

2024-25 REVIEW

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN FOOTBALL LEAGUE

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE SEASON

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18-PAGE
PLAY-OFF
FINALS
PREVIEW

PREMIER
DIVISION
SOUTH

PREMIER
DIVISION
CENTRAL

DIVISION
ONE
SOUTH

DIVISION
ONE
CENTRAL

PITCHING
IN



SOUTHERN
FOOTBALL LEAGUE



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A welcome from
Southern League Chairman

DAVID MARTIN

Another season to remember...

Football in the National Leagues System at Steps 3 and 4 is thriving and after an action-packed season we all look forward to strong and competitive play-offs. Premier League and EFL football is expensive and football supporters are realising they can have an enjoyable and affordable family day out at their local club.

The attendance figures at the play-off games last season were the highest we have encountered since the play-off were introduced. I don't expect any difference this season.

The play-offs can be tough. After a hard and gruelling season, all four clubs are equal. It might seem harsh on the club who finishes second, especially if the club who finished fifth is many points behind. But that is all part of the excitement of the play-offs. Instead of clubs who are mid-table looking forward to a summer break, they are still in with a chance of the play-offs right up to the closing stages of the season.

I would like to congratulate all 16 clubs who qualified for the Southern League play-offs this season. It's a magnificent achievement, especially for those clubs who have not been in the play-offs at this level before or who are looking for a second successive promotion.

The play-offs can also be heart-breaking, as I experienced at a final I attended last year, where promotion was decided on penalties.

For the first time, all Step 3 play-off matches will be broadcast live on ClubberTV.co.uk. The Southern League has entered into a streaming trial, along with the Northern Premier League and Isthmian League, where the viability of the wider project will be assessed following the success of The National League broadcasting of matches with DAZN.

If you are attending a play-off final match on Bank Holiday Monday, I hope you enjoy the experience and don't forget the new season will start on August 9th with more thrills and spills ahead!

David

David Martin
Southern League Chairman



"Football in the National Leagues System at Steps 3 and 4 is thriving and after an action-packed season we all look forward to strong and competitive play-offs."

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A word from Southern League
Operations Manager

JASON MILLS

The game we all love...

As we come to the end of another season, we reflect on the highs and the lows, but more often than not it is the highs that we take away with us before regrouping for another campaign in August!

The highs are certainly being experienced by the eight Clubs who are in Bank Holiday Monday's Final matches. Huge congratulations to them for reaching this far and I am sure four thrilling matches stand before us to end the 2024/25 in a fitting manner.

Whilst it is the manager, coaches and the players that take the main applause, we must not forget the very important role that the volunteers at each and every Club play in making the team and the Club work. Without those, there would be no Club and on behalf of my colleagues here at the Southern League we salute each and every one of you.

Your commitment and time are so much appreciated. With that said, if anyone has even a little amount of spare time to help their Club, please consider doing so. Get in touch with them and offer your support or alternatively check out pitchinginvolunteers.co.uk/ where you can see vacancies at your Club.

It is also extremely warming to know that so many of our Clubs are embracing their communities with support in so many ways, and not just with teams through the ages and genders, but with support within the community itself. We are delighted to be able to offer financial assistance through the Trident Community Fund, with a variety of different schemes being adopted by our Clubs. We look forward to being able to continue that again next season.

It therefore leaves me to say thank you for your support in the Pitching In Southern League and the team in which you play for, support or help run. Without you the National League System could not function.

Whichever team you support or if you are simply attending one of the four finals, have a fantastic Bank Holiday Monday and enjoy the game we all love so much!

Jason

Jason Mills
Southern League Operations Manager



"The highs are certainly being experienced by the eight Clubs who are in Bank Holiday Monday's Final matches. Huge congratulations to them for reaching this far and I am sure four thrilling matches stand before us to end the 2024/25 in a fitting manner..."

Merthyr Town



IT'S 12 MONTHS SINCE MERTHYR TOWN AGONISINGLY SLIPPED OUT OF THE PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER SOUTH PLAY-OFF PLACES ON THE FINAL DAY OF THE SEASON HAVING BEEN PART OF THE LEADING PACK THROUGHOUT THE CAMPAIGN.

Rather than feel sorry for themselves and take the hangover into this season, they used the obvious disappointment to fuel a title challenge that has seen them lose just four of their 42 League games, which has included over a century of goals scored and a record-breaking 32-game unbeaten run that stretched from the end of August to the beginning of April.

They held off a brave challenge from AFC Totton to confirm the title with a game to spare following a 3-0 victory over Hungerford Town on Bank Holiday Monday.

"To lift the title means everything to me," Tom Handley told us. "We've put in so much work from pre-season right up until now and to see all that effort rewarded in this way really is something special. This is not just for us as players, it's for the staff, the fans, and everyone involved at the club. Just incredible, it still hasn't sunk in yet!"

"There were a few defining moments along the way, but one that stands out for me was Noah's last minute equalising header against Gloucester City. That result really gave us belief and momentum. After the draw away at AFC Totton, we knew the title was in our hands, but we just had to stay focused, and keep believing.

"Personally, I feel proud of the consistency and contributions that I have been able to make throughout the campaign, whether that's goals, assists or just doing my job for the team. As a group, I think we've been relentless; a 32-game unbeaten streak is simply remarkable at any level of the game. Everyone bought into the same goal that we set out at the start of the season and I'm so pleased that our hard work has paid off.

"There have been some special moments for me; my two goals against Chertsey Town stand out and, of course, taking over the captain's armband following Matty's injury has given me so much pride; moments like this stay with you forever.

"The Premier South has been a really competitive division as always. There are no easy games and every team gave us a test. Credit to the other sides, especially AFC Totton, who pushed us all the way, and it made winning the title feel even more rewarding because of that competition they provided to us.

"This is as much for the fans as anyone else because they have been absolutely brilliant all year, home and away. They've backed us in good numbers and to celebrate this title with them was

something to really cherish because the players appreciate their efforts to support us.

Hopefully this is the start of some good times to come!"

A regular on the scoresheet has been Ricardo Rees whose goals have been a key ingredient, not just this season but over recent years too.

"All of the hard work of the past three years has come down to this moment," Rees told us. "It's paid off for us in a big way and it means so much to everyone associated with the club. We had a tough patch at the end of December and into January, but whilst we were drawing a lot of games at that time, we came through it without losing. That was huge for us and it's what ultimately got us over the line.

"To collectively have over 100 goals to our name is a huge achievement, particularly as the standard of the Premier South is better than it has been over the four seasons that I have played at this level.

"Everyone has proved that they can beat anyone and the competition has been strong, so to go 32 games unbeaten like we did is a remarkable feat. To see what this means to the fans and volunteers here means so much. They are most certainly our 12th man and we thank them from the bottom of our hearts."

The Southern League sends our congratulations to all at the club on their achievement.

"As a group, I think we've been relentless; a 32-game unbeaten streak is simply remarkable at any level of the game..."



Images | John Smith

Bedford Town



IT'S THE STUFF THAT DREAMS ARE MADE OF. HAVING SECURED THEIR STEP 3 RETURN VIA THE PLAY-OFFS AT THE END OF LAST SEASON, BEDFORD TOWN HAVE GONE ON TO ACHIEVE A SECOND SUCCESSIVE PROMOTION, BUT NOT ONLY THAT, THEY'VE DONE IT AS PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER CENTRAL CHAMPIONS.

In an extremely competitive division where the top spot exchanged hands on numerous occasions, Lee Bircham's side ended the campaign with 25 wins from their 42 League games to finish with 82 points, five points clear of Kettering Town.

The title was secured thanks to a 2-0 victory over an in-form Stourbridge on the final day of the season as Ryan Blake and Jack Davies got the goals.

The popular Blake has played a pivotal role in both of the promotion successes, establishing a regular place in the team and enjoying a new lease of life.

"When I first arrived at the club it had just suffered relegation and the team had to be rebuilt," he told us. "It was at a pretty low-ebb, and we had our struggles in those early days, but the Gaffer brought together a group of players that went on to secure promotion at the first attempt.

"A few changes were necessary over the summer in preparation for life back at this level, but credit to the Gaffer for assembling another promotion-winning squad that has been able to cope with the extra demands that this level has brought.

"For me personally it has been a really successful couple of years. It's amazing that the most successful period in my career has come at the latter stages and hopefully there will be more of these special moments still to come because I am thoroughly enjoying the journey!

"To see what we have achieved makes me immensely proud. Going into this season we expected it to be tough; you only have to look at the big clubs that are involved, but we approached it with determination and belief in our own ability.

"Hearing that final whistle to confirm we were champions is something that I will never forget and it's an occasion that will live long in the memory of everyone who was part of it as we etched ourselves into the history of this fantastic club.

"It's hard to pick a single defining moment, but what stands out most is the resilience of the team. No matter what came our way—whether it was tough losses or challenges behind-the-scenes—we always found a way to come together and deliver on the pitch. That final loss to Royston in February felt like a turning point; from then on, everything just clicked and we went on an incredible run.

"If you would have asked anyone at the start of the season, our goal was simply to stay in the league. But thanks to the club's ability to keep its core group intact, along with a few key additions that the Gaffer brought in, we were able to compete at the right end all season. And, of course, having someone like Leon Lobjoit in our team has been invaluable—he's saved us on countless occasions throughout the year, what a front-man he is!

"It's been a very competitive league, where anyone can beat anyone. With teams like Kettering and AFC Telford in the mix—clubs that everyone expected to dominate—it makes our underdog season all the more impressive. When you consider how Biggleswade Town, who narrowly beat us to the title last season, have struggled at this level, it just goes to highlight exactly how tough this League is.

"We will savour this moment and enjoy it. Like I told the boys, for many of us—especially the older ones—this feeling might not come around again, so we'll soak it all in, enjoy our summer break, and see how the rest of the football landscape unfolds."

Another member of the team who has played his part in both promotions is Lewis Green and he was quick to praise the efforts of Ryan Blake in particular.

"Going back-to-back is an unreal achievement for the club," he said. "The likes of Blakey, Leon and Mensah have been there with me every step of the way, but especially Blakey because he's played every game over these past two seasons. What a top bloke he is and a great player.



"I joined the club following a trial day; I'd never played non-League before so to now sit here with two promotions is unbelievable.

"If we're being totally honest, I don't think any of us expected to be in this position when we began the season. It was such an emotional day when we clinched the title as all of our hard work came to a positive conclusion. All of the highs and lows along with the blood, sweat and tears. It was a nerve-wracking day because anything can happen, but we managed to get the job done and it was such a relief at the end – I enjoyed every minute of it!

"Strange as it seems, but the defining moment in all of this came when we lost 6-2 at AFC Telford United. That defeat really brought us all together as a group and it sparked a run where we lost only one more game in our next 14 outings.

"It's been a mental season, though. I missed most of pre-season with a broken finger but then got thrown straight back in for our game at Halesowen Town after about four months out, so that was interesting!

"I remember when I re-signed for the club ahead of this season, the Gaffer said that his target was to finish fifth from bottom and make sure that we survived at this level. No-one even mentioned the top half of the table, let alone pushing for the play-offs or the title.

"Keeping a solid core of players together certainly helped and then we've added around that as the season has gone on. We're a team of interesting characters and that's why we do well!

"It's been said many times how tough this League is, some of the clubs in it have big fan bases and big budgets, but you have to embrace that and enjoy the challenge that it brings. With everyone taking points from each other and the lead changing hands so many times, it made this one of the more interesting Leagues to follow.

"The fact that we're moving up into The National Leagues hasn't really sunk in yet. Whether it's in the North or South, we'll take stock a few weeks down the line, but for now we'll celebrate our achievement and also enjoy having a break from the Gaffer's running!"

The Southern League congratulates everyone at the club on their fantastic achievement.



Images | Bedford Town F.C.

"I remember when I re-signed for the club ahead of this season, the Gaffer said that his target was to finish fifth from bottom and make sure that we survived at this level. No-one even mentioned the top half of the table, let alone pushing for the play-offs or the title..."

Yate Town



HAVING LED THE WAY FOR SO LONG, IT WOULD HAVE BEEN EASY FOR YATE TOWN'S PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE SOUTH TITLE BID TO FALL APART WHEN THEY LOST TOP SPOT RECENTLY.

But they stepped up to the plate to regain pole position and get the job done on the back of just six defeats from their 42 League games, taking the title with 88 points, six more than their nearest challengers, Evesham United.

"I am extremely proud of everything we have achieved this season," skipper, Joe Guest, who scored the only goal of the game against Didcot Town on the final day of the season, told us. "Right from the outset our objective was promotion and thankfully we have been able to achieve it automatically!

"There are five or six local lads in the team, myself included, and I think that makes it extra special. That said, all of the boys have worked unbelievably hard to achieve this. Winning any title takes dedication and a tremendous amount of hard work.

"After coming so close to making the play-offs at the end of last season, we fully expected to be in the top five this time around, but to captain the team to the title means the world to me. I just want to play my part in making the team better; getting the technical players to do what they do best and help the younger lads as and when they need it.

"This League is so competitive. Every team in it poses their own problems; there are a mix of different styles to combat and thankfully we've been able to come through this test with flying colours.

"Next season will be tough again, of course, as we step up a level, but we'll be more than equipped to deal with it. We're ready to make the step up; there are a lot of lads here who have played at higher levels and with a few additions and some minor tweaks here and there, we'll be ready to consolidate. We'll look to play the same style that has got us into this position and there is certainly plenty to look forward to and be positive about."

For manager, Darren Mullings, it was the perfect ending to his first full season at the helm.

"It's been a long but enjoyable season," he added. "The lads have been absolutely fantastic since the very first day of pre-season.

"We set ourselves a target back then and we kept it to ourselves for a long time. We started the season extremely well and no-one could really touch us right up until January time, which was pleasing.

"The last few weeks have been challenging as we suffered a bit of a dip in form based on our high standards, but we stuck to our beliefs and showed a tremendous amount of character and belief to get it over the line.

