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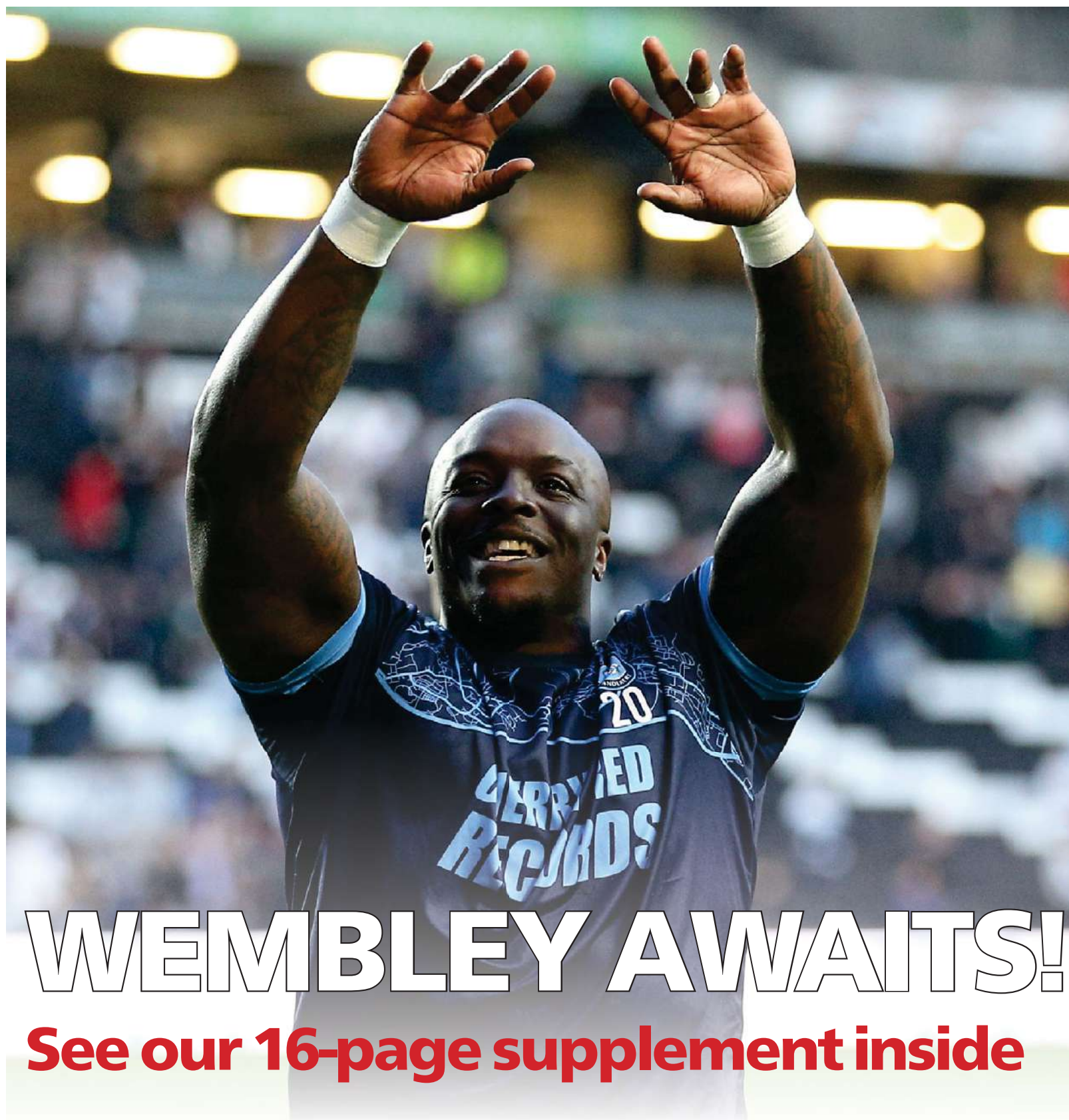
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See our 16-page supplement inside

