



ADAM VIRGO GIVES HIS MID-TERM VERDICT

EVATT'S MASTERPLAN HAS LEFT THE BIG GUNS TRAILING IN THEIR WAKE

WE ARE right in the middle of a massive period of the National League season.

A busy festive schedule, big derbies and teams facing each other twice in the space of a week – back-to-back wins can be just as pivotal as successive defeats. We've crossed the halfway stage now so here is a look at each team as the season moves into the New Year.

BARROW

You wouldn't have said at the start of the season that they would be the team to beat at Christmas. But Ian Evatt is showing what a good manager he is. At the start of the campaign he was disappointed with the goals they were conceding and the manner. But now they're on a roll.

The 3-0 away win at Notts County was a big statement. I listened to Ian's interview after about how they came with a gameplan – they scored a couple of goals by using the width, getting good balls into the box. It sounds silly, but you can tell they are taking on basic instructions. That's huge.

They're the only team that haven't really faltered since an inconsistent opening. The biggest fear for me is not whether they can finish the job off but can they keep the manager?

YEovil TOWN

When a club is relegated you always wonder how quickly they will adapt to the National League. Darren Sarll has done a magnificent job. They've got a really good spine to their team.

Stuart Nelson is a good keeper, Charlie Lee has title-winning experience and Jimmy Smith has, arguably, been their best player this season. Rhys Murphy is probably the best No.9 in the league. Even Remeao Hutton has been excellent at right-back. He's a great out ball, fit and strong.

Imagine they are above where they would have expected to be. They've given themselves a great chance of winning this league at the first time of asking but – and it's a big one – they need to defend better and keep more clean sheets.

BROMLEY

This club has got an identity and a direction, from top to bottom. Great with youth, the community is important and Neil Smith has signed National League experience. I'm a big fan of striker Michael



GOLDEN BOY: Jamie Reid has really impressed for Torquay

Cheek. Then Reeco Hackett-Fairchild is catching the eye. He's very talented and, at 21 years old, he has a real chance of being snapped up.

The thing with Bromley for me is, individually, sometimes the players can be too inconsistent. On their day, they are a match for anybody and when they are all on form as a group they can be unstoppable.

HARROGATE TOWN

Play-off hangovers do happen and Harrogate probably fell into that bracket with a slow start to the season. That's never a real surprise to me. They found wins hard to come by early on. Then they got three points at Halifax with a clean sheet and it was the start for them.

They will have learnt a lot from last season. I can't see them breaking into the top two but certainly a play-off spot.

SOLIhULL MOORS

Don't write them off winning this league. The way they play, the personnel they've got, gives them every chance.

Their frontline with Paul McCallum, Danny Wright, Jake Beesley and Nathan Blissett are a problem for anyone. Then Jamey Osborne being on song is absolutely key.

I felt last season they got found out a little bit because of the way they play. I think they're now better suited to push for this title. If I could have a mulligan on my Chesterfield pre-season prediction for the title, I'd probably pick Solihull.

WOKING

When a team gets relegated from the National League you ask whether you will ever see them again. But Alan Dowson brought

Woking back at the first attempt and they're thriving now at Step 1.

They are the hardest working team in the National League when they haven't got the ball. That's testament to the fitness of how fit Dowson has got the players. Part-time teams – those training on a Tuesday and Thursday night – are more likely to be relegated but they're proving me wrong. With a good work ethic and keeping things simple, you've got every chance. Probably the team of the season so far.

STOCKPORT COUNTY

The credit I give Jim Gannon is how he gave the chance to the players that got them promoted. He felt some weren't good enough and, in fairness, has had to make some hard decisions. That's not an easy part of management when someone has done well for you.

But he's made those tough decisions and it's worked. He's brought in the likes of Joe Piggett, Joe Leesley and Tom Walker. They are very, very good players. On their day they can give teams a hammering.

BOREHAM WOOD

At one stage you thought they'd be looking at relegation. But they're doing unbelievably well. It's difficult for manager Luke Garrard because if anybody does really well then they're off.

In that final third he's got four good players – but all different. Kabongo Tshimanga joined from Oxford City in the summer and has scored 14 goals.

I've always liked Keiran Murtagh in midfield and they have experience throughout the squad. Right-back Kane Smith is fit again too. I really like him. They lose a lot of games but they also win a lot.

MAKING A NOISE: Barrow are the team to beat at the halfway stage of the National League season
PICTURE: Dan Westwell



NOTTS COUNTY

Arguably the biggest club that's ever been in the National League but when you've been on a losing run and you drop into a league where you're expected to win straightaway, it's not easy. People forget how much turmoil they were in during the summer.

All things considered, I think they'd have taken where they are. The takeover went through, there's a new identity and optimism. It takes time to fix things. Whether they make the play-offs this season is one thing, but next season could be the one where they make a really big push.

FC HALIFAX TOWN

They're struggling for goals and clean sheets at the moment but you can't look at their current run of results and say it is any reflection on the squad or manager Pete Wild because they're doing more than what they should be in terms of league position.

The main worry is how long the bad form and inconsistency goes on for. After such a storming start to the season, they've hopefully already got enough points on the board to not have a late season panic. Cameron King in midfield is a very talented player.

