

Armstrong update

Gonzaga sit top of the tree at Christmas! The Armstrong league is five rounds in and it is starting to take shape. There have been a few match upsets and quite a few games haven't gone according to rating. The Armstrong in the last few seasons has seen a clear division between the top half and bottom half of the league in terms of strength and round 1 showed this difference clearly as the usual top 6 were paired against the teams recently in the lower half of the league and as a result there were no upsets and the smallest margin of victory was a very respectable 5.5-2.5 victory for Trinity over Dun Laoghaire. Gonzagas 8-0 victory over newly promoted Curragh was a tough reintroduction to Leinsters top flight for the Kildare based team. However while there were no match upsets there were a number of game upsets. Jonathan O'Connor had a good victory over the very strong David Fitzsimons overturning a rating difference of 227 points however there were two bigger upsets in round 1. Chris Johnson of Dun Laoghaire beat Oisin Benson of Dublin Univeristy who boasted a 312 rating advantage but the biggest upset came in Benildus Derby where Aodhan Keane of the B team beat the experienced Dave Willow who was 483 points higher rated although I expect Aodhan to be much higher rated this time next year.

Round 2 didn't see any of the massive victories that happened in round 1. The largest win was Dublins 6.5-1.5 over Kilkenny, this left Kilkenny with only 2.5 points after two matches and put them into an early relegation battle. Dublin University held Gonzaga to a 4-4 draw meaning that Benildus A and Elm Mounts 5.5-2.5 wins left them only half a point behind Gonzaga and the draw itself indicated that the league might be a tighter affair than last season between the top 4 rated teams. The only upset came from Balbriggan as Bart Cichonski beat Mel O'Conneide of Benildus A who was 284 points higher rated.

Round 3 saw a first win for the newly promoted Curragh beating Balbriggan 4.5-3.5. Given Balbriggan were higher rated on 6 boards it was a very impressive result and much needed after their baptism of fire back to the Armstrong. After Gonzaga's draw with Dublin University in the previous round a match against second placed Elm Mount could give an indication to how the league might start to form. Any victory for the home team would see them go ahead of Gonzaga whereas a victory for Gonzaga would keep them ahead and having played last seasons second and third placed teams would put them in a very strong position. While Gonzaga may have out rated Elm Mount on 7 boards a tight result was expected however Gonzaga got the rub of the green in a few matches and managed to record the largest match win of round 3 winning 6.5-1.5. A few upsets were seen and the leagues biggest David and Goliath result so far was seen. Tom Fitzpatrick of Phibsboro didn't let a 453 point rating difference deny him a victory against Oisin Benson of Dublin University, but the biggest upset of the league came on the next board as Fergal O'Beirne beat the experienced Tim Harding who is 506 points higher rated!

With Gonzaga putting in big results in 2 of their first 3 matches it was important for Benildus A and Dublin University to record a big win in round 4

or else the reigning champions might start to build a large lead which could be hard to claw back. Dublin University played the solid Balbriggan who showed just how hard they can be to beat as while they were out rated on all 8 points they managed to get a 4-4 draw. This result coupled with Gonzaga's 7.5-0.5 victory over Kilkenny meant that Dublin University would trail the leaders by 7 points after only 4 rounds which left it up to Benildus A to challenge at the top which they did with a convincing 6.5-1.5 win over the Curragh. These big results also had a big impact at the other end of the table leaving Kilkenny in last place with only 6 points after 4 matches and the Curragh slightly better off but only slightly with 9 points. With the other teams near the bottom Benildus B and Phibsboro both on 11 points a clear division between the top, middle and bottom of the league was beginning to form.

So the last round before the Christmas break could keep things tight or paint a clearer picture of where teams might be finishing later in the league. Benildus B were at home to Gonzaga and given the previous results anything more than 0.5 would mean they scored more than their relegation rivals which they managed. While the match might have finished 7-1 that extra 0.5 they gained over their relegation rivals may prove valuable on the last day of the season. This big win put some pressure on Benildus A to keep pace with Gonzaga but against a solid Dublin team they could only record a 5-3 win meaning they will trail the reigning champions by 4.5 points going into the new year. At the other end of the table a potential relegation battle was taking place between Kilkenny and Phibsboro. A heavy loss for Kilkenny could see them heading toward the Heidenfeld but a victory would make things very interesting which exactly what happened with Kilkenny edging it with a 4.5-3.5 victory. A victory for Pdraig Hughes against John Courtney who is 259 points higher rated was the biggest upset in this round.

So the table is starting to take a clear shape, Gonzaga at the top with a 4.5 point lead over Benildus A who lead third placed Dublin University by a further 4 points are the two teams who will be favourites for the title. Benildus A are currently scoring points which if they continued would see them finish with over 62.5 points which in most seasons could easily win the league however if Gonzaga continue at their scoring rate would finish on 72.5! As impressive as that would be it seems quite unlikely given that Gonzaga only dropped 7 points in 5 matches and 4 of those points came in the one match against Dublin University it would be very difficult to maintain that consistency for the whole season. Gonzaga face Benildus A in the third last round in a match which will probably determine who wins the league this year. At the other end a very interesting relegation battle is starting to form. Kilkennys victory over Phibsboro have given them a chance at staying up and brought Phibsboro into a relegation scrap they were hoping to avoid. Phibsboro's final 2 matches are against Gonzaga and Benildus A so they will be wanting a little breathing room by round 10. Benildus B will have the biggest say in the relegation battle as they play all 3 of their rivals these head to head results will have a bigger influence on who gets relegated than their results against the top teams. To finish up I'd like to look at some statistics from the last 5 seasons and while statistics can prove anything (73% of people know that) they are interesting to consider, unfortunately this does not bode well for Benildus A, Curragh and Kilkenny. Firstly at the top, in the past 5 seasons the league has been won by

the team at the top of the league after 5 rounds 80% of the time, the only exception came when Kilkenny managed to over throw a 0.5 lead held by Elm Mount to win the league, an ominous stat for Benildus A. The statistics for relegation are almost as damning. In the last 5 years the teams who were in the relegation places after 5 rounds have been relegated again 80% of the time. Only 2 teams have stayed up after being in the relegation zone after 5 rounds. In 2013 Dublin stayed up finishing 10th after being behind by 1 point at this point in the season. And in 2012 Rathmines also trailed by a point at this point but managed to finish 9th, and Celbridge who were 3.5 points a head actually got relegated instead. So while the stats would make the betting man look at the Curragh and Kilkenny for relegation the 0.5 and 1.5 points they trail is not insurmountable as Dublin and Rathmines B have proven in the past.