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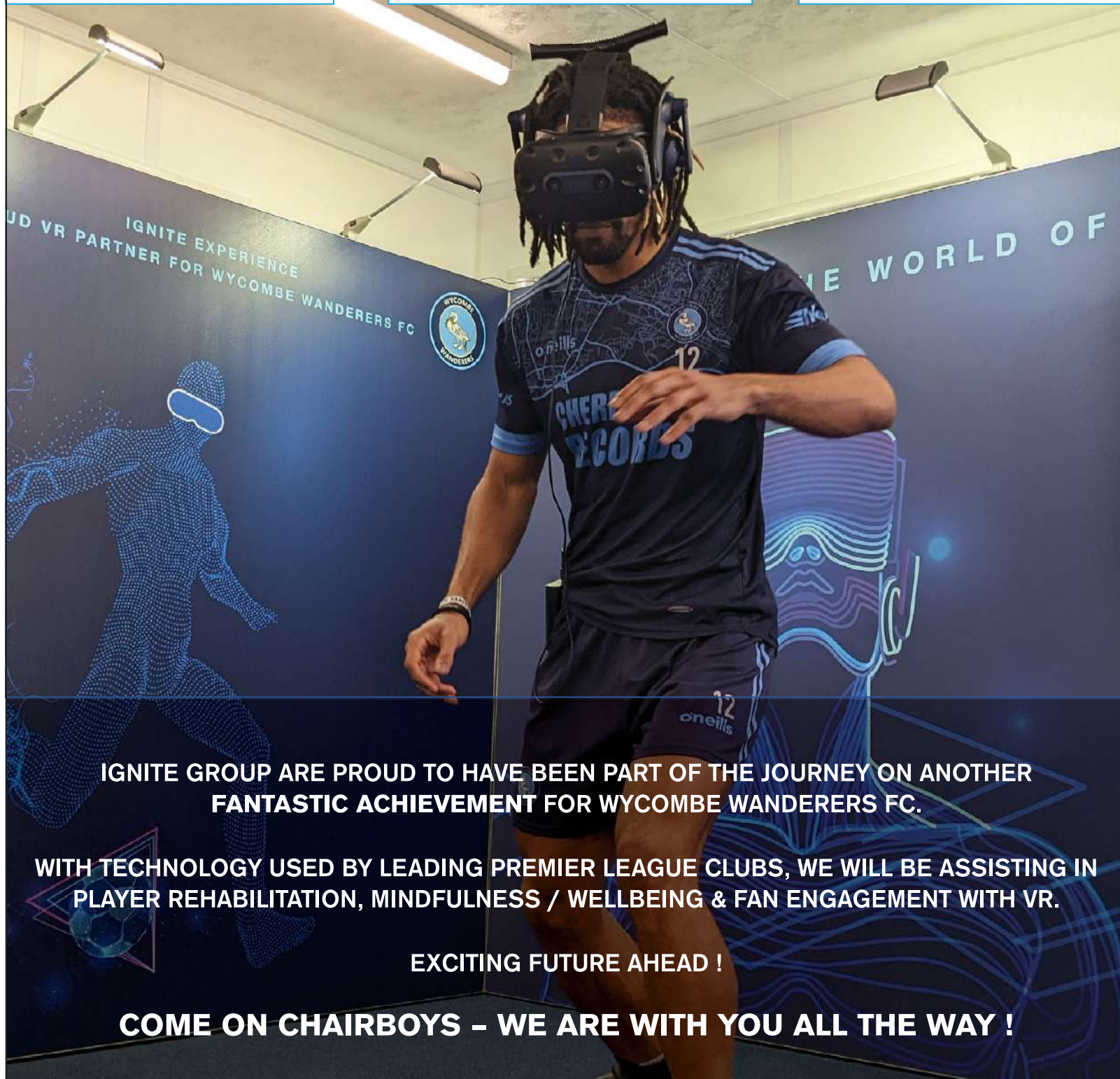
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What the manager said

WYCOMBE Wanderers manager Gareth Ainsworth has revealed that his side are the 'underdogs' going into the League One play-off final against Sunderland this weekend.

The Chairboys will take on the Black Cats in the Wembley showpiece on May 21, to see which club will secure the third and final place for next year's Championship season alongside Wigan Athletic and Rotherham United respectively.

Both sides go into the fixture on good form, but the boss has insisted that he knows the North East outfit will be labelled as the favourites.

Speaking to the press ahead of the match, he said: "We're going to be the underdogs and that is going to be our approach as that's how we do things here.

"This is a David and Goliath without a shadow of a doubt, and I am very proud to say that this could be the biggest away following Wycombe have had this century.

"That is phenomenal considering there were a few cup runs the club had in the 2000s (2001 FA Cup run and the 2006/07 League Cup run), and this is what football is about.

"We are a successful side in 2021/22, we've got 83 points and we've got nothing to lose.

"I want my boys to show what they can do."

On reaching the final, Ainsworth continued: "We would have taken a play-off final at the start of the season all day.

"With everything we experienced



Gareth Ainsworth is looking forward to the final against Sunderland on May 21 (PA)

in the Championship, we were still not fancied to go straight back up, and rightly so, as we haven't gone straight back up, but we weren't fancied for the play-offs.

"And this season was big because two years ago, people always say it was down to points-per-game.

"We still had to win the play-offs but that doesn't seem to matter to anyone.

