

**PITCHING
IN**

PARTNERS WITH



**SOUTHERN
FOOTBALL LEAGUE**

REVIEW

2023/24

**+ 16-PAGE
PLAY-OFF
FINAL
PREVIEW**

IMAGE | @allytakesphotos

JOURNEY THROUGH THE SEASON



Ever thought of volunteering to help your local football club?

There are many different volunteer roles in non-league football and Southern League football clubs need your help with them.

The Trident Leagues and Pitching In have recently launched a new online Volunteer Hub where you can find opportunities and contact your local football club.

Please visit
Pitchinginvolunteers.co.uk
to find out more



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LEAGUES**
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WELCOME



The play-offs are now an established part of the football calendar at all levels of the game. After more than 40 matches in the regular season, it comes down to 90 minutes in the play-off final that will define success for the

participating clubs. The dial is reset, and everyone starts equal.

I would like to congratulate the eight teams that will contest the four Southern Football League play-off finals this season. Some looking to re-establish their place in the higher league whilst others looking to reach the highest they have ever achieved in the football pyramid.

The attendances at the semi-finals have been impressive, with 3,004 watching AFC Telford United's 2-0 victory over Mickleover and 10,930 in total at the eight matches. Whether it was a comprehensive 3-0 win that Frome Town enjoyed over Mousehole or the pulsating penalty shoot-out where it took 17 spot-kicks for Waltham Abbey to overcome AFC Dunstable, the play-offs have stimulated the interest of supporters across our leagues.

Non-League football at Step 3 and 4 of the National league system is thriving and The FA are now recognising our level of the game with the England Football Club Programme, which helps clubs develop over set themes such as Governance, volunteers and coaching and for the first time next season, our level of the game will have proper representation at Wembley with the new National League System Board to sit alongside the Professional Game Board and the National Game Board.

If you are attending a play-off final match, I hope that you enjoy the experience and I am sure we all look forward to the new season kicking off again on August 10th.

David Martin
Acting Chair
The Southern Football League

Congratulations to the eight clubs taking part in these finals, the culmination of all that hard work and dedication from club officials, volunteers and supporters alike all comes to a conclusion in these play-off finals as we wave goodbye to the 2023/24 season.



For those clubs who are victorious in these matches it is promotion that is achieved and a chance to enjoy new clubs, stadia and people. For the others it will be preparing to go again next season.

It has been a difficult season for a number of our teams with the weather that some parts of the country have endured with relentless rain meaning a string of postponed matches over several weeks, but we got there and finished the season on time.

It would be remiss of me not to say a huge thank you to all those people that volunteer at their club. Without volunteers the task of running a non-League club would be nigh-on-impossible. I know this from my own experience when at my club before joining the League.

Volunteering is done with one real word, 'passion'. For our League Sponsors, volunteering is a key part of their commitment to non-League football and is why the Volunteers Hub was set up. If you are not already involved at your club and have some time to help, we would urge you to get involved and you can access the Volunteers Hub via: pitchinginvolunteers.co.uk/.

It now leaves me to say a big thank you for supporting non-League football, enjoy the next few months before we start again on 10th August.

Jason Mills
Operations Manager
The Southern Football League



CHAMPIONS CHESHAM UNITED

The Generals were no fools as they clinched the Pitching In Southern League Premier South title on April 1 with four games to spare.

Racking up an impressive 90 points from their 42 games, which saw them taste victory 28 times and concede 46 goals along the way.

Establishing himself as a reliable and popular last line of defence over the course of the season was Zaki Oualah.

The Algerian custodian joined the club at the start of the season from Weymouth and has played his part in the success.

“I am very proud to win the League with this club,” he told us. “It’s full of great people and it’s exciting to have been part of a team that’s going to be remembered in the club’s history.

“There were a few different places I could have ended up this season, but I’m really happy that Micheal Murray brought me in and persuaded me to choose Chesham!” So, what have been the key factors in the club’s success over the course of the campaign.

“I think one of the key factors has been the consistency and experience of the management, staff and players,” he added.

“I think the average age of our squad is something like 27 years old, so it’s a team full of players with plenty of know-how.

“JD and Muzza also know the League very well and have managed the group exceptionally well, setting us up tactically as well as analysing our opponents’ strengths and weaknesses.

“Personally, I feel I have had a solid season; our target from the start was to get promotion and keep 20 clean sheets, we’ve managed to get promoted and I was very close to the clean sheet record!

“I have won the play-offs before with Farnborough back in 2017, but I think winning the title this season has been a more satisfying feeling. It was also great to reach the first round of the FA Cup too earlier in the season.

“I’d say there are four stand-out moments for me this season. Firstly, getting to the first round of the FA Cup by saving a penalty in extra-time against Braintree Town. Then there was travelling away to Plymouth Parkway with a cancelled train, delayed train, a trespasser on the train track and finally train signal faults, which all meant that as a team we turned up at 4.15pm and lost the game 4-0!

“Thirdly, the 13-game unbeaten run where we only conceded five goals to bounce back from that Plymouth game, shows the togetherness and determination of the team and then finally it was the title-clinching win at Harrow Borough.

“It was a great turn-out from the Chesham supporters with some fantastic celebrations! The fact that it has been Ramadan whilst we won the league just made it that little bit more special.”



IMAGE | Trevor Hyde

CHAMPIONS NEEDHAM MARKET

Jamie McGrath couldn't have dreamt of a better scenario than the one that panned out as Needham Market clinched the Pitching In Southern League Premier Central title with three games to spare.

His hat-trick helped the Marketmen to a 3-1 victory over Royston Town on the same day that nearest challenges, Mickleover, succumbed to defeat at Stourbridge by the same scoreline.

"It's unreal," he said. "Just to get it over the line is what we wanted to do, but to do it in the manner we did, I am absolutely buzzing.

"I didn't really care how we did, I just wanted us to get hold of that trophy, but for me to get a hat-trick was pretty special and something I will never forget.

"In terms of their importance, those three goals are the best I've ever scored, but there have been so many great performances out there throughout the whole season.

"The boys at the back have been unbelievable. Our home record defensively is just ridiculous, so that's where it all starts.

Thankfully, this year we've been able to back it up a little bit more at the other end.

"We actually lost the opening game of the season 6-1, so to come back from that and win the League with a few games to spare is such a fantastic achievement by everyone involved.

"The supporters have stuck with us and been excellent all season. They've made themselves loud; we don't get the biggest in terms of numbers but they've certainly been loud and that backing means so much to us."

The final reckoning saw Needham Market finish three points clear of nearest challengers, AFC Telford United, as they secured 85 points with 26 wins and seven defeats from their 40 League games. Not bad for a side who started the campaign in the worst way possible!



IMAGE | Mark Easlea

CHAMPIONS WIMBORNE TOWN

There was an extra special story behind Scott Arnold as he lifted the Pitching In Southern League Division One South title on the final day of the season.

Wimborne Town's 3-1 away victory at Melksham Town saw them crowned Champions and not only did the club captain end an 18-year wait for a title, his appearance was his 616th for the club, putting him as the joint record appearance holder.

"This means the world to me," he told us. "I've spent 18 years at a club which has always been in the mix for titles but never actually won one, so to win it on the same day as equalling the club's appearance record is what dreams are made of.

"You couldn't have written the script any better! We went into the game under a lot of pressure; this was our third attempt at winning it after failing to get the results we needed in our previous two games, but everything worked out in the end!

"To lift the trophy in front of over 1,000 Wimborne fans is something that I will never forget.

"It's not been the greatest of seasons for me personally, if I am being honest. I've been out of the side more than I've been in it, but we have an unbelievably strong squad

and I am proud that I have been able to come in and do a job when required. "This team has been relentless. The boys have turned up week in, week out and just worked their socks off. There's not been too much moaning even though I can probably count on one hand the number of training sessions we've had when it hasn't been lashing down with rain!

"It's been a hard slog, but stuff like this gives you the attitude to not give in and it has certainly stood us in good stead because we've been pushed all the way by a strong Frome Town side.

"So many of our games have been won late on or turned on their head with us coming from behind, including on the final day, because of the never-say-die attitude and determination that exists within the group. "I am really proud with what we have achieved this season."

In the end, The Magpies took the title by four points as they finished on the 79-point mark having lost just five of their 36 League games.



CHAMPIONS BIGGLESWADE TOWN

Rohdell Gordon's decision to drop into Step 4 earlier this year has paid off after he helped Biggleswade Town to the Pitching In Southern League Division One Central title.

The 28 year-old, who has graced The Football League for Stevenage, departed Isthmian League Premier Division outfit, Margate, at the end of January.

"It means a lot to end the season with a title win after what has been a roller-coaster season for me personally," he told us. "I left Margate after a new manager came in and wanted his own players. I didn't want to drop down a level, but at the same time I wanted to join an ambitious club with something to play for and not just a mid-table Step 3 team.

"Biggleswade Town ticked a lot of boxes; they were in the play-off places when I joined but I could see what a good group of players they had and it was a perfect opportunity for me to help the club achieve their ambitions.

"The final day of the season was tense. Bedford Town were strong favourites to win their game, so we knew that we had to get our job done and to go 1-0 down in that situation is not easy.

"But, we understand our strengths as a team; we stayed patient, kept doing the right things and eventually got our reward with four second half goals.

"There is so much positivity amongst this group of players, there's a really strong bond between us all and that has been the difference because when you are all good mates off the pitch, it helps you to be more fluid on the field.

"I arrived at the beginning of February and fitted in like a glove straight away. I already knew the management, so that helped me hit the ground running and I would like to think that I have played a part in what the lads have achieved.

"Once that final whistle went at the end of the last game, it was so special. These are memories that will stay with me forever." Biggleswade Town ended up on 72 points, three ahead of rivals, Bedford Town. They won 22 of their 36 League games to return to Step 3 after two seasons in Division One Central.



