

Intriguing battle of the NFD leaders

KAMLESH GOSAI

Durban

THE NATIONAL First Division (NFD) goes into overdrive this afternoon, with a KwaZulu Natal provincial derby offering more than bragging rights among the major clashes.

At the top of the standings, leaders Thanda Royal Zulu of Richards Bay host Black Leopards in the headline match of the day's seven fixtures.

This game could represent a defining moment in the race for automatic promotion that Thanda have dominated for much of this 2016/17 season's campaign.

The KZN derby between Royal Eagles and AmaZulu in the Midlands also has a bearing on both teams' promotion hopes.

Fourth-placed Eagles and AmaZulu in sixth position are targeting at least a play-off spot, for which they must finish second or third. Only the winners of the league earn automatic promotion to the Absa Premiership.

Thanda's battle with second-placed Leopards, with seven games left to play, brings together teams separated by nine points. Leopards and the others in the chasing pack, among them Stellenbosch and Mthatha Bucks, might benefit from a Thanda defeat. It could open the title race if Thanda's lead is cut to six points.

Durban's sleeping giants, AmaZulu, will fancy their chances of registering a season's double over their hosts. Usuthu go into the tie chasing a hat-trick of wins, while Eagles won one of their last three outings in a campaign blighted by inconsistency.

However, Eagles boast the league's leading scorer in 20-goal Sedwyn George and are generally difficult to break down at home.

AmaZulu will also miss Zimbabwean midfielder anchor Buthelezwe Ncube who is suspended.

On the other hand, Kings are without head coach Kostadin Popic, who is reportedly back home in Serbia for a surgical procedure. How his absence impacts on the team remains to be seen.

Another Durban side with an outside shot at a play-off spot are Real Kings. Like AmaZulu the league rookies are aiming for a hat-trick of victories when they host Cape Town All Stars.

The First Division newcomers upset Leopards 2-1 last weekend and before that walloped Milano United 5-1 to entrench themselves in mid-table.

Kings managed to upset Leopards away from home without top scorer, Sipheshile Nzimande, which points to other players raising their game in the second half of the season.

Kings will again miss Nzimande, who is absent for personal reasons, but are confident Thobani Kunene will capably lead the frontline. Kunene rejoined Kings on loan from Platinum Stars in January and has been among the players instrumental in their resurgence.

TODAY (all games start at 3pm)

Santos v University of Pretoria (Athlone Stadium)

Witsbank Spurs v FC Cape Town (Puma Rugby Stadium)

Thanda Royal Zulu FC v Black Leopards (Umlathuze Sports Complex)

Royal Eagles v AmaZulu (Harry Gwala Stadium)

Mbombela United v Stellenbosch FC (Kanyamazane Stadium)

Magosi FC v Jomo Cosmos (Peter Mokaba Stadium)

Real Kings FC v Cape Town All Stars (Sugar Ray Xulu Stadium)

