with lack of income a real worry for him and his wife.

"You're looking at bills and seeing nothing's coming in. I was thinking 'do I need to get a second job?' It was a real tough time," he told BBC Sport.

The former Swansea youngster, now 24, finally had surgery on his injury but when offered deals by old club Newport and Yeovil he turned them down, to the surprise of his agent.

"I'm really big in my relationship with God, and God showed me months before that something with Wycombe was going to happen so I thought this was meant to be," Samuel said.

"I asked God what was going on when I was injured - we prayed and asked what plans he had and God gave me a vision of the Wycombe badge, and this was before any interest."



Wycombe boss Gareth Ainsworth (right) and assistant Richard Dobson have built a reputation for getting the most out of players

Ainsworth came calling a week before the 2018-19 season and despite an "awful" first few weeks where he could "hardly kick a football," Samuel built his fitness and earned a contract.

The Welshman has since signed a further two deals and, 65 Wycombe appearances later, finds himself a Championship player.

"A lot of the lads here are rejects. They come here after falling out of love with the game and being mistreated somewhere," he said.

"But the first day you walk through those doors you start to fall in love with football again."

Players with life experience



Josh Parker started his career in the Championship with QPR and has returned to the second tier 10 years later

While every footballer has a story to tell, there is a feeling that those at Wycombe really have seen it all.

Aged 22, striker Josh Parker made an eyebrow-raising move to Slovenia - and then Serbia - after "becoming addicted to living up to the stereotype of a footballer".

The Antigua and Barbuda international's four years in mainland Europe were not without incident, but he believes his experiences are typical of those in the Adams Park dressing room.

"Even though it didn't go super smoothly, what I took from it basically shaped the person I am today because it was the catalyst for so many changes in my life," Parker said.

"I'd say a good 75% of our squad could write a book on their lives - not just inside football but outside of football - you're talking gritty things that most people would take to the grave."

He loved his two years with Domzale and earned a move to 1991 European Cup winners Red Star Belgrade, but a contractual dispute saw things take a rocky turn.

"I had people from the Professional Footballers' Association and old coaches telling me to just leave because I was losing weight, not eating, suffering from anxiety and depression but my body wouldn't let them win."

Parker's mother had to take equity out of her house to help him pay bills, and after finally leaving Serbia in June 2015 he spent seven months working in his brother's coffee shop, "not caring" about football.

But a successful trial at Gillingham got him back into the game and after winning the 2018-19 League One play-off final with Charlton, he went and repeated the feat with Wycombe last season.

"We're a whole bunch of wrong'uns that make each other right," Parker said of the Wanderers dressing room.

"They're going to hate us in the Championship because we're happy when things aren't going well and when things are going well.

"I'll tell you now we'll end up a lot higher than people think. We won't go down, there's no doubt."