

SECOND AND THIRD DIVISIONS: Watch out for Bristol City and Leyton Orient, writes **Nick Szczepanik**

Ambitious Wigan are without peer

With the ascent of Fulham and Manchester City to the Nationwide League first division at the end of last season, the nearest thing to "big clubs" in the second will be Bristol City and Stoke City.

Tony Pulis, the manager who took Gillingham to the play-offs, had his choice of either job, and went west, and the Ashton Gate club will be favourites to take one of the automatic promotion places, especially if Pulis can hang on to Ade Akinbiyi, whom he bought while at Gillingham.

The Gills, though, may have missed their chance, although Peter Taylor, Pulis's replacement, brings a good recent pedigree to the manager's job after his success with the England Under-21 team, while Stoke

may need another season to sort themselves out. But watch out for an ambitious club who just missed out last season. Wigan Athletic are moving into a new 25,000-seat stadium, have solid financial backing, and will expect to challenge strongly.

The other team promoted last term, Walsall, who often took the field without any players who cost fees, should inspire all the others to believe that this could be their season. Bournemouth, having come back from the brink of financial disaster, went close last season: despite having little cash to splash, they boasted a superb home record and an excellent team spirit, and should make the play-offs this time.

Oxford United were desper-

ately unlucky to be relegated from last season's first division, only finding their missing goal-touch when it was too late. Malcolm Shotton has as limited a transfer budget as anyone, but his team's performance against Chelsea in the FA Cup showed their potential, as did that of Preston North End against Arsenal. The quality of football played by David Moyes' side for most of the season delighted many neutrals before they faded late on, but they should equal or better last term's fifth place.

The promoted teams all look capable of survival at the very least, and Brentford and Cardiff City are expected to thrive. Ron Noades might even take the Bees into the play-offs.

The manager's favourite axi-



Akinbiyi (centre): should help Bristol City up if he sticks around

om that "anyone in this division is capable of beating anyone else" was repeated often in both the second and third divisions last season, and the four clubs relegated to the bottom division might feel that they were no worse than some who survived. Northampton Town, for instance, were good enough to eliminate West Ham United from the Worthington Cup.

Whether that will translate into a challenge for promotion

from the third division depends, naturally, on the teams already there, some of whom have already been on the brink of escaping for several seasons. Of these, Leyton Orient fell at the play-off final hurdle, while Peterborough's youth system is producing some of the most promising talent outside the top divisions. Darlington have acquired that essential ingredient for progress, a multimillionaire chairman, who has promised

PREDICTIONS

Second division
Promoted: Wigan, Bristol City
Play-offs: Preston*, Oxford, Bournemouth, Brentford

Third division
Promoted: Leyton Orient, Peterborough, Darlington
Play-offs: Brighton*, Hull, Rotherham, Swansea

* also promoted

"a new dawn", and Swansea City, another club who had the beating of West Ham, will also hope to continue climbing under John Hollins.

Elsewhere, look for Brighton and Hove Albion and Hull City finally to begin to live up to their undoubted potential. Hull spent much of last season in 92nd spot, but pulled clear after the appointment of Warren Joyce as the replacement for Mark Hateley as manager, while Brighton have returned to the South Coast after two years' exile in Kent, and are managed by Micky Adams, who took Fulham out of the same division two seasons ago.