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STORIES OF THE MONTH AUGUST

Featuring:
**SALISBURY | AFC TELFORD
UNITED | MALVERN TOWN
BIGGLESWADE TOWN**

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER SOUTH

Salisbury manager, Brian Dutton, praised his side after they came through a busy schedule of six League matches unbeaten throughout the month of August.

“We’ve got a small squad, only 16 players,” said Dutton, who saw his side win three and draw three of their games. “There’s a few walking wounded after the demanding schedule we’ve had, but I’m pleased with the start we have made to the season overall.

“To be unbeaten after the first six games is pleasing and hopefully it can continue into September.”



PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER CENTRAL

AFC Telford United manager, Kevin Wilkin, admitted that he is still learning about his players as they look to adapt to life following relegation at the end of the previous campaign.

“I am still learning about the players’ capabilities,” he said. “They have to be able to take responsibility for their roles within the team and it is evident that in certain areas, this needs to improve.

“The biggest thing to come out of our early games is the need to be able to take our chances when they come along in what is a competitive League.”



PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE SOUTH

Having secured their Step 4 status for the first time since 2009 at the end of the previous season, Malvern Town co-manager, Stephen Cleal, admitted that his side have to start learning quickly about the added demands the higher level brings following the early action.

“This club has been very good for a very long time,” he said. “But now we’re going to be facing different challenges every week and our decision-making has to be better. “We haven’t played anywhere near to our potential in our opening games of the season. That said, there is enough quality in our side, we just need to show it in the right areas.”

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE CENTRAL

Goals were the name of the game for Biggleswade Town in the early weeks of the season as they came out of the blocks with real purpose under the guidance of Danny Payne, who stepped up from assistant manager to take over at the helm during the summer.

“Over the summer we’ve tried to recruit players throughout the team who are proven goalscorers at this level,” said Payne. “Last season we were reliant on one or two players to get the goals, but already this season they’ve been shared around.

“It allows us to play the type of football we want where the players are able to go out and just express themselves. We know that we’re always going to score goals and we’re in a good place at the moment, playing with plenty of confidence.”

STORIES OF THE MONTH SEPTEMBER

Featuring:
CHESHAM UNITED
MICKLEOVER | BISHOP'S
CLEEVE | AFC DUNSTABLE

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER SOUTH

It was an extremely positive start to the season for Chesham United. Top of the early table with seven straight wins and progress in the Emirates FA Cup.

Whilst not allowing himself to get too carried away, Chairman, Peter Brown, was encouraged by the start.

“We must keep our feet firmly on the ground,” he insisted. “Yes, we can enjoy the fantastic start we are having, but we are still only in the foothills of the mountain we are looking to climb this season.

“Nothing is ever won in September and there are many challenges ahead, and it is our job to make sure we are prepared for those challenges.

“We have made the calculated decision to back our management with the playing squad and – within reason – give them the tools they need to continue a promotion push, without feeling constant pressure to trim the playing budget.

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER CENTRAL

There was plenty to celebrate at Mickleover. Not only did they make an explosive start to the season with ten straight League wins by the end of September, but there was also the emergence of some exciting young talent.

“I’ve got my first-team coach, Pablo Mills, who is Head of the Academy and first-team player, Andrew Dales, who is an Academy coach so we are able to see at close quarters what is coming up through the ranks here,” said manager, John McGrath.

“We are also safe in the knowledge that our young lads coming up through the ranks are getting exactly the same training as the first-team, so that helps in their transition.

“There is a nice blend of youth and experience in the team, which we hope will serve us well as the season goes on.”

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE SOUTH

There were some encouraging signs for Bishop’s Cleeve as they began to find consistency in their performances.

“The lads are playing with smiles on their faces,” said manager, Paul Collicutt. “We’re now seeing some consistency in our performance levels and whilst there are still a number of areas in which we can improve, we’re playing some exciting stuff.

“Things are definitely moving in the right direction. We’re also seeing some quality goals and I have a good feeling about where things can go this season with this team if we continue to work hard after what ultimately proved to be a disappointing campaign last time around.”



PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE CENTRAL

AFC Dunstable manager, Joe Oxley, admitted that he was happy with the start that his young side had made to the season. “It’s been a busy start to the season, but over the past couple of weeks we’ve started to get on top of things with a decent routine and a solid and consistent group of players,” Oxley said. “I am pleased with the progress that has been made in a short period of time and we’re enjoying the challenges that this League presents.

“We had a clear idea when we came in that we wanted to develop a pool of young players who have the hunger and drive to learn and improve and use this as a platform to progress to the next level.

“A lot of the lads have been around full-time football so come with an idea of what is expected of them.”

STORIES OF THE MONTH OCTOBER

Featuring:
AFC TOTTON |
BERKHAMSTED | BEMERTON
HEATH HARLEQUINS |
WALTHAM ABBEY

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER SOUTH

The knack of scoring goals never leaves you. Just ask AFC Totton front-man, Scott Rendell, who hit five goals in just three League games during October.

The 37 year-old played a pivotal role in helping his side earn promotion at the end of the previous campaign and then get to grips with the higher level.

“The buzz that you get when you score a goal never goes away,” Rendell admitted. “Even at my age; if anything, it’s even more special!

“We’ve already showed that when we’re on it, we can be more than a match for anyone at this level. We’re in a good position to be able to push on and there is plenty more still to come from us.

“There will be ups and downs along the way, we know that as we come up against stronger opponents, but this is an exciting journey and I’m loving every minute of it.”

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER CENTRAL

Berkhamsted were finding the early going tough after promotion, and manager, Steve Heath, couldn’t help but fear the worst when, after a 9-0 defeat at Coalville Town, his side went two goals down in the opening 17 minutes of their next game against Stratford Town just days later.

But displaying tremendous character, they managed to get themselves back on level terms and took a point from a game that they were unlucky not to win in the end.

“The defeat hurt like crazy,” Heath admitted. “But the games come thick and fast at this level; there is no time to dwell on things and it was a case of picking ourselves up, dusting ourselves down and being ready to go again.

“We knew when we came into this League how tough it would be. This is an unforgiving level of football and there are going to be some tough days for us, the step up in standard has probably been even greater than I was expecting, but we are learning all of the time.”

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE SOUTH

Following back-to-back promotions, Bemerton Heath Harlequins found themselves amongst the front-runners after the first couple of months of the season.

“We have a very strong team bond here,” explained midfielder, Charlie Burden. “There’s a winning mentality throughout the club and, to be fair, we’re still on a high from securing promotion into this level at the end of last season.

“The atmosphere is really positive and we’ve taken that into the start of the season. I joined the project a few years ago and never expected the progress to be made as quickly as it has, but there is absolutely no reason why it can’t continue.”

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE CENTRAL

Sam Shaban had an afternoon to remember when his four goals inspired Waltham Abbey to a 5-2 away win at AFC Dunstable, a result which pushed them up to third in the table.

“This is the first time I’ve scored four at senior level,” Shaban said. “It was great to get the goals, but the most important thing was that the team got the three points.

“I am really enjoying my football this season. As a team we are playing some really attractive football and we know that on our day, we can beat anyone at this level.

“It’s still early days in the season, but we’ve had a decent start and we want to be able to build upon this now. We know that we have the ability and talent within the squad to be right up there come the end of the season and push for promotion.”



STORIES OF THE MONTH NOVEMBER

Featuring:
**SHOLING | HITCHIN TOWN
PAULTON ROVERS |
HERTFORD TOWN**

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER SOUTH

Sholing stalwart, Byron Mason, celebrated breaking through the 700th appearance mark for the club.

“I like to think that I keep myself in good shape all year round - and I stretch a hell of a lot,” he said when we asked him the secret of his longevity. “I love the game so much that it drives me on to get another season out year after year and I hope that can continue for a while to come yet.

“Getting promoted to the Southern League Premier South at the end of last season is my second-best moment behind winning the FA Vase at Wembley. It came after so many years of ups and downs because of ground grading, but we finally got to play in the League that I believe we belong in as a club.

“We’ve started to put a few results together and have got a few players back to give us a more settled squad, so I think we can push on now.”

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER CENTRAL

It was a day to remember for Hitchin Town goalkeeper, Charlie Horlock, as his side won 3-1 at fellow high-flyers, Halesowen Town.

He opened the scoring from a goal-kick and then saved a 94th minute penalty as his side went straight down the other end and grabbed a third goal to secure a big victory.

“I think it’s fair to say I’ve never experienced a game like that and probably never will again,” Horlock told us. “I think it’s every goalkeepers’ dream to score a goal and save a last-minute penalty, so it’s a bit of a privilege to experience both in one game!

“My goal was a complete fluke; 99 times out of 100 it just trickles through to the opposite keeper. When it went in, I didn’t know what to do, so I ended up just standing there and shrugged!

“As for the penalty save, it was a soft decision in the first place, in my opinion, so justice was done with that.”



PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE SOUTH

Move over Roy of the Rovers after Kyle Tooze marked his first-ever game in management with a hat-trick to help his side, Paulton Rovers, win 4-3 at Westbury United.

“I am still trying to find out if scoring a hat-trick on your debut as manager has ever been done before,” Tooze told us. “It’s a weird celebration as, of course, I am buzzing at scoring a hat-trick to win us the game and the three points, but then as manager, I’m disappointed in the poor goals we conceded, so it’s mixed emotions.

“The opportunity to manage in the Southern League doesn’t come along too often, so after discussions with the Board and the players recently, I decided to grab this chance.

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE CENTRAL

After a solid career in the professional game, Hertford Town player-manager, Ben Herd, was reveling in the hands-on nature of working in non-League football.

“I always felt that professional football restricted me,” Herd admitted. “Throughout my career I’ve always had more to give, so being as hands-on as I am here in all aspects of the club is just what I was looking for.

