

## **Stadium Sponsorship Survey Results and Comments 12<sup>th</sup> October 2006**

### ***the background***

On the 25<sup>th</sup> June 2003, Wycombe Wanderers Football Club announced that the naming rights to Adams Park had been sold for a three year period to a local software company, Causeway Technologies. Overnight Adams Park became the Causeway Stadium.

This decision remains, both contentious and emotive for many Wycombe supporters.

In February 2006 the Trusts (Supporters Trust and Founders Trust) held a meeting with Mr. Ivor Beeks (Chairman) and Mr. Steve Hayes (Managing Director). One of the items for discussion was the issue of Stadium Sponsorship. The Causeway Stadium deal was coming to an end and the PLC Board wanted to gain opinion on the interim name of the stadium. This stimulated many subsequent meetings and much debate over the rights and wrongs of further sponsorship.

In order to assist the Club in its decision, it was agreed that the Trusts, in conjunction with the Club, would poll supporters to establish the opinion of supporters. The PLC Board and Trusts agreed the following;

- a. Adams Park would be incorporated into the postal address if a further sponsorship deal were to be sought in the future.
- b. The PLC Board would honour the results of the poll, if the majority of supporters were against sponsorship, assuming 500 or more responses were received and with the condition that it would return to the subject again if a 'significant' opportunity arose.
- c. The PLC Board stated that if it chose to pursue sponsorship then it expects to seek a deal worth a minimum net income of £50K p.a. to WWFC over a period of no less than 5 years.

A questionnaire was sent to approximately 3,300 Wycombe Wanderers supporters. This group consisted of Supporters Trust members, Founders Trust members, PLC shareholders, season ticket holders and match day ticket purchasers. Supporters were asked to respond on the principle of sponsorship, do you agree or disagree, and subsequently for those in agreement to elaborate upon the perceived value of the sponsorship deal. Responses were received via the post and the internet.

## survey responses

940 responses were received, a 28% response rate.

The total of 940 responses clearly exceeds the minimum 500 required for the vote to be accepted by the PLC Board as a representative sample.

The table below illustrates the results of the poll.

**Results and Responses from the Stadium Sponsorship Survey**

	Total Responses	A	B	B1	B2	B1 & B2	B3
<b>Total</b>	940	311	629	301	193	494	135
<b>% of Total Responses</b>	100%	33%	67%	32%	21%	53%	14%
<b>Response A</b>	I oppose sponsorship of the stadium name under any circumstance						
<b>Response B</b>	I am willing to accept the principle of sponsorship of the stadium name						
<b>For respondents to B only:</b>							
<b>Response B1</b>	I am willing to accept sponsorship of the stadium name on the best terms commercially available						
<b>Response B2</b>	The framework of a 5 year deal resulting in a £50K p.a. net income to WWFC as outlined by the WWFC Board is acceptable to me as a minimum sponsorship deal						
<b>Response B3</b>	I am open to further sponsorship of the stadium name but only under better terms than the deal outlined in B2 above						

## interpretation of results

1. Of the total responses, the majority (67%) accepted the principle of sponsorship of the stadium name – Response B versus Response A.

2. Those voting against sponsorship totalled 33%. Although it is a minority, this is a significant minority.

3. Those who accept the principle of sponsorship were asked to vote on whether they are willing to accept sponsorship on the basis of B1: the best terms commercially available; B2: the framework of a 5 year deal with £50K p.a. net income to WWFC, as outlined in an interview with Steve Hayes, as a minimum level; B3: only on terms better than those outlined in the interview.

None of the responses B1 (32%), B2 (21%) or B3 (14%) returned the 51% of votes that would make it the favoured response outright.

4. Response B1 + B2: Since those supporters who voted for B1 are, by definition, willing to accept the same framework as those voting for B2, providing the terms of B2 are the best commercially available, it is appropriate to take the responses to B1 and B2 in combination.

5. The sum of B1 & B2 returns a total of 53% and indicates an overall slim majority (53% versus 47%) in support of the principle of sponsorship at a minimum level of a 5-year deal with £50K p.a. net income to WWFC, as outlined in the letter that accompanied the survey. This result is therefore returned as the result of the poll.

6. Response B3: A minority of those accepting the principle of sponsorship would wish to see a better deal than that outlined.

7. Beyond the numerical results, many respondents stated that Adams Park must be included in the name in some form. The Trusts consider this to be an essential requirement if sponsorship of the stadium is undertaken.

8. Many respondents commented that they were pleased to have been consulted for their views. The large number of responses indicates the depth of feeling on this topic.

