

Runaround now by Stuart Fuller

Remember the Eighties? Some hands at the back there. Those who did live through the best decade in history will surely remember Mike Reid's Runaround where kids had to quite literally run around a room to stand in the right place when answering trivia questions. Well, are you ready for the Non-League equivalent come the end of the season?

For those who don't know what is happening, let me try to explain so that you know where we need to be standing come the end of the season. In its most basic form, the structure of the National Leagues (as we are called today) pyramid is changing to simplify things. As we stand at the moment, the structure looks like: -

Step 5 – The National League Premier League – 24 teams, two promoted, one via the Play-offs to the Football League, four relegated to Step 6.

Step 6 – The National League North & South – 24 teams in each, two promoted from each, one via the Play-offs to Step 5, three relegated from each to Step 7.

Step 7 – Isthmian League Premier, Southern League Premier and Northern Premier League Premier Division – 24 teams in each, two promoted from each, one via the Play-offs to Step 6, four relegated from each to step 8.

Step 8 – Isthmian League North & South, Southern League Central & South-West, Northern Premier League North & South – 24 teams in the Isthmian, 22 in the others, two promoted from each one, one via the Play-offs to Step 7, three relegated from Isthmian Leagues, two each from the Southern and Northern League (total of 14 teams) to step 9.

Step 9 – County League – 14 regionally based leagues – League winners promoted at end of season.

One of the reasons for the review has been driven out of feedback from the clubs at steps 7 and 8 who have to fit in lots of midweek games at the start of the season and then face potential fixture backlogs if bad weather or a cup run happens mid-season as well as some significant miles that need to be travelled. So the National Leagues committee were tasked with coming up with a new model and in conjunction with the FA, next season we will see the biggest shake up to the structure of the Non-Leagues since the creation of Step 6.

At the start of next season, the model will look like: -

Steps 5 and 6 will remain unchanged

Step 7 – A fourth league, administered by the Southern League, will be introduced, likely to be formed as a "Central" league. This league, along with the three existing leagues will reduce in number from 24 teams to 22 teams, with only the bottom side in each league being relegated at the end of the season. 19 clubs will be promoted from Step 8 comprising of the twelve Clubs finishing in 1st and 2nd position in each division, together with the

highest ranked 3rd place Club on the basis of points per game during the Playing Season plus six further Clubs determined by a series of Play Off Matches.

Step 8 – A third league will be introduced into the Isthmian League structure, meaning there will be seven leagues at Step 8. All leagues at Step 8 will reduce to 20 teams. Only the clubs finishing bottom of this season's Step 8 leagues will be relegated. This league will be formed through the promotion of the champions of each of the 14 Step 9 leagues plus 12 runners up, decided on a points per game ratio.

For this season, only one side from the Bostik League South (and North) will be relegated whilst the top two will be promoted and the next four go into the Play-offs. It is possible that the team finishing third may also be automatically promoted if they have a higher points per game than the other five 5th place sides at Step 8. In that instance, the seventh placed team would go into the Play-offs.

Still with me? OK, from season 2018/19 it starts to get really complicated. At Step 8 a total of twelve teams will be promoted – the seven league winners, then five from a complex Play-off arrangement (to be determined) that will see two clubs losing out from the seven leagues. Three will be relegated from the four Step 7 leagues. Likewise, promotion via the playoffs at Step 7 will involve the four league winners being joined by two clubs from the four divisional Play-offs (if the National League North/South agreed to relegate four not three it would work perfectly!).

This season therefore represents the best opportunity we have had for promotion in many-a-season. Whilst there is some excitement about how the leagues will be structured next season in the Isthmian League Step 8 and the addition of so many new sides (and new grounds) from Step 9, we are obviously hoping we will be in the Isthmian Premier. If we are still at Step 8 next season then we will see eight less games, which would mean virtually no midweek trips to deepest, darkest Kent, less travel costs and more local derbies.

Exactly how the two new leagues will be structured and the clubs involved can't really be decided until the season end but rest assured we will keep you up to speed on any developments.