“I love the challenge of trying to build a football club and everything that comes with it, be that bringing vibrant young players through or unblocking the toilets on match day.

“It’s been a positive start to the season; even when we weren’t getting the results, we were playing some good stuff and it was only a matter of time before things started to click into place.”

STORIES OF THE MONTH DECEMBER

Featuring:
**HUNGERFORD TOWN |
ALVECHURCH | WESTBURY
UNITED | WELWYN
GARDEN CITY**

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER SOUTH

Hot-shot, Conor McDonagh, already found himself breaking through the 20-goal mark. “I’ve been blessed to have quality team-mates around me and a manager who backs me and that’s the simple reason why I’ve been able to reach 23 goals already this season,” he said. “My target going in to each season is always 30, and I think most strikers will say the same, so to be over 20 already is good going. “I’ve played at this level a long time and I know that this time of year, with so many games in a short space of time, can make or break a team, so hopefully we can keep building on our momentum and see where it takes us.”



PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER CENTRAL

There was some fantastic community spirit displayed by Alvechurch FC as part of their Christmas Activity and Challenge Weeks. A challenge was set to raise £5,000 for 50 Christmas Hampers to be handed out within the local community.

The target was reached through various sponsored activities and challenges by their teams.

“It’s been a phenomenal effort,” said Sporting Director, Mark Fogarty. “We’ve seen sponsored walks, runs, all manner of things from so many people.

“Everyone involved with the club has come together to reach our target and I am pleased to say that 54 hampers have been handed out by our men’s and women’s team players, alongside our kitchen staff who worked so hard to put them all together.

“As a club we have been able to make Christmas that bit easier for others, and that means so much to us.”

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE SOUTH

Westbury United ended the year by announcing Phil Hampson as their new Chairman.

“I am immensely proud and extremely privileged to help guide the club forward,” he told us. “It’s something I’ve always quite liked the thought of taking on, but you never really think it’s something that would actually happen or if you’re even qualified enough to do it, so it’s nice to have that trust bestowed upon you.

“I have a real belief in basic principles in work and life centering around organisation, communication and honesty. If I can successfully combine these principles into the club alongside our future plans, I think we’ll be okay!

“I believe a great club is one stood on strong foundations, giving opportunity and pathways to senior football for local kids.

“It’s been a tough start to the season. This League is ridiculously competitive, but we will fight for everything.”

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE CENTRAL

Welwyn Garden City reached the 20-point mark in style with a good 4-2 away win at Kings Langley to make it four victories in a row in a game which saw Bailey Stevenson notch all four goals.

“I am over the moon with my own performance and that of the whole team,” he told us. “To score all four of our goals was really special for me, it’s the first time I have done it at this level.

“We started the season quite slowly, but our form has started to pick up and with the talented squad we have plus the confidence gained, hopefully the only way is up now.”



PLAY-OFF FINAL AFC TOTTON

AFC TOTTON v SALISBURY |
PITCHING IN
SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER
SOUTH | MONDAY 6 MAY | 3PM



AFC Totton have ridden on the crest of a wave this season. Having been promoted from Division One South at the end of last term with just four defeats from 38 League games, their momentum continued as they were able to adapt well to the demands of the higher level to finish in second place.

With 81 points and an impressive 89 goals from their 46 League games, it's been a season of real entertainment for the fans, where their average attendance of 1,231 makes them the only team in the Premier South to have an average in four figures. There was plenty of drama in their semi-final against Bracknell Town, where Tony Lee added another goal to his impressive tally since joining the club earlier in the season to open the scoring just past the hour-mark.

It looked like that was going to be enough to see them through until the visitors levelled with three minutes to go and suddenly the momentum shifted.

However, they were able to show tremendous resolve to recover in extra-time and win the game courtesy of a goal from Ethan Taylor to set up today's encounter where, once more, they will have home advantage.

"Wednesday's game was very high tempo," said defender, Luke Hallett. "Both teams were going at it as you would expect. It was a deserved win in the end, but we've achieved nothing yet, we have to keep our feet on the ground ahead of today's game.

"It's going to be another exciting game between two teams who like to play football. I was happy with my contribution in the semi-final; I made a few good blocks in the area to break attacks down, but could have made better decisions on the ball at times.

"You don't get into these positions in football all that often, so I am excited for this afternoon's game. We've made tremendous progress this season but we have to ensure that we get our heads down and focus on finishing the job off today."

Whilst Hallett has an important job to do defensively, at the other end of the pitch, Tony Lee will be looking to get the goals to fire the team into the next level.

"Finishing 13 points ahead of Bracknell put a little bit more pressure onto us on Wednesday evening," he admitted to us.

"We started the game a bit nervy but once we settled down, we were able to go about our business and our patterns of play started to come together.

"For me personally I found myself 2v1 or even 3v1 at times early on, but like the rest of the team, I grew into it and it was nice to step up and put a free-kick away after I had missed an early good chance to open the scoring.

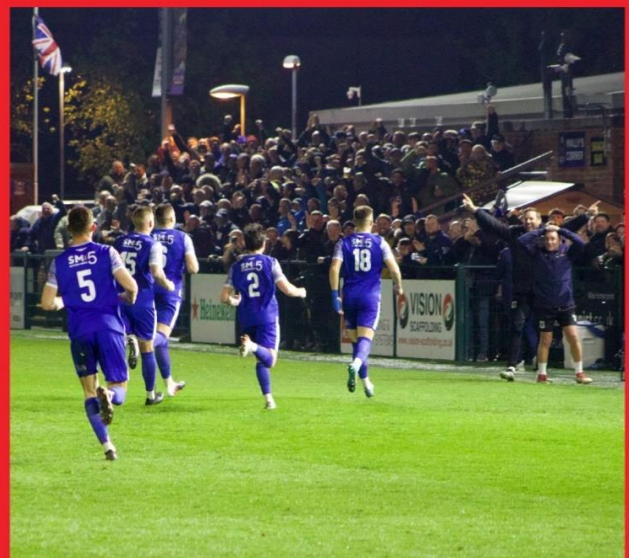


IMAGE | AFC Totton

PLAY-OFF FINAL AFC TOTTON



“Now it’s going to be second against third, similar to last season’s final where two of the best footballing sides in the division go head-to-head.

“I don’t think that there will be any shy football played this afternoon, that’s for sure. There will be a lot of quality on show between two teams who have been up there all season. Like the two semi-finals, I expect it to be a good advert for the Southern League and the Premier South.

“I just can’t wait. I had heart-break at the semi-final stage with Poole Town last season, so I want to end this one on a high and turn what has been an up-and-down campaign into a real positive.”

Meanwhile, Jordon Ragguette, has praised the resilience of the side, something that he feels will be needed again this afternoon.

“We showed plenty of resilience on Wednesday, particularly in the wake of Bracknell’s late equaliser when we continued to push for a winner,” he told us. “We know that we’ve always got goals in us, so it was just about continuing to do what we do, being solid at the back and penetrative up top.

“The nature of the game meant that I wasn’t as attacking as I like to be; I was playing the game quite passive, but I was just happy to be back out there and involved in such an occasion.

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“I have been working hard to get back from injury; at one stage I thought that my season was over, so I am grateful to the medical staff for getting me back so quickly in order to be involved in the play-offs.

“It makes me even more appreciative of being here this afternoon. These are the kind of games that you work hard for all season; there’s a chance for us to achieve something great but we have to prepare correctly and go out there with the correct mindset, which I am sure we will do.

“Salisbury are a strong side, there is no doubt about that, and we have to be able to out-fight them all over the pitch if we are to emerge with the result that we all crave.”

All three have heaped praise on the Stags’ supporters whose numbers have continued to rise as the campaign has gone on.

“The support has been massive to help give us that extra 10%,” continued Ragguette.

“There’s been a real buzz around the whole season and it’s great to see the fans enjoying it as much as we are.”

Lee added: “The fans have been quality since I first walked into the building. There were a few nerves from them in extra-time on Wednesday, but they helped to get us there in the end and more of the same is required today.”

“In football, fans are the most important,” concluded Hallett. “They give you the extra boost you need, especially when it goes to extra-time like on Wednesday.

“They were quality and had our backs the whole time. Without the fans we wouldn’t be where we are today!”



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SOUTHERN
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PLAY-OFF FINAL SALISBURY

AFC TOTTON v SALISBURY |
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Salisbury left it late to secure their place in today's final. Trailing by a goal to nil at home to Gosport Borough in the semi-final with just three minutes left on the clock, it took a monumental effort to turn the scoreline on its head.

Josh Hedges set them on their way with an 87th minute equaliser before a last-minute penalty was coolly converted by leading scorer, Noah Coppin, to send them through and they will be looking to take the momentum gained from this late show into today's game.

"It was a fairly even game overall," admitted opening goalscorer Hedges. "Both teams had chances to open the scoring, but we were pretty comfortable defensively.

"We knew that there would be a spell where we would have to soak up a bit of pressure and that came at the start of the second period, it was just a case of how we reacted to it. We thought that we had weathered the storm when they went ahead with just under 19 minutes to go.

"We never let our heads drop because we always knew that we were the fitter of the two sides and as long as we kept pushing, a chance to get back into the game would eventually come our way.

"Thankfully I was able to draw us level with the clock ticking down and it gave us extra energy. I was able to beat my man and find the net and then from there we went on to get the penalty a few minutes later which Noah despatched.

"I wasn't happy with my performance; I would go as far as to say that it was one of my worst of the season. I just never really got into the game but I kept going hoping that something would happen for me and, thankfully, it did!

"Leaving it so late didn't do much for our nerves, though! Now we go into what promises to be another thrilling match this afternoon.

"Both sides have showed what they are capable of, they finished a couple of points ahead of us, so it's going to be close and competitive. There are sure to be twists and turns over the 90 minutes ahead in what is going to be a memorable showdown.

"As player, it's always exciting to be involved in these intense battles. The atmosphere is sure to be electric and it's what you play the game for."

