

O'Hanlon Cup

The first three months of 2016 have brought with them some classic match-ups in the O'Hanlon Cup, particularly further down the league table, as the season heats up and draws close to its final act in April.

At the top of the table, **Gonzaga** will have been very pleased with a stellar 5-1 victory last week against Skerries. This result has stretched their lead to 7.5 points, on a total score of 38.5, and they now look to be in a good position for a tilt at the title. In second place, on 31 points, are **Gorey**. The Wexford side are yet to play three of the bottom four sides in the league, however, and will know that three good results will put the pressure on the Ranelagh-based outfit.

Vying for 3rd position at the moment are **Skerries** and **Ballinasloe**. Skerries are on 28 points having played eight matches, ahead of Ballinasloe's 25, although Ballinasloe are yet to play their round eight fixture. Both remain within striking distance of Gorey, and their head-to-head clash on the final day could be a direct shoot-out for a promotion place. Skerries had built up a head of steam heading into February, at which point they looked like they could challenge for top spot, but a draw against a defiant Drogheda and that heavy loss to Gonzaga seem to have put paid to their charge.

Royal Lopez and **Elm Mount** are on 26 and 25 points respectively, both having played nine matches. Elm Mount have shown remarkable consistency of results, drawing five of their nine games! However, they have also given walkovers on three occasions; if they manage to field six players consistently next season, they should be looking at pushing for a promotion spot. Ratoath side Lopez have also established a strong base on which to build next year, having only been defeated by Gonzaga, Gorey and