

Gloves are off in Yeovil's bid for big time

IT'S a cold, wet Tuesday in Yeovil and Gary Johnson is standing in the middle of the pitch at Huish Park, waving his hands and getting animated.

To his right, as always, is the local legend he replaced as manager. They are great friends, Johnson and his assistant, Terry Skiverton, men of a similar temper and standing in this town.

The players are listening, nodding, soaked. Yeovil was once famous for making gloves, hence the 'Glovers' nickname, but no one is wearing a pair. 'No airs and graces at this club,' Skiverton says.

It's been a tough few years for this little town. Unemployment here is among the lowest in the country, but people noticed when the high street started featuring more pound shops and pawnbrokers.

'The recession has hit everyone,' Skiverton says. 'Maybe we can put a few smiles on faces. People round here take a lot of pride in



by **RIATH AL-SAMARRAI**

the club. We've been putting Yeovil on the map.'

They face Brentford at Wembley on Sunday in the League One play-off final. A win will be largely down to one of the smallest big men in management. Johnson is 5ft 6in with a huge personality.

This has been his club since he arrived 12 years ago. He's an old-school boss who would think nothing of sacking a good player if he was a bad apple. 'He's like Sir Alex Ferguson in the way he runs the club,' says Skiverton.

Johnson has had seven promotions as an assistant and manager, including 2003 when Yeovil were promoted to the Football League for the first time in their 108 years, and 2005, when they went up to League One as champions. He left

soon after, going to Bristol City, who he took up to the Championship and then into the 2008 play-off final, before stints at Peterborough and Northampton.

In the meantime, Yeovil went into decline, slipping towards the League One relegation zone under Skiverton, who took charge in 2009 after more than a decade as a player at the club. He had been Johnson's captain so when the club asked Johnson to return in 2012 it was a little awkward.

'Losing the job stung,' says Skiverton. 'But we sat for six hours and talked it out. He said to me, "I won't take the job if you don't stay". He picked me up. He is passionate and can be angry. But he rallies people. If it had been any other manager I would have left.'

'A lot of football is about personality. We are strong tactically due to the gaffer and Darren Way (Johnson's other assistant), but so much is down to psychology. The gaffer is brilliant at it. He knows how to get people going, makes them feel tall, it's one of the reasons we are doing what we are now.'

Final call: Ed Upson (right) celebrates his winner in the play-off semi-final with Sam Foley

GARY DAY/PINNACLE



Close: Skiverton and Johnson

It's also the key tenet of what has been a remarkable recruitment record. Skiverton adds: 'We bring in young players who have been overlooked, or older players who others think are done. It's about the right personality and that is what the gaffer can spot so well.'

Ed Upson, the former England Under 19 international left Ipswich without making an appearance, yet scored the winner in the semi-final against Sheffield United.

Paddy Madden cost £15,000 from Carlisle, where he rarely played last season. He's scored 22 in 35 games for Yeovil. James McAllister is 35 and was released by Bristol

YEOVIL: THE FACTS

Town population: 40,000

Club formed: 1895

First promoted into the Football League: 2003

2012-13 League One place: 4th

Average attendance: 4,137

Annual wage bill: £800,000

Most expensive current player: Paddy Madden who cost £15,000 from Carlisle

City last year; he's Yeovil captain. Sam Foley was playing non-league for Newport County last season. 'I have to pinch myself,' he says. 'Five years ago I was playing in front of 50 people.'

Yeovil visited the FA's St George's Park before the semi-final and made their journey to London yesterday because Johnson wanted to 'get the tourist stuff like pictures of the stadium out of their systems early'. Dossiers will soon be handed out by Way.

'Everyone here is up for a fight,' adds Foley. 'That's what the manager wants. We're all up for a fight on a Sunday.' The gloves are off.