Defender, Josh Sommerton, has described the game ahead as a 'proper battle' between two sides who have been amongst the front-runners pretty much throughout the season.

"This is going to be a really tough game," he told us. "A proper battle between two strong teams at this level.

"They have had a good second half of the season so we know that we are going to have to dig deep to be able to stop them in their tracks.



PLAY-OFF FINAL SALISBURY



“As we showed on Wednesday and throughout the season, we’re a team that never gives up; this is a one-off game so we’ll just go out there, play our own game and give it everything we’ve got. It will be fast-paced and physical, so it’s going to prove to be a good spectacle.

“It will definitely rank up there amongst the biggest games that I have been involved in, I just hope that we can come out on the right side of it. For me, it’s the chance to show what I am capable of on this stage.

“I’ve been trying to get back into the swing of things over the second half of the season having suffered at the hands of injury, so it’s nice to be playing my part in these games.

“If we can learn anything from Wednesday, it’s just to keep going, keep believing and work as hard as we can because we don’t want to have any regrets of what could have been at the end.”

Man of the moment, Noah Coppin, is sure to have an integral role to play in proceedings, as he did in the semi-final.

“It’s been a great season for me and I am going into every game full of confidence,” he told us. “It’s been nice to get the goals and accolades, but ever since the summer, my main goal has always been to see this club promoted.

“Now we are just one game away and our focus is on getting the job done. It’s

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massive, everything comes down to today, there are no second chances.

“The fans have been a real driving force and we need them with us for one final big effort.”

Sommerton agrees: “The fans were massive on Wednesday. We had a huge turnout of over 2,000 and they were so vocal.

“It made for a special atmosphere and they effectively pulled the ball into the net for our two late goals. It was a pleasure to be out there playing in front of them and no doubt they will be just as supportive today.”

“The enthusiasm that our fans show really rubs off onto the players,” added Hedges.

“The cheers, chants and energy gave us that extra drive in the final five minutes on Wednesday. They were with us every step of the way as our 12th Man and more of the same is needed this afternoon, so come on you Whites!”



PARTNERS WITH



SOUTHERN
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PLAY-OFF FINAL

AFC TELFORD UNITED



AFC Telford United are looking to bounce back into the Vanarama National League North at the first attempt this afternoon having completed a solid season which has seen them with the fewest defeats of all teams in the Premier Central, just six from 40 games.

They ended the campaign in second-place with 82 points, just three off Champions, Needham Market, and 11 ahead of this afternoon's opponents, who finished just one place below them.

Their semi-final passage was smoother than most as Montel Gibson's opener just before half-time and a second from Remi Walker ten minutes from time saw them overcome the challenge of Mickleover without too many problems.

The game was watched by a crowd of over 3,000 and there are going to be even more packed into the New Bucks Head this afternoon.

"What a night Wednesday was for everyone involved," said goalscorer, Montel Gibson.

"It was never going to be easy, but we dug deep, stuck together and came up with some big moments to win the game.

"As a striker, it's always nice to contribute towards a victory so I was buzzing when I scored! Hopefully, I can do my bit today too.

"It's the culmination of so much hard work over the course of the season from both teams. Both teams have vastly experienced managers at the helm and both teams are

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are looking to get back into The National League North at the first attempt.

"We're two solid teams who have only lost a combined total of 13 games from the 80 that we have played in the League this season. It's going to be so close; we've worked all season to get here and I am just raring to get out there and get the action underway.

"We want to make this a successful season and that means getting this club back into Step 2."

The versatile Jordan Piggott has enjoyed his first taste of play-off action so far and is now looking to put the cherry on top of the cake.

"I absolutely loved it out there on Wednesday evening," he told us without hesitation. "This is a great opportunity for me to play in some big games with so much at stake and I am revelling in it.

"I've been looking forward to today ever since the final whistle went in the semi-final. We did well because Mickleover are a good side who have been amongst the top two all season.

"The first goal was always going to be crucial and fortunately for us, we have someone with the quality of Montel to put us ahead.



IMAGES | Kieren Griffin Photography

PLAY-OFF FINAL

AFC TELFORD UNITED



“We never looked back after that. I should have done better with a chance that came my way from a header following a brilliant ball in from Ricardo [Dinanga], but other than that, we were worthy winners.

“Now we have to be real for the physical challenge that Leamington will present to us. You can sure that we’ll be up for it and having home advantage will give us a massive boost.

“The numbers that turned up for the semi-final were brilliant and they just never stopped singing and encouraging us. They were 100% our 12th Man and more of the same is going to be required this afternoon.”

Gibson added: “There’s a togetherness and connection here like no other. Any club coming to our stadium know that it won’t be easy for them and hopefully this will be the case today.”

For manager, Kevin Wilkin, it was a real team effort. “The whole group did brilliantly,” he said. “It’s great to have a shot at the final. I am proud of my players for the way in which they have applied themselves, not only on Wednesday but over the course of the whole season.

“The conditions on Wednesday evening didn’t help either team, but we went out there pressed high and were bold and

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aggressive in our approach, which paid off. The lads bought in to what we wanted to do and we were deserved winners in the end. “We managed the game well against strong opponents, who if it hadn’t been for the points deduction would have finished in the top three with us.

“Now we look to the game in prospect today and Leamington have a style of play that serves them well. We have to make sure that we are organised to deal with the threats that they carry; we played them recently and it was a close-fought game, something that I am expecting this afternoon as well.

“If our energy levels and desire is the same as in the semi-final, then we will give ourselves every chance of getting a winning result.”



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PLAY-OFF FINAL LEAMINGTON

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Just like their opponents, Leamington are looking to bounce back at the first attempt having suffered relegation out of the Vanarama National League North at the end of last term having had a six-season run at that level.

Under the shrewd guidance of manager, Paul Holleran, who celebrated his 700th game at the helm earlier in the campaign, they have been amongst the leading pack throughout and secured a third-place finish having won 19 of their 40 League games, amassing a total of 71 points along the way.

The play-off semi-final saw them finally overcome the challenge of Redditch United in extra-time, with the popular Jack Edwards notching the all-important goal.

“It was a massive result for us,” said goalkeeper, Callum Hawkins. “You have to give Redditch credit, they made it a very difficult game for us and neither team gave up much in the 90.

“As we got to extra-time, you know that legs are going to tire and chances will come. We stayed solid as a defensive unit and thankfully we were able to take our chance when it came along.

“Credit to the lads because they found a way to win and managed to deal with all the pressure that came with it.

“For me, keeping a clean sheet was the main thing; there weren’t many chances at either end, so it was important to keep

concentration and when it did break for them, I was able to do my job.”

Now attention turns to the final, with Hawkins expecting another hard-fought encounter against an AFC Telford United outfit that finished the season 11 points above them.

“It will be a battle, that’s for sure,” he added. “We didn’t do ourselves justice in our last game against AFC Telford, but we bounced back from that and we are looking to put things right today.

“As a team we have plenty of belief in each other; if we stay solid at the back, we know we’ll get chances at the other end.

“This has been an incredible journey for me, coming back from my ACL injury, and to be part of this is the cherry on top of the cake.

“With my best defensive record already completed, I just need one final push to reach my other goal going into the season.”

Part of the Brakes’ back-line will be the no-nonsense Rob Evans and Josh Quaynor.

“The semi-final was always going to be a 1-0 game,” added Evans. “Luckily, we came out on the right end of the scoreline.

“We had to defend well as a unit with everyone playing their part. It’s going to be even more difficult this afternoon because, in my opinion, AFC Telford are the best side



IMAGE | Keith Clayton

PLAY-OFF FINAL LEAMINGTON



I have come across in this League all season. "I know a few of their lads and what they are all about. Their stadium will be bouncing with probably over 5,000 there, but these are the games that you want to be involved in.

"It's a huge chance for us to play Step 2 football next season, and for me personally, it would turn my season around after it didn't start how I expected it to."

For Quaynor, he was pleased to be involved in the build-up to the winning goal on Wednesday.

"It was tough going out there, but I was pleased to get through the whole game and make a contribution to the winning goal," he told us. "There was not a lot between the two teams with the added pressure of not wanting to make a mistake in what was such a close encounter.

"It's going to be similar today. I am looking forward to playing in another final and hopefully I can play my part in helping us to get over the line."

All three agree that the travelling fans are going to have a big role to play.

"I don't know the words to explain how amazing our supporters are," said Hawkins. "The connection between the players and the fans at this club is so tight knit that the boys want to give 100% for the fans and the

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fans reciprocate that with their support. "The emotions when we scored on Wednesday were incredible. I don't think I can remember a moment like it in my career so far and I can't thank the fans enough for making that moment so special."

Evans added: "The fans helped to drag us over the line in extra-time when we were running out of steam. They will be outnumbered on Monday, but I am sure we will hear them loud and proud as always."

Meanwhile, Will Shorrock, will be using his experience of 12 months ago when he was part of the Rushall Olympic team that went to Nuneaton Borough in the play-off final and secured a penalty shoot-out victory to send The Pics into Step 2 for the first-ever time.

"It's going to be a great occasion, just as it was last year," he told us. "It's going to be tense and both teams will be looking to find that bit of quality that will make all of the difference, as was the case in our semi-final.

"It has all the ingredients to be a good game, it's a one-off occasion, anything can happen. It was such a great feeling to win with Rushall last year and I am determined to have that again.

"I've loved every minute since I have been here and that's credit to everyone associated with the club, so I want to do it for them."



PARTNERS WITH



SOUTHERN
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PLAY-OFF FINAL FROME TOWN



For much of the season, Frome Town were battling it out with Wimborne Town for the title as both teams pulled away from the chasing pack. With one automatic promotion spot up for grabs, one of them was always going to have to go through the play-off route.

They ultimately finished four points adrift of the leaders but nine points clear of third place, having accumulated 75 points and tasting defeat just five times from their 36 League outings.

