

Another season of badminton is now on the horizon with the Reg Harris Shield to be the curtain raiser once more. The league season will then begin a few days later with 55 teams competing across eleven divisions and all hoping for a successful season.

The Masters has expanded to ten teams this year with five teams competing in the Premier division. Fitzwimarc were unbeaten last year as they won yet another title. It's hard to see past them lifting it again this season, despite higher handicaps. The two Greensward sides were the closest to ending Fitz dominance in this division and under their new name of Phoenix Flames, both teams will be challenging near the top. Westcliff narrowly avoided the drop last year and could be in a struggle again this year with newly promoted Eastwood.

Fitzwimarc first team may dominate the Premier division but their Seconds fell a point short last season and were relegated. They are likely to go well in the division below though and will compete for the title with Phoenix Flames Thirds. Hawkwell will be looking to improve after a decent campaign last year and new side Eastwood Seconds could spring a few surprises while Fitz Thirds will look to avoid a second successive wooden spoon.

The Men's divisions are severely depleted this season after a total of five teams withdrew including Men's Premier runners-up Leighway. This could allow Westcliff to ease to consecutive titles but both Eastwood and newly promoted East Thurrock should offer a stern test and be challenging for the title. Powerplay and Fitzwimarc were both comfortably safe last year but in a stronger, smaller division then it could be a relegation battle for these two.

Powerplay Seconds were relegated down to the first division but after they withdrew Southend and B & BP look set to take advantage. Fitzwimarc Seconds and Westcliff Seconds neither challenged for the title nor looked in trouble at the bottom and it could be a similar case this season. SLH Rayleigh needed just two wins last year to survive but with no side coming up into the division after Chase withdrew, it could be a long season for them.

Two sides withdrew from the Men's second division with Fitz Fourths, who finished one off bottom, and David Lloyd Seconds, who finished bottom, both going. Relegated Eastwood Seconds will be the favourites to take the title but will face tough competition from David Lloyd and Fitzwimarc Thirds. An improving Phoenix Flames and solid Hawkwell side will be looking to build on good campaigns last year.

The Ladies division, in contrast to the Men's, are thriving with three new teams taking part this year and just the Fitzwimarc first team dropping out. Leighway look set to continue their dominance of the Premier division. Chelmsford Casuals could well be runners-up again but an improving East Thurrock side could push them. Eastwood will look to avoid a relegation scrap with Westcliff, relieved from relegation last year, set for another tough season in the top flight.

Due to the new sides coming in, last season's seven team first division has been divided into a division of five and four. It could be a three way fight for the title in the first division with just five points separating Phoenix Flames, Eastwood Seconds and SLH Rayleigh last season. B & BP and Westcliff Seconds were level on points last season and will battle it out to avoid the drop.

The newly formed Ladies second division has just one side that played in the league last season. Fitzwimarc Seconds have now become the first team this season and they will compete alongside Hawkwell, Phoenix Flames Seconds and Westcliff Thirds. This is probably the most wide open division in terms of promotion.

Finally, the Mixed divisions have gained one side and lost just one side but that is reigning Premier champions Leighway. It presents a great opportunity for East Thurrock to claim their first top division title and a third in four seasons for them in the Mixed. Eastwood were champions just two years ago and will be hoping for a better season and a title push. Westcliff should be safe in mid table while their Seconds come up into the division with Fitzwimarc given a reprieve from relegation. Those two will be looking to avoid the drop.

Phoenix Flames lost just twice last season and with no side coming down from the Premier, they are the favourites to take the title this season. B & BP pose the biggest threat to that. SLH Rayleigh come up into the division and their young side should have enough to avoid relegation troubles. Fitzwimarc Seconds and Eastwood Seconds could be the two sides in trouble.

Westcliff Thirds dropped down to the second division after just one win in the last campaign but will be looking for a strong showing this time. Highlands have improved year on year and could have their eyes on the title after finishing second. Fitzwimarc Thirds and Phoenix Flames Seconds both had mixed seasons last year and it could be similar this year. Phoenix Flames Thirds enter the division while Hawkwell will look to avoid a third wooden spoon in four years.

All in all another exciting season ahead. Throw into the mix the Peter Gibbs Cup, several tournaments and the SDBA Championships in May means there is a lot to look forward to over the next nine months.