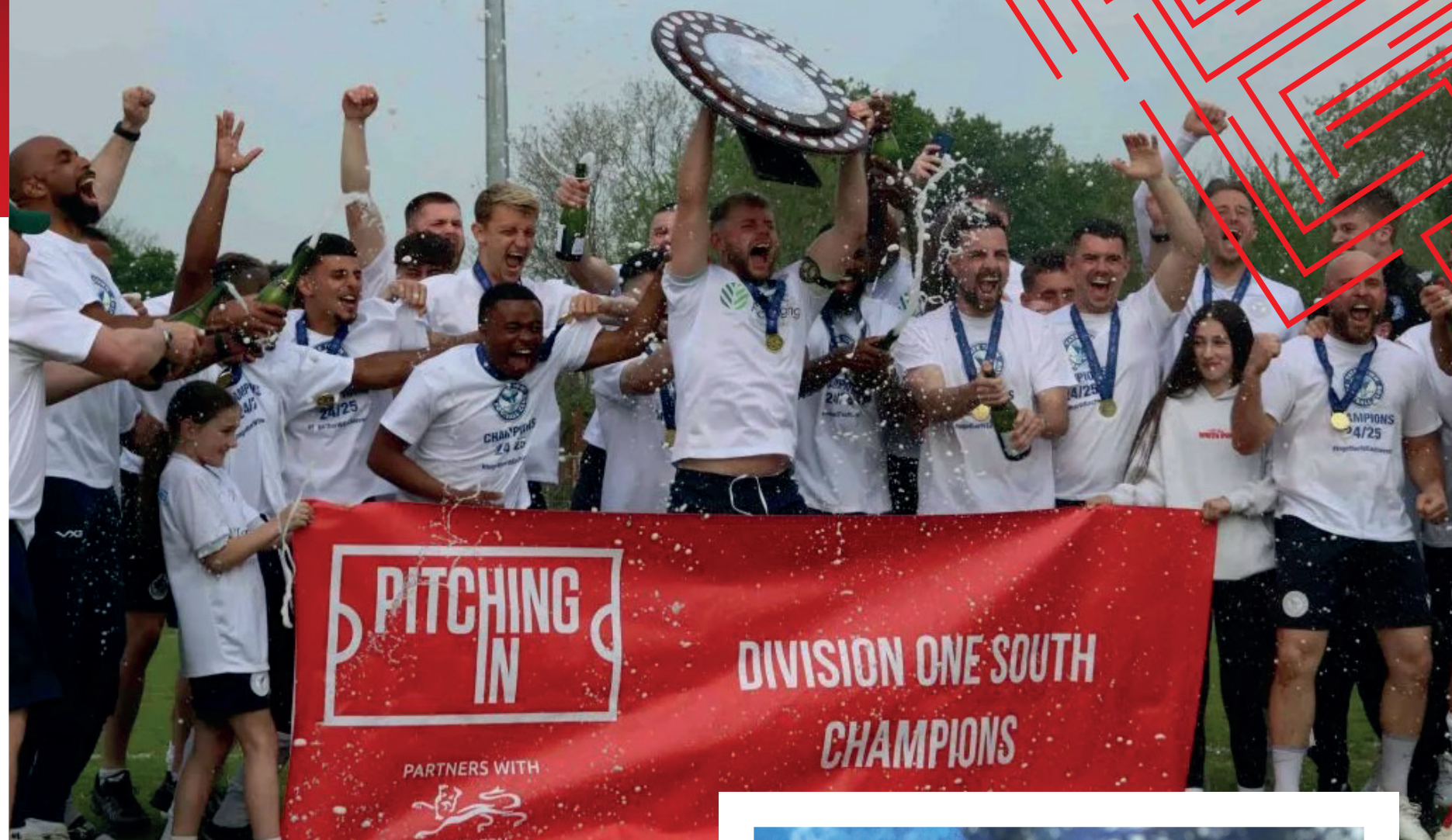
"To clinch the title in front of such a big crowd at home is what it's all about, this is why we do it. Everyone has played their part and I can't thank them enough for what they have achieved this season.

"I've never seen a group quite like it; they are a pleasure to work with and we're just like one big family. They have made my first full season in management an absolute delight and I can't wait to see what's next."

One of Mullings' experienced on the field lieutenants, Lloyd James, was keen to savour the occasion.

"You never know when it will be your last game," he said. "I've been involved in football a long time and I know that whenever you win a title, it's massive and you have to enjoy the moment.

"This ranks up there with everything I've achieved in my career; the League table doesn't lie and over the course of the season, we have been the best team. Credit to Evesham United because

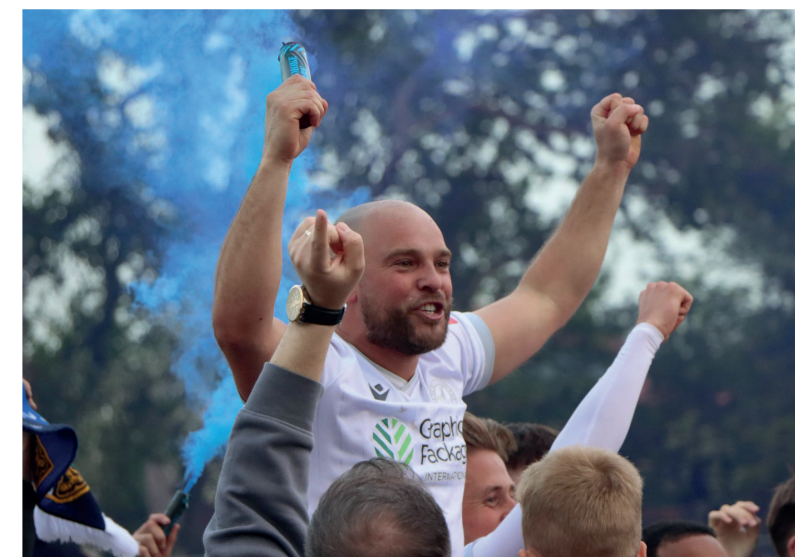


they went on a great run and pushed us all the way, but we deserved it in the end.

"The Gaffer has driven us forward and pushed us on to this success; there are so many people involved behind-the-scenes, it not just the players, it's a team effort from everyone and we are going to enjoy this before turning our attention to what lies ahead.

"The boys handled the occasion really well on the final day of the season and it was great to be able to clinch the title on home soil and in front of a packed house. The atmosphere was fantastic and it made all of the difference."

The Southern League sends its congratulations to everyone involved with the club on their title triumph.



"To clinch the title in front of such a big crowd at home is what it's all about, this is why we do it. Everyone has played their part and I can't thank them enough for what they have achieved this season..."

Real Bedford



THE FIRST OF OUR FOUR LEAGUE TITLES WAS WON ON APRIL 12TH WHEN REAL BEDFORD CONFIRMED THE PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE CENTRAL CROWN WITH THREE GAMES STILL TO PLAY.

A hard-earned 1-0 victory over relegation-threatened King's Langley, their 30th win of the season at the time, was enough to see off the challenge of Berkhamsted.

Following promotion at the end of last term from the Spartan South Midlands League Premier Division, they quickly adapted to life in Step 4 and have gone on to accumulate over 100 points, score 12X goals and lose only twice from 40 games on their way to a third successive League title.

"I am extremely proud to be part of this story," said skipper, Lee Watkins. "I've led teams in the past, but to have captained a side this good and talented has been a real privilege.

"There have been plenty of key moments along the way. I think back to scrappy 1-0 away wins at the likes of Flackwell Heath and AFC Dunstable. The home

game against Flackwell Heath was another one where we managed to get a massive point having found a way back from 5-3 down with ten men against strong opponents.

"From a team perspective, we have done what we set out to do at the start of the season, but not only that, we've done it by sticking to our principles and our style of play.

"I've played in this League a few times in the past, so generally I had an idea of what to expect going into the campaign. This is such a competitive League and you can see that by the number of teams who have been battling it out for a place in the play-offs.

"To get over 100 points at any level of football is a real achievement and to do it on the back of a run that saw us go over 20 games unbeaten made it extra special.

"Everyone involved with the club can be proud of their efforts; we've all worked together to get this club to where we wanted to be from the outset. We look to the future with plenty of excitement and anticipation."

Manager, Rob Sinclair, who has guided the club to each of their title successes, added: "It's incredible; you only have to look at the celebrations when we clinched the title to see how much this means to everyone.

"I'm really proud of the players; they have embraced the challenge of Step 4 and given absolutely everything they've got over the course of what is a long, hard season."

The Southern League sends our congratulations to all at the club on their achievement.



"From a team perspective, we have done what we set out to do at the start of the season, but not only that, we've done it by sticking to our principles and our style of play..."



stories of the season

Premier Division South



CHERTSEY TOWN BACK IN THE SWING

Jack Mazzone wasted little time in getting back into the swing of things at Chertsey Town.

The lively striker was brought back to the club he previously served on loan to add know-how to the forward line following their promotion into the Premier South.

He wasted little time in getting off the mark, just two minutes into their opening game of the season, and followed it up with further goals during the month.

"I've been around the game long enough to know that a good team spirit can take you a long way whatever level you play at and we've got that here," he told us. "When everyone is on the same page and has that understanding, then the sky really is the limit.

"I've played in this League before so the club was keen to have that knowledge of what it takes to be successful. From my experience, the top five or six tend to break away from the pack and I believe we can be part of that group."



Premier Division Central



STOURBRIDGE BROTHERHOOD

It was a result that made everyone sit up and take notice as a new-look Stourbridge outfit went to pre-season title favourites, AFC Telford United, and won 5-1 following a resounding display.

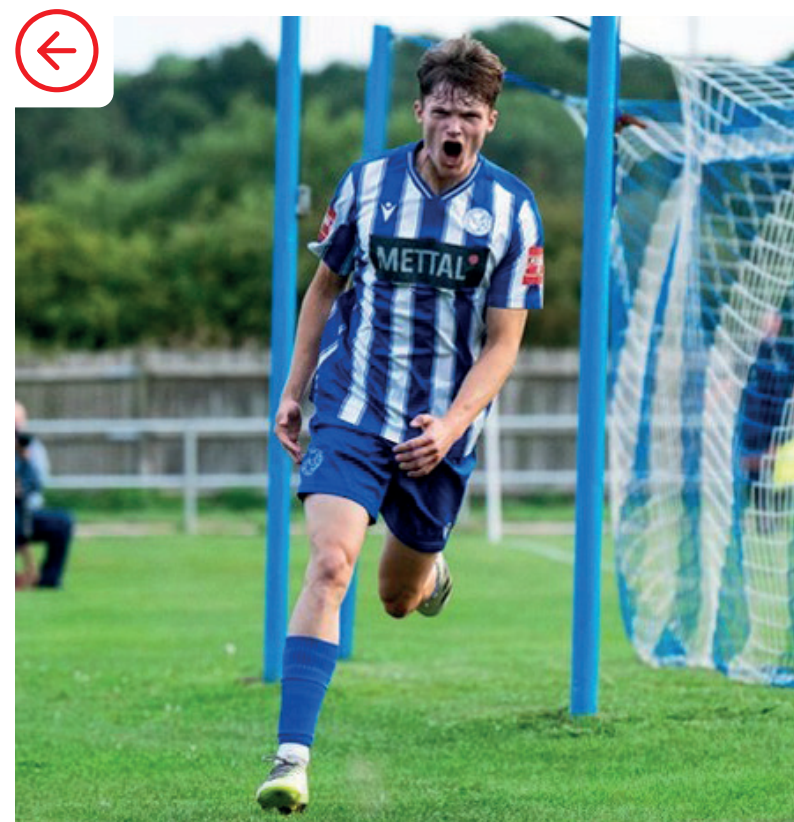
The appointment of Liam McDonald as manager over the summer led to an influx of new players and coaching staff.

"The first few games of the season have been class," said Harvey Portman, one of only a couple of players to survive from the previous season. "The squad is very new and we're still learning about how each other plays, but it's been a case of so far, so good.

"The progress that we have made since our first pre-season game has been massive. There's still a lot for us to do, of course, but the Gaffer and his staff have really worked hard with us and we're buying into their vision.

"The Gaffer is very big on building a togetherness and brotherhood between the group. It's served him well in the past and we've been able to show signs of that in these opening games."

Division One South



THATCHAM TOWN BOURNE IDENTITY

The Division One South new-boys got up-and-running with their first victory in their opening home game as Oliver Bourne's goal proved to be the difference against fellow new-boys, Shaftesbury.

"It's always a great feeling to get on the scoresheet, but it being the club's first home game and win in this League made it extra special for me," said Bourne. "The important thing now is to keep the momentum and hopefully add more wins. This is a tough League and we are learning more about it all of the time.

"There are a lot of new teams and players that we will be coming up against and I am excited to see what is in store for us.

"As a group we have plenty of belief in ourselves and there is no reason why we can't be challenging for the play-off places."



Division One Central



WARE FOUR-MIDABLE

It was an August Bank Holiday weekend to remember for Ware as they kick-started their season with a 3-2 victory over Barton Rovers, where they came from two goals down with 20 minutes to go to win, before dismantling neighbours, Hertford Town, by five goals to one in a game which saw Jon Clements help himself to four of the goals.

"Naturally I was over the moon to be able to weigh in with four of the goals, particularly as it was a local derby," Clements told us. "To be as clinical as we were bodes well. The dressing room has seen a lot of changes over the past few months, but we've recruited some really hungry and talented individuals.

"We're still growing as a team, but overall a great group of lads, and pleasure to play with.

"I love this League and the new teams that have joined us over the summer. There are one or two whom I expect to be leading the charge, but there is an extremely tight pack behind them battling it out for the play-off places."

stories of the season

Premier Division South



WINCHESTER CITY HOMECOMING

All of the blood, sweat and tears were worth it for Winchester City as they finally stepped out at their redeveloped Charters Community Stadium home for the first time.

An extensive programme of work took place over the course of the summer with a 3G playing surface laid, new LED floodlights installed, stand redevelopment and improvements of the surrounds with new fencing dug-outs and hard standing areas.

"This is a project that has been six or seven years in the making," Club Director, Stuart Munro, told us. "I am very proud of what has been achieved. There have been plenty of hurdles to overcome and we've had to jump through many hoops, but we've made it!

"This project is not just about the here-and-now, it's about building a sustainable future for the football club and reaching

out to provide a first-class facility for the whole community.