On Wednesday they brushed aside Mousehole in the play-off semi-final, finding themselves two goals to the good early on through Kane Simpson and James Ollis, who went on to grab his second of them game on the stroke of half-time to effectively end the contest.

“We played very well on the night,” two-goal hero Ollis told us. “It was a thoroughly deserved victory and gives us a real confidence boost going into this afternoon’s game as Mousehole are a good team who went into the game in a rich vein of form. “To play my part with two goals was pleasing but the main thing was that we made it through.”

A solid home record, which has seen them go unbeaten in the League, has given the Robins a foundation on which they have built over the course of the season, but the final game of the regular season saw two goals within the closing minutes – one from Ollis – earn them a share of the spoils with

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Monday’s opponents, Bristol Manor Farm, in a 3-3 draw.

“We played out a draw when we last met but this game will be different,” Ollis continued. “We didn’t play at our best on that occasion, far from it. I’m sure it will be another tight game with lots of drama, but if we play like we did on Wednesday and for 90% of the season, I have no doubt that we will get the result that we all want.

“Everyone is buzzing for the game; you’d be crazy not to be. Play-off finals don’t come around often, so you have to make sure that we take the chance that stands before us.” At the other end of the pitch, skipper, Sam Teale, is still reveling in another clean sheet, particular as his side were reduced to ten men in the second period after George Rigg saw red for two bookings.

“As a centre back, a clean sheet is always something to celebrate,” he told us.

“Especially being down to ten men for the majority of the second half and up against technically-gifted opponents.

“The lads were immense out there. To be three goals up at the break was really pleasing and whilst the second half was a bit different, we defending superbly and limited them to very few genuine chances.



IMAGES | Frome Town AFC

PLAY-OFF FINAL FROME TOWN



“I loved every minute of it out there and now I can’t wait to face the physical battle that Manor Farm will bring. They’re a dangerous team with some high-quality individuals, so we know that we will have to be at our best.

“These are the type of games you want to be involved in at the end of the season; getting promotion via the play-offs is probably the best way to do it, but even though we finished 16 points above them, we have no divine right to win it just because we are at home.

“We have to go out there and perform to the standards that we know we are capable of to earn the right to win the game.”

Also on the scoresheet in the semi-final was Kane Simpson, who is looking to repeat the feat this afternoon.

“Games at this level don’t come much bigger than this,” he said. “I’m buzzing to be involved; there’s sure to be a big crowd and a great atmosphere, so hopefully we can get over the line.

“We are up against one of the form teams who have been scoring plenty of goals, but so have we and I’ll be doing all I can to get my name on the scoresheet.

“Our game plan worked on Wednesday. We came out of the blocks really well and the two early goals knocked the stuffing out

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of Mousehole. Hopefully we can start just as brightly this time around.

“It’s rare that one to 11 are all at it on the same day, as was the case in the semi-final, and we will be looking to repeat that this afternoon.”

The Robins’ fans have followed their team with such passion this season clocking up the miles on the road and helping to make their Badgers Hill home a fortress.

“Our fans are always loud and keep you going even when you think that there is nothing left in the tank,” added Simpson.

“We need them to be on form again today.”

Strike partner, Ollis, agreed. “The supporters have been immense all season.

We’re lucky to have such loyal fans who turn out in good numbers week in, week out. The reason why we’ve gone unbeaten at home is largely down to them.”

“Yes, the Dodge Ultras are massive,” added Teale with a smile. “We need them in full voice today as we know that Bristol Manor Farm also have a vocal following, so that should make for a cracking atmosphere.”



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PLAY-OFF FINAL BRISTOL MF

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It took until the final day of the regular season to confirm their play-off place, but a run of just one defeat from their last 12 outings sees Bristol Manor Farm go into this afternoon's final in a rich vein of form.

It'll take some stopping to beat us; we know how good Frome Town are at home, but we were 3-1 up there recently with just a few minutes to go and even though they were able to pull it back and level the scores, we showed what we are capable of on that occasion.

"I am looking forward to the challenge that stands before us. We've worked so hard over the course of the season and hopefully that can pay off and this will be our year."

Goalkeeper, Seth Locke, knows that whilst his side go into the game as underdogs, all of the pressure will be on their hosts.

"There will be a large crowd and this combined with the expectation on the home side means that they will have to deal with the added pressure that comes with it," he told us. "At the end of the day, it's just another game of football and we're playing with smiles on our faces at the moment.

"It's going to be some occasion this afternoon with two big clubs in this League battling it out in front of what is sure to be a vocal crowd.

"I'm sure it'll start off cagey, as is the case with most finals, but if we can get into our groove then I am sure we will play our

A 3-3 draw at Frome Town on the final day, where they were just minutes from becoming the first team to win at Badgers Hill in the League this season, saw them clinch fourth place with 59 points from their 36 games.

They took their momentum into the play-off semi-final at local rivals, Cribbs, on Wednesday where Owen Brain fired them into an early lead only for the hosts to level matters on the hour. Within ten minutes of that set-back, they were back in front thanks to Harry Lucas and they were able to hold on to their lead.

"Getting such an early goal was so important for us," said Jayden Nielsen, who won both the Player of the Season and Players' Player of the Season awards last term. "Cribbs is always a tough place to go to, so the goal settled us down.

"We showed great character to respond so quickly after conceding the equaliser and then we dug-in to hold onto our lead this time.

"It was a real team performance, with everyone rolling their sleeves up and doing their jobs.

"We're playing with a lot of confidence and belief at the moment.



IMAGES | Bristol Manor Farm FC

PLAY-OFF FINAL BRISTOL MF



part in what will be a great advert for the Southern League and non-League football in general.

“We play the game for occasions like this; I am excited to see what this team can achieve. We’ll be giving it a good go and see where it takes us!

“It was a hard-fought and intense battle on Wednesday, as you would expect from a Bristol derby. Both teams left nothing out on the pitch and it was our extra quality that shone through in the end to get us over the line, so we will need that again today.

“I am always learning and high-pressure games such as this one provide a great opportunity for me to continue on that journey.”

For right-back, Mason Winter, his confidence was given a boost as he returned straight into the starting line-up having returned from suspension.

“The Gaffer showed faith in me by slotting me straight back into the team and that meant a lot,” he told us. “Hopefully I repaid his faith as I felt that we defended well and it gave us the platform to go on and get the win.

“It was all about getting through and we managed to do that. We had to show the physical side of our game to first of all win the battle, but we know that we have that in our locker.

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“Now we will be tested by a Frome Town team that combines quality with plenty of experience. We fell short in the play-off final two years ago; we never really showed up that day, so I see this as a shot at redemption.

“It’s a massive game for everyone involved and it will be something for us to remember throughout our careers. The prize is right there in front of us; it’s going to take a big effort, but we can do it.”

The Farmy Army are sure to agree. They have developed a very favourable reputation for the backing of their team, which also includes an impressive array of flags and banners, which are sure to be out in full force this afternoon.

“Our supporters are the best in the League by a country mile,” added Winter. “They make such a difference for us out there and as players we can’t thank them enough for the way in which they get behind us week in, week out.”

Nielsen added: “There are no other fans like them. They have been great all season and, as Mason says, we are so grateful to have them behind us.”

“I don’t think they realise how much they give us,” concluded Locke. “They push us to go that extra mile and we would not be where we are without them!

“They are singing for 90 minutes non-stop week in, week out, home and away. Brilliant!”



PARTNERS WITH

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FOOTBALL LEAGUE

PLAY-OFF FINAL

BEDFORD TOWN



After an explosive start to the campaign, Bedford Town's form tailed off slightly during the second half of the campaign, but they remained in contention for the title right up until the final day of the regular season.

They ended up missing out on the title by three points, but can boast the fewest defeats in Division One Central, with just seven losses from their 36 League outings. In Wednesday's semi-final, they hit opponents, Ware, with two goals in quick succession as half-time approached and whilst they didn't have things all their own way in the second period, they emerged as worthy winners.

"It was a good performance all-round," stated Ryan Blake. "Some of the boys' legs, including mine, were starting to go as the second half went on and although we conceded a late goal, by that stage we had already got the job done.

"We deserved the win; personally, I have had better games this season but we've played a lot of football this season and its starting to show. I've made sure that I have rested up since Wednesday and now I am ready to go again for one final time this season.

"When you reach this stage of the season, you know that the opponents are going to make it a difficult game; Waltham Abbey have earned the right to be here and we've had a couple of close games against them this season, with us just edging one of them.

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"But this is a final and anything can happen. They will arrive here well-prepared and we'll be the same, so it makes for a tough match.

"This will be the first play-off final that I have ever played in, so I can't wait to be involved. It's been a bit of an up-and-down season but we deserve our big day. Fingers crossed that we can finish the job and end the season on a high."

After Alex Collard had given the Eagles the lead on Wednesday, Leon Lobjoit weighed in with what proved to be a crucial second goal right on the stroke of half-time.

"It's always nice to get on the scoresheet, but it's extra special in big games like this," Lobjoit told us. "The game was entertaining, both teams approached it in the right way and started well before getting the goals, which allowed us to settle things down a bit.

"Ware never stopped working and they got their reward with a goal at the death, but it proved too little, too late for them.

"It was a relief to have made it through and now we just need one final push. Both teams go into the game in good form so you could say that it's anyone's game.

"We have to ensure that we make home advantage count."



IMAGES | Tom Hall Photography

PLAY-OFF FINAL BEDFORD TOWN



At other end of the pitch, Carl Mensah, will be charged with keeping the lively Waltham Abbey front-runners in check.

“If we can defend as we have done over the past five or six games then the rest will take care of itself,” said Mensah. “Whoever made it through would present us with a tough game, one where the stakes are so high. “Waltham Abbey have already beaten us here this season so we will be looking to make amends for that and redress the balance.

