



Clacton & District: Panthers clear in hunt for fourth title

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At the halfway stage of the Clacton & District League season, Nomads Panthers hold a 22-point lead at the top of **Division One** and look odds-on favourites to make it four titles in a row.

The energetic Sam Hume and much-improved John Hatley have capably filled the gap left by James Denyer in the Panthers' ranks and, with Gill Locke and Colin Webber proving as reliable as ever, only a disaster of monumental proportions can prevent the Panthers taking top honours yet again.

If it looks almost done and dusted at the very top, four possible contenders – including three Windsor teams – are vying for the runners-up spot.

The excellent Felipe Rodriguez and Andy Vincent have been consistency personified for the Hawks which has seen them rise up the table, whilst the ever-dependable Eagles are always there-or-thereabouts and won't be far away come the end of the season.

The Condors, with Colin Stallwood, Greg Green and Martin Hogg in their line-up, have the pedigree to be the best of the bunch – but their three top players have appeared together in the same team only once so far.

But Walton C, with the flair of Gary Young allied to the solidity of Derek Willis and energy of Paul Meikle, could be the team to spoil the Windsor party.

Gavin Price has been Walton B's top player which should ensure his team secure a mid-table finish, whilst Brotherhood C, with their mix of elite and journeymen players, should also find a niche in the middle of the table.

Brotherhood B's Martin Edwards has shown good form and, with Gracie Edwards and David North providing excellent support, they have eliminated any relegation worries. And although it's been something of an up-and-down season for Nomads Lions, they have enough quality to keep clear of trouble.

Brotherhood D, unexpectedly promoted to the top-flight last season, are rooted to the bottom but they continue to battle hard and, just before Christmas, had the satisfaction of recording a first win of the season.

Windsor Kestrels, 10 points away from the safety zone, are the second side facing the prospect of relegation, suffering as they do from having a line-up of four solid citizens but without one elite player to win them two or three points consistently every match.

It's a three-horse race at the top of a competitive **Division Two**.

Nomads Tigers are one of only two unbeaten sides in the whole of the League and, with a squad comprising Daryl Lott, Roger Hance, John Marshall and John Bonner, they are more than capable of taking the title.

But there's little to choose between the Tigers and Windsor Owls, for whom Frank Burbidge and Mark Salter have been in sparkling form. The two teams have been neck-and-neck all season and the eventual destination of the title may well depend on how the Owls cope with the expected absence of Woo Dy during the final quarter of the season.

However, don't rule out the chances of Lawford whose regular threesome have shown, season after season, that they are a competitive outfit and, on their day, able to beat anyone in the Division.

Five teams, separated by just 12 points in the middle of the table, have been having their own private battle to determine who will take fourth position.

Three Brotherhood teams currently occupy fourth, fifth and sixth places, each of them containing an in-form player to lead the way – the ever-steady Barry Allen for the 'F' team, the much-improved Tom Wilkin for the 'I' team and the always-impressive Grant Sharpe for the 'H' team.

Windsor Harriers have made a habit in recent seasons of ending in the middle of the table and this year should be no different whilst promoted Windsor Buzzards, for whom Pete Bloomfield has been something of a revelation, have adapted well to Division Two standards to banish any relegation worries.

All of which leaves four teams facing an anxious second half-season at the foot of the table.

Nomads Bobcats are currently nine points clear of the relegation places but they have proved the most enigmatic team in the League so far, their only two wins of the season gained when they employed reserves from Division Three. And, having used the services of eleven different players during the course of the first-half season, such inconsistent team selection makes it near-impossible to gauge their likelihood of survival – or not.

Of the remaining teams, Andrew North has shown typical dogged determination which has helped to keep Nomads Jaguars survival hopes alive but Brotherhood E will need one of Duncan Dunne, Tony Edmonds or Rodney Betts to start putting forward a run to help them stay up. And current bottom team Windsor Magpies will be hoping John Plummer can continue his improved form to help his team scrape their way up the table.

Nomads Pumas have led **Division Three** for the last three months and, with Eric Lemke playing alongside regulars Lionel Goddard, John Bowers and Andrew Cousins, they are unbeaten in the League.

The Pumas start the second half-season seven points ahead of Walton D who, in Rivhu Khan, have the outstanding player in the Division. And with Khan well-supported by Lynette Sparks, Toni Hayhow-Khan and the occasional appearance of John Long, an unexpected runners-up spot could well be within Walton's grasp.

If there is to be any challenge at the top, it can surely only come from Nomads Wildcats who, in Andrew Cawley and Brian Friday, have two more-than-capable performers – although Nomads Leopards, since the recruitment of Jason Lloyd and Ethan Lloyd, have risen rapidly from the lower reaches of the table to their current fourth position.

Mike Wellum for Nomads Ocelots, and Woody Fitzpatrick for Windsor Ospreys, have both performed well during the first-half season whilst Ron Dacey and Alan Charman have been the best players for Windsor Penguins. All three teams should enjoy mid-able respectability.

Brotherhood G's new players have settled well into League play with Paul Metcalf proving the pick of their squad whilst Kayley Lamb and Kayleigh Stratford have been the back-bone for Windsor Swallows.

The ladies of Nomads Cougars' are gradually acclimatising themselves to the rigours of table tennis life and have notched up some encouraging wins, supplemented by the occasional points of their mentor and Team Secretary Mike Hillier.

It's good to see Windsor Kites well away from the wooden spoon position, largely due to Chris Simson's sudden – and pleasing – emergence as a quality Division Three player.

And although Nomads Lynx are isolated at the foot of the table, they have been dogged in performance and magnanimous in defeat, and should take comfort in the knowledge that the only way is up.

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