

Let me start by saying that there is no such thing as a perfect system, all have flaws that can be criticised. However, it is not by coincidence that all sports that have League structures base their outcomes on the results of fixtures format with a season-end result dependent upon winning, losing or drawing fixtures and the league points accordingly afforded to each result achieved. All leagues have results-based outcomes.

Winners should be the best performing team across the season. This proposal, potentially, undermines the basic principle of sport, that winners take the prizes.

A League Points system, earned for the position placed at each match has been in place since the inception of athletics Leagues and has worked as it rewards the clubs that win fixtures. The fact that this has thrown up inconsistencies with regards to the total match points at the end of the season, is a function of several things, some of which (not all) I will address later.

The current set up is not ideal, with the pairing of clubs (in Divisions One and Two) in order to create larger, more competitive and fewer fixtures. However, whilst not perfect, it retains the basic format whereby all clubs only compete against each other, on a scoring basis, once.

This proposal is like the Premier League saying that match results are irrelevant; the title will go to the team that scores the most goals and the lowest scorers will be relegated. Or the County Cricket Championship being decided by the team getting the most runs or wickets. Such proposals would be rejected.

There are numerous points to make here but the proposal makes an unrealistic presumption, that points are won in matches that are all equable in terms of competitiveness and circumstances. That, as we all know and have experienced, is not the case, thus the most reliable way to ensure that the best teams prevail is to base reward on their performance in matches relative to the opposition that they face on that day, in those conditions, i.e. a League Points basis.

The nature of the League means that the mix of teams that score against each other in each match is different every time, thus there is not a comparable challenge between clubs as they each have a unique fixture structure. For some/many clubs their ability to get out a team ebbs and flows across the course of the season, for a host of reasons, which affects the strength of fixtures and can impact the outcome of their and their oppositions results. A League Points system irons out some of these inequities.

Looking back over recent years, the best example of this being an issue in more than one Division is 2023. In the First Division Harrow (my club by the way) were the highest point scorers but finished 2<sup>nd</sup>. Chelmsford won the title (with 100 points less) and correctly so, as they had won three of their four fixtures. They were the best team in the League on the basis of the ability to win against the teams that they competed against. Had the proposed

change been in place they would have won three fixtures but finished 4<sup>th</sup> in the League .... That is, quite frankly, ridiculous!

In the same year, the same happened in Division Two NE. Cambridge Harriers had even better record, winning three and finishing 2<sup>nd</sup> in their four matches. Dartford Harriers finished 2<sup>nd</sup> having won two, finished 2<sup>nd</sup> in one and 3<sup>rd</sup> in the other, the same record as 3<sup>rd</sup> placed Dacorum, putting them two League points behind the winners. Havering were a further two League Points below in 4<sup>th</sup>. On head-to-head performance, Cambridge Harriers were the best team. However, if this rule change applied, they would also have finished the season in 4<sup>th</sup> place!!! Again, a ridiculous outcome.

To understand how this happens we need to consider the strength of opposition by making a comparison between the clubs' fixtures, which exposes why such a successful team scored fewer points than the teams below them. The conclusion is that the opposition turned up with stronger, more complete teams, thus impacting on Cambridge Harriers ability to gain points, whilst elsewhere this was not always the case. This proposal does nothing to address the impacts of these effects, indeed it promotes them.

For the purpose of this critique, I will only look at the top three clubs in Division Two NE in 2023, which indicate that Cambridge Harriers fixtures, for whatever reason, were more competitive in nature than those of the clubs below them, yet they all met the same teams over the course of the summer.

A match-by-match assessment shows that in Cambridge Harriers fixtures only five opposition clubs (33.3%) failed to score 200 points and of those only two (13.3%) ended up with less than 150 points. None scored less than 100 points. In other words, it appears that these were all closely contested, competitive fixtures between well filled, well matched teams.

If we look at Dartford's fixtures, eight teams (53.3%) failed to gain 200 points, four (26.6%) scored less than 150 points of which one (6.7%) scored less than 100 points.

Dacorum matches saw six teams (40%) score less than 200 points, two (13.3%) below 150, in fact, on both occasions scoring less than 100 points.

Given that each club faced the same opposition at different times across the season, this reflects the point earlier, that it is luck of the draw as to whether teams meet opposition on one of their strong or weak fixture dates. Is that fair? The proposal does not recognise this as an issue.

Interestingly, there were only two matches in Division Two NE in 2023 where teams scored less than 100 points, each had either or both of Dacorum and Dartford in them. Did that give those clubs an unfair advantage over Cambridge Harriers at the end of the season? ... Very likely when the Match Points differential was not overly significant, particularly when you consider that one club scored nearly double the number of points against Cambridge Harriers than in the match where they struggled to get out a competitive team.

If the proposal to move to a match points basis is approved it will unfairly punish clubs that end up in more competitive fixtures and benefits those when opposition clubs arrive with partial teams, making points accumulation easier, particularly if a club turns up with a team covering minimal events, as in the case where they score under 100 points.

It should also be noted that Cambridge Harriers defeated both Dartford and Dacorum in their head-to-head clashes (they also defeated 4<sup>th</sup> placed Havering), while Dartford defeated Dacorum. Thus, on performances against each other, the correct teams were promoted. However, on a points-based outcome, Dartford and Dacorum would have been promoted, and Cambridge Harriers would be 4<sup>th</sup>. How can that be justified???

Did the performance of paired clubs have any impact? I do not think that there is any strong evidence either way. The suggestion that a pairing of a strong club with a weak club disadvantage the former after the first match is debateable, particularly as there are so many other things to consider about relative strength of fixtures and given that all clubs only meet them once. However, if that is the case, that would seem to be more an argument for retaining the League Points basis, which rewards performance against the teams that you are competing against in each fixture, thus negating that disadvantage!

I understand that it looks unfair when teams with greater match points finish below those with less, but that is a function of the inability to ensure that all fixtures are of the same standard and it is not a flaw that renders the system worthy of change. Over the history of the League the vast majority of league positions are reflected correctly both on a League and Match Points tally, which suggests that, though imperfect, the system does, by and large, throw out accurate end of season tables. This season only 10 or so clubs, out of 94, finished in League positions that could be deemed wrong on a Match Points basis, of which three impacted on nineteen promotion/relegation places. Surely for such a fundamental change to be made you would expect these figures to be markedly higher and suggestive of an inherently unfair system?

As previously noted, an immediate criticism of the proposal is that it punishes clubs for the ability of their opposition to arrive with strong teams and rewards clubs when opposition fail to arrive with a team capable of providing a similar challenge, thus skewing the points outcome unfairly. The disproportionate outcome then results in a League table that totally ignores the significant imperfections it delivers. Meanwhile the current system ensures, to a degree, the integrity of the League, smoothing out this weakness by reflecting the position of the team in the match and not the points scored on an unlevel playing field situation. You can only beat the opposition in front of you!

I, therefore, ask clubs to recognise the fundamental flaw of the proposed system apropos the current model, which itself is not perfect, and to reject it on the basis that it is important that the competition retains credibility in that the best and successful teams end up winners.