“We going to have to be up for it and at it right from the first whistle. To be honest, you shouldn’t need any extra motivation for these type of games, it should all come naturally.

“For me, losing in the play-offs last year with Walthamstow has made me even more determined not to go through the same again this time around. I am glad to have another opportunity and I intend to grab it with both hands.

“As a group we’re excited; we so badly want to give our supporters something to smile about over the summer and get this club straight back up to Step 3.

“The fans were there for us on Wednesday as they have been all season. We had to weather a storm in the final 20-25 minutes but the support that we received really played its part.

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“They have been integral to what we have done this season and to have over 1,000 here for our last two games shows what a great fanbase we have here. It doesn’t go unnoticed and I am sure that they will be even louder today.”

Blake and Lobjoit both agreed. “To get the numbers that we do at Step 4 is fantastic,” added Blake. “They can help give us that extra push we need this afternoon.”

“It was important that they kept us going when we needed them most on Wednesday,” Lobjoit stated. “Now they can play their part in getting the job done today so that we can celebrate together in unison at the end.”

Meanwhile, a winning result this afternoon would be the perfect ending to a big week in the life of Kyle Connolly and his family.

The wing-back missed the play-off semi-final on Wednesday evening due to the birth of his daughter, Felicity, the previous day.

Both mother and baby are doing well and now dad wants to add another happy memory to this most special of weeks.



PARTNERS WITH

**SOUTHERN
FOOTBALL LEAGUE**

PLAY-OFF FINAL

WALTHAM ABBEY



After an epic battle in the play-off semi-final, which went on long into the night as they finally prospered 8-7 on penalties, Waltham Abbey are ready to face their latest challenge head on as they look to secure Step 3 football.

The Abbotts finished the season in fourth place in the table, with 61 points to their name, eight points and two places behind Monday's opponents, Bedford Town. They went to AFC Dunstable in the play-off semi-final on Wednesday evening and played their part in an enthralling contest which saw them go ahead right at the end of the opening period before seeing the scoreline turned on its head and equalising in the last minute of normal time. Extra-time saw them go behind again but once more they found it within themselves to level matters and take the game to a penalty shoot-out, which was equally as dramatic.

"I don't actually think we played at our best," admitted defender, Kieron Cathline. "That's actually a positive because we know that we can do better in the final. "What we did do well was stick together and get our goals at important times. AFC Dunstable are a good side; they are a young team packed full of energy and flair, so for us to beat them gives us a of confidence. "My job is to lead from the back and organize those around me. I'm getting better at it; I knew in great detail what the Gaffer wanted from me on Wednesday and

BEDFORD TOWN v WALTHAM ABBEY | PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE CENTRAL | MONDAY 6 MAY | 3PM

it will be the same today, our preparation throughout the season has been good. "There is no getting away from the fact that it will be a tough game this afternoon. Bedford Town have a lot of attacking talent; both games against them in the League this season have been tight, so it should be another hard-fought contest, as it was when we met only last month. "We expect them to be direct, physical and with plenty of pace. I think we're two similar teams in some ways, which is why it's always close games with them. "There will be a good atmosphere so we will have to stay calm and hopefully get the job done. I've won a League before but never been promoted through the play-offs, so that would be a new experience for me if it were to happen today.

"You don't get to play in occasions like this all that often, so I am buzzing for it." For goalkeeper, Bradley Robinson, it will be his second play-off final in three years, having been involved during his days at Ware. "To be so near yet so far on that occasion was upsetting," recalled Robinson who not only saved three penalties in the semi-final shoot-out but also scored one. "Hopefully it will be a different outcome for me this time and I can play my part in helping the team get the job done.



IMAGE | AFC Dunstable

PLAY-OFF FINAL

WALTHAM ABBEY



“Of course, it’s going to be a difficult game against big and strong opponents with plenty of attacking power, but we’re ready for the challenge.

“Wednesday’s semi-final was probably the most mental game I have ever been involved with. It was very much back-and-forth but ultimately, we were able to find a way to get through. We had to dig deep to get the win and it will be the same today.

“If it goes to penalties, I will be up for taking one again!”

Striker, Sam Shaban, agrees that Wednesday was a game that had everything.

“It was incredible,” he told us with a smile.

“It was the best game of the season; everyone worked their socks off and played their part.

“I was happy to come off the bench and have some involvement. I’ve had some time out with injury recently, but it’s nice to be back and making an impact again.

“We have the belief that on our day we can beat anyone and that will certainly be the case this afternoon. We’ve prepared well, as we always do, and now it’s time to put it into practice.

“It’s a chance for us to make history and we will be giving it everything we’ve got.”

Wide-man, Ben Baker agrees. “We go into the game with absolutely nothing to lose. We’re the underdogs but we know the challenge that we face. Bedford are a top team who have been up there all season

BEDFORD TOWN v WALTHAM ABBAY | PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE CENTRAL | MONDAY 6 MAY | 3PM

and were a touch unfortunate not to win the League.

“We relish the task in hand, just as we did going to AFC Dunstable in our last game. That game must have been thrilling for the neutral, but not so much fun to play in!

“In these important games, a collective desire is such a key factor and we showed that in abundance, so it’s something that we need to carry on into today.

“I know a lot of the Bedford group and for me, it couldn’t have been a better game to finish on. This is the reason why we play football.”

As a local lad, it means so much to Jason Hallett to be involved in today’s big game.

“Waltham Abbey is my boyhood club,” he told us. “I grew up there and have so many friends both inside and outside of the club. I know how much it would mean to the whole community if we were to get a result this afternoon.

“I will be going out there and doing it for them.

“We played at Bedford a few weeks ago and got a 1-0 win, so we know what we have to do, but it’s going to be tough.

“The fans here are unreal; they made the difference when we had to dig deep on Wednesday and I am sure that they will be there in good numbers to back us over the 90 minutes ahead today.”

Baker agreed: “It’s a well-used cliché, but they were our 12th man on Wednesday and we definitely couldn’t have done it without their support. They gave us the extra push.”

“I could hear them from behind the opposite goal on Wednesday,” added goalkeeper Robinson. “It really inspires you... I don’t think I was a favourite with the AFC Dunstable supporters, though!”

Cathline concluded: “We know that we’ll be out-numbered today but I am sure that the travelling faithful will make themselves heard. They have been amazing all season and now we need them for one more push. Let’s do it!”



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STORIES OF THE MONTH JANUARY

Featuring:
HANWELL TOWN |
ROYSTON TOWN | YATE
TOWN | THAME UNITED

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER SOUTH

There was a boost to the usual numbers at Hanwell Town's clash with Hendon as a group of almost 100 Newcastle United fans descended on The Powerday Stadium. Hanwell Town has strong links with the north-east club as they were originally formed back in 1920 by a group of Geordies who were working nearby on the railways.

"We've opened our doors to Newcastle United fans travelling down to the capital on numerous occasions," said Marketing Manager, Elsa Jones. "With Newcastle playing at Fulham later in the evening in the Emirates FA Cup, it presented us with the ideal opportunity to welcome some Newcastle fans on their way to the game.

"A great day was had by all; we were able sell extra food, drink and merchandise, which is so important for clubs like ours, and the only disappointment was that we couldn't hold onto our two-goal lead and had to settle for a draw in the end!"

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER CENTRAL

Royston Town made what manager, Chris Watters, described as a 'perfect' start to the New Year as they won four of their five League games in January.

"It was a perfect start to the New Year with four straight wins," beamed Watters. "The lads have been excellent and got themselves into some real momentum, which is so important in football.

"We now go into a run of fixtures against teams who are in and around us in the table, so hopefully we can continue our rich vein of form and continue climbing the table."

It was a run of form that saw them win the PST Sport Club of the Month Award for January 2024.



PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE SOUTH

There are not many players who swap the Zimbabwe Premier League for the Pitching In Southern League Division One South, but that's exactly what Calum English-Brown has done having joined Yate Town.

"I was actually born in Scotland, I hold an Irish passport and grew up in Zimbabwe," he said. "I came over to England in December and I'm gradually finding my feet here.

"The pitches and, of course, the weather is taking some getting used to. There is a very busy schedule of games but it's good to be out there getting minutes under my belt.

"I'll need to use it to bulk myself up to be able to cope with the demands of English football!"



PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE CENTRAL

Thame United were handed a perfect gift over the festive period with the emergence of teenage front-man, Harry Alexander.

"Harry is a prime example of a young lad who wasn't quite ready at the start of the season," admitted manager, Ben Williams. "He's kept with us; we've kept with him and now he's getting his chance to shine.

"He's added physicality to his game on top of his undoubted ability. He didn't throw his toys out of the pram when we took him out of the team, instead he just got on with it, worked hard at his game and showed desire and determination to get back into the team and show what he is capable of."

STORIES OF THE MONTH FEBRUARY

Featuring:
TIVERTON TOWN |
BROMSGROVE SPORTING |
WIMBORNE TOWN | WARE



PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER SOUTH

The goal scoring form of Jack Rice-Lethaby was helping to lift the fortunes of Tiverton Town as they looked to pull away from the relegation places.

His two goals helped them secure their first away win since November and took his tally to 12 for the season.

“It’s always great to be part of a winning side, especially when the three points moved us out of the bottom four,” admitted Rice. “There’s a growing energy amongst the team and hopefully it can take us on a positive run of results.”

“It’s a case of pulling together because the standard of this League is very high this season. It seems more unpredictable than ever in terms of results; everyone is capable of beating each other.”

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER CENTRAL

Former Premier League winner and England international goalkeeper, Tim Flowers, was handed the managerial reins at Bromsgrove Sporting.

“We are working extremely hard to sort things out off-the-field, but the product on the pitch is just as important,” said Chairman, Rod Brown. “I know Tim from my days at Kidderminster Harriers, so I gave him a call and asked if he would come in for the rest of the season with a brief to retain our Step 3 status.”