"This time, we've got to the play-offs after playing 46 games and we're now in the final which is a great achievement, and I am

looking forward to the match on Saturday."

The final will be Ainsworth's third in charge of the club following Wycombe's appearances in 2015 and 2020 respectively.

From those two showpieces, several members of the Wanderers playing squad are still on Wanderers' books.

These include names such as Anthony Stewart, Joe Jacobson, Curtis Thompson, David Stockdale, Adebayo Akinfenwa, Dominic Gape, David Wheeler, Nick Freeman, and Jason McCarthy, whilst Matt Bloomfield, who played in both finals, has since retired and is now part of the backroom staff at the Adams Park club.

The experience and know-how in facing a Wembley battle is something these players are used to, and the boss hopes that the pain of 2015 and the joy of 2020 will help those who have not represented the Chairboys in a final to rise to the occasion.

He continued: "We've got a bit of experience.

"I have got a few boys who were with me from the 2020 final and they know that this isn't just

another game.

"You can't say it's just another game as it's at Wembley Stadium and you've got to embrace it.

"In a way, there is a different way of playing in a final than there is in a league game, because you've got to go through it to know what it's all about.

"I was lucky enough to do it as a player, and I am hoping that some of my experienced boys who have been there and done it will help the younger ones get through.

"The experience around the dressing room will be vital for me, and it will be an interesting dynamic with some of the boys coming through who have lit up the season.

"And that's going to be key for us as it's going to be the biggest crowd that most of my players have ever played in front of.

"It might be the record highest attended League One play-off final ever and the biggest support Wycombe Wanderers have taken away this century.

"The boys won't hide away from it as I want them to embrace it and I want them to know what this is all about."

The match will kick-off at 3pm.

Martin O'Neill wishes the boss luck

WYCOMBE manager Gareth Ainsworth has revealed he received a message of support from former Chairboys boss, Martin O'Neill.

The Northern Irishman spent five years with Wanderers between 1990 and 1995, where he won two promotions in 1993 and 1994, as well as two FA Trophy cups in 1991 and 1993.

Ainsworth said: "I had a phone call from Martin O'Neill who said he will be there, and moments like that for me are really special because you don't really get that much credit within the game.

"You're the manager so you tell how well everyone is doing or not how well everyone is doing, so it's nice that every once in a while, a person like Martin calls up and tells you to go for it.

"We're going to take it in our stride and I am looking forward to seeing the likes of Chris Forino who was at university last year, and Anis Mehmeti who was playing in step nine last year (in the Non League pyramid), so to experience this Wembley moment is brilliant. Then on the other side, you've got David Stockdale who two years ago was out biggest influencer on the bench."

Gaffer on Alex Neil and being linked to S'land job in 2019

WYCOMBE manager Gareth Ainsworth has praised Sunderland boss Alex Neil ahead of the League One play-off final this Saturday.

Neil, who achieved promotion to the Premier League with Norwich City via the same competition in 2015, took over at the Stadium of Light in February following the departure of Lee Johnson.

In his 17 games in charge of the club so far, he has won nine, drawn seven and has only lost one.

Ainsworth said: "He's done a brilliant job.

"He's got some good players and it's a tough job, Sunderland. I was publicly linked with that job a few years ago and it really is a tough, tough job when you find out just how big that club can be.

"They are probably the biggest club outside the Premier League. "For us to be playing them in a final is just phenomenal."



Well done Wycombe Wanderers, we'll be cheering you on at Wembley.

**Good luck for Championship football next season.
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Wanderers' history at

By James Richings

AS we prepare for the showpiece at the home of English football, let us look back at the six previous times the Chairboys walked out onto that Wembley pitch.

1957 FA Amateur Cup final

Wycombe's first-ever appearance at Wembley ended in defeat as they lost to Bishop Auckland in the 1957 FA Amateur final.

The North East side took the lead through Billy Russell's 13th-minute goal, before Frank Smith equalized for the Chairboys.

However, Derek Lewin and Warren Bradley ended up sealing the win for Auckland.

1991 FA Trophy final

Wycombe defeated Kidderminster Harriers in that year's FA Trophy final 2-1, with goals from Keith Scott and Mark West securing the win. A brilliant start to the Adams Park era.

1993 FA Trophy final

Around 30,000 people arrived at Wembley to watch Wanderers smash Runcorn 4-1 in their second FA Trophy final in three years.

Goals from Jason Cousins, Graham Hill, Steve Thompson, and Dave Carroll secured the cup for the Adams Park outfit.

1994 Third Division (League Two) play-off final

It was the Chairboys' second promotion in two years as they entered the third tier of English football for



the first time with a brilliant 4-2 victory over Preston North End.

Three goals in five first-half minutes saw PNE take the lead through James Bryson before Steven Thompson equalised just 60 seconds later.

