

GET READY FOR EASTER BONANZA!

ALL ROADS are leading to a pivotal Easter weekend in the National League title race.

Here's where we are. Following yesterday's results, Salford City top the National League.

At one point Leyton Orient were dropping to third until Matt Harrold's late equaliser against FC Halifax but instead sit second, level on points with Solihull Moors.

Perhaps crucially, the O's hold a game in hand on both – Eastleigh on Tuesday night under the lights in east London. Win that and Justin Edinburgh's side will be two points ahead of Salford and three clear of Moors with four games to go.

Following Eastleigh, they travel to Sutton United before what, one way or another, will be a crucial period of two matches in four days.

On Good Friday, Orient welcome play-off chasing Harrogate Town before travelling to Solihull Moors on Easter Monday. While those two duke it out, Salford will be taking on AFC Fylde, themselves chasing promotion.

It's all making for a gripping – and unpredictable – dashes for the Football League.

There's no margin for error.

At the end of May, Leyton Orient will flock in their numbers to Wembley for the FA Trophy final against Fylde, desperate for a promotion party under the Arch. There are many permutations but, for now, they've still got fate in their own hands. It will be some story for Orient, two years after their club was close to being extinct.

Salford have been difficult to pin down at times this season, but they've hit impressive form for the final dash. The Ammies may like the look of their run-in. Fylde aside, they will be against teams with little to play for but position – Maidenhead at home on Saturday, followed by Wood and Hartlepool United on the final day.

Like Orient, they've changed their shape in recent weeks and with top-scorer Adam Rooney working his way back to full speed, will have a strong belief they can take top spot.

Solihull Moors will be drawing on all the nous in their changing room of what it takes to get out of the division, but even just a top-three finish will be quite something. Tim Flowers' side have stayed the distance when, let's be



By **Matt Badcock**

frank, many expected them to have long slipped away.

While the top three are in a good place, Wrexham hope yesterday's win over Braintree signals the end of a sticky run. A final flurry of Barnet, Sutton, FC Halifax and Harrogate is by no means straightforward but they will be hopeful of finding their groove should they be forced to do it via the play-offs.

With the format of the play-offs and the one-off legs, position is vital. Ending up fourth or fifth means a home tie in the eliminator games with sixth and seventh the new wildcard spots.

Harrogate still have work to do to book their place in the top seven and a finish of Orient, Gateshead and Wrexham will ensure they stay firing all the way until the end of what has been a highly commendable campaign under Simon Weaver.

Eastleigh, despite letting a two-goal lead slip at Fylde yesterday, have a play-off spot in their own hands at the minute with a game in hand on Ebbsfleet United and Sutton below them.

Despite their off-field problems, Garry Hill's Fleet are in an excellent vein of form, while Gateshead aren't totally out of it. The next batch of teams will largely be playing for that top-half finish. Chesterfield are now safe under John Sheridan after what has been a disappointing first year in Non-League that even threw up brief fears of relegation.

In many ways, they are a similar side to Orient last season, who got themselves safe and were able to build for the following year. Expect the Spireites to have a much bigger say next term.

Maidenhead United once again deserve credit for steering clear of the drop, not least because of the players they saw move on in the summer. Should we expect any less from an Alan Devonshire side?

The foot of the table is the stuff of nightmares when it comes to next season's league constitutions. All southern with Braintree, Maidstone down, while Aldershot and Havant are clinging on.

We're down to the final miles of this one.



ADAM VIRGO RUNS THE



LEADING THE WAY: Graham Alexander's Salford City moved to the top yesterday

IN HAND: Justin Edinburgh's Leyton Orient play Eastleigh on Tuesday



IT'S RESULTS, THAT'LL WIN

LEYTON ORIENT may have slipped off top spot yesterday but the O's are in a situation Justin Edinburgh would have taken at the start of the season.

I've always been a big believer that you'd rather have the games and points on the board than in hand, but they've got the chance to return to the top of the league when they play Eastleigh on Tuesday.

They've shown great character since a sticky period at the turn of the year that included a 3-0 home defeat to Salford City. Fair play to them.

The manager has to take a lot of credit for this title push. He kept with the majority of the squad from last season, tightened them up defensively – which they needed to do – and when you've got a genuine goalscorer in your side like Maccauley Bonne, you've always got the chance.

They've got a good goal difference – which is like another point – so if they can take three against Eastleigh, they will be in the driving seat.

A recent formation change to three at the back seems to be paying off. When I saw them earlier in the season at Boreham Wood, I felt with the 4-4-2 that if they

stopped playing in midfield then they looked a little bit lost.

Playing three centre-backs allows the full-backs to get forward and then they have had a link in the final third – Jordan Maguire-Drew before his injury – they were missing. It's freshened everything up and still gives them a strong defensive united.

Dan Happe and Marvin Ekpiteta are having a good season, Jamie Turley has come in and done well, and Josh Coulson's return is a boost. It was a big blow to lose him for a few weeks. Although Josh Koroma has been the biggest miss so it's key he's back too, especially to help Bonne.

Cherry picked

If they do end up in the play-offs, I dread to think the impact that could have psychologically. Would they be able to immediately put aside the disappointment of leading the way with games in hand?

Like Orient, Salford have also changed their formation to three at the back. Again, the manager Graham Alexander deserves great credit.

He's looked at it and said, 'Right, I thought there was a way of playing out

of this league but it's not quite working for me'. For the want of a better word, he's gone with the physical side. The current three at the back of Nathan Pond, Carl Piergianni and Liam Hogan are now just defending – it's their primary job.

Salford have become a harder team to beat. It's probably the area where I thought, to win the league, they needed to be a lot cuter defensively and grind out results. Sometimes you have to win ugly.

Graham has changed the way they play and gone with big, strong players that work hard when they don't have the ball. I give credit to Tim Flowers at Solihull Moors for that as well.

Look, the modern-day fan wants an expansive style to watch. I get that impression throughout all the leagues I cover. It's a difficult position for a manager to be in – you know a run of six defeats is almost a sackable offence.

But I've covered this league for five years and let's be honest – Lincoln won the league by being more direct, Barnet played everything off John Akinde, the way Macclesfield finished the league, they put everything into Nathan Blissett. We are at the stage of the season where it's about getting results effectively.