"It's an opportunity for us to really start moving forward both on and off the pitch. We're not going to try to run before we can walk, though. It will be done in a considered, controlled and sustainable manner."

Premier Division Central



HITCHIN TOWN REAL DEALL



After seven straight losses, Hitchin Town got their first points on the board in fine as they went to Halesowen Town and came away with a 4-0 win.

Playing a key role in the win was Rio Deall, who not only got his name on the scoresheet but also tormented the home side all afternoon.

"There is no escaping the fact that it's been a tough start to the season for us," Deall admitted. "But we've stuck together and have been improving game-by-game, and it showed through in this performance and result.

"We went into the game believing that we could get our first points on the board. We worked harder than our opponents and got our reward at what is never an easy place to go to. To win 4-0, though, was excellent and a massive boost.

"The performance shows that we can compete at this level; we need to build on it now and start climbing the table. We've come through tough times, but now there is a chance for us to really kick-on and get things moving in the right direction."

Division One South



CINDERFORD TOWN UP & RUNNING

There was relief at Cinderford Town as they finally got their first points on the board at the seventh time of asking courtesy of a 2-1 victory over Westbury United.

"We've been close in the majority of our games so far, but either haven't quite held on or we've made a mistake that's cost us," said experienced skipper, Adam Davies, who scored the opening goal. "It was nice to be able to see this one out and it also had the added bonus of getting my name on the scoresheet.

"We haven't been far away with our performances so far this season; the jump from Step 5 to Step 4 is a big one, so we always knew it was going to be difficult for us to compete in what is a strong and competitive League.

"You learn a lot about those around you when things aren't going your way and it's clear we have a great group here who all stick together and there's enough experience around the place to get us out of the difficult periods.

"I've played over 300 games at this level and every year the standard just gets better and better."

Division One Central



BIGGLESWADE FC PURE DEVOTION

History was made for Biggleswade FC as they made it into the Emirates FA Cup third qualifying round for the first-ever time following a 2-1 victory over AFC Dunstable.

One of the great sub-plots to this story is that striker, Amir Hadi, came back from a holiday in Morocco to play in the game before returning the following day.

"A good mate of mine was getting married in Morocco on the Wednesday," he explained. "So, a group of us decided to make a holiday out of it.

"When we booked the trip, I knew that this weekend was designated for the FA Cup, but at the time I didn't know if we would still be involved in the competition.

"As soon as we made it through after winning at Basildon United in the previous round, I booked a flight back home so I could play in the game and then a return flight back to re-join the wedding party on the Monday.

"Money comes and goes but memories last forever and it was important to me to be available for this game and be part of what is such a prestigious competition."

Premier Division South



TAUNTON TOWN IRISH EYES ARE SMILING

Heard the one about the club Vice-Chairman who woke on matchday to a flurry of missed calls, played in goal that afternoon, kept a clean sheet and helped his team through to the next round of the Isuzu FA Trophy?

Well, that is what happened to Taunton Town for their third round qualifying clash with Basingstoke Town, as Lloyd Irish stepped up to the plate to help them through.

Irish is no novice, though, he has almost 400 career appearances to his name.

"I woke up on Saturday morning fully expecting to be in the board room as I'd hung up my boots and gloves at the end of last season," he admitted. "But a couple of weeks previously I signed forms just in case of an emergency, not really expecting it to happen.

"Then when I looked at my phone first thing on Saturday morning and saw all the missed calls from the club, I knew something wasn't right. The regular 'keeper had been taken ill and they needed me to step in. It was such short notice that I didn't have time to think about the game, but thankfully all went well."



Premier Division Central



LOWESTOFT TOWN THE END OF AN ERA

It was the end of an era at Lowestoft Town when Jamie Godbold brought the curtain down on a 20-year association with his hometown club as player and latterly manager.

After amassing over 500 appearances, he then led them to promotion at the end of last term during six years at the helm.

His final game before joining the coaching staff at Ipswich Town, saw a battling 1-0 victory over Harborough Town.

"I've not been involved in too many 1-0 wins during my time at the club," he said with a wry smile. "I was proud of the way in which the players battled it out, as I have been throughout my time in charge.

"Everyone at the club, from the Board to the players, staff, supporters and the amazing volunteers, they have all played their part in my journey here. I leave with so many fantastic memories.

"This club has been a big part of my life and that of my family; they've never known anything different, coming here is their Saturday afternoon, so it has been just as emotional for them as it has for me."

Division One South



MALVERN TOWN GOOD CALL

Having forced his way into the starting line-up earlier in the month, Alex Bell certainly made an impact for Malvern Town.

Bell went on to help the club launch an unbeaten run, weighing in with four goals in three games from right-back!

"The football is good at the moment," he told us. "I haven't felt this feeling for a while, so it's great for me personally and also good to see the positive vibes around the club.

"I'm just happy to be out there and making a contribution. It's been nice to score some important goals and build some momentum and confidence.

"My aim now is to keep my starting place. I was previously coming off the bench a lot but now I am determined to hold down my place.

"From what we have done over this past month, there's no reason why we can't push for the play-offs and with our superb fan base behind us every step of the way, that always gives us an extra boost."



Division One Central



ENFIELD FC BY GEORGE

It's every goalkeepers' dream. Your team is trailing 2-1, you've entered the sixth and final minute of stoppage time and win a corner. The manager gives you the nod to go up for it and not only do you score the equaliser, but you do it with an overhead kick.

The dream actually played out in reality for George Edgeworth as he created 'a moment to tell the grandkids' when he netted a dramatic leveller for Enfield as they came from two goals down to get a 2-2 draw against Biggleswade FC.

"I said to their 'keeper as we were walking off at the end that this is something that every goalkeeper dreams about," said Edgeworth. "I've only ever been a goalkeeper so I've never scored goals before at any level, so when the ball hit the back of the net, I just didn't know what to do!

"It was crazy and certainly something to tell the grandkids one day. This is what football is all about, such a special feeling.

"We always back ourselves to keep going right until the bitter end because we've done it a few times already this season and we were able to battle out a point."



NOVEMBER

stories of the season

Premier Division South



SWINDON SUPERMARINE FULLY FOCUSSED

A five-game unbeaten run thrust Swindon Supermarine from the lower reaches of the table onto the fringes of the play-off places.

"We had quite a few new faces come in over the summer, so it took a little while for us to gel," explained skipper, Ryan Campbell, who broke through the 300 appearance mark for the club during those early month of the campaign. "Recently things have really started to click into place and we've hit some good form.

"I think we're fifth in the current form table, so it's a case of keeping this momentum going for as long as we can.

"We knew how tough this League would be; it's the most competitive it's been in a few years, so that makes our current position even more impressive.

"There are shock results week in, week out and you have to be on your game in every minute of every game or else you will get found out. We're fully focussed and trying not to listen to any outside noise."



Premier Division Central



KETTERING TOWN HART AND SOUL

Both Kettering Town and Harborough Town did the Southern League proud with their exploits in the Emirates FA Cup as they both reached the second round proper before succumbing to Doncaster Rovers and Reading respectively.

Prior to that, the Poppies came from behind to beat Sky Bet League One outfit, Northampton Town, 2-1 after extra-time in front of the live BBC cameras.

"It was just incredible," defender, Ben Hart, told us. "There's nothing quite like getting a result with your team after all the hard work we put in.

"The energy from the fans and the support from the whole club really pushed us on. It's a mix of pride, excitement, and that hunger to keep winning. Moments like these are why we play football.

"The buzz around the club is amazing. You can feel the excitement from the fans, staff, and players alike. There's a sense of unity and purpose here at Kettering that makes it a special place to be.

"Being part of something like that, which means so much to so many people, is a privilege and it motivates us to give everything we've got each game."



Division One South



EXMOUTH TOWN IN FULL FLOW

The early season goals were certainly flowing for Tom Bath at Exmouth Town after the Devon outfit made a positive start to the season following their struggles of the previous campaign.

"The team has started fantastically well this season," Bath told us. "The key to it has been working hard for each other and collectively contributing to the wins.

"On a personal note, I feel I have been playing well and now finally contributing with goals and assists, so hopefully that can continue.

"Obviously last season was a season of two halves for us where it was tough at the beginning but we finished the season strongly and pulled ourselves away from relegation.

"We've taken that into the start of the current campaign and with a couple of new additions to the squad, it has only benefitted us.

"As a group we're keeping our feet on the ground and taking it game-by-game. To be honest, to finish anywhere higher than last year is a bonus."



Division One Central



AYLESBURY UNITED SOLID FOUNDATIONS

With just six goals conceded from their opening 13 League games, Aylesbury United were building from some solid foundations.

The month of November included a run of four straight clean sheets as they sat amongst the early front-runners.

"The season is going really well for us so far," said Ben Stallard. "We know that there are still areas that we need to improve on if we are to get to where we want to be, but it's been positive and something for us to build upon.

"All of the hard work that we put in during pre-season is paying off. Going into the season we knew that our fitness levels would be key as well as our willingness to outwork any of our opponents.

"A lot of credit must go to the back four and goalkeeper, Jack Hopwood, who have been outstanding and given us a solid platform. When you're not conceding many goals, it gives the rest of the team so much confidence and this added to the undoubted quality we have has been a good mix."



stories of the season

Premier Division South



PLYMOUTH PARKWAY BEARDMORE TAKE A BOW

There were certainly a few heads that were turned with Plymouth Parkway's 6-0 victory over high-flying Gloucester City.

What made the result even more special was that all six of the goals were scored by one player, Mitchel Beardmore, an outstanding feat at any level of football.

The 20 year-old, who is on loan at the Pitching In Southern League Premier South club from Exeter City, scored twice in the first half and then added another four after the break to complete a memorable afternoon for him and his team.

"This is the first time I have scored six in a game at any level," he told us. "It's something that's going to stay with me forever.

"I was in disbelief at the end, to be honest. We went into the game expecting it to be a tough, close-fought affair against strong opposition, but to come away with a 6-0 win and for me to score all six was beyond my wildest dreams.

"I'll get the headlines but this really was a team effort."



Premier Division Central



SPALDING UNITED TULIPS IN BLOOM

A run of just one defeat from six games saw Spalding United step into Christmas on a positive note as they started to find their feet at the higher level following promotion at the end of the previous campaign.

"The mood in the camp is very positive," said experienced skipper, Connor Brown, whose early season arrival sparked an upturn in fortunes. "There's a good buzz around the place, which always helps when you're on a good run of form.

"It's good to be able to take this kind of form into what is such a busy time of the season. The games are non-stop and it's not easy both physically or mentally as the games come every couple of days. This is a good standard of football; there are some strong teams at this level and I am enjoying the challenge. Being a new team in this League, it's all about taking it game-by-game and making sure we stay consistent and keep improving gradually.

"We don't want to run before we can walk, but the signs are that we're moving in the right direction and we'll see where it takes us."



Division One South



CRIBBS SPIKE GLEE

There was a big result for Cribbs as they recovered from a heavy defeat in their previous game to inflict Yate Town's first home defeat of the season to give recently-installed manager, Ryan Crouch, his first victory at the helm.

"It was an unbelievable performance," said teenager, Spike Weaver, who opened the scoring with a well-taken individual effort. "From the moment we arrived, we just felt as though we were going to get something from this game.

"There was real belief even though we were going to a side that are many people's tip for the title and who had lost only once all season.

"I just tried to follow the Gaffer's message of staying disciplined defensively and be aware of the numerous threats from our hosts.

"It was a massive win in the end and it gives us something really positive to build on now. Yes, we've beaten top of the League but we can't sit back and take anything for granted because in this League, you will quickly get punished."



Division One Central



BERKHAMSTED MATT FINISH

Berkhamsted went into the month in positive fashion, leading the way in the table and already with 40 points on the board.

"We're in a good position as we enter a crucial time of the season," said skipper, Matt Bateman, who ended December with nine League goals to his name. "There are some tough games coming up amongst what is a busy schedule, but we understand the importance.

"I'm pleased with my goal return so far; I'd like to have more, though, doesn't every striker?

"I just want to keep making a contribution as we look to maintain this strong start. We knew it would be a tough challenge going into the season; it's always hard going into the unknown but we were determined to face it head-on following relegation at the end of last season and bounce back at the first attempt.

"We might be top at the moment, but there is still a lot of work to do. Once one game passes our focus immediately turns to the next one, and that's the way it has to be."



PLAY-OFF FINALS

MONDAY 5TH MAY 2025

Premier Division South



V



**AFC
TOTTON**

**GLOUCESTER
CITY**

Snows Stadium
3pm kick-off

Premier Division Central



V



**KETTERING
TOWN**

**AFC TELFORD
UNITED**

Latimer Park
3pm kick-off

Division One South



V



**EVESHAM
UNITED**

**MALVERN
TOWN**

The Spiers & Hartwell Stadium
3pm kick-off

Division One Central



V



BERKHAMSTED

**FLACKWELL
HEATH**

Glencar Community Stadium
3pm kick-off



Image | Peter Short

Setting the scene

It was certainly a dramatic night on Wednesday with the semi-finals taking place across all four of our divisions.

In the Pitching In Southern League Premier South both games served up a real treat. At AFC Totton, the home side went two goals down in the opening 20 minutes at the hands of Dorchester Town as Luke Pardoe and then Luke Roberts found the net. A last minute penalty from Scott Rendell gave the hosts hope and then all of a sudden stoppage time burst into life when two quickfire goals from Tony Lee in the 97th and 100th minute put the home side in front. The visitors refused to give up as Jack Dickson made it 3-3 20 minutes into added on time! It sent the game into extra-time where Charlie Austin grabbed the winner towards the end to send AFC Totton through to the final.

Also racing into an early two-goal lead were Walton & Hersham as Dawid Rogalski and Bobby Taylor put them in command against Gloucester City within the opening 12 minutes. A goal from Joe Hanks just past the 20-minute mark thrust the visitors back into it as Ed Williams levelled matters with 71 minutes on the clock. The game went into extra-time and when that also failed to separate the two sides, it went down to a penalty shoot-out where Gloucester City prospered 5-3.

There was more come from behind glory in the Pitching In Southern League Premier Central as Halesowen Town went ahead at AFC Telford United through Kieren Donnelly midway through the first half. The hosts hit back with two goals in quick succession just before the break from Dylan Allen-Hadley and defender, Orrin Pendley. With 15 minutes to go, Charlie Wragg restored parity for the visitors before Matty Stenson stepped up and grabbed what proved to be the winner just a few minutes later in front of a crowd of over 3,200.