Paul Raynor gave Preston the lead again soon afterward to make it 2-1 at half-time.

On 47 minutes, Simon Garner made it 2-2 before Dave Carroll bagged a 13-minute second-half brace to make it Wycombe 4-2 Preston, which confirmed the Chairboys' second consecutive promotion.

2015 League Two play-off final

After no goals were scored, extra time was needed.

Five minutes into extra time, Wanderers went 1-0 up thanks to a Joe Jacobson free-kick, that was deflect-

ed in off Daniel Bentley's back, but in the final seconds, Southend's Joe Piggot scored to level the game and send the final to a penalty shoot-out, which Wanderers lost 7-6.

2020 League One play-off final

Anthony Stewart gave the Chairboys the lead inside 10 minutes before Mark Sykes' cross made it 1-1.

But with 11 minutes to go, Oxford's keeper in Simon Eastwood smashed into Fred Onyedima in the penalty box and up-stepped Joe Jacobson to score the winner.

7. 2022 League One play-off final: Wycombe Wanderers vs Sunderland, May 21, 2022

Ecstasy or agony awaits on May 21, but which one will it be for Wycombe?

Credits: Paul Lewis (chairboys.co.uk) and Matt Cecil (wufc.co.uk)



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Wembley Stadium

Looking back

WYCOMBE boss Gareth Ainsworth has revealed that he is 'calm' going into the play-off final against Sunderland this weekend.

He will be no stranger to walking out of the tunnel at the home of English football, as this will be his fourth visit to Wembley Stadium.

His previous two visits were with the Chairboys in the 2015 League Two and 2020 League One play-off finals respectively, whilst his inaugural appearance at the gargantuan stadium was for Preston North End in the 1994 Division Three play-off final.

The then 21-year-old played in a 4-2 defeat for PNE, which coincidentally was against Wycombe Wanderers.

He said: "I'm calm.

"I'm lucky enough to be part of a Wembley final, once as a player and two as a manager (soon to be three), and we've got a base of players that have played in these games, and historically, Wycombe Wanderers have turned up for big games.

"We've got some big players for a big game and I am hoping for a big performance.

"This is a really exciting time."

The 49-year-old is also no stranger to achieving promotions as a manager and player.

He has masterminded two with Wycombe in 2018 and 2020, and was seconds away from his first as the club's boss in 2015.

As a player, he went up with Cardiff City in 2003, and then with Queens Park Rangers a year later in 2004.

This means he is one of the few players to achieve promotion in two consecutive seasons with two different teams.

Ainsworth also gained promotion with Wycombe as a player in 2011 from League Two.

On his previous achievements, the boss continued: "I had one against Sheffield Wednesday at Hillsborough with QPR, I had one at the Millennium Stadium with Cardiff, and I have got a few with Wycombe and it's just an exciting time.

"Playing as a 21-year-old at the old twin towers was a fantastic experience for Preston in the play-off final, which we lost, coincidentally to Wycombe."

"These are great moments that you look back on in your career."



Remember 2020 ?

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The final push for glory

By Jack Dawson & J Richings

WYCOMBE Wanderers are looking to bounce back to the Championship at the first attempt on Saturday in their League One play-off final, whilst Sunderland are hoping to end a four-year stint in England's third tier.

With promotion to the Championship on the cards for both teams, let's take a look at how life in the second tier could impact both clubs.

Wycombe Wanderers

The Chairboys finished one point and one place from safety during their Championship year of 2020/21, proving a lot of their doubters wrong.

A second shot of life in the second tier would surely see an improvement to the side with a bigger know-how of how to avoid the bottom three.

With fans not being allowed to enter the stadium last year due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the club lacked that roar of encouragement to get them over the line, which has worked this season due to the amount of late goals Wycombe have scored at Adams Park.

Those extra couple of points the crowd could earn by roaring on the team could easily push the team to survival.



Additionally, spectators returning could also see major success in the industry and surrounding area of the club.

Having missed out on the away crowds last season meant many areas missed out on potential tourism revenue from travelling fans.

With every region across the country being hit by the pandemic and

subsequent lockdown, promotion would really help breathe some much-needed life into areas of the town that may have been left behind.

All of this together would make promotion a really exciting aspect for the Chairboys who could go on to find a new era for the club less than a decade before they almost dropped out of the league.



Sunderland AFC

The Black Cats are currently England's sixth most successful club, with their major honours consisting of winning the top division six times and the FA Cup twice.

Since their relegation to League One in the 2017/18 season, they have often been touted as one of the biggest in the division due to their large sta-

dium, fanbase and history.

Yet, they have struggled to get out of League One in three consecutive seasons.

