

Preston's new culture

AS their final season on the League's last remaining plastic pitch opens, the manager of Preston is promising a cultured passing style to suit the surface.

Nothing odd there except that North End have just dropped into the Third Division and the manager is John Beck, arch exponent of the long-ball game. Carlisle may have a dozen new faces, but Beck's nine signings look more convincing. He can also expect unrivalled backing from the Preston public if he repeats his feat of raising Cambridge from the old Fourth.

Dario Gradi's principles are such that Crewe would still be pushing the ball around if their pitch were a cabbage patch. Some fans would probably trade the plaudits for the odd promotion, and with the team who lost May's play-off final on penalties coming to maturity, now could be the time.

Wycombe Wanderers, unlike some recent Vauxhall Conference champions, appear equipped to flourish both on and off the pitch. The bookies make

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them favourites, which may betray a lack of imagination, although having spurned Nottingham Forest, Martin O'Neill will expect to match Barnet's two-year rise at the least.

Scunthorpe should fare better in Richard Money's first full term; ditto Doncaster, who have undertaken a rare summer spree. Walsall, whose admirable manager, Kenny Hibbitt, juggles slimmer resources shrewdly, ought to be contenders again, with Bury and Lincoln.

Gillingham (who, ominously, recently lost their manager Glenn Roeder), Northampton and Hereford all flirted with demotion to the Conference last time and do not appear significantly stronger. Scarborough's shoestring existence and Chester's losing habit (33 defeats in their descent from the Second) may see them also dragged into the dogfight.

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