Goals were in short supply in the other semi-final as 120 minutes of football failed to separate Kettering Town and Harborough Town. In what was a tense and edgy occasion it went all the way to a penalty shoot-out where the hosts held their nerve to grab a 4-3 victory.

Over in the Pitching In Southern League Division One South, Evesham United held home advantage against Exmouth Town but fell behind right on the stroke of half-time when Ben Griffith was able to snatch the lead after the Devon outfit had defended well to keep their hosts at bay. The breakthrough finally came for the home team just before the hour when Levi Steele equalised and it wasn't long before Lewis Middleton turned the scoreline on its head. With Evesham now firing on all cylinders, Andre Wright weighed in with a third goal before Middleton rounded the scoring off with a fourth at the death.

The game between Bishops Cleeve and Malvern Town certainly ebbed-and-flowed. Sam Clark gave the visitors the lead just past the quarter-hour mark, but Ross Langworthy was able to level matters within ten minutes. A Jay Malshanskyy goal ten minutes from the end of the opening period put the hosts in front and they held the lead until 20 minutes from time when Jack Watts restored parity against his former club. With the scores level at the end of 90 minutes, the game went into extra-time where Charlie Johnson won it for Malvern Town to set up an all Worcestershire final.

Finally, in the Pitching In Southern League Division One Central, Berkhamsted had to be patient to make the breakthrough against a determined Hadley, but once Connor Tomlinson opened the scoring just past the half-hour mark, the floodgates opened. Luke Andrews and Ryan Kinnane added further goals before the interval and then Bernard Christie made it 4-0 at the start of the second half. A late Louie Collier strike added further gloss to the scoreline.

The other semi-final saw Flackwell Heath take an early lead against Barton Rovers as Wiktor Makowski added to his impressive tally with just four minutes gone. There was no further addition to the scores until stoppage time at the end when Makowski made sure with his second of the evening.

What a night! Congratulations to the winners and commiserations to those who saw their season come to an end.

Hold on tight as more drama awaits this afternoon...

Premier Division South

AFC Totton

One year on

12 MONTHS CAN BE A VERY LONG TIME IN POLITICS, PARTICULARLY IN THESE CURRENT TIMES IN WHICH WE LIVE. THE SAME CAN BE SAID ABOUT FOOTBALL AND A YEAR AGO THIS VEY WEEKEND, AFC TOTTON WERE LINING UP AGAINST SALISBURY IN THE PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER SOUTH PLAY-OFF FINAL.



Images | Phillip Standfield



They had home advantage having finished second in the table, so no change there, but lining up in goal against them was Ryan Gosney and he went on to help his side secure a 4-3 penalty shoot-out victory after it ended 2-2 after 120 minutes of football.

Now the shoes are on the other foot, or should that be gloves on the other hand, as Gosney steps out for AFC Totton hoping that this can be their year to finally secure Step 2 football.

"That day seems a long time ago now," he admitted to us. "It was nice to play my part in the shoot-out and help Salisbury win

the game and secure promotion; everything went right for me that day, but my allegiances are firmly with AFC Totton now and I'll be doing all I can to be a play-off winner again on Monday. It's such a great feeling to win promotion in this way, but gutting if you lose, of course.

"It's been a mixed season for me. I was sent out on loan by Salisbury early on and then requested that my contract be terminated so I could play regular football elsewhere. At this stage of my career I need to be playing games regularly and when Jimmy Ball gave me a call, I knew that this was the place I was meant to be.

"Everything here is geared up for progression. Promotion has always been the aim from the day I first walked through the door and whilst we missed out on the title to a very good Merthyr Town side, our focus is firmly fixed on taking that second promotion spot.

"This year has probably been the most competitive Premier South ever. It went right down to the wire with seven teams still in the relegation mix on the last day of the season and the battle to take that fourth and final play-off place.

"There has been so much excitement and so many sub-plots, it's what football is all about and why we all love the game so much.

"Now there is one final story to be written and hopefully it will have a happy ending for us. To be honest, we thought we had blown our chances with the way in which we started the game against Dorchester Town on Wednesday.

"To go two goals down early on against strong opponents gave us a real mountain to climb, but the one thing that you can't take away from this group is the character that we have and we pushed to the bitter end.

"Stoppage time was absolutely crazy, carnage! We thought that we'd managed to turn the scoreline around and snatch it at the death but then Dorchester hit back in something like the 20th minute of added time.

"This is what the play-offs are all about, fantastic entertainment, but not so much if you are involved in it! We were guilty of letting the occasion get the better of us in the opening 45 minutes and that is something that we will have to learn from on Monday.

"We're just excited to get out there now, it's what we all play football for. We know that we're in for another tough game, but we'll take it in our stride, learn from our mistakes in the semi-final and hopefully start a lot better than we did previously."

Scoring past Gosney in that play-off final of 12 months ago was Tony Lee and he has continued to do the business in front of goal, including a stoppage time brace in Wednesday's madness.

"It was a case of saying at 2-0 down, we're either going to go out with a whimper here or just play with freedom and go for



it. Thankfully we chose the latter and we were much the better side in the second half. The sending off helped us and we kicked on even more from that.

"We had to be patient to get the goal that we deserved and then thought we'd won it with my goals in stoppage time, but we were wrong and credit to Dorchester for that. It summed up the game, which had everything.

"It was emotionally draining but we've had four days of rest and recovery to clear our heads and be ready to go again.

Gloucester City are a good side and they're looking to bounce back into Step 2 at the first attempt.

"All that we went through on Wednesday means nothing if we don't approach this game right. We can't afford to let the first half pass us by like it did in the semi-final. We have to be able to get on the ball and play our usual game.

"A lot of the games we've faced this season have seen opponents up their game against us and made it into a cup final, so it's something that we've become used to having to deal with and it will stand us in good stead for Monday.

"After everything that has been thrown at us, I think we can be proud. We've bettered last season's points tally and we've got the belief within our ranks to get this over the line."



Premier Division South

Gloucester City

Spot on



Images:

Jamie Brain Photography

ON A HOT AND STICKY LATE APRIL EVENING, COOL HEADS WERE REQUIRED AS WALTON & HERSHAM AND GLOUCESTER CITY BATTLED IT OUT IN THE PLAY-OFF SEMI-FINAL. THE STATS ALL POINTED TO AN ENTERTAINING AND CLOSELY-FOUGHT ENCOUNTER AND IT CERTAINLY PLAYED OUT THAT WAY.



The home side burst out of the blocks and found themselves two goals to the good within the opening 12 minutes, but Gloucester City are made of strong stuff and hit back midway through the opening period as Joe Hanks added to his impressive tally.

It made for a second half where temperatures were running high, with the next goal being crucial. Step forward Ed Williams. The City legend levelled the scores to send the game into extra-time.

Still the teams could not be separated and so it went to a penalty shoot-out, where Gloucester City kept their heads to convert all

five of their spot-kicks with Williams calmly despatching the all-important fifth and final penalty.

"I missed my last penalty," Williams told us. "So when it came to deciding the takers I was first to put my hand up in a bid to redeem myself. I said I'd be happy to take the fifth, the Gaffer probably wasn't as keen given my last effort, but I got my wish and thankfully I was able to get the redemption I was looking for!"

"It really was exhausting out there. It was tough conditions against technically-strong opponents and it would have been easy for the game to get away from us when they went two

goals up so early on, but we showed unbelievable character to get back into it, something we've done a few times this season.

"Having weathered the storm we managed to get into our stride and when I was able to equalise, in my mind there was only going to be one winner. The celebrations at the end were fantastic. The fans were brilliant and carried us through. We're going to need them right behind us again on Monday.

"Yes, it's going to be tough going to AFC Totton but in our two games against them this season we've been the better side and I am sure we'll go there and give them a good game."

A lot will depend on Joe Hanks bringing his shooting boots. He's enjoyed an impressive campaign in front of goal and is hoping for a big finish.

"Personally it's been a great season for me and I just hope that I still have a few more goals left in me," he told us with a smile.

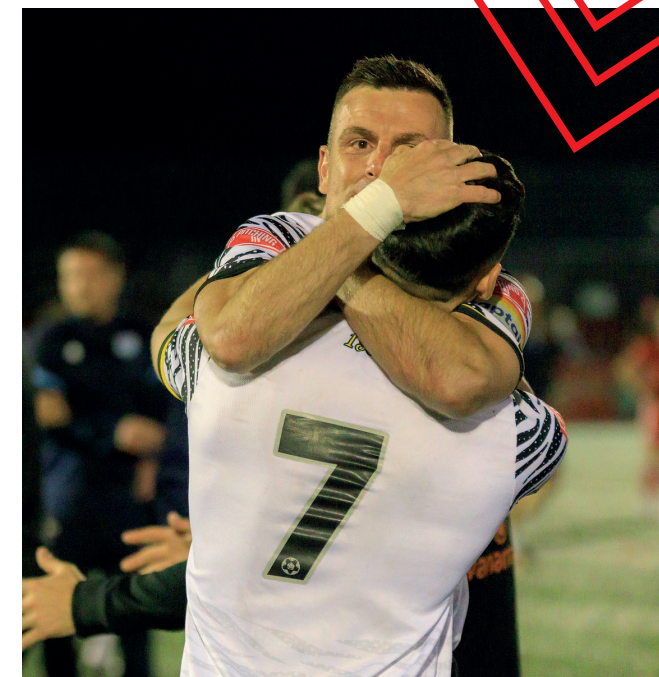
"Playing alongside the likes of Elis Watts, whose cross led to my goal on Wednesday night, Kev Dawson, Harry Pinchard and Ed Williams means that I'm always going to get chances.

"I just feel we've got one more big performance left in us. We've done the rest and recovery, got together as a group over the weekend and worked on a few things - now we're ready to do it all over again, for one last time this season."

"We ran ourselves into the ground on Wednesday," added Elis Watts, who joined the club at the turn of the year from Hungerford Town. "After the opening quarter-of-an-hour or so, we held our shape very well and frustrated our hosts. I felt that we played some great football, especially in midfield, and ended up getting what we deserved.

"I enjoyed my battle with their left-back; I got an assist too, which I was happy about. We put in the hard yards and now the focus turns straight onto the task in hand on Monday."

Defender, Tyrone Duffus, knows that they have to avoid the kind of start which saw them give their hosts a two-goal head start on Wednesday evening.



"It will be a tough game on Monday," he admitted. "We've drawn twice with them this season so it will be a tight game and, obviously, we have to avoid a repeat of the start we made in the semi-final. We can't let them get a foothold as they have the quality and experience to not allow us back into it.

"We're ready to get out there and build on the good things we did at Walton & Hersham. I felt that we were the better team on the night and fully deserved to go through.

"If we can reach the standards that we know we are capable of we'll give ourselves every chance of getting a winning result here."



Premier Division Central

Kettering Town

A case for the defence

WHEN TWO OF THE BEST DEFENCES IN THE PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER CENTRAL CAME UP AGAINST EACH OTHER IN THE PLAY-OFF SEMI-FINAL ON WEDNESDAY EVENING, GOALS WERE ALWAYS GOING TO BE IN SHORT SUPPLY.



Images | Peter Short



Kettering Town and Harborough Town played for 120 minutes without a goal between them and so the game went into a penalty shoot-out, with the chance for someone to emerge as a hero.

After Dan Jezeph saved the first penalty of the night, things looked ominous for Kettering when they went on to miss their first two spot-kicks, but the pendulum was to swing one way and then the other as the Poppies pulled it back to 3-3 after all five spot-kicks had been taken.

Sudden death saw former Brazil international, Sandro, an extra-time substitute, miss for the visitors, but Sam McIntock was unable to take advantage as his effort was saved. It was a case of anything you can do as Jezeph saved well to deny visiting skipper, Connor Kennedy, leaving namesake and fellow captain, Connor Johnson, to step up and send Kettering through.

"We were pushed all the way by the best team we've faced for a while," admitted goalkeeper, Dan Jezeph. "But we were at it from the start, creating chances and winning the ball high up the pitch, a bit more like the Kettering from earlier this season.

"Although we didn't convert, we had three or four good chances. From my point of view, it was a 16th clean sheet of the season, my tenth in the last 18 games, so I'll take that. In fairness, I didn't have too much to do other than a few routine saves, but my time to step-up was in the shoot-out!

"I was pleased with the two saves I made. They came at important times, saving the first after we missed our first two and then in sudden death, giving Connor the chance to step up and score the winner.

"It was such a sense of relief at the end. Spirits were high and now we'll take this confidence into Monday where we have home advantage once more against an AFC Telford United side that we faced recently and it ended in a draw.

"I'm expecting a similar sort of game; neither team will want to give too much away and we know that we have to start as we did against Harborough Town to give us the best chance of winning the game.

"The season has been bitter-sweet in many ways. There have been successful moments; we enjoyed our FA Cup run and sitting at the top of the table, but the frustration is that we should have gone on to win the League from the position we were in.

"Fair play to Bedford Town because they kept grinding out results and deserved to win it in the end. We've got the chance to make a successful season become a very successful season if we can get the right result on Monday. There will be over 2,500 Kettering fans present to help us over the line."

As Jezeph revels in his penalty shoot-out saves, manager, Richard Lavery, has admitted that he didn't see any of them!

"I had my back turned for every spot-kick," he said. "I didn't see a single one of them, I just couldn't watch.

"We did practice them, but it's a bit different doing it with no crowd compared to an occasion with so much riding on it like this in front of nearly 3,000 people.

"There's no doubt that we deserved to win the game based on the balance of play over the 120 minutes. We created some great chances and you've got to take at least one of them. It's something we will be looking to improve upon on Monday."

Meanwhile, defender, Ben Hart, described Wednesday as a 'proper game' and is expecting another coming up.



"Wednesday was a proper game from start to finish," he told us. "I was pleased with how I played, especially when we came under pressure during the second half and into extra-time. I just tried to stay solid and do my job.

"I got a bit of freedom to get forward and try to impact the game, which I enjoyed. As a team we showed real character; going all the way to penalties is never easy and takes a lot of mental strength and toughness, but as a group we dug in, stayed together and, importantly, got the job done.