In their first season back in League One, they lost 2-1 to Charlton Athletic in the playoff final.

This was followed by an eighth-place finish in 2019/20, and a 3-2 defeat on aggregate to Lincoln City in last season's playoff semi-finals.

League One has been such a heavy fall for the club who had spent 14 of their last 18 seasons in the Premier League before their fall to this division.

In their most recent run in the top-flight, they lasted for 10 consecutive seasons before relegation which included a run to the League Cup final in the 2013/14 season.

Back-to-back demotions in 2016/17 and 2017/18 is what caused this steep drop down the divisions from which the club is still yet to fully recover from.

Victory against Wycombe might finally allow the club to start rebuilding their status and put them on the path to get them into the Premier League.

The sleepy giant may finally be awoken, with determination to get back to its previous glories in the Premier League.

Super Sam Vokes signs new Wanderers deal

SAM Vokes has committed his future to Wycombe Wanderers by signing a contract extension.

The 32-year-old, who joined the club from Stoke City last summer, has so far scored 17 goals in 49 games in what has been a brilliant season for the Welshman.

His efforts saw him win the club's Player's Player of the Year this month, with his 50th match for the Chairboys potentially being against Sunderland in the League One play-off final.

Speaking on securing Vokes' services for another season, Gareth Ainsworth said: "This is a massive statement of Sam's commitment to Wycombe Wanderers, and of our ambitions to keep this squad as strong as

it can possibly be.

"Bringing Sam to Adams Park last summer was a big coup for us and I'd say that keeping him here is even more significant, after the year he's had.

"Sam has made this place his home from day one and he's enjoying his football again after a frustrating period before he came here. He's shown exactly why he's earned so many caps for his country and played in the Premier League, and he's led by example on and off the pitch.

"The owners and I share a plan to get us into the Championship and continue to build this club into something bigger and better than it's ever been before.



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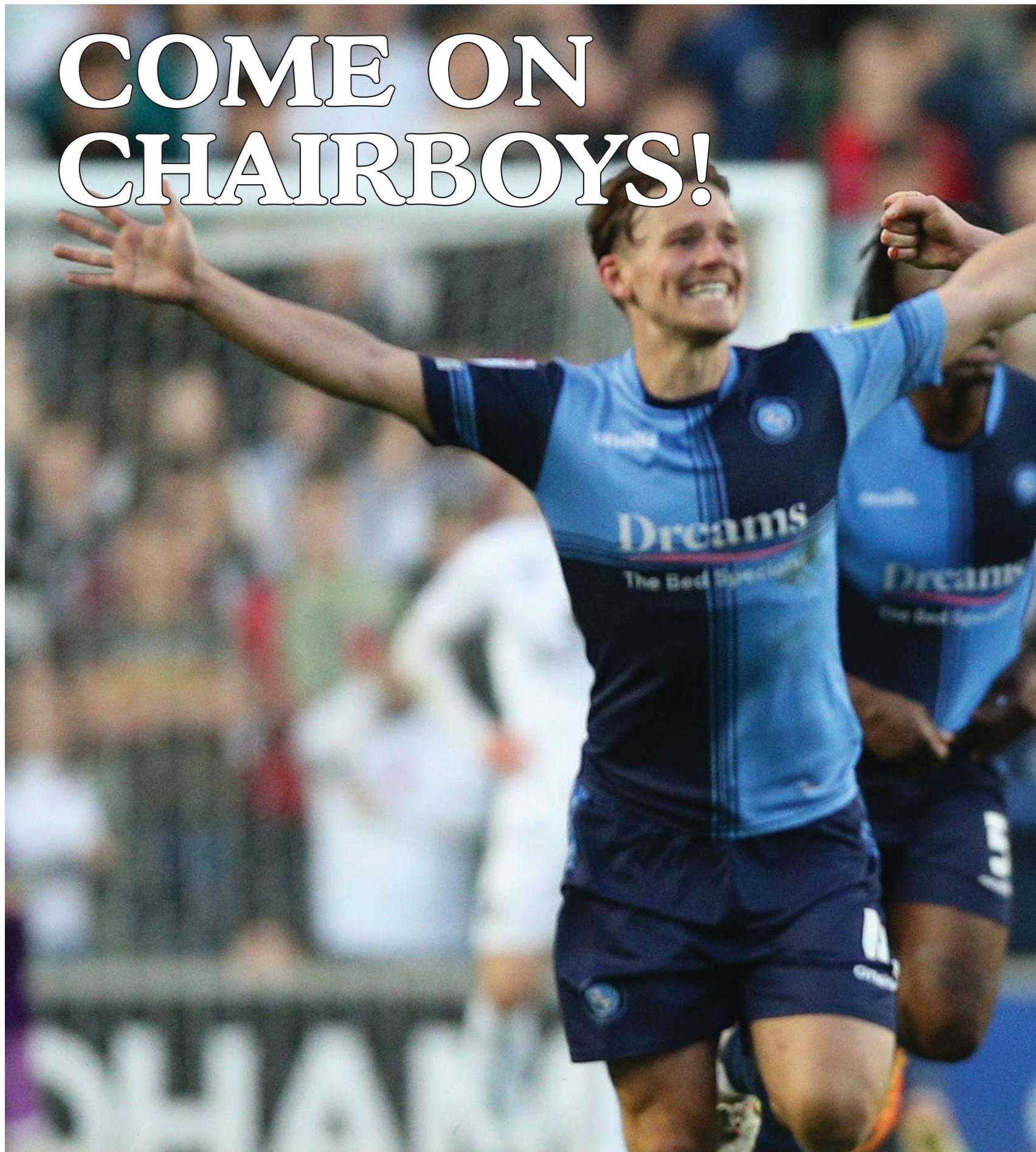