BARNET

Darren Currie will live or die by the way he wants his team to play. You've got to respect him for that. He was one of the best players I ever played with. He played the game in the right way and that's what he wants from his Barnet side. I've stuck my neck out to say Jack Taylor is the best player in the National League.

The problem is defensively they're not good enough at the moment and they also need to take their chances – they're probably the most inconsistent side in both boxes. If they get it right, they can make the play-offs.

DOVER ATHLETIC

If their home record was like their away record they'd be top of the league. The way they play suits them on the road. They were excellent when I saw them against Yeovil in the league and Southend in the FA Cup. Like for so many others in mid-table, it's all about finding that consistency I can't see them scoring enough this season to really push up the league.

EASTLEIGH

In the summer they lost Paul McCallum's goals, Mark Yeates'

assists and the best right-back in the division in Josh Hare. But I think, as a club, they're in a better place now.

For a number of years they became a holiday home for retiring players as they tried to buy their way out of the league.

I think it's going to be a mid-table season but I don't say that as a bad thing. They've had a lot to deal with off the field following the departure of owner Stewart Donald so it was always going to be difficult. Ben Strevens has a small squad and it's probably more about rebuilding. He's doing a good job.

HARTLEPOOL UNITED

Whether I didn't like playing there and I'm still taking it out on them, but they don't fill me with great excitement when I watch them. They've struck me as a club that could be in the National League for a while.

But you have to say they've given themselves the best chance possible by appointing Dave Challinor as manager. That was a huge, huge statement of intent. To get him was a real coup – they probably couldn't believe their luck when Fyde got rid of him. He knows the league really well and I think this will be a

season of sorting them out. I'll be keeping a close eye on them in the summer because he will want to bring in his own identity. It needs a big sort out.

TORQUAY UNITED

If you want entertainment then get along to see the Gulls. They score so many goals you think they've got a chance. Going forwards they are one of the best to watch. They have a genuine goalscorer in Jamie Reid, but they concede so many as well. You can't go through a season shipping as many they do. In three of their last five games they've

conceded six, three and five in separate games. That's going to be their problem.

SUTTON UNITED

It was always going to be a difficult job to follow Paul Doswell. When a club has had a long-serving manager, it is a big change for the whole club. They've got a good squad and maybe they should be doing better than they are but they've really picked up nicely in recent games.

I love Harry Beautyman in midfield and with a fit Tommy Wright they will be OK.

DAG & RED

The biggest fear is when you're really relying on one player to do well. For Dagenham it's Angelo Balanta. When he's out of the team they're not the same. In the summer they signed Mitch Brundle, who I like, but some of the other signings you think, 'Decent enough but can he get them in the play-offs?'

It'll be interesting to see if they go out and look for more quality as they've been on a slippery slope.

MAIDENHEAD UNITED

Alan Devonshire always loves to throw the, 'Told you so!' at me. It's been an outstanding achievement to stay in this league over the last couple of years. They're doing as well as they can, really. You'd worry if they lost Danny Whitehall because where are the goals going to come from? I slightly fear for them being down there.

AFC FYLDE

Something just didn't seem right there. They did so well last year, Dave Challinor signed players quickly and all of a sudden he's got the boot.

They've been so reliant on Danny Rowe to score goals but now he's having a season where he hasn't been so prolific.

I also wonder if they've got the players who will be used to a relegation battle. They've got nice footballers. You can't get to Christmas in this position but keep saying, 'Oh, they will go on a run'. They've only won seven games all season. They concede so many goals it's frightening.

ALDERSHOT TOWN

There's no one I look at in their squad and think, 'I'd definitely take him'. Ethan Chislett is doing very well but apart from that it's just an OK squad. They've lost key players over the last few seasons and it's hard to replace

them. Where are the goals going to come from? That's their biggest issue. The other issue for them, along with those around them, are the teams below them – Wrexham and Chesterfield. Teams that should be doing a lot better.

WREXHAM

They just don't excite me. I can't fathom them being relegated but they've got to sort themselves out because it could happen. On Boxing Day they made it three wins in four which is much more encouraging but I do fear for them. They need to bring in two or three new players who hit the ground running. If they don't they're in trouble.

CHESTERFIELD

These Chesterfield players are on good money but they're nowhere near doing what they should be. I'm not just saying that because I tipped them at the start of the season!

I saw their game against Notts County and even though they won, there is no way in a million years this squad is good enough. They were so poor.

At some clubs you point the finger at the manager but the players should be doing a lot better. It's surely very embarrassing. Being so poor defensively could maybe see them drop out of the league.

EBBSFLEET UNITED

What can you say? A club that had so much positivity – promotion, reaching the play-offs in their first season back – good players, a good young manager. All of a sudden it's turned into a nightmare.

I played with Kevin Watson at Colchester. He wants to play the right way and since he's gone in as manager they've had a reaction. It's going to be very difficult for them to get out of it so they need to pick up some wins.

CHORLEY

They've got good, honest players and they've picked up some decent results. That's got to be pleasing. They went through a period of drawing 0-0 so they have grit and determination.

They're going to get the odd tonking and it's going to be tough but they've got a big period coming up and if they can stay up, Jamie Vermiglio will have done a magnificent job. But, like Aldershot, the teams they are trying to leapfrog are teams that should be pushing for promotion.