### ***the Club's reaction***

The Trusts met with Mr. Steve Hayes, Managing Director Wycombe Wanderers Football Club PLC, to discuss the results and the implications for the naming of Adams Park. The substance of the meeting is reproduced below (TB = Trusts' Boards; SH = Steve Hayes):

TB: Now the results have been compiled we can see that 67% of supporters accept the principle of stadium sponsorship. Are you happy with this outcome?

*SH: It has been a good exercise. The response rate has been excellent, it shows what a difficult subject this is. I suppose it's fair to say that whatever we do we are always going to upset somebody at some point. Am I happy with the outcome? It would have been easier if the outcome was a significant majority but it is clearly not. Those opposed to sponsorship are proud of the Club's heritage, and rightly so. They may be in the minority but it is a significant minority.*

TB: As you say, the first question polling the principle of sponsorship has indicated a large number of supporters opposed to sponsorship. It's the result of the second poll which really causes the problems - 53% of respondents are happy to accept the net £50K p.a. deal over 5 years but of course 47% of respondents feel any deal should be greater in value or not undertaken at all. On this basis if the Club accept a deal on this basis you will be doing so against the wishes of almost 50% of supporters – a classic no win situation.

*SH: In a perfect world we will not upset anybody. Let's turn this round. The only way for this Club to succeed is for it to embrace the town and surrounding areas of Wycombe. We need to be a community club. We want to attract all factions to Wycombe Wanderers – families, children, students, adults – we want people to come to Adams Park to enjoy the whole day, it has to be more than just a game of football – a day out for all the family, somewhere to meet your mates, have some food, enjoy a drink and really have a great day out. We want a community club, the council want a community club, and we believe we can make the people of Wycombe want a community club. If we can achieve this then the Club will succeed and we will not have to consider things like stadium sponsorship and to potentially upset people.*

TB: Are you saying you will not be looking for a stadium sponsor?

*SH: No I didn't say that. What I will say though is we are not currently doing so and do not have any plans to do so in the immediate future. It is a low priority for us. There are other areas we can maximize. The Conference Centre for example is something we are working hard on to*

*increase off-the-pitch revenues. We would really appreciate supporters helping us to sell this space – if you work locally and your company uses conference space then point them in the direction of the Club – small gestures like this really do help us.*

TB: You talked about the Club's intention to become a community club once again. Do you not think that any potential future sponsorship of the stadium is a huge contradiction to this policy? Would it not be more powerful to develop the Adams Park brand and use this to bring the Club closer to the community?

*SH: Yes, which is why sponsorship is a low priority but it is however sensible to keep all the options open. If an excellent opportunity presents itself then we would be mad not to look at it. We have to try new things; we have to make changes. Not all of these things will be accepted by everybody. We will almost certainly upset somebody, but that does not mean we will ride roughshod over people.*

TB: Life being what it is will almost certainly mean some supporters will be convinced you are searching for a sponsor as we speak., How can you reassure them this is not the case?

*SH: We can't really, can we? All we can say is that, if we do start to look for a ground sponsor or if a sponsor contacts us, both Trusts will be informed immediately. The Trusts have directors on the PLC board and will know what is going on, although it is possible that the Trusts will not know who the company is during early discussions.*

*It is worth making it very clear that the naming of the stadium is a very important issue and not one that the board is taking lightly. What happened in the past can't be changed. There is little point in anyone spending further time and energy on this. The stadium is called Adams Park and nothing will happen to change this without both Trusts being informed right at the outset of a possible interest from a company or the PLC seeking interest.*

### ***the Trusts' view***

Stadium sponsorship is clearly a controversial subject. The supporters of Wycombe Wanderers have diverse views and these are reflected in the views and voting of the Trusts' members. Some are vehemently against sponsorship, some believe that the Club should seek all the commercial revenue that it can generate and some are somewhere in the middle.

The Trusts are pleased that the Club agreed to survey supporters for their opinions. Whilst it is not practical to run surveys on every issue, it is indicative of a desire to obtain more direct feedback. The large number of responses demonstrates that supporters welcomed the ability to comment.

The results show a majority of supporters in favour of stadium sponsorship at the level of a minimum £50K p.a. net income to the Club for 5 years. This is a level that the Club, rather than the Trusts, indicated it would wish to achieve. The slim nature of the majority, however, indicates that a deal struck at such a level would be very controversial.

The Trusts are mindful that it is easier for the Club to alienate an existing supporter than it is to gain a new one. The Trusts, through their PLC Board Members, will continue to monitor developments. If we are notified that the Club has or is seeking to enter into negotiations re

sponsorship of the stadium name then the Trusts will notify supporters. The Trusts will seek to hold the Club to the promise to retain Adams Park in the address of the Club and ensure that the heritage provided by Frank Adams is not forgotten.

