

Promotion rivals out to capture coveted prize

"GIVE me 84 points now, I'll take it and go to the Bahamas," offered Martin O'Neill, Wycombe Wanderers' manager, before the current season started. "Eighty-four points will win the league this season."

I'm unaware whether O'Neill has yet packed his sunglasses and sun lotion, but as the halfway stage of the season approached, the Blues' manager can be pretty pleased with a haul of 41 points from 19 games.

The GM Vauxhall Conference title race has barely reached the halfway mark, but as football prepares to enter a new era, with the imminent inception of the Premier Division, the battle for the one promotion place to the Football League is hotting up.

With Maidstone, Aldershot, Northampton and Oxford falling to varying depths of financial despair, a second promotion place may yet offer itself, if a Football League club does actually fall by the wayside. Blues might need it.

As Wanderers went into their Christmas confrontations with in-form rivals Slough Town, the blemish on the statistical landscape was Colchester United.

Before a difficult holiday programme, Colchester sat on top of the table by a clear seven points, although they had played two more games than Blues.

Their halfway haul was an awesome 48 points from 21 games. If they repeat this form in the spring, they will amass more points than any other Conference side in the 12-year history of the competition.

Barnet and Darlington, winners of the last two Conference titles, have hit 87 points for their promotions. They have since proved that Conference champions fully deserve their Football League place.

Darlington proceeded to win the Fourth Division title under Brian Little's continued guidance, while Barry Fry's Barnet, who finished runners-up for three of the four seasons preceding last May's triumph, are now also well in contention for promotion to Division Three.

Colchester missed the title by a mere two points last season. Last year on Boxing Day, they drew 0-0 with Barnet at home, then went and won 3-1 at Underhill on New Year's Day.

But on the final day of the season, with the title still up for grabs, a 2-0 win over Kidderminster was not enough as Barnet won 4-2 at Fisher with two late goals from top marksman Gary Bull.

So beating your most feared rivals is not a necessary condition of winning the Conference title. After slipping 2-1 at home, and being walloped 3-0 away, to Colchester, Blues may find a jot of consolation here.

Colchester remain full time, of course, and this will be a considerable advantage to them as injuries and weary legs plead for time to recover.

Colchester manager Roy McDonough claimed last month that he saw only Wycombe as real rivals for the title, and the two retain their positions as the bookies' favourites.

But it is by no means a two-horse race yet. Macclesfield and Altrincham are putting in sturdy, steady claims near the top, while Slough, with games in hand, are belying their off-field financial struggles and enjoying a fine season.

But games in hand are never worth their potential points as fixture congestion plays a part. Last season, Wycombe's FA Trophy semi-final opponents, Altrincham, were many people's favourites, but simply had too many games to play in the final run-in to recover in-between.

This factor may rule Kettering out of the running. Ladbroke's make them third favourites at 12-1, and they would trail Colchester by just a single point if they won their six games in hand. Such a feat is asking too much.

Neither Blues nor Colchester will be distracted



**Chief soccer writer
PETE LANSLEY
assessed the title
prospects of Wycombe
Wanderers and the
other top Conference
clubs before their
Christmas matches**

by the glamour of the FA Cup, having made their exits after lengthy first-round clashes. But tomorrow, third-placed Farnborough Town enter the heady stage of the third round of the FA Cup when they play West Ham.

Not that this contest should prolong Farnborough's fixture list too much, but such an achievement may provide them with their season's highlight.

Redbridge complete the list of outside contenders. Bottom of the table back in November, Redbridge have made this reporter eat his words by mounting a remarkable climb of the table.

With an influx of quality signings, such as Paul Cavell, who scored the recent winner at Barrow, they may already have started to change the shape of the title race by the time you read this.

Their recent results suggest they were capable of taking points off Colchester in the teams' two festive fixtures. Farnborough faced tough games with Welling, while Kettering's double header with Boston won't have been easy.

If Blues came out with four points from their games with Slough, it could have been a very beneficial Christmas for Wycombe.

Another of the crucial spells of the season is at Easter. Wanderers, after visiting Farnborough on April 4, are blessed with two home games they are wholly capable of winning, against Welling and Bath. Farnborough visit Slough on Easter Monday, Kettering travel to Bath on the Saturday, while Colchester face Telford, a good side who might feel aggrieved not to be mentioned as title outsiders.

Of the six-pointers, Wycombe still have to face Kettering and Farnborough this season, while Colchester still have both their dates with Kettering to play.

The Us will be glad to have Wycombe and Farnborough out the way, although Ted Pearce's FA Cup heroes are at the time of writing the only team to have beaten Colchester in the league.

Of these contenders, I agree with McDonough: it will be Colchester or Wanderers. Whether O'Neill needs Colchester to 'blow up', or whether there will be two promotion places, Wycombe are in with an excellent chance of winning the title.

McDonough is doing a fine job; but he is new to it. O'Neill has had an extra season in his role.

Blues, I believe, have the nerve to maintain the battle until the end. They won the Trophy last season, have since strengthened their squad, and have learned to see off many of the awkward 'little' teams who they were losing to last year.

They have a couple of proven goalscorers yet to refine their form, but are still in touch with Colchester.

While Steve Guppy has attracted strong interest from Charlton, several Colchester players, including skipper Tony English and Steve McGavin, may get snapped up by the bigger clubs.

It will be the form, goals and luck produced by the clubs' players that decides the issue over the next four months.

Whatever happens, the two best supported clubs in the Conference look set to battle it out right until the end for non-league football's ultimate prize: a place in the Football League.