



Clacton & District: Walton on Panthers' tail

Author: Paul Stimpson

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With the second half of the Clacton & District League season resuming in January, the race for the Division One title is developing into the closest for many years.

Reigning champions Nomads Panthers are aiming for their eighth consecutive title but they face stiff competition from Walton A, for whom Daniel Young has been in scintillating form.

Panthers are currently seven points ahead of their rivals, having played a game more. But with the scheduled first half-season meeting of the teams being postponed, the two sides have not yet met head-to-head and the two matches between the teams in the second half-season will be crucial to the final outcome of the title.

Brotherhood A were also hoping to loosen the Panthers' grip on the title but their 9-1 defeat at the hands of the reigning champions in their early-December encounter would seem to have scuppered their title hopes.

Below these three teams, new signing Mel Rampton has been a reliable ever-present for Windsor Eagles whilst Felipe Rodriguez has returned to something like his best form for Windsor Hawks. Both sides are fighting not only for fourth place, but also for bragging rights as the top Windsor team.

At the other end of the table, promoted Brotherhood B have struggled all season and, whilst they continue to battle valiantly, their relegation fate seems set in stone, even at the mid-way point of the season.

And although Walton E are the marginal favourites to join them, Walton C, Walton B and Nomads Lions are only a handful of points ahead and none of these three sides will feel safe from the spectre of relegation.

It's a tense three-way tussle at the top of Division Two with just a single point separating current leaders Brotherhood D from Brotherhood C and Lawford, who are locked together in second place.

There's little to choose between these three teams and it would be a brave – and extremely foolhardy – pundit who would make any predictions at this stage. It's a contest which will be eagerly watched as the season progresses and one which may only be decided in the final week of the season.

Ray Chillingworth has enjoyed his best season for a number of years for Windsor Buzzards and, with David North always available for Nomads Bobcats, both teams will be looking to a top-half finish.

In the lower-half of the table, just 13 points separate five teams. Windsor Kestrels, whose season has stalled after a promising start having accumulated just ten points from their last four matches, are now level-pegging with Brotherhood E in sixth and seventh places. But with Graham Bunce and Kevin Pryor in the respective ranks of the Kestrels and Brotherhood, both teams will feel confident of staying free of trouble – in which case, perm any two of the current three bottom teams for the relegation places.

Windsor Magpies are currently bottom but, should Dave Martin play with any regularity, they will undoubtedly improve their position, which would spell danger for either – or both – Windsor Harriers and Brotherhood G, neither of who possess a talismanic points-gatherer to play them out of trouble.

The situation is more clear-cut at the very top of Division Three where Nomads Jaguars are thirteen points ahead of their nearest rivals, with a match in hand. They've already proved themselves the class side of the Division and are heavy odds-on favourites to finish as champions.

But the situation is less clear-cut when it comes to the runners-up spot. Windsor Penguins are currently second but a mere four points ahead of Windsor Pumas and seven in front of Nomads Leopards. The three sides are evenly-matched and the battle for second place could well prove a nail-biter.

Walton D and Brotherhood F, presently the fifth and sixth sides, are probably too far behind to make any impact on the top four and both seem destined for mid-table respectability. But both teams possess players capable of causing an upset and their results against the teams battling for the runners-up place could be crucial in determining who finishes second.

There's hardly a proverbial sheet of tissue paper separating the bottom four teams. All four sides have a similar look to them, relying on one player to garner the majority of their points – Arthur Wells-Garrett for Nomads Ocelots, Bob Bales for Windsor Robins, Sharon Gowlett for Windsor Merlins and Dominic Joannou for Nomads Lynx.

And with those four players also evenly matched, their personal battles in the second half of the season could well determine the ultimate finishing positions of their teams.

* The table tennis season resumes next week with the final group matches of the Handicap Doubles Challenge. The following week sees Round One of the Handicap Knock-Out Cup, which will involve 28 of the League's 30 teams. The League programme resumes in week beginning 20th January.

* The first of the League's Tournaments, the Handicapped Singles, takes place on Saturday 8th February at the Windsor Club's St James' Hall venue.

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