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Wembley via Menorca

A SUNDERLAND fan will travel to the Wembley final against Wycombe via a trip to Spain.

James Jelly, 33, has declined taking the train, driving down and flying to London for the showpiece on May 21, as he will instead fly from Newcastle to Menorca in Spain, spend the night on the Spanish island and then fly from Menorca to Stansted.

A good Samaritan has also offered him a lift from the airport to London, where he will stay on Friday night with a relative.

All of this will cost Mr Jelly £51, rather than the £161.99 flights from Newcastle to London, or the £260 return train ticket.

The Sunderland fan told the Sun newspaper: "I'm going to pack my shorts and make a little holiday out of it. I'll have a couple of pints and a walk around Menorca."

In total, Mr Jelly's RyanAir flight from Newcastle to Menorca has cost him £12.50, his hotel for one night is £28, with his flight back to England costing him £10.50.

The Sunderland fan is saving up for his wedding in August.



James Jelly will be making the trip down Wembley Way via a flight to Spain (PA)

Jacobson on the 'incredible' supporters

WYCOMBE Wanderers captain Joe Jacobson believes the 20,000 plus fans that are making their way to Wembley will make a difference in the club's play-off final against Sunderland.

He said: "Having the fans back shows how much we really missed them this season.

"It's strange because you get used to them not being there but once they were back you just get that feeling.

"I remember seeing all of them in the friendly against Leicester at home and it was just amazing.

"It makes you realise how important they are and to have 20,000 plus is going to be incredible.

"In the second final against MK Dons, our fans out sang their fans throughout the game and there was a reason why they only wanted 2,200 there because they knew how powerful they were going to be.

And the captain's message to the fans said: "Enjoy the game and we're going to do everything we can to put smiles on your faces come 5pm."

Old Wycombe kits are sold in charity auction

TWO anonymous Wycombe Wanderers supporters who decided to give away several of their old Chairboys shirts have helped raised nearly £300 for a football charity.

Kit Aid, which sends unwanted football jerseys to impoverished areas in Africa and Asia, will see an extra £290 go their way after the Bucks Free Press helped organise an auction which saw several signed items go for up sale.

These included three signed Luke O'Nien shirts, one signed Joe Jacobson shirt and four Wanderers training tops.

This comes after the BFP arranged a separate auction at the back of March this year for the charity, as we managed to raise £1,100 through 15 unwanted Wycombe shirts that dated back to the early 1990s.

The shirts that were sold were:

- A Luke O'Nien away shirt from 2014-2016 which has been signed

- A Luke O'Nien away shirt from 2016/17 which has been signed

- A Luke O'Nien away shirt from 2017/18 which has been signed

- A Joe Jacobson signed training shirt

- Four unsigned training shirts

A signed O'Nien Sunderland shirt was also donated to the cause.

The item went for £100.

To make a donation to the Kit Aid charity, visit www.justgiving.com/kit-aid.

Since forming in 1998, Kit Aid has shipped 858,737 kits to different parts of Africa and beyond, with 37,785 being sent in 2022 so far.



Some of the shirts that were donated to the cause

Train timetable for Wycombe fans going to Wembley

A SPECIAL train timetable has been issued for the League One play-off final between Wycombe Wanderers and Sunderland on May 21.

Chiltern Railways said: "In particular, a high-capacity special timetable with additional trains will be in operation between High Wycombe and Wembley Stadium, from approximately 09.30 (on May 21), and also back to High Wycombe after the match.

"Queuing systems will be in operation at both High Wycombe and Wembley Stadium stations.

"In order to ensure smooth boarding of trains at High Wycombe, please ensure you purchase your train tickets before the day of travel."