The Club have stated a desire to reach out to the community that it operates within. The Trusts will continue to work with the Club to assist in creating a community club, which is justifiably proud of its past whilst embracing the future. Whatever your personal opinion on stadium sponsorship, we ask that you support both the Club and the Trusts in achieving this objective.

### ***historical perspective***

Adams Park was named after the Club's greatest benefactor, Frank Adams. His gift of the deeds to Loakes Park to Wycombe Wanderers Football Club, on the 19<sup>th</sup> April 1947, arguably secured the very future of the Club we enjoy and love today. This day concluded a 3 year period of negotiations by Frank Adams to personally purchase the deeds to Loakes Park from Lord Carrington, his objective being to end any uncertainty over its [WWFC] future.<sup>1</sup> During the presentation of the deeds to the Club President, Mr. C.P. Vine, Frank Adams told a crowd of 5,000 Wycombe supporters *'If future generations obtain the same enjoyment out of Loakes Park as it has given me in the past, then this gift will have been worthwhile.'*<sup>2</sup>

Loakes Park was situated in a prime, town-centre location, adjacent to Wycombe General Hospital. The foresight shown by Frank Adams in securing the deeds to Loakes Park became apparent from the late sixties onwards. In 1968 the Health Authority began to express its desire to expand upon Loakes Park. Throughout the seventies the Club was courted by a variety of developers, culminating on Christmas Eve 1985 when the Club eventually sold Loakes Park to property developers, Westbruton Ltd., for a reported £3.4m.<sup>3</sup>

Wycombe Wanderers Football Club finally relocated to Hillbottom Road in August 1990 and appropriately named the stadium "Adams Park", in recognition of the magnificent gesture by Frank Adams some 38 years before.

Frank Adams knew Wycombe Wanderers as an amateur football club. Promotion to the football league and the embracing of full-time professionalism in 1996 has seen the Club change out of all recognition.

Commercialism in football is not a recent phenomenon. The first Football cigarette cards appeared in the 1920s and a vogue was subsequently created for their collection. In 1923 the FA Cup Rules were first sponsored by Lilywhites, (a sports equipment and clothing supplier), who had purchased the sole rights to publish. The 1930s brought the likes of Dixie Dean and Stanley Matthews advertising cigarettes and men's cosmetics.<sup>4</sup>

Today's football commercialism is on a vastly greater scale. After a troubled couple of decades in the 1970s and 1980s, the marketing of football went into overdrive. Shirt sponsorship, now joined by short sponsorship, is universal. Pitch-side advertising is now the norm and incorporates the very latest technology for maximum income generation. Concourses, bars, players, managers, mascots, directors and now even substitutions are all marketable commodities and are available for sponsorship to the highest bidder. More recently, stands have been renamed after sponsors, the naming rights to the stadium have been sold and, in

the case of Wimbledon becoming MK Dons, even a football club has been sold and relocated thereby losing its original identity and heritage.

In short, Wycombe Wanderers find themselves in a rapidly changing market place where the fixed costs of operation have dramatically out-paced the revenues generated from the turnstiles and bars.

At the time of the Causeway deal in 2003, Rod Tomlin, the then Executive Director of Wycombe Wanderers FC, stated that sponsorship of Adams Park was essential for the future of the Football Club, *"I hope that in the present climate people will accept it was right in the interest of the financial stability of this Club"*<sup>5</sup>. In a separate statement he further stated: *"At the end of the day we know it will probably upset a number of people. Some will look at it as though we've sold our heritage down the river, but I don't. I hope that in the present climate people will accept it was right in the interest of the financial stability of this Club"*.<sup>6</sup>

At some point in the future, the Club will doubtless be faced with the decision again whether or not to seek further sponsorship and utilise the ground's name to generate additional revenue. To some there is an immediate negative reaction to such sponsorship, pulling on the strings of emotive arguments about heritage. Many supporters, vehemently opposed to sponsorship, hope that, after the conversion to a Public Limited Company, the promised additional investment would negate the need to continue to sell the Club's heritage. To others such deals are simply necessary business transactions. These supporters have accepted the principle of sponsorship and are prepared to move forward with the new 'commercialised' world of professional football. The arguments of 2003 are still alive and as relevant today in 2006.

### **references**

1. Wycombe Wanderers 1887-1996 The Official History; Dave Finch & Steve Peart
2. Wycombe Wanderers 1887-1996 The Official History; Dave Finch & Steve Peart
3. Wycombe Wanderers 1887-1996 The Official History; Dave Finch & Steve Peart
4. Branding, sponsorship and commerce in football. University of Leicester, Sophie Howard and Rhiannon Syace, August 02
5. Chairboys On the Net: Ground Adams Park Sponsor Shock, 24<sup>th</sup> June 03
6. Chairboys On the Net: Ground Sponsor Press Release, 25<sup>th</sup> June 03