“We had a good, long chat and at the end of it he agreed to accept the position, which is great news.”

“He’s an excellent coach who brings plenty of experience from both his managerial career and his playing days at the top level. His knowledge of the game and contacts can only help us as a club.”

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE SOUTH

There was a welcome visitor to Wimborne Town’s home game against Bemerton Heath Harlequins.

Jez Bedford suffered a lacerated kidney in a game during the previous month. Detailed examination showed that he had been a whisker away from requiring surgery, sustaining a grade three laceration.

“Recovery is going well,” he said. “I had a scan and it came back all good, so now I am just waiting to see the consultant.”

“Hopefully I will get the green light to get back to work and back to contact football but for the time being, I’m a spectator.”

“It was a freak accident. The specialists were surprised how I managed to suffer the injury whilst playing football.”

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE CENTRAL

Ware were able to move back into the play-off places with Alex Warman coming into the team and making an instant impact.

“I’ve enjoyed my first few games here,” he told us. “This is a good League to play in; there are a lot of talented young players involved and the standard is high, so I am enjoying the challenge.”

“There are a lot of teams still in contention for a top five finish so I am enjoying the competitive nature of each game at the moment.”

“There’s no reason why we can’t get into the play-offs and then take things from there. I have been impressed by what I have seen here so far.”



STORIES OF THE MONTH MARCH

Featuring:
**BASINGSTOKE TOWN |
LEAMINGTON |
MOUSEHOLE |
CIRENCESTER TOWN**

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER SOUTH

Basingstoke Town's form was music to the ears of the Dragons' faithful as they surged up the table.

"We're starting to get the squad back together again now and it's showing in our recent results," said Paul Hodges. "We were playing well a few months back but just struggled to finish games off; with the players returning we've been able to find our rhythm and get on a run.

"I've been happy with my own contribution since I've moved into a midfield role. Early on in the season couldn't find my spark as a forward and also picked up a few injuries here and there.

"The hope now is that there is still a lot more to come from us between now and the end of the season."

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER CENTRAL

There was a significant achievement as Paul Holleran took charge of his 700th game at the Leamington helm.

"I never imagined to last this long in the job," he admitted to us. "A good lifespan for a manager is two or three years, which I'd had at my previous clubs, so to be still here over 14 years later, it's something you are seeing less and less in modern football.

"Over time we've built an infrastructure and a culture and strengthened bonds. There have been a couple of occasions when I could have gone but didn't and by the same token, there have been times when the club could have decided to go in a different direction, so it works both ways.

"But this job has been a good fit for me and my life and it has given me so much joy and pleasure over the years."



PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE SOUTH

Hayden Turner couldn't have picked a better scenario in which to break through the 100-goal milestone for Mousehole as his hat-trick helped the team to a commanding 5-0 victory over fellow play-off hopefuls, Bidford.

"I am incredibly proud to have scored 100 goals for the club," Turner told us. "I have absolutely loved my time at the club so far and it's a great feeling to know that I have been able to make a telling contribution during my time here.

"To reach the milestone with a hat-trick was the icing on the cake really. It was my first hat-trick of the season and couldn't have come at a better time.

"This season has been a real learning curve for me and the team but we are thoroughly enjoying it."



PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE CENTRAL

At 42 years young, Cirencester Town goalkeeper, Stuart Nelson, was still enjoying the game as much as ever as his side battled it out for a play-off spot.

"Match days are what it's all about, you just can't beat that feeling," he told us. "Whatever level you play at, you still get that same buzz and those same feelings when you win.

"I am just enjoying every minute of it. I think as you get older, you appreciate it even more because you are a long time retired.

"The team were pretty solid over the first half of the season; we were able to lay the foundations and now we have to be able to build upon them with a positive finish and see where it takes us."

STORIES OF THE MONTH APRIL

Featuring:
**SWINDON SUPERMARINE |
STAMFORD | MELKSHAM
TOWN | STOTFOLD**

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER SOUTH

One of the dramatic stories from the final weekend of the regular season was Swindon Supermarine hauling themselves out of the relegation zone courtesy of a commanding 3-0 victory over Winchester City.

“It was a massive relief to get the job done,” said a relieved Ryan Campbell, who opened the scoring. “Every single one of us were at it from the first whistle.

“There were a few nerves in the first ten minutes or so, which is understandable, but as soon we scored the first goal all the nerves around the team settled and we were really able to show our quality to go on and win the game comfortably.

“There’s no getting away from the fact that we under-performed this season. But from the position we were in at the start of the season, not winning a single game until November, it’s been a hell of an escape!”

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER CENTRAL

Whilst there was obvious disappointment at just missing out a play-off place on the final day, Stamford can be proud of the way in which they adapted to life at this level following promotion at the end of the previous campaign.

“This League has proven to be extremely competitive this season,” captain, Rob Morgan, told us. “It’s often come down to fine margins, where any mistakes can be costly. “Coming up to a new League was always going to be a challenge, but as a team we have not only proven that we belong at this level but also that we can compete at the top end and push for promotion. “Overall, it’s been an enjoyable season with plenty of progress made.”



PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE SOUTH

After almost 400 appearances for his hometown club, Dave Thompson played his final game for Melksham Town on the final day of the regular season.

“I’ve never felt like more of a right time to stop playing,” he admitted to us. “Although I feel 21 when I cross the line at training and on match days, I soon after remember I’m not when my body is in bits for the next few days!

“This season couldn’t have started much better, but with a thin squad and the loss of some key players, it unfortunately got away from us.

“On a personal note, I probably played more games than I wanted to but enjoyed every minute of it.”



PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE CENTRAL

Following an impressive spell as interim manager, which yielded 15 points from a possible 21, Paul Donnelly was appointed into the Stotfold hot-seat on a permanent basis.

“It’s the perfect job for my first venture as a number one,” he told us. “Having been part of the backroom staff, I know exactly how the club is run and don’t need to worry about building new relationships.

“The lads have been brilliant for me in some difficult circumstances; we’ve had to deal with a lot of injuries, but we haven’t made any excuses, we’ve just got on with it and to finish in the top ten is no less than we deserve.”



TABLES 2023/24



PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER SOUTH | FINAL TABLE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	-Pts	Pts
Chesham United	42	28	6	8	83	46	37	-	90
AFC Totton	42	23	12	7	89	45	44	-	81
Salisbury	42	23	10	9	70	46	24	-	79
Gosport Borough	42	23	9	10	75	43	32	-	78
Bracknell Town	42	21	5	16	84	71	13	-	68
Merthyr Town	42	20	7	15	85	59	26	-	67
Walton Hersham	42	18	11	13	78	67	11	-	65
Hungerford Town	42	18	10	14	77	70	7	-	64
Dorchester Town	42	17	9	16	66	77	-11	-	60
Hendon	42	14	16	12	70	65	5	-	58
Winchester City	42	15	12	15	63	67	-4	-	57
Basingstoke T	42	15	8	19	69	83	-14	-	53
Poole Town	42	16	4	22	70	76	-6	-	52
Tiverton Town	42	14	10	18	64	74	-10	-	52
Sholing	42	13	10	19	52	63	-11	-	49
Swindon S	42	13	10	19	73	92	-19	-	49
Hanwell Town	42	12	12	18	64	71	-7	-	48
Plymouth P	42	12	12	18	60	68	-8	-	48
Beaconsfield T	42	13	9	20	63	78	-15	-	48
Hayes & Yeading	42	11	13	18	59	67	-8	-	46
Harrow Borough	42	10	9	23	60	97	-37	-	39
Didcot Town	42	6	10	26	45	94	-49	-	28

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE PREMIER CENTRAL | FINAL TABLE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	-Pts	Pts
Needham Market	40	26	7	7	74	34	40	-	85
AFC Telford United	40	24	10	6	69	34	35	-	82
Leamington	40	19	14	7	61	32	29	-	71
Redditch United	40	21	7	12	65	52	13	-	70
Mickleover	40	25	6	9	77	43	34	-12	69
Stratford Town	40	21	6	13	69	57	12	-	69
Stamford	40	19	9	12	80	58	22	-	66
Halesowen Town	40	18	8	14	54	50	4	-	62
St Ives Town	40	18	4	18	87	72	15	-	58
Royston Town	40	17	6	17	63	61	2	-	57
Coalville Town	40	15	10	15	68	57	11	-	55
Stourbridge	40	14	10	16	52	50	2	-	52
Leiston	40	14	10	16	56	71	-15	-	52
Barwell	40	13	12	15	64	65	-1	-	51
Kettering Town	40	13	9	18	49	74	-25	-	48
Alvechurch	40	12	9	19	49	70	-21	-	45
Bromsgrove Sporting	40	12	8	20	44	51	-7	-	44
AFC Sudbury	40	10	10	20	53	62	-9	-	40
Hitchin Town	40	11	6	23	46	64	-18	-	39
Long Eaton United	40	5	7	28	39	109	-70	-	22
Berkhamsted	40	3	12	25	31	84	-53	-	21
Nuneaton Borough	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0

* Mickleover had 12 points deducted for fielding an ineligible player

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE SOUTH | FINAL TABLE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	-Pts	Pts
Wimborne Town	36	24	7	5	76	42	34	-	79
Frome Town	36	22	9	5	74	42	32	-	75
Cribbs	36	18	12	6	56	46	10	-	66
Bristol MF	36	17	8	11	67	50	17	-	59
Mousehole	36	17	7	12	82	58	24	-	58
Larkhall Athletic	36	16	10	10	67	53	14	-	58
Evesham United	36	13	12	11	56	47	9	-	51
Yate Town	36	13	11	12	56	46	10	-	50
Bishops Cleeve	36	13	9	14	68	63	5	-	48
Malvern Town	36	13	8	15	59	61	-2	-	47
Tavistock AFC	36	13	7	16	62	71	-9	-	46
Bideford AFC	36	13	7	16	46	58	-12	-	46
Bemerton HH	36	12	7	17	52	71	-19	-	43
Willand Rovers	36	11	9	16	50	60	-10	-	42
Bashley	36	11	9	16	45	59	-14	-	42
Melksham Town	36	10	10	16	52	65	-13	-	40
Westbury United	36	8	10	18	45	62	-17	-	34
Exmouth Town	36	9	6	21	49	67	-18	-	33
Paulton Rovers	36	6	8	22	37	78	-41	-	26
Hamworthy U	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	-	0