"We're buzzing for the final; these are the games you want to be involved in. There will be nerves, of course, but there's more of a sense of excitement and anticipation than anything else. It'll be tight, but we have the belief and confidence in our ability.

"As Dan says, this season has been a real mix of highs and challenges for us. I've grown as a player and as a team we've built some momentum at the right time.

"Going into the season the target was always play-offs minimum and now we've given ourselves the chance to finish the job off. Let's hope we can take it!"



Premier Division Central

AFC Telford United

Man on a mission

AFTER FALLING AT THE PLAY-OFF FINAL HURDLE LAST YEAR, AFC TELFORD UNITED MANAGER, KEVIN WILKIN, IS EVEN MORE DETERMINED TO GUIDE HIS TEAM BACK INTO STEP 2.



Images | Kieren Griffin Photography



The Bucks lost the fewest games of all teams in the Pitching In Southern League Premier Central this season, just six from their 42 outings, and were top scorers with 82 goals to their name.

But they had to settle for a third-place berth, one place and three points behind Monday's hosts, Kettering Town.

"I've not had the best record in winning play-off games recently, but in my first experiences of them I managed to win three out of four," said Wilkin after seeing his side come from behind to beat Halesowen Town 3-2 in the semi-final. "Since then it's been more challenging and I've missed out against some good sides, but to have the chance to go again on Monday is pleasing, and hopefully we can go one better.

"Last year's defeat at the hands of Leamington doesn't really

provide any more motivation, but I guess it does mean I show a bit more resolve in certain situations.

"The play-offs are a great way to win and a very tough way to lose, which is something I certainly understand and helps me make sure I don't get carried away in certain situations.

"Wednesday was a great win in a really tough game, but we've achieved nothing yet. It will count for little if we don't finish the job off on Monday in what will be another extremely stern test." Pulling the strings on Wednesday was skipper, Luke Rowe, who was at the very heart of the action.

"I think it was a solid, resolute performance from our lads," he told us. "To have the character to go from a goal behind to 2-1 up and then concede again yet still find it within us to get the winner is a credit to everyone involved.

"It was a proud moment to get it over the line, but as the Gaffer quite rightly says, we've not achieved anything yet.

"I think that it's important to be relaxed and level-headed about Monday's game. We've worked hard to put ourselves into this position and now we have to enjoy the feeling of being part of such a big occasion.

"We have to do all we can to seize the opportunity that stands before us. The last thing we want to do is come off that pitch at the end with regrets. Both teams will have prepared well and be up for the game, so it's all about what happens on the day.

"This is an unreal environment to be in. I came here at the start of February from Bromsgrove Sporting and we're now 18 unbeaten. There is such a strong winning mentality around the place and what a fan base!

"I know as an opposing player how intimidating it can be with the numbers we get; the fans have such a crucial role to play and I am sure they will be in good voice on Monday."

Jordan Piggott agrees. "The fans are our 12th man, there's no doubt about that. The numbers we take away are envied by many at this level and they play their part in helping to drive us on and pick us up when things are maybe not going our way.

"There are sure to be ups and downs during Monday's game, as there were in the semi-final, and we will need those supporters with us every step of the way, which I am sure they will be.

"I enjoyed Wednesday's game; it was great for me to be back out there and in a midfield role to help bring a bit of energy to the team!

"The lads all ran their socks off on what was a warm night, so credit to them all. It really was a great game of football with both teams going for it. It's a shame that someone had to lose,



but that's football and I am glad that we were able to do enough to get it over the line.

"Another tough one lies ahead but we go into it with confidence. If we continue to do what we're doing, then there's no reason why this year can't be our year.

"Over the course of the season we've drawn too many games, that's why our title challenge faltered, but it has proved that we are a tough team to break down and beat. Hopefully we'll keep that solidity on Monday and then get the goals to see us to victory!"



Division One South

Evesham United

Bravehearts

AT ONE STAGE IT LOOKED AS THOUGH YATE TOWN WERE GOING TO RUN AWAY WITH THE PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE SOUTH. IT NEEDED A TEAM BRAVE ENOUGH TO STEP OUT FROM THE PACK AND CHASE THEM. EVESHAM UNITED WERE THAT TEAM.



Images | Stuart Purfield EUFC



A heavy home defeat at the hands of Bishops Cleeve on Boxing Day proved to be the catalyst. It led to some soul-searching in the dressing room afterwards, which prompted a run of 15 wins and just one defeat from the next 19 games and as Yate suffered a wobble in form, the Robins were able to gradually claw back the 13-point deficit to hit top spot at Easter.

However, a return fixture with Bishops Cleeve on Easter Monday yielded a stoppage time defeat which ended their all too brief dalliance in pole position. But the fact that they took the title

challenge right down to the final day of the season is testament to the form they found over the second half of the season.

On Monday they go head-to-head with Worcestershire rivals, Malvern Town, a team who have been in similarly impressive form since the turn of the year.

"We're a young team but I am proud of the way in which we chased Yate Town down," said skipper, Amer Awadh. "They were top for a long time and at one stage built up a really big lead, but we kept plugging away and took things right down to the wire.

"In the end we just came up short but we continuously proved people wrong and these boys have come a long way. Finishing second is a real achievement and I think we got rid of the disappointment of missing out on the title on Wednesday by coming from behind to get a good victory over Exmouth Town.

"Even when we went a goal down on the stroke of half-time, we never lost belief and kept our composure to get the victory. We were ruthless in the second half and our substitutes made a real difference; it shows what a strong squad we have with plenty of options.

"I always say that the boys on the bench are just as important as the starting 11 and each one of them made a difference on the night and we'll need that again on Monday against opponents who have been in impressive form.

"I'm excited but calm at the same time. This is my second season as captain and my job is to set an example to those around me. I've been in this situation before, so I know what it takes to win a play-off final.

"Having home advantage will be massive and we need to make that count. Malvern Town did the double over us this season, so we owe them one!

"It'll be a competitive game; the team goal at the outset of the season was promotion and it all comes down to Monday and the biggest game this club has had for a while."

It's an occasion to relish for key defender, Michael O'Regan, who has played every minute for the Robins this term. "The ingredients are all there," he said. "A local derby, two in-form and well supported teams, it should make for a great game of football.

"Both teams will go into it in confident mood; we were very good on the whole in the semi-final, we controlled most of the first half without creating many clear-cut chances and then got caught out right at the end of the half.

"We were able to step things up a gear after the break and ran out comfortable winners in the end.

"I'm proud of the contribution I have made this season, the only disappointment is that we won't reach my target of 20 clean sheets. We've come close, we're on 18 at the moment and it would be nice to add another one on Monday afternoon."



At the other end of the pitch, Reegan Messenger will be looking to deliver the goals.

"I'm pleased to have 14 goals to my name and hopefully there are more to come," he said. "As a team we have been fantastic this season; we've played some good stuff and we're buzzing for the chance to move this club into Step 3.

"A hallmark of the season has been the way in which we graft for each other, it's what we're all about and it helped us make it through on Wednesday against Exmouth Town having fallen behind.

"We know that we have to be fully-focussed because Malvern are a good team in fine form."

After being forced off during the first half on the Wednesday evening, Aaron Heap is hoping to be fit and available

"I was gutted to pick up a knock and have to come off so early on," he told us. "I was kicking every ball on the sidelines but I always had faith in the boys to get the job done, even when we fell behind.

"Hopefully I'll be okay for Monday. I've got experience of winning a play-off final so I know how much of a great occasion it can be. It'll be tough and it'll be tense, but we know what we have to do and we'll go out there and give it everything we've got.

"I've enjoyed the season and my involvement. I've played in the majority of games and weighed in with a bunch of assists; I would have liked more goals but that's something I'm working on!"



Division One South

Malvern Town

Claret and blue passion

CO-MANAGER, LEE HOOPER, BLEEDS CLARET AND BLUE. A LIFELONG ASSOCIATION TO MALVERN TOWN AND THREE DECADES OF SUPPORT FOR ASTON VILLA HAS SEEN TO THAT.



Images | Cliff Williams



So when the opportunity came to pick up a couple of hundred spare seats from the North Stand redevelopment at Villa Park last summer and install them in the main stand at the HDANYWHERE Community Stadium, there was only one man for the job to go and collect them.

Those seats have been constantly filled this season as crowds have grown to watch a team that has risen up the Pitching In Southern League Division One South table and into the play-offs on the back of a 19-game unbeaten run.

They've created history with the Hillsiders' highest-ever points tally and League finish and now they stand on the verge of making it into Step 3 for the very first time. Not bad for a club that was playing at Step 6 as recently as 2021.

"I'm immensely proud of what has been achieved here," said Hooper, who lives across the road from the ground, nestled at the foot of the Malvern Hills, and made his senior playing debut for the club at the age of just 15, a quarter-of-a-century ago. "From top to bottom, everyone has played their part. It was only

just over a decade ago that we were struggling to keep afloat at Step 6 and then the Chairman [Chris Pinder] came in and things have just grown.

"It's all been done gradually over the course of the past ten years; we've not tried to run before we can walk, but we have built things up on solid foundations. To now be sitting just one game away from potentially being in Step 3 is crazy.

"We deserve to be here, though. To go 19 games unbeaten since the start of January and to come through such a tough test as we did at Bishops Cleeve on Wednesday evening says it all about what we have here.

"The atmosphere before Wednesday's semi-final was really settled. Everyone knows their roles and what is expected of them. We had worked hard on our game plan and how to get at our opponents and we just went out there and carried it out.

"There were a whole hosts of emotions during the 90 minutes and then extra-time, of course. We showed glimpses of our

free-flowing football and then dug in to keep the ball out of our goal when we came under pressure.

"It was a true play-off game and the emotions were there for all to see from everyone involved with the club at the end.

"You have to be able to enjoy the highs because you never know when they will come around again. We've achieved so much just to even get to here, but now we have a big game ahead and we'll go out there and give it all we've got.

"It's a free hit for us. We know what we're capable of if we perform as we can and we'll make the short trip there in good spirits and backed by a large and vocal following.

"It's a cliché but we have to play the game and not the occasion. Evesham United are a good side and pushed Yate Town close for the title, so we know that task ahead.

"But this is the play-offs and whatever level you're at, they really are fantastic and nerve-wracking all at the same time. I remember watching Aston Villa in the Championship play-off final in 2019. What a great day that was and the celebrations afterwards went on long into the night, I can tell you! Had they lost it just wouldn't have been the same, so hopefully there will be some celebrations going on in the Malvern area of Worcestershire on Monday night!"

One of Hooper's key on the field lieutenants is skipper, Lewis Platt, who also happens to be his brother-in-law. He has juggled becoming a father for the first time earlier in the season with the demands of this level of football and all of the long trips.

"The commitment has been tough at times, but nights like Wednesday make it all worthwhile," he said. "I'm lucky to have a supportive wife who rarely misses a game and she's looking forward to Monday as much as anyone.

"Our target has always been the play-offs, but on January 4th we were closer to the relegation zone than the play-off places. But from somewhere we've been able to put together an amazing run and now stand 90 minutes away from Step 3.

"When I made my debut here 13 years ago as a teenager, we were mid-table at Step 6, playing in front of less than 100 fans, so it shows the journey we've been on and we've been able to grow off the pitch as well as on it.

"There are a core of players who have been with us every step



of the way. We haven't 'bought' success, we've earned it with patience and steady progression. It really is testament to the work of Hoops, Sooty [co-manager, Stephen Cleal] and Andy Bevan who recruit carefully and are meticulous in their planning.

"What a night Wednesday was; we had to dig deep to get it over the line against strong opponents and now I'm buzzing for this final, which we go into with no pressure. Whatever happens, it has been one hell of a journey and a career high for me."

Leading scorer, Jack Watts, agrees. "There is something special going on at this club and it's an honour to be part of it.

"There's so much togetherness amongst the group and a steely determination to succeed. We've broken club records along the way and I've loved every minute of it. This team just does not know when it's beaten and that was in evidence again on Wednesday.

"I was pleased to see my penalty go in; at 2-1 down it came at a crucial time and it was always going to be a close and hard-fought game given the links between the two clubs, myself included.

"Now we look ahead to the challenge Evesham United will present and although we've beaten them twice this season, which not many teams can say, we know only too well what a funny old game football can be.

"Our fans are the best in the League and they will be there in big numbers. Can we make it 20 unbeaten for them and achieve promotion? Only time will tell..."



Division One Central

Berkhamsted

Build and grow

THIS SEASON HAS BEEN ABOUT BUILDING AND GROWING FOR BERKHAMSTED AND THEY'VE CERTAINLY MANAGED TO ACHIEVE THAT, BOTH ON AND OFF THE FIELD.



Images | @JC98photography



Having suffered relegation at the end of last season, manager, Chris Devane, set about the task of rebuilding the team, whilst off the pitch various plans and initiatives were put in place with the aim of taking the club forward, including a new 100-seater stand that now sits proudly at the Glencar Community Stadium.

The upshot is a second place finish in the Pitching In Southern League Division One Central table and a stadium that is fit for Step 3 football should the need arise at the full-time whistle on Monday.

Having seen almost 900 people attend Wednesday's semi-final, a club record, it promises to be another historic occasion for the visit of Flackwell Heath.

Both teams had pretty straightforward passages into the final, with Berkhamsted in particular making short work of Hadley with a 5-0 triumph.

Setting them on their way with the opening goal was Connor Tomlinson, one of a number of players who bring higher level experience into the mix having signed from Spalding United earlier in the season.

"We were extremely ruthless and professional on Wednesday," he told us. "The intensity was there from the start; we settled on the ball quickly and got our goals at the right times.

"Now we need to ensure that we can replicate this kind of performance on Monday. We're pretty relaxed in the sense that

we know exactly what we have to do. Each of us has our own roles and responsibilities that we've worked hard to master as the season has gone on.

"There's always that slight nervousness that you get in any cup final, but we're pretty cool, calm and collected.

"That's not to say that we don't appreciate how tough it will be because Flackwell Heath are a very good side and they have proven that over the course of the season.

