



TOUGH ASK Roger Sikhakhane must save Royal Eagles PHOTO: SAMUEL SHIVAMBU / BACKPAGEPIX

TIMOTHY MOLOBI
 timothy@citypress.co.za

With a 12-point lead at the top of the National First Division (NFD), Highlands Park can start celebrating their return to the Absa Premiership.

Any side that has lost three times in 23 matches deserves a second chance in the elite league, and the Lions of the North are marching towards their destiny.

They have everything going for them - they have scored more goals (40), conceded the least (9) and have a healthy goal difference (31).

It would take an extraordinary collapse of Owen Da Gama's side for anyone to catch them.

But, while they have one foot in the Premiership, the same cannot be said about the other end of the table.

The focus has been more on the play-offs spots - teams that finish second and third - but the real battle is at the bottom of the log, where as many as six teams are fighting for survival.

Only 10th-placed University of Pretoria seem to be safe from relegation after they reached the 30-point mark - which is usually



ALMOST THERE Highlands Park have opened a 12-point gap at the top of the NFD table

PHOTO: THEMBA MAKOFANE

NATIONAL FIRST DIVISION LOG

| Pos | Team | P | W | D | L | GF | GA | Pts |
|-----|------------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|
| 1 | Highlands Park | 23 | 15 | 5 | 3 | 40 | 9 | 50 |
| 2 | Real Kings | 23 | 10 | 8 | 5 | 28 | 19 | 38 |
| 3 | Tshakhuma Tsha Madzivhandila | 23 | 10 | 6 | 7 | 27 | 31 | 36 |
| 4 | Black Leopards | 23 | 9 | 8 | 6 | 28 | 15 | 35 |
| 5 | Jomo Cosmos | 23 | 9 | 6 | 8 | 30 | 26 | 33 |
| 6 | Witbank Spurs | 23 | 7 | 11 | 5 | 27 | 25 | 32 |
| 7 | Cape Town All Stars | 23 | 7 | 10 | 6 | 19 | 17 | 31 |
| 8 | Mbombela United | 23 | 10 | 4 | 9 | 26 | 27 | 31 |
| 9 | Stellenbosch | 23 | 7 | 9 | 7 | 19 | 23 | 30 |
| 10 | University of Pretoria | 23 | 8 | 6 | 9 | 26 | 32 | 30 |
| 11 | Royal Eagles | 23 | 6 | 8 | 9 | 36 | 38 | 26 |
| 12 | Ubuntu Cape Town | 23 | 5 | 9 | 9 | 22 | 30 | 24 |
| 13 | Richards Bay | 23 | 5 | 9 | 9 | 18 | 27 | 24 |
| 14 | Uthongathi | 23 | 4 | 11 | 8 | 14 | 19 | 23 |
| 15 | Super Eagles | 23 | 5 | 8 | 10 | 19 | 31 | 23 |
| 16 | Mthatha Bucks | 23 | 4 | 8 | 11 | 23 | 33 | 20 |

NFD: Bottom of the pack wait to strike

the benchmark amount.

Interestingly, all but one of the six clubs that are threatened by relegation are coastal sides - Royal Eagles, Ubuntu Cape Town, Richards Bay, Uthongathi and Mthatha Bucks.

With two teams dropping down to the ABC Motsepe League, two sides that were promoted from the second division - Super Eagles and Uthongathi - are also in danger of going back to the SA Football Association ABC Motsepe league after just one season in the professional ranks.

Super Eagles are second from the bottom, and Uthongathi are a notch above them.

Bucks, the lone Eastern Cape side, are occupying the last spot and it would be a bad day for the

province to lose their only representative.

At the same time, Richards Bay have not recovered from selling their Premiership status to AmaZulu at the beginning of the season.

After winning last season's campaign as Thanda Royal Zulu, Bay sold their status, but now find themselves fighting for survival.

Another side in danger of going down is Royal Eagles, which always promise so much but deliver so little on the field. Despite chopping and changing coaches, Eagles find themselves 13th on the log.

Their hopes lie in their latest coach, Roger Sikhakhane, who led Thanda to promotion last season.

But it is also happening at the top, where nine sides are vying to

book a place in the play-offs.

Two places are reserved for the promotional play-offs for clubs finishing second and third, which will fight it out with the 15th-placed Absa Premiership side.

With seven matches to go, Real Kings and Tshakhuma Tsha Madzivhandila occupy the two top places, but there is still a long way to go before they can secure their spots.

Tenth-placed University of Pretoria, which are six points behind third-placed Tshakhuma, can still qualify for the play-offs, but their recent form does not inspire confidence.

There is still a lot of football to play and the chasing pack are licking their wounds and waiting for the right moment to strike.

NATIONAL FIRST DIVISION FIXTURES

Saturday - 3.30pm:

- Real Kings vs Black Leopards (Sugar Ray Xulu Stadium)
- Tshakhuma Tsha Madzivhandila vs Richards Bay (Thohoyandou Stadium)
- Mthatha Bucks vs Uthongathi (Mthatha Stadium)
- Super Eagles vs Royal Eagles (Goble Park)
- University of Pretoria vs Witbank Spurs (Tuks Stadium)
- Highlands Parks vs Mbombela United (Makhulong Stadium)