PITCHING IN SOUTHERN LEAGUE DIVISION ONE CENTRAL | FINAL TABLE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	-Pts	Pts
Biggleswade T	36	22	6	8	77	39	38	-	72
Bedford Town	36	20	9	7	79	37	42	-	69
AFC Dunstable	36	20	4	12	77	66	11	-	64
Waltham Abbey	36	18	7	11	70	55	15	-	61
Ware	36	18	5	13	69	61	8	-	59
Cirencester T	36	16	9	11	66	44	22	-	57
Stotfold	36	16	7	13	67	56	11	-	55
Hadley	36	17	4	15	64	60	4	-	55
Welwyn GC	36	17	3	16	79	79	0	-	54
Biggleswade FC	36	14	6	16	62	58	4	-	48
Kings Langley	36	13	9	14	71	74	-3	-	48
Barton Rovers	36	11	11	14	58	65	-7	-	44
Kidlington	36	12	8	16	49	60	-11	-	44
Hertford Town	36	13	5	18	55	73	-18	-	44
Aylesbury United	36	12	7	17	61	74	-13	-	43
North Leigh	36	14	1	21	52	80	-28	-	43
Leighton Town	36	12	6	18	51	63	-12	-	42
Thame United	36	11	4	21	51	70	-19	-	37
Kempston Rovers	36	8	5	23	36	80	-44	-	29

DIVERSITY

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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.

Recently, for the first-ever time, we have appointed a 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.

“This is a new position created for the first time,” said Stephen Hyde. “Whilst we are still at the very early stages of the process, progress is already being made.

“A series of Zoom meetings have taken place involving our clubs and various organisations and we are excited to see how things develop and grow in this area.

“We want to engage with our clubs and supporter groups to spread the message that the Southern League is all-inclusive, providing a matchday experience across all four of our divisions that can be enjoyed by everyone, without fear of discrimination and abuse.

“Enhancing a club’s diversity can also lead to financial benefits, acting as a mechanism to tap into new markets.

“It will also make a club more attractive for investment and funding, and open up new opportunities through increased community involvement, so there are many facets to this.”

To celebrate and showcase the strength of the diversity within the Southern League, we would like to hear your stories.

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

VOLUNTEERS

THE LIFEBLOOD OF OUR GAME



Volunteers play such a crucial role at clubs across all four of our Leagues. 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.

At AFC Totton, the club is thriving both on and off-the-pitch. They have adapted to the added demands of Step 3 extremely well,



in no small part to the team of volunteers that they have built up, particularly within their media department.

Benjy Rees is Lead Commentator on StagsRadio. He came to the club two years ago as a graduate of Solent University's Degree in Sports Journalism course. Now living in South Wales, he frequently makes the 320-mile round trip to commentate on AFC Totton home games - and the away games, too - ensuring professional quality match coverage for the listening audience of Stags fans.

Meanwhile, Ben Rochey-Adams is a local resident who played for a youth team loosely affiliated with AFC Totton in his teens. Having worked in advertising, graphic design and print, he took on the role of Matchday Programme Editor two years ago. He now travels with the team home and away, and writes long-form match reports for the club's website - as well as helping to carry the radio equipment!

There are similar opportunities across all of our Member Clubs to get involved and make a difference.

Find out what's available here: southern-football-league.co.uk/Pitching-In-Volunteer-Hub

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 2023/24 season.

IMAGES | Craig Hobbs

OBITUARY ANTHONY HUGHES

The Southern League and football in general lost a good man during the course of the 2023/24 season with the passing of Anthony Hughes.

His sheer passion and enthusiasm for the game was there for all to see. It came from a lifetime of involvement as a supporter, administrator and even bit-part player. "Football was always there for me, I can't remember a time that it wasn't," he told David Square in a 2021 interview. "At the age of three or four I would be kicking a ball around at the side of the pitch at Merthyr Tydfil with my dad who was ever-present at the club.

"It meant that I became entrenched in the Southern League; from the late 1960s until I was into my late 30s my team was part of it and I would watch them week in, week out without fail.

"The Southern League has been such a massive part of my life. I was one of those anoraks who would be badgering Dennis Strudwick by telephone on a Tuesday evening for that night's results in those pre internet and mobile phone days.

"Dennis and I went on to become friends and work together, but I must have been a real pain to him in my teenage years!

"I first became involved behind-the-scenes at Merthyr at the age of 12 when I worked on one of the turnstiles. I did this for a few years before taking over the Matchday Programme and then progressing to become Secretary and on the Board.

"Things came full circle because it then meant that I was able to take my dad to games on the team coach and have him in the Boardroom with me. There was never a time when my dad stopped going to games; he was there through it all, right up until he passed away in 2010.

"I can't imagine a time on a Saturday afternoon when I'm not watching football and that is something that my dad instilled into me.

"During my illness in 2019 and into 2020 and then throughout Lockdown, I had two years without regular football, which was

a particularly difficult time for me.

"I have many memories of Merthyr.

Throughout my childhood it was always a stable club run by local businessmen who were all friends. There may have not been much on field success, but it was always well-run.

"Ken Tucker was Secretary when I started working on the turnstiles. He had started at the club as a player then went on to have a professional career with the likes of Aston Villa and Cardiff City before returning to his hometown club and eventually becoming Secretary. He went on to serve on the Football Association of Wales Board for decades as a well-respected football man.

"Into my teenage years and I would travel on the team coach to away games. I can remember one occasion we were playing at Bromsgrove Rovers on a Tuesday evening. When we got there, the manager at the time, Doug Rosser, told me that one of the players was unable to make it and I would have to be substitute, so he took my scarf off me and gave me some kit instead.

"I ended up sitting on the bench as a terrified 16 year-old, particularly as former England international, Bobby Hope, was running the show on the pitch for the home side.

"The same thing happened again at Alvechurch. I was quite excited this time, but on this occasion, I had to come on and play at left-back for the final 25 minutes!

The home side had future top-flight star, Alan Smith, leading their forward line and a player called Phil Harper, who told me in no uncertain terms what he would do to me as soon as I came on to mark him!

"It was a great experience and I played once more, at Milton Keynes. It was the day after my 18th Birthday so I was a little worse for wear. I got 20 minutes this time against opponents who secured their first win of the season.



“We then went through six great years in the Conference, finishing as high as fourth one year and regularly getting crowds of 2,500 – 3,500. We also won the Welsh Cup and got into Europe where was faced Italian outfit, Atalanta, over two legs.

“It was fantastic times; we were big news and featured in all of the newspapers and even on the Saint and Greavsie show.

“The upshot of it all, though, was that the club got into financial difficulties, which became an all too regular occurrence in the years that followed.

“I can recall being banned from the ground for an article that appeared in the programme, only for the owner to sell the club 48 hours later so I never actually missed a match before the ban was lifted!

“There was also time when two different managers turned up to manage the team in a game at Bath City due to wranglings behind-the-scenes. I was Secretary on that occasion and a difficult day was topped off at the end of the game when someone crashed into my car and wrote it off!

“I became Secretary in 1999 and it came with its challenges over the years. It was something of a roller-coaster with various owners at the helm, but eventually a Supporters Trust was formed and they were able to gain control of the club and also, luckily, keep hold of the ground as it was discovered that it was on the site of an old Roman Fort.”

Anthony first joined the Southern League Board some 20 years ago.

“I’d always attend the end of season League AGM as a representative of Merthyr,” he added. “In 2003 I was chatting to John Eastment; he had been with Merthyr Tydfil for a brief time and had been Chairman of the Southern League before moving to live abroad.

“When he returned to these shores, he got involved with the League again as well as Taunton Town and told me about an upcoming vacancy on the Board. I applied for it and fortunately was chosen.

It was something that I took to straight away.

“The League Chairman at the time was a gentleman called Doug Gillard. He had a big influence on me; he knew how to fight his corner and had so much strength and determination.

“When he suddenly passed away, Ken Turner took over and he was someone that I got to know quite well. Terry Barrett then stood against him for the Chairmanship and won, so the upshot of that was the Vice Chairman position became available and a year or so later I got it.

“In the meantime we had to find an FA Councillor to replace Ken as both Terry and Brian McCarthy [then Vice Chairman] were ruled out because of their age, so I was elected into the position.

“It was certainly a learning curve and was extremely eye-opening with all of the politics involved, but I persevered with it and grew into the role. I even started to enjoy it!”

It was Anthony’s dream to become Southern League Chairman and he was able to achieve his ambition during the summer of 2022, bringing his many qualities to the role and being an extremely popular figurehead.

“It’s all about the clubs,” he said on numerous occasions. “Everything we do and every decision we make is for the benefit of our Member Clubs.

“There are also a massive army of enthusiasts out there that we need to tap into because volunteers are just as crucial to clubs as money and we have to find a way of getting them into our clubs, just as I did all of those years ago because it can be a fantastic journey.”

We thank Anthony for all that he has done, not only for the Southern League, but for football in general throughout his life in which he did so much for the game that he loved with such passion. It is great that there is now a stand named after him at his beloved Penyardarren Park.

PITCHING IN

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This special online publication has been produced on behalf of the Southern League by Media Manager, Andy Poole

Thank you to all photographers whose work has been used within these pages

We are always looking for any newsworthy Southern League-related stories for southern-football-league.co.uk, please email: news@southern-football-league.co.uk

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