"I've been impressed with the standard since I first arrived here. There aren't the same number of teams who are vying for the top places as there is in the level above, but there are still four or five very strong outfits in this League and both teams on show on Monday are amongst them."

For popular goalkeeper, Hafeed Al Droubi, he is hoping that 13 is a lucky number as he sets his sights on a 13th clean sheet of the campaign.

"I can't complain about this season; 30 games, 12 clean sheets and a play-off final at the end of it," he told us. "The management has put together an amazing bunch of players here, so credit to them for that.

"The spirit that we have has been key to getting us to where we are. Everyone works hard for each other and we're all on the same page.

"Wednesday's performance was born out of this; we were magnificent from start to finish. We went into it with a game plan and executed it to a tee. Hadley simply had no answer to us and personally I was happy to come off at the end with a clean sheet.

"Now all of the hard work, blood, sweat and tears comes down to this final game. Playing in front of such a big crowd on Wednesday has whetted our appetite for more and we can't



wait to step out in front of another packed house on Monday with the prize of Step 3 football up for grabs."

Manager, Chris Devane, is full of praise for his side who ended the season with 27 wins from their 40 League games, during which they scored 94 goals and with another five to their name on Wednesday, they only need one more to reach 100 in League and play-off games this term.

"I think the group have done brilliantly," Devane told us. "It's not an easy assignment to try and re-group after a relegation and the lads have been great.

"This is actually the toughest I have known Division One Central. It's a lot more competitive than when we were last in the division. Real Bedford have done brilliantly and set the standard, but we've been not too far behind them.

"In terms of my own management style, on the pitch it's front-footed, attacking football. Sometimes it is our downfall but we go after everyone we play, with press and high energy. Off the pitch I like to create an environment where, first and foremost, people enjoy being there and things are done professionally in terms in terms of preparation and training.

"If you have a group of players who want to play for you and the club, it's a formula that usually works and we've found that to be the case this season.

"Since we first reported back for pre-season training during the summer, the aim has been to finish in the top five and earn promotion through the play-offs. Ten months later and that hasn't changed; we've put ourselves into a fantastic position to achieve it, but there is still a lot of hard work to be done on Monday against strong and dangerous opponents."



Division One Central

Flackwell Heath

Embracing the challenge

FLACKWELL HEATH HAVE CERTAINLY EMBRACED LIFE AT STEP 4 AFTER SECURING THE COMBINED COUNTIES LEAGUE PREMIER NORTH TITLE AT THE END OF LAST SEASON.



Images | Charlie Carter



They made their intentions clear on the opening day of the Pitching In Southern League Division One Central campaign with a resounding 6-0 victory over AFC Dunstable and since then there have been goals and smiles aplenty.

A third-place finish on the back of a haul of 84 points represents a job well done for the Buckinghamshire outfit and having swept past Barton Rovers in the play-off semi-final with a commanding display and 2-0 win, they are keen to make it a second successive promotion as they head to a Berkhamsted side who finished one place and five points above them.

Doing what he has done throughout the season on Wednesday evening was Wiktor Makowski whose brace took his tally to 41 for the season in all competitions.

"I was delighted that we were able to make it through to the final but I came off the pitch disappointed with my own performance," the ace marksman admitted to us. "I set my standards very high and I am my own worst critic at times; I felt

that I gave the ball away too much and didn't hold it up enough, but I suppose the two goals brushed away all of that.

"To be in the play-off final at the end of our first season at this level says it all. Whatever the outcome on Monday, we can all be proud of what we have done this season. It's been fantastic; we've given everything we've got and to stand so close to achieving back-to-back promotions is testament to the work put in.

"It will be a tough challenge for us at Berkhamsted, they are a good side with quality throughout their team. We must approach it just as any other game and look to do the things that we do best.

"If we're being honest, this League has turned out to be harder than we expected, particularly after winning our first four games in a row. We've had to concentrate and focus on every game because each opponent brings their own challenges.

"There have been teams we've beaten comfortably and then

others who we've lost to when we shouldn't have. At this level you have to be focussed for every minute of every game and that will definitely be the case in the game ahead."

Ben Stallard, who joined the club in March, agrees. He has tasted life at both ends of the table at this level with Aylesbury United and Kings Langley.

"This season has been really competitive," he added. "There a lot of strong teams throughout the League and if you're off your game even slightly, you will be punished.

"We had to dig deep on Wednesday against a very physical Barton Rovers side and we're gearing ourselves up for another stern test on Monday.

"We know that we can be better on the ball than we were in the semi-final, but what we did well on that occasion was the gritty stuff out of possession. We dug in and kept a clean sheet against a strong side, something that I was particularly pleased with as I was holding just in front of the back four, breaking up the play and looking to start attacks.

"I may not have been here all that long, but it's clear to see the ambition that this group has and there is plenty of quality to back it up too. The work ethic is superb and we'll go to Berkhamsted and give it everything, as we always do."

The fact that Berkhamsted did the double over Flackwell Heath this season in the League doesn't faze full-back, Lewis Patrick.

"Why should it?" he asked. "Barton Rovers also beat us twice during the regular season but it was a different story on Wednesday.

"We fell below our usual standards but we still ran out worthy winners. They went down to ten men for 70 minutes and then nine men for half-an-hour following impulsive decisions, but we were always in control.

"Anything can happen in the play-offs and that's why I am not concerned about what has happened previously in our games against Berkhamsted or the fact that they finished above us in the table. It's all about what happens on the day.

"That said, we're going to have to raise our game. Both teams have the same ambition and one of the teams will achieve it. I'm expecting it to be frantic; we mustn't forget that going into this season there wasn't a lot of Step 4 experience in our ranks, but



we have risen to the challenge and now we need one last push." With another assist under his belt in the last game, Michael Harding is ready to make a similar impact.

"As soon as the final whistle went on Wednesday our thoughts turned to the preparation for this game," he said. "We've prepared the same way as we always do. It's a cup final with a fantastic prize at the end of it, but we just have to ensure that we do the things that have gotten us into this position in the first place.

"It's taken a fantastic amount of work and effort and now it all comes down to this. We're ready, we're prepared and we are determined.

"I probably appreciate days like this even more now because this is my first season back following a long time out with a painful back injury. Being out for so long definitely gives you time to think and take stock.

"These are the type of days you want as a player. Yes, there's pressure, but it's good to be in this position. I know that there is still room for improvement for me, but 28 goals and assists this season is a record I am proud of and I'll be striving to better it next season, hopefully as a Step 3 player!

"We've continued to prove people wrong all season, so fingers crossed we can do it one more time."



stories of the season

Premier Division South



SHOLING D-DAN THE MAN

There was another Mason family landmark to celebrate at Sholing at the turn of the year when Daniel Mason, the youngest of four brothers who have all turned out for the club over the years, made his 600th appearance.

During that time, he has weighed in with an impressive 296 goals to make him the club's all-time record scorer.

"For me to be up there with some of the legends of this club is a great feeling," he said. "I can remember the early days of my time here, just being around the dressing room was a big learning experience for me and now here I am, a decade later and with 600 appearances to my name.

"It's something that I'll look back upon with a tremendous amount of pride when I hang up my boots.

"This season has been a transitional time for us. There's been a bigger turnover of players than we have previously been used to and it's been frustrating because we know how good we are and how good we can be, but it's not translated into results."



Premier Division Central



LEISTON VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

A steady climb up the table had taken Leiston from nervously looking over their shoulders to excitedly looking towards the play-off places.

It was all part of finding their identity according to 19-goal leading scorer, Jamar Loza.

"Confidence is really high at the minute, for me and the team," he said. "The team is playing well, so it goes well together with me scoring goals and the team winning. It's no good me scoring and the team not winning.

"During the second half of the season we must be aiming to get into those play-offs places. Obviously, it's tight and we're not far from looking down either, but our sights are set on that leading pack.

"We've established our identity now and the team is playing well together as a unit. Our belief in what we are doing is high and that is so important as we go forward."



Division One South



DIDCOT TOWN MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

The opening month of the year saw popular Didcot Town skipper, Adam Learoyd pass through the 400 appearance landmark for the club.

Having taken a while to get back on track following relegation at the end of the previous season, The Railwaymen were starting to build up a head of steam going into the New Year, just outside the play-off places.

"I came up through the ranks here and made my debut back in 2006," recalled Learoyd. "The scary thing is that there are quite a few of my current team-mates who weren't even born then!

"There are some special memories and I absolutely love being captain and trying to pass on some of what I have learned to those around me.

"At this level you've got to be ruthless; you have to head it and kick it, it's not always going to be pretty football.

"We've put ourselves into a position to challenge for a place in the play-offs over the second half of the season. There have been ups and downs, which you will get with a young group of players."



Division One Central



BARTON ROVERS FULL STEAM AHEAD

After a slow start to the season, Barton Rovers went into the New Year sitting in third place in the table following an impressive run of form.

"We didn't start the season how we would have liked to," admitted summer signing, Markel Cousins. "We suffered a few heavy defeats early on, but it just shows the character that we have here.

"There are some strong personalities in the changing room and we've been able to bounce back and get into the position that we now find ourselves in.

"No game is easy, as we know from earlier in the season, and I think that experience has made us even more switched on to each challenge that we face. Every team is capable of taking points from each other, but our focus is firmly fixed on what we do."



stories of the season

Premier Division South



WALTON & HERSHAM THE HIGH LIFE

High energy and high intelligence. That's the philosophy of Walton & Hershham manager, Billy Rowley, and it's certainly paying off for his young side.

Their stoppage time victory at Chertsey Town was not only their fourth win in a row, but the sixth time that they had scored in the 90th minute or beyond in their previous seven games!

"We kept going, as has been the hallmark of our recent displays," said Rowley. "The main factor behind our run of form is our team spirit. On paper we've got one of the youngest teams not only in this League but throughout the Southern League and it took us a while to get to grips with the style and challenges in the early weeks of the season.

"It's been a learning process and our hard work is starting to pay dividends. We've also had that bit of luck along the way, which all teams need from time to time and, of course, the ability to keep going until the bitter end.

"We have a possession-based style here; it's high energy stuff with plenty of movement on the pitch. I want highly intelligent players who are adaptable and give their all."



Premier Division Central



BIGGLESWADE TOWN FIGHTING SPIRIT

Despite sitting at the foot of the table, Biggleswade Town came within minutes of pulling off victory at leaders, AFC Telford United.

A first half strike from Daniel Izekor, his eighth goal of the season, gave them the lead, which they were able to hold on to until the closing stages of the game to deny them what would have been only a third League triumph of the campaign.

"We need to take the qualities that we showed here with us into the games that lie ahead," Izekor told us. "We know that we have plenty of quality and even though we couldn't quite see it out at AFC Telford, we have to take confidence and belief from the result.

"Hopefully this point can be the catalyst we need to get ourselves into a run of results and build some momentum.

"We know what we have to do; we've set the standard. The togetherness that we have is going to be so important and we have to keep on fighting and believing if we are to stand any chance of achieving our goals.

"It's a tough ask, we know that, but whilst its possible, we have to give it absolutely everything we've got."



Division One South



BEMERTON HEATH HARLEQUINS PLATT'S MAGIC

The script could not have been written any better for Luke Platt's first home game since his appointment as permanent manager of Bemerton Heath Harlequins.

A resounding 7-0 home success over Bristol Manor Farm not only extended the Wiltshire outfit's unbeaten League run to six games, but also thrust them headlong into the play-off places.

"This was a fantastic way to make a statement," Platt told us. "We've got a great group here; each and every one of them played their part in this tremendous victory.

"I've been at the club for five weeks now and I'm excited by what the future holds in store for us.

"We're all on the same page in terms of where we want to be come the end of the season and the players are embracing every opportunity that comes their way, which is so refreshing to see.

"This League is tough for many different reasons. Every team we have played since I have been here have brought their own challenges in some regard. There's a variety of styles and threats which, as a coach, makes it a great test."



Division One Central



BEAONSFIELD TOWN MAKING MOVES

It's fair to say that it has been a season of transition for Beaconsfield Town. Relegated at the end of last term, they began the current campaign with a completely new look and youthful team.

Further change came during the autumn when manager, Garry Haylock, decided to step down and was replaced by his assistant, Sam Togwell. It was only during February that the team started to find its feet.

"We've been improving game-by-game," said Manuchim Oke-William. "You can really feel the confidence growing within the squad. There's a feel-good factor around the place now and we just want to keep this momentum going for as long as we can.

"We've had to work hard this season but progress has been made and now we're starting to see the benefits of the work we've done. As a team we always knew that we had the quality to match anyone in this League, things just weren't clicking into place.

"It's been a case of sticking to the process and continuing to believe."

stories of the season

Premier Division South



HANWELL TOWN MOORE IS MERRIER

Longevity is something that is becoming all too rare in the modern game amongst managers as the demand for quick success outweighs the patience needed to be able to build something over time.

At Hanwell Town, popular manager, Chris Moore, has been in place since 2018 and during the course of the month celebrated his 300th game at the helm.

"The club's hierarchy have been brilliant and have left me to do what's needed to make the club successful," he told us. "That takes a lot of trust on both ends, I guess, but we have a great working relationship.

"When I came to the club we had finished in the bottom half of Step 4 with an eye on relegation, so to be playing at Step 3 is credit to everyone that's help build this club up along the way. It's an ongoing process where the main commodity has been time.

"I'm big on professionalism and standards. Anyone that plays for me finds that out pretty much as soon as they come through the door. I can be calm and relaxed but I am also known to have the hair dryer in me as well!"



Premier Division Central



ALVECHURCH GLOVE STORY

With one of the best defensive records in the League, Alvechurch were able to boast that not one but two of their goalkeepers received an international call-up.

Hot on the heels of Dale Eve's inclusion in the Bermuda squad, the emerging Ronnie Hollingshead was called up for Wales U21s.

It was music to the ears of manager, Tim Flowers, who knows a thing or two about goalkeeping, but whilst Flowers focuses on the task of managing the team, he leaves the goalkeepers in the safe hands of goalkeeping coach, Neil Reeves.

"As a goalkeeping coach you are always proud to see them playing well and keeping clean sheets," Reeves told us. "But to have both of our 'keepers called up to represent their country is very special, particularly at this level.

