

Can we expect a shake-up at the Daily Mirror following the appointment of Richard Wallace as editor?

# A popular successor to Piers

By Rob McGibbon

The phone goes and it's Press Gazette wondering if I fancy doing a piece on the new editor of the Daily Mirror. Up to speed as ever, I say: "Well, yes, but I suppose it depends on who it is..."

"It's Richard Wallace."

"RICHARD WALLACE? I swear loudly and nearly fall off my chair in shock. I think this was a common reaction to the appointment, not least by the man himself."

The news was announced during half time of the England v Switzerland game last week and it brought cheers across the Mirror's newsroom. A few minutes earlier, the same bunch of people had been yelling happily as Wayne Rooney cartwheeled his way into the hearts of the nation. Now they were cheering their own boy from the terraces of the 22nd floor.

When Wallace — who has been with the paper for 14 years — walked into the office on Monday morning for his first day in charge, none of the enthusiasm for his elevation had diminished: he was given a round of applause by staff. If Piers Morgan had been the David Beckham of the Mirror, then Wallace was hailed as the Wayne Rooney. I think they would have even forgiven him for doing a cartwheel into his spectacular new office.

Wallace has been the first to admit that he was surprised and overwhelmed to get the job, as well as the heartfelt backing. Such a welcome dose of honesty and humility from a man in that position has won him wider appreciation beyond Canary Wharf.

But who is Wallace, what can be expected from him and how did he pull off one of the most surprising ascents since, well, Morgan himself?

Wallace grew up to a sense of his place. I have been friends with Wallace since we did the showbiz beat for rival papers in the late Eighties. I only see him very rarely these days, but I know him to be a straight-up, entertaining guy, who is dedicated and gifted with that great gut instinct for newspapers.

But, my partiality aside, everyone I have spoken to about Wallace and elsewhere — including Morgan — is pleased for him and growing used to the idea that he can make a great editor. The bottom line is that Wallace is a proven all-rounder, as well as an all-round good bloke.

One journalist there said: "The sense of limbo since Piers left has been a bit of a nightmare. We've had to read what might be happening to us in other papers and there was a big worry who we would get."

"It has been a brilliant appointment and it has given everyone a lift, a real morale booster. Richard is widely respected and liked in the newsroom. He is tough and expects high standards, but he is fair and inspires loyalty. Above all, he is a good laugh and his philosophy is about enjoying the job and that anyone can have an impact on the paper."

Wallace began his Fleet Street career shifting on *The Mail* on Sunday, before joining the Daily Mail on showbiz. He was the sharpest operator on the circuit and was poached by *The Sun* and then from there, by the Mirror, in 1990.

His executive career was nurtured by Morgan and he is credited with turning Matthew Wright into a celebrity and for creating the iamGirls. Wallace's calibre increased immeasurably when he became head of news in 2000 and he was at the forefront of the paper's achievements under Morgan, most notably with the award-winning coverage of September 11.

Wallace, now 43, garnered much popularity during this time for his encouraging and avuncular attitude towards young reporters. He



In charge: After the Iraq hoax, the Mirror's new editor Richard Wallace launched his first edition on the back of England's Euro victory

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he started to believe in his credentials and that the job was well within his capability. Sly Bailey and others began to agree.

During the interviews, Wallace delivered a clear and achievable vision to halt the decline of the Mirror's sales, which impressed Bailey. The fact that his popularity meant he would keep together the Mirror team — Morgan's finest legacy — swung the vote. Several key people were ready to jump if the new appointment didn't suit and in the final days, Ellis Watson, the group's managing director, was seen asking a few key department people who their top choice would be. Everyone said Wallace.

SO WHAT CHANGES is Wallace likely to make? The general feeling is that Wallace is not going to rip up the paper and start again. Nor will there be mass hirings and firings. The team is one he knows well, trusts and wants to retain.

I understand that the key to his strategy is to refocus the paper back on the reader and to bring it to a sense of stability, consistency and, above all, balance.

One of Wallace's strongest beliefs is that the loyal bedrock of the readership in the North needs to be engaged. He senses they have been willfully ignored, or taken for granted, in pursuit of a blinkered, London-rules agenda. One idea to refocus attention is by putting greater emphasis on targeted editorialising of the paper.

Wallace is also determined that the paper reflects the values and interest of its core northern readers. He wants coverage of events — particularly politics — to have a relevance to its readers. The same test will be applied to the paper's columnists, who will be scrutinised to see whether they have a genuine place in the Mirror.

Wallace is committed to bringing a sense of

balance to the paper, so gone are the days of one news story dominating the entire production. Despite his showbiz background, the Mirror will definitely not stoop to become the daily froth, but I believe showbiz will be befed up with a new supremo overseeing the entire operation. However, expect to see as many moving human interest and stories aimed at women as showbiz buy-ups.

As for politics, I think we can expect a genial reconciliation with Tony Blair. That's not to say the Mirror will suddenly be chums on all fronts. In fact, Wallace is as vehement about Blair's position on Iraq as was Morgan, so there will be no U-turn there.

However, I believe the approach with Downing Street will be cooler and less personal. No 10 was on the phone within minutes of Wallace's appointment, so they are eager to build bridges. Although Wallace holds his hands up to being something of a novice on the political scene, he is his own man and has no desire to spend his evenings schmoozing with Blair or Gordon Brown.

Above all, Wallace plans to continue Morgan's exuberance and flair around the newsroom and to rekindle the fighting spirit that brought in so many exclusives and attracted so much attention. But do not expect him to chase fame for himself or to court favour from the media pages.

Wallace prefers an anonymous approach, like Paul Dacre and Rebekah Wade, and the response from the readers will be valued way above any inter-industry back-slapping.

"When I first heard that Richard Wallace was the new Mirror editor, I was happily shocked. Now the idea seems to make perfect sense. Good on him."

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gained further respect during a successful 15-month stint as US editor.

He returned last August to be deputy editor at the Sunday Mirror and his flair show through when he stepped in while Tina Weaver went on maternity leave earlier this year. He gave the paper a sparkle and steadied sales, a fact noted by Morgan initially.

Wallace began putting his hat in the ring for the Mirror job as more of an exercise than with any real hope of getting it. But as the process went on,