They also confirmed that no trains will operate from the Aylesbury Vale Parkway Station to Marylebone for the entire day.



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Sunderland's thoughts

By James Richings

WE spoke to the Sunderland Echo's Joe Nicholson ahead of this weekend's final.

On paper, this is a real David vs Goliath battle. Will the Sunderland fans and team see it that way?

"There has been more positivity heading into this play-off campaign compared to previous seasons as the side have finished strongly.

"They are on a 15-match unbeaten run and have lost just once since Alex Neil was appointed in February.

"Sunderland will go into the match as favourites but they have been here before."

Considering that this is Sunderland's fourth straight year in League One, was automatic promotion the main goal for the Black Cats this season?

"Automatic promotion was definitely the aim at the start of the season under Lee Johnson.

"Johnson was sacked while the club were third in the league, yet the club's hesitancy to appoint his successor (12 days) meant automatic promotion was already a long shot when Neil fi-



nally got the job.

"At that point, it looked like Sunderland would struggle to even get in the play-offs and they've had to go on an impressive run just to finish in the top six.

"Under Neil they averaged exactly

two points per game, taking 30 points from 15 matches, to reach the play-offs."

What is the perception of Wycombe Wanderers up in the North East?

"Wycombe are seen as a physical and direct team.

"When Sunderland first played at Adams Park in 2019, Black Cats supporters were unhappy with some of the challenges that were made from the home players - particularly a reckless tackle from Marcus Bean on Duncan Watmore, which left the latter

sidelined for the next few months.

"Wycombe's promotion in 2020 also left a sour taste on Wearside as the Chairboys moved ahead of Sunderland on points per game and were promoted via the play-offs.

"Rob Couhig's comments about Sunderland being a 'Netflix show' has also spiced things up ahead of the final.

Luke O'Nien spent three years with Wycombe and got promoted with them in his final season with the club. What do the Sunderland fans think of him?

"O'Nien is a great character in the Sunderland squad and has become a popular figure on Wearside due to his passion, commitment and off-field work.

"Earlier this year the midfielder was named the North East Football Writers' Personality of the Year after raising more than £7,000 for NHS Charities Together and engaging with supporters by posting fitness videos during the lockdown.

"On the pitch, he has played in several different positions, including centre-back, wing-back and central midfield, and it's still unclear what his best role really is."



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An emotional journey

By Jamie Cameron

AS a fan who's always relished every part of the matchday experience, the Covid-enforced behind-closed-doors games were incredibly difficult.

Wanderers playing in the Championship at places like the City Ground and Carrow Road without fans being able to be present was tough, but this season has made it all worth it.

The opening day win over Accrington was a very emotional one, returning to the stands after 18 months away.

Garath McCleary's early brace in front of the terrace sparked scenes of joy, and already made me realise what I had been missing during the pandemic.

Away days at Cheltenham and Wigan came and went, and who could forget the magical night at the Etihad, where Brandon Hanlan's opener allowed us to dream.

Games like that with a huge travelling contingent are amazing, but the really special ones are those in an obscure



northern town with just a couple of hundred Chairboys.

Those spontaneous days in miserable weather may sometimes be dull, but the pandemic made everyone miss them.

Fleetwood this season was

a great example of that in blustery conditions, where Wycombe could've scored five or six but still managed to draw the game.

The last week of November was one of the highlights of the season for me, beating

Plymouth comfortably at Home Park before ending up 300 miles north of there four days later to watch an entertaining 2-2 draw with giants Sheffield Wednesday.

There were some worries of Covid returning over

Christmas, but the feel-good factor returned in the new year.

I'd become slightly bored of home games over the years, and although the first couple after the lockdown were good, the back-to-back games against Sunderland and Oxford in January rekindled my love for Adams Park.

The televised draw with Sunderland was a great advert for the league, and the win over Oxford was the best atmosphere I'd seen at a home game for years at the time.

There were a couple of wobbles, with the winless run in February, and a couple of late-season draws at Gillingham and Wimbledon threatening to de-rail the play-off push, but compared to seasons before the pandemic, I was just glad to be in the stands and whatever happened on the pitch happened.

Burton was an incredible day to finish the regular season, and after how devastating it was to not be able to see the 2020 Wembley win in person, it will be a fitting end to a fantastic season to watch Wycombe under the arch again.

VAR confirmed for the League One play-off final

THE use of the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) will be used in the League One play-off final between Wycombe Wanderers and Sunderland.

The English Football League (EFL) revealed in the evening of Thursday, May 12, that the use of the tool might be implemented in the showpiece at Wembley Stadium on Saturday, May 21.

This was after the EFL confirmed that VAR will certainly be seen in the Championship play-off final, which will take place eight days later on May 29.