"Both of them work hard and push each other to the limit; they are a joy to work with and have so much talent. Their character off the field couldn't be more different, though, and if Dale was any more laid back, he would fall over!"



Division One South



TAVISTOCK AFC FEELING FRESH

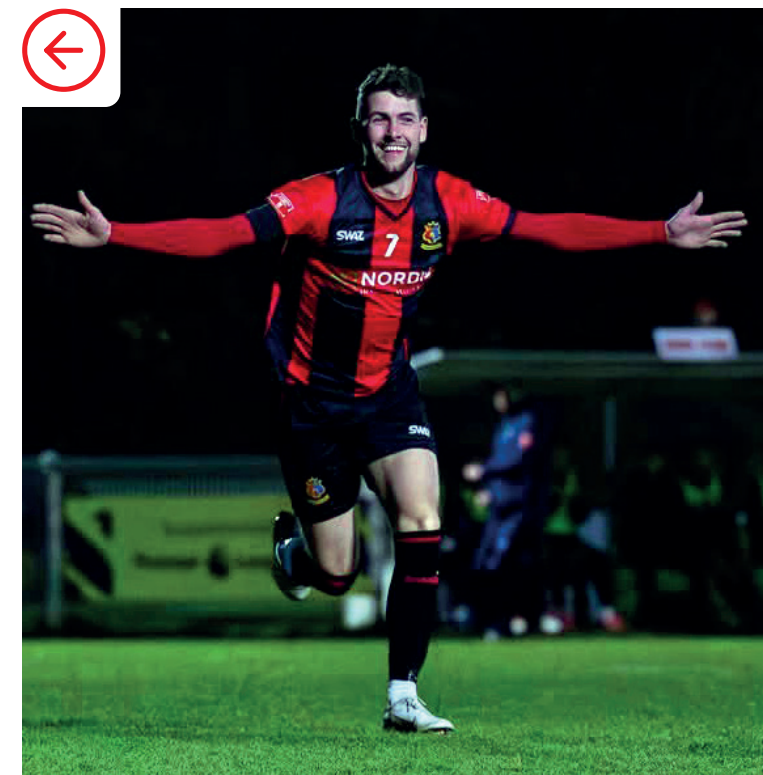
The month of March is now becoming synonymous with Non League Day and the club which sparked the initiative back in 2010, Tavistock AFC, saw their fortunes start to take an upturn as they began to pull away from relegation danger.

The improvement came after long-serving manager, Stuart Henderson, freshened up his squad, with Luke Mortimore one of the players coming in as he made the step up from lower level, Okehampton Argyle.

"It took me a couple of weeks to get settled and up to speed again with this level," Mortimore admitted to us. "Obviously the results weren't great at the time and I came into a team low on confidence, but things have really picked up since then and there's a real buzz around the team now.

"That has helped me to get into my stride and I am pleased with the contribution that I am making.

"It just shows how important confidence is in football. The new faces that have come into the group have freshened things up and had an effect on everyone. The self-belief has grown and now the results are starting to go our way."



Division One Central



LEIGHTON TOWN HAPPY NEW YEAR

2025 started in emphatic fashion for Leighton Town with just one defeat from their opening 15 games of the year, including a nine-game winning streak that ran from early February and throughout the month of March.

"This is always an exciting time of the season, but even more so with the form that we are in," front-runner, Kyal Williams, told us. "The intensity is ramping up with each week that passes and every match becomes more important than the last. We've put ourselves into a good position with the run that we have been on and we want to make sure that we finish the season strongly.

"There is a lot of motivation within the squad to make sure that we give everything we have in this final stretch having done so well since the turn of the year.

"I think this run of form can be attributed to a combination of hard work, team cohesion and an attention to detail."



stories of the season

Premier Division South



POOLE TOWN GRAND TOURAY

With so much to play for, this time of the season often throws up unexpected results as the pressure ramps up a notch.

That was certainly the case as Poole Town boosted their hopes of escaping the relegation zone as they went to Merthyr Town, who were unbeaten at home and on the verge of taking the title, and won 2-1 thanks to a last-gasp goal from Ezio Touray, his sixth in the previous eight games.

"We stuck rigidly to our game plan throughout the whole game as we knew that it was going to be tough against strong opponents who have had an excellent season," said Touray. "We know what we're capable of and how dangerous we can be when we're at it and I think that we were able to display that on this occasion. Not many teams go there and get anything, particularly after falling behind and in front of such a big crowd too."

"The season as a whole has been a bit of a roller-coaster; we've seen good days and bad, but that's just how football is, it's what makes it so exciting and compelling. We have the responsibility of the town on our shoulders and we'll be doing all we can to stay at this level."



Premier Division Central



HARBOROUGH TOWN VIVA BEES

There was a unique atmosphere at Harborough Town for their home encounter with St. Ives Town, thanks to a large group of recently-acquired Spanish supporters.

Earlier this year the club entered into an agreement with leading Spanish media channel, La Media Inglesa, who were looking for an English club to 'adopt'.

They had been gripped by the club's Emirates FA Cup adventure which saw them hit the headlines by signing former Brazil international, Sandro, on their way to reaching the second round proper for the first time in their history, eventually succumbing to a thrilling 5-3 extra-time defeat at League One Reading.

Part of the partnership is that games are live streamed throughout Spain and other Spanish-speaking countries such as Mexico, Argentina and across Latin America.

"This is a ground-breaking partnership," said Harborough Town co-Chairman, Peter Dougan. "It will help the club to grow a global fan base as well as create a global scouting network and increase revenues through merchandising opportunities."

"The project shows the ambitions of the football club to grow and create other partnerships that will ultimately benefit the whole community of Market Harborough."



Division One South



WESTBURY UNITED STRONG BONDS

It takes a special kind of resolve to be able to put together a competitive team on little or no budget.

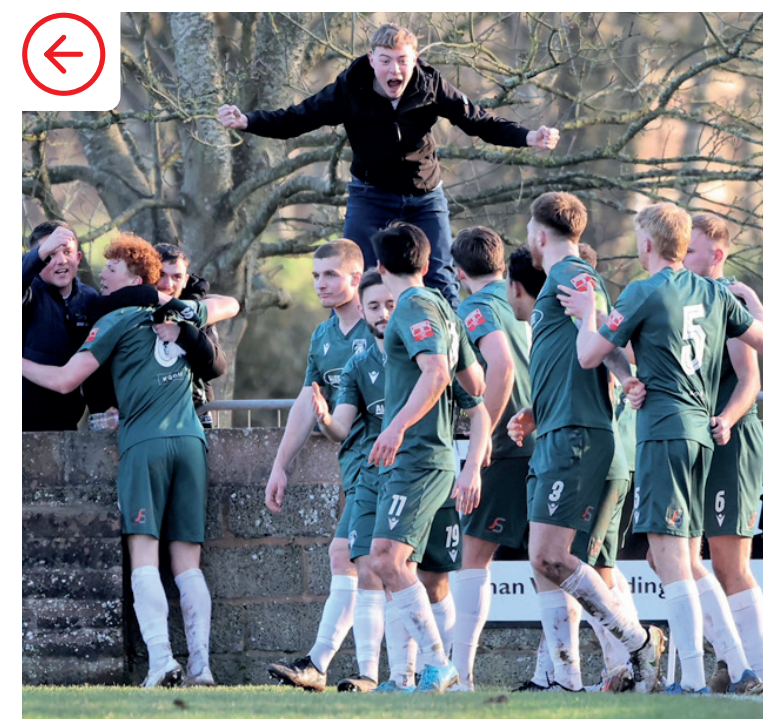
That's what has happened at Westbury United during a campaign that has brought its fair share of challenges both on and off the pitch, including a spell where they had to play their home games at Frome Town as the playing budget was cut.

"It's been a strange season for one reason or another," said reliable defender, Dan Restorick. "There have been things happen that are out of our control but the fact that 90% of the players opted to stick together and continue playing here for free speaks volumes for the spirit we have amongst the group."

"The job that the Gaffers have done is nothing short of incredible. To get us to where we are with no budget takes something really special."

"Personally, I am having one of my best-ever seasons. My confidence is high and I've also chipped in with a few goals as well, which is always nice."

"Having players around you that you can trust is such a massive thing and the issues that the club has had has only brought us even closer together and strengthened the bond."



Division One Central



NORTH LEIGH THE WAIT IS OVER

Easter Monday and throughout our four divisions, titles were being won, play-off places were being secured and relegation battles fought.

Away from all of the drama there was a no less significant result being secured as North Leigh, whose relegation fate was sealed weeks ago, secured only their second win of the season at the 39th attempt as they beat Kidlington 2-1.

"Securing the win has given us a significant boost," said Samuel Olawale, who was amongst the scorers as they tasted victory for the first time since the beginning of October. "It was a performance that we can build on and has provided much-needed confidence throughout the group."

"On a personal level, it was nice to add another goal to my tally. Since I've joined the club, the determination and resilience of the players and supporters has been exceptional. It's through adversity that you find your true character and the atmosphere around the place has remained positive and hopeful."



THE FINAL STANDINGS 2024-25



Premier Division South

#	Team	P	W	D	L	F	A	W	D	L	F	A	GD	PTS
1	Merthyr Town	42	14	6	1	58	17	13	4	4	47	29	60	91
2	AFC Totton	42	15	6	0	51	16	10	7	4	34	19	50	88
3	Walton & Hersham	42	13	7	1	50	26	11	4	6	40	28	36	83
4	Gloucester City	42	14	5	2	53	22	7	9	5	28	31	28	77
5	Dorchester Town	42	14	5	2	46	21	5	13	3	29	27	27	75
6	Havant & Waterlooville	42	14	4	3	54	18	7	7	7	30	31	35	74
7	Hungerford Town	42	10	5	6	37	24	6	6	9	26	31	8	59
8	Hanwell Town	42	7	9	5	28	24	8	4	9	30	38	-4	58
9	Taunton Town	42	6	11	4	38	30	7	7	7	26	28	6	57
10	Wimborne Town	42	11	5	5	29	22	4	7	10	20	34	-7	57
11	Sholing	42	8	5	8	30	29	6	5	10	29	39	-9	52
12	Gosport Borough	42	7	5	9	31	32	6	7	8	22	29	-8	51
13	Plymouth Parkway	42	8	3	10	38	36	6	5	10	25	41	-14	50
14	Poole Town	42	9	4	8	24	22	4	6	11	24	40	-14	49
15	Basingstoke Town	42	6	6	9	26	28	5	9	7	36	36	-3	48
16	Chertsey Town	42	6	4	11	36	40	8	1	12	31	42	-15	47
17	Tiverton Town	42	8	6	7	23	28	4	5	12	16	43	-32	47
18	Bracknell Town	42	6	7	8	32	34	5	6	10	25	38	-15	46
19	Winchester City	42	4	6	11	25	40	8	4	9	29	34	-20	46
20	Swindon Supermarine	42	7	7	7	31	29	5	1	15	29	49	-18	44
21	Frome Town	42	3	6	12	22	32	6	7	8	17	28	-21	40
22	Marlow	42	3	4	14	23	45	2	2	17	22	70	-70	21

Premier Division Central

#	Team	P	W	D	L	F	A	W	D	L	F	A	GD	PTS
1	Bedford Town	42	14	3	4	46	31	11	4	6	33	27	21	82
2	Kettering Town	42	12	7	2	42	21	10	4	7	31	23	29	77
3	AFC Telford United	42	13	6	2	50	26	6	11	4	32	34	22	74
4	Halesowen Town	42	13	4	4	36	25	8	7	6	28	20	19	74
5	Harborough Town	42	12	2	7	31	18	8	9	4	33	23	23	71
6	Stamford	42	12	4	5	33	24	8	5	8	20	27	2	69
7	Spalding United	42	12	4	5	35	23	8	4	9	35	31	16	68
8	Stratford Town	42	9	8	4	34	18	9	5	7	27	26	17	67
9	Stourbridge	42	8	7	6	25	21	10	2	9	35	29	10	63
10	Leiston	42	9	5	7	33	30	7	7	7	23	28	-2	60
11	Royston Town	42	9	8	4	28	24	5	7	9	23	25	2	57
12	Banbury United	42	8	8	5	18	13	6	7	8	22	27	0	57
13	Alvechurch	42	10	3	8	26	22	6	5	10	23	24	3	56
14	Bromsgrove Sporting	42	7	3	11	30	29	8	3	10	27	32	-4	51
15	Bishop's Stortford	42	8	4	9	27	27	6	5	10	23	33	-10	51
16	St Ives Town	42	8	5	8	36	32	5	6	10	22	28	-2	50
17	AFC Sudbury	42	7	8	6	30	22	6	3	12	22	35	-5	50
18	Redditch United	42	7	8	6	30	26	6	2	13	20	32	-8	49
19	Barwell	42	9	2	10	34	38	4	5	12	22	37	-19	46
20	Lowestoft Town	42	6	4	11	23	42	4	3	14	32	64	-51	37
21	Hitchin Town	42	6	4	11	27	37	2	6	13	25	45	-30	34
22	Biggleswade Town	42	2	8	11	18	35	3	5	13	26	42	-33	28

Division One South

#	Team	P	W	D	L	F	A	W	D	L	F	A	GD	PTS
1	Yate Town	42	13	6	2	34	19	13	4	4	38	19	34	88
2	Evesham United	42	15	2	4	41	20	10	5	6	25	16	30	82
3	Bishops Cleeve	42	13	5	3	47	18	11	1	9	29	16	42	78
4	Malvern Town	42	14	4	3	57	28	7	8	6	38	33	34	75
5	Exmouth Town	42	11	4	6	36	21	11	4	6	33	18	30	74
6	Mousehole	42	15	2	4	50	19	5	9	7	31	35	28	72
7	Bemerton Heath Harlequins	42	14	5	2	50	22	7	4	10	29	36	21	72
8	Melksham Town	42	12	3	6	40	22	6	8	7	32	31	18	63
9	Falmouth Town	42	8	6	7	28	23	8	2	11	32	37	1	58
10	Bideford AFC	42	10	5	6	30	24	5	8	8	34	41	-1	58
11	Didcot Town	42	11	6	4	28	20	4	6	11	27	43	-8	57
12	Bristol Manor Farm	42	7	8	6	33	30	6	8	7	40	40	3	55
13	Westbury United	42	8	6	7	33	28	7	4	10	25	29	1	55
14	Bashley	42	8	7	6	30	31	6	6	9	23	34	-12	55
15	Willand Rovers	42	9	6	6	35	24	4	7	10	26	38	-1	52
16	Tavistock AFC	42	8	3	10	28	25	6	5	10	27	33	-3	49*
17	Shaftesbury	42	9	5	7	41	39	4	3	14	22	45	-22	46
18	Larkhall Athletic	42	7	8	6	37	37	4	2	15	19	42	-23	43
19	Helston Athletic	42	6	8	7	34	43	4	3	14	20	57	-46	41
20	Thatcham Town	42	10	3	8	29	31	0	6	15	17	47	-32	39
21	Cribbs	42	3	4	14	17	40	6	2	13	18	46	-51	33
22	Cinderford Town	42	3	3	15	27	50	5	4	12	29	49	-43	31

