

Clacton & District League: Panthers on track for a title hat-trick

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As the players of the Clacton & District League gird their loins in readiness for the second-half of the 2014/15 season, the big question in Division One is 'Can anyone stop the Panthers?'

Whilst there is fierce competition at the top of Divisions Two and Three, Nomads Panthers begin the new year with an impressive 14-point lead. As last year, James Denyer has gone through the first-half of the season with an unblemished record and, with Colin Webber and Gill Locke producing consistently good results, it seems only a shock of seismic proportions can prevent the Panthers taking the title for a third year running.

Nomads Lions, who currently hold second position, can rightly be regarded as the surprise team of the season. With brothers Paul and Sam Hume in fine form, and John Hatley and John Fenton providing steadfast support, the Lions have established themselves as favourites to take the runners-up spot – and make it an unlikely one-two for the Nomads Club.

Walton A and Brotherhood A both have quality players in their squads and were expected to be the main challengers but both have experienced problems in fielding a full side on a regular basis, and they find themselves in a battle for third place.

Mark Smith's return to the ranks of the Eagles during November has boosted the Windsor side's chances of a top-half finish – but there is a cluster of equally matched teams in the middle of the division who are fighting for that privilege.

The presence of Gary Young has given Walton C a guaranteed points-machine, Windsor Condors, led by Colin Stallwood, should be higher but have suffered through player availability, whilst Windsor Hawks have recovered from an early-season drop in form to a currently respectable seventh position. Meanwhile Walton B's familiar quartet continue to plough their mid-table furrow and provide stern opposition to whoever they play.

Gracie Edwards has settled in well for Brotherhood B who sit above the relegation places and, with the consistent Martin Edwards continuing to average over 50 per cent, they will be confident of staying clear of the danger zone.

All of which has left – unsurprisingly – the two promoted sides, Windsor Kestrels and Windsor Ravens, in the relegation places, with both facing the prospect of a speedy return to the second division.

In Division Two, two Brotherhood teams are fighting for the honours.

Gary Stallwood could well play in a higher division but his consistent winning performances for Brotherhood C at this level, allied to an already strong squad, means they start 2015 with a slender five-point advantage over club-mates Brotherhood D, a capable all-round side who, like the 'C' team, have lost only once all season.

These two sides look favourites for the trophy positions but three teams – Nomads Ocelots, Lawford and Windsor Owls – are waiting in the wings should either Brotherhood side falter.

It's no surprise that the Ocelots, led by the evergreen Brian Parish, are in the mix at the top. And Lawford, last season's third-placed side comprising the able trio of Paul Hewitt, Richard Spence and Ian Sherwood, was always likely to feature in the top four. However, the prominence of the Owls was less foreseeable but a testimony to the fact that all their squad members – Frank Burbidge, Adam Jackson, Tricia Salter and Sue Watson – have played above themselves so far this season.

Windsor Harriers are again proving the typical average Division Two team, whilst the combative Brotherhood F and the talented but mercurial Brotherhood I should both feel pleased with their positions of mid-table security.

Five teams, separated by just 12 points, are fighting it out at the bottom and all five will know they must produce the goods in the second-half of the season if they are to survive.

Brotherhood H have relied on Grant Sharpe's points to keep them afloat to date but, with Allen Denyer hoping to return to action in the new year, they look best-placed to avoid the drop.

Tony Edmonds, Rodney Betts and Duncan Dunne are all seasoned campaigners, which should see Brotherhood E safe, but Windsor Magpies will be looking to David Sweetland and John Plummer to convert narrow defeats into narrow wins to help them in their survival quest.

John Marshall has provided three-quarters of the points for a Nomads Tigers' side that looks vulnerable, as do Nomads Jaguars, despite the valiant efforts of Andrew North, Kevin Hume and Caroline North to lift them out of trouble.

The Division Three title race is a straight head-to-head contest between Windsor Buzzards and Nomads Lynx. The Buzzards, having played a game more, currently lead by 12 points but their recent 6-4 victory over the Lynx gives them the narrowest of advantages at the halfway stage.

Nomads Pumas, a team beset by injury and illness, have done well to emerge in joint-third place at the start of the new year, a position they share with a Nomads Leopards' side enhanced by the presence of new-signing John Bonner

Brotherhood G began the season with a host of player availability and injury problems but, from November onwards, they restored the equilibrium and, led by Graham Parkes, find themselves well placed for a top-four finish.

Nomads Wildcats, with Andrew Cawley prominent, and Windsor Penguins, with Alan Charman, Jackie Bunce and Mike Monschau all solid table tennis citizens at this level, should both feel content to be occupying a mid-table position. But the fast-improving Woody Fitzpatrick and the promising Millie Easton have given Windsor Ospreys a great opportunity to secure an unexpected top-half finish.

With nine registered players, Nomads Bobcats have varied their side from week to week but, with Doug Green back from injury, they will be hoping to climb the table in the second half of the season. And it's good to see Walton D's Lynette Sparks and Toni Hayhoe-Khan producing some winning results, their position bolstered by the fine form of Rivhu Khan.

Windsor Swallows are another side to have been plagued by player problems but all credit to team captain Iris Howlett for her continued enthusiasm in keeping the Swallows up and running. And although Windsor Kites currently prop up the table, the improved form of Chris Simson could yet see them edge out of the unenviable wooden-spoon position.

[Click here to view league averages](#) (qualification four matches and 30 per cent)

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