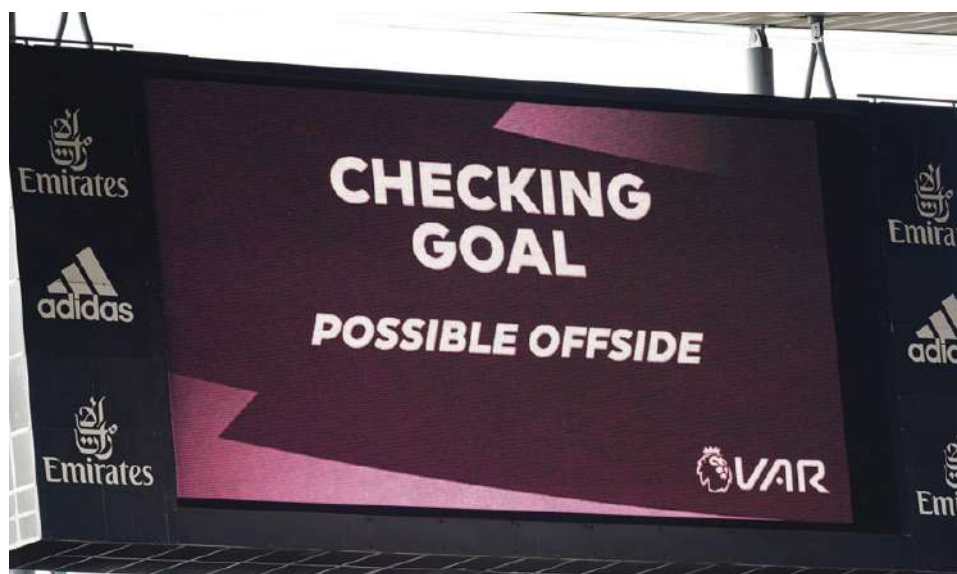
The football governing body then confirmed the news on Monday, May 16.

Wanderers said: "With VAR having already been confirmed for the Sky Bet Championship Final on Sunday, 29 May, it will also be used at this Saturday's Sky Bet League One Final between Sunderland and Wycombe Wanderers, as well as the Sky Bet League Two Final on Saturday, 28 May.

"It will be the first season VAR will be used at the EFL Play-Off Finals.

"Match officials for Saturday's final will be announced in due course."

Currently, the system is only operating in Premier League and specific League and FA Cup matches, as well as in the Europa, Europa Conference, and Champions League.



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Thank you, Bayo

By James Richings

HE was told that he was too big to play football and that he should find another profession.

Fast forward 22 years, Ade-bayo Akinfenwa has amassed nearly 800 career games and has scored over 200 career goals.

His career has seen him travel to Lithuania, Wales and to all four corners of England where he has achieved gargantuan success.

Promotions, player of the season awards, thousands of fans worldwide, what was regarded as a 'publicity stunt' when he walked through the doors at Adams Park as a Wycombe Wanderers player for the first time in 2016 has probably gone down as the best piece of business Gareth Ainsworth has done for the club.

It looks like the boss certainly contacted the Big Man on WhatsApp six years ago.

So, as the now 40-year-old prepares for his final match as a professional footballer



which just happens to be at Wembley Stadium in this year's League One play-off final against Sunderland, how is Akinfenwa feeling before his swansong?

Speaking to BBC Radio 5 Live after the Chairboys defeated Milton Keynes in the semi-finals, he said: "If it's

10 minutes, two minutes, to be able to get out on the hallowed turf for my last kick in the professional game, it's a beautiful ending to my story - as long as we get the win."

Since arriving at the club six years ago, the Beast has been a breath of fresh air.

Every fan interaction has

been unique in its own way, and there are hundreds, if not, thousands of stories of supporters telling tales of how Akinfenwa made their trip at Adams Park, or at an away ground, extra more special.

Thank you for everything you have done. #BMO.

Getting ready for the final on May 21

WYCOMBE captain Joe Jacobson hopes the experience in the squad will benefit the Chairboys when they take on Sunderland in Saturday's League One play-off final.

He said: "We've had the game at Wembley a couple of years ago and we still have a few members of that squad with us, and it's these little things that we can relate to."

"We spoke before the MK Dons game about how we were more experienced than them and it showed, especially in the first game."

"We've got a lot of boys who have played in the play-offs and we've got lots of boys who have won play-off games, which we hope will be really helpful."

The Welshman has also revealed that the preparation is different from two years ago due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The captain continued: "The build now to then has been so different."

"Even now with organising tickets for family and friends, and having more people from the media at the training ground which didn't happen two years ago and it's nice to have that hype and buzz around the place. You grow up wanting to be a professional footballer to play in these types of games in front of full houses."



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