* Tavistock AFC had 1 point deducted for fielding an ineligible player

Division One Central

#	Team	P	W	D	L	F	A	W	D	L	F	A	GD	PTS
1	Real Bedford	40	15	4	1	77	22	18	1	1	52	11	96	104
2	Berkhamsted	40	14	4	2	45	18	13	4	3	49	29	47	89
3	Flackwell Heath	40	14	3	3	46	16	12	3	5	43	29	44	84
4	Barton Rovers	40	13	5	2	37	19	9	6	5	35	28	25	77
5	Hadley	40	15	2	3	45	16	7	7	6	36	33	32	75
6	Thame United	40	11	3	6	48	28	11	3	6	29	30	19	72
7	Leighton Town	40	11	4	5	35	24	7	5	8	28	28	11	63
8	Biggleswade FC	40	9	4	7	33	34	7	6	7	29	38	-10	58
9	Welwyn Garden City	40	9	4	7	28	20	7	5	8	30	33	5	57
10	Ware	40	6	9	5	35	26	7	8	5	28	24	13	56
11	Beaconsfield Town	40	6	5	9	33	35	7	6	7	25	27	-4	50
12	Enfield	40	9	3	8	36	36	3	9	8	25	31	-6	48
13	Hertford Town	40	7	8	5	37	35	5	4	11	22	32	-8	48
14	AFC Dunstable	40	8	5	7	26	25	5	3	12	24	43	-18	47
15	Aylesbury United	40	6	3	11	19	31	8	0	12	27	39	-24	45
16	Northwood	40	7	2	11	30	31	5	2	13	28	48	-21	40
17	Stotfold	40	7	3	10	27	37	4	4	12	25	49	-34	40
18	Leverstock Green	40	5	6	9	20	24	4	6	10	26	39	-17	39
19	Kings Langley	40	4	7	9	33	37	5	4	11	19	27	-12	38
20	Kidlington	40	3	4	13	22	43	4	3	13	17	47	-51	28
21	North Leigh	40	1	3	16	14	49	1	2	17	9	61	-87	11



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VOLUNTEERS

The lifeblood of our member clubs...

VOLUNTEERS PLAY SUCH A CRUCIAL ROLE AT CLUBS ACROSS ALL FOUR OF OUR DIVISIONS.

THERE ARE SO MANY UNSUNG HEROES DOING THEIR BIT BEHIND-THE-SCENES WEEK IN, WEEK OUT AND AS WELL AS SHINING A LIGHT ON THEM, WE ARE ALSO AWARE OF THE NEED TO CONSTANTLY FIND NEW VOLUNTEERS TO GET INVOLVED AT OUR MEMBER CLUBS.

That is where the Pitching In Volunteer Hub comes in. It runs across the Trident Leagues, in association with title sponsors Pitching In.

The Hub assists all member clubs in generating the much-needed support of volunteers, whether it's for day-to-day operations or just matchday roles.

You will be able to find any current vacancies that member clubs have all in one place as well as who to contact for further information or to apply for the position.

The survival of non-League clubs is only made possible by the fantastic number of volunteers who devote their time and energy into helping out. If you have that time, your local club would be most grateful, and we encourage you to get in contact with them to find out how you can support them.

There was a nice story at Pitching In Southern League Division One Central outfit, Hertford Town, this season where loyal volunteer of many years, John Staines, had just one wish for his 93rd Birthday, which coincided with the club's home game against Flackwell Heath – he wanted to see a crowd of over 1,000.

Every home game, without fail, John stewards the car park at Hertingfordbury Park, whilst his wife, Shelagh, looks after home and away officials in the boardroom.

"People like John are worth their weight in gold," said Hertford Town player-manager, Ben Herd. "Come rain or shine, he and his wife, Shelagh, are

there carrying out their duties with warmth and dedication that has never faded over the decades.

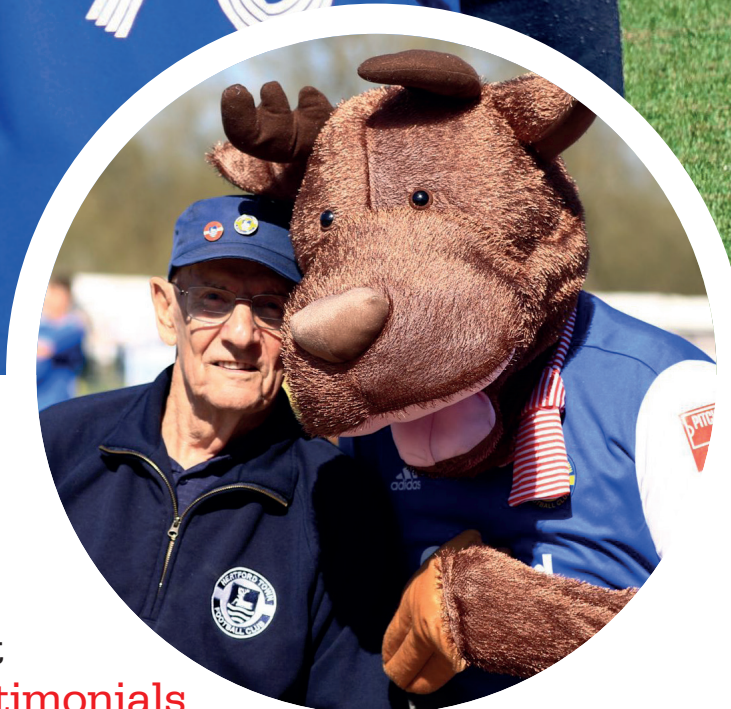
"The word legend is used all too often these days, but John truly is a Hertford Town legend; he represents the very best of non-League football and the volunteers without whom a club like ours simply would not be able to operate.

"Typically his Birthday wish was not about himself, it was about the club that he holds so dear and has been the mainstay of his life. It speaks volumes about his dedication to the club."

Free admission for all was offered by the club to help John achieve his wish and they were rewarded with a crowd of 1,045 who were treated to a thrilling game which ended in a 6-4 victory for the visitors.

And yes, despite it being his Birthday, John and wife, Shelagh, were both hard at work throughout the afternoon fulfilling their volunteer roles – they didn't want it any other way!

To all of the volunteers who work tirelessly behind-the-scenes at our member clubs, we salute you and thank you most sincerely for all of your efforts during the 2024/25 season.



Find volunteering opportunities at your local club via:
pitchinginvolunteers.co.uk



Check out some excellent testimonials from volunteers at
pitchinginvolunteers.co.uk/testimonials

Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

Embracing a better future...



Case Studies

THE SOUTHERN LEAGUE IS COMMITTED TO PROMOTING AND CELEBRATING DIVERSITY IN FOOTBALL.

WE WANT EVERYONE INVOLVED WITH OUR MEMBER CLUBS, BE IT PLAYERS, STAFF, VOLUNTEERS OR SUPPORTERS, TO FEEL SAFE AND WELCOME AT GAMES REGARDLESS OF AGE, DISABILITY, GENDER, RACE, FAITH, SEXUAL ORIENTATION OR ANY OTHER PROTECTED CHARACTERISTIC.



During the course of the 2023/24 season we appointed our first-ever Diversity Director, Stephen Hyde, whose remit is to share examples of good practice by member clubs, provide signposting to resources available to clubs wishing to improve their EDI profile and act as a point of contact for supporters/players wishing to raise issues, if they feel unable to raise it with their own club.

"A lot of progress has been made over the course of this season, but there is still much more to do as we engage with our clubs and supporter groups to spread the all-inclusive message," said Stephen Hyde. "We want to be able to provide a matchday experience across all four of our divisions that can be enjoyed by everyone, without fear of discrimination and abuse and we want our clubs to be leading the way within their local communities."

"The League carried out an EDI Survey just prior to Christmas, the results of which were then presented to clubs at our February meetings.

"The information that we received back provided us with useful baseline data of the current composition of club committees and boards, which we can use to benchmark against similar organisations to help formulate actions going forward and provide a year-on-year comparison as things progress.

"During the month of December we carried out our first My Club, My Shirt initiative where we asked supporters and volunteers at our member clubs to provide photographs of themselves proudly wearing their club's shirt.

"The aim being that the imagery shows that regardless of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership,

pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation, that your club is welcoming, inclusive and a place for absolutely everyone.

"The best photographs were displayed at a joint FA and Southern League equality event as well as on our Official Website, whilst those who took part each received a Southern League polo shirt, embroidered with their initials.

"We are planning to run the promotion again next season, so look out for that.

"A potentially big change coming for clubs is the introduction of Martyn's Law. Following the Manchester Arena attack in 2017, the previous, and now current, Government have developed and now introduced into Law the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2025, otherwise known as 'Martyn's Law'.

"The Law will impact all venues and clubs. The Government have indicated that there will be, at least, a 24-month implementation period before the Act comes into force. The FA is currently in dialogue with the Home Office on this matter and further guidance, which will be designed to be easy to follow and needing neither particular expertise nor the use of third-party products or services, will be given in due course.

"During the course of next season we will also be ramping up our focus on sustainability within football. The ball has started rolling on this with a couple of our member clubs, Redditch United and Stourbridge, involved in sustainability projects, the details of which can be found on this page.

"This season has also seen us back various initiatives, including the rainbow captain's armband, which promotes our support of Kick It Out's Equality Charter, which we signed up to earlier this year.

"We are also pleased to be supporting Football v Homophobia, joining hundreds of other clubs, Leagues and organisations within the game to back this initiative, which is committed to making football more inclusive for the LGBTIQ+ community. The Southern League believes that LGBTIQ+ people deserve a place in football and that clubs hold the key to making football welcoming and inclusive.

"In March we joined the Isthmian League and Northern Premier League in showcasing the work of Her Game Too to coincide with International Women's Day and promote the role that girls and ladies play in our national game.

"So, as you can see, there has been plenty going on and there is plenty more to come!"

For all equality, diversity and inclusion communications relating to the Southern League, and to share your story for publication on our Website, please email: sfl.diversity@gmail.com



Redditch United



The Pitching In Southern League Premier Central club took a significant step in its commitment to environmental sustainability by providing branded reusable water bottles to all its junior players.

This initiative aims to reduce single-use plastic waste at The Valley Stadium and promote greener habits among its young athletes.

The project, which includes the installation of a water fountain at the stadium, was partially funded by a £750 grant from The Birmingham County FA's Green Innovation Fund.

By encouraging players to switch from single-use plastic bottles to reusable ones, the club hopes to make a lasting impact on its environmental footprint.

Club Chairman, David Faulkner, expressed his enthusiasm for the initiative: "At Redditch United, we

recognise our responsibility to lead by example both on and off the pitch. By reducing plastic waste and promoting sustainable practices, we're not just improving our facilities but also teaching valuable lessons to the next generation.

"We're grateful to The Birmingham County FA for their support in making this project a reality."

This is not the club's first step toward sustainability. They have also installed an air source heating and boiler system and upgraded its lighting to energy-efficient LED fixtures.

These measures have significantly reduced the club's carbon emissions and energy consumption, further demonstrating its commitment to creating a greener future.



Stourbridge



The Pitching In Southern League Premier Central club received a Green Fund grant from the Birmingham County FA which enabled them to provide sustainable eco-friendly drinks bottles to all players in their Disability Section.

The grant promotes and rewards green initiatives and sustainability projects. The expectation is that this will contribute to a more sustainable future by reducing single use plastic bottles and litter waste at training and on matchdays, and less waste going to landfill.

The bottles have been manufactured using planet friendly materials that

have been recycled, are reusable and recyclable. They are BPA free to provide a lifetime eco bottle and are suitable for hot or cold drinks.

As well as reducing the carbon footprint of this one section of the football club, it will also help with carbon off-setting, as 50 mangrove trees have been pledged to be planted.

Over the next 25 years these trees will store as much carbon equivalent as 53,400 driven miles or 11 flights between London and San Francisco.



PLENTY TO BE POSITIVE ABOUT

THIS SPECIAL ONLINE PUBLICATION HAS BEEN PRODUCED ON BEHALF OF THE SOUTHERN LEAGUE BY MEDIA MANAGER, ANDY POOLE.

A thank you to all of the photographers whose work has been used within these pages.

E-NEWSPAPER

This season has also seen us produce our Saturday Evening E-Newspaper each weekend throughout the campaign, featuring reports from ALL games plus news and statistics.

A nod to the Saturday evening sports papers that once were so popular across the UK, we have been able to make the publication available as a free download at 7.30pm each Saturday evening.

We appreciate all of the feedback that we have received for this ambitious project, headed by Andy Poole, which is something that no other League is currently providing.

GOALS OF THE WEEK SHOW

We are also proud of our Goals of the Week Show that David Square works so hard to produce on our behalf.

It premieres at 7pm each Wednesday evening throughout the season and features goal action from across all four of our divisions.

Thank you to all of the member clubs who have regularly submitted footage.

MY LIFE IN FOOTBALL

During the summer months we will run the My Life In Football series each week on our Official You Tube Channel, which features in-depth discussions with some familiar names from the beautiful game.

AND FINALLY...

There has been plenty to be positive about over the course of the 2024/25 season here at the Pitching In Southern League and we are excited to see what's in store next season, the preparations for which are already well underway.

Don't forget that we're always on the look-out for any newsworthy Southern League-related stories for use on our website. Please email: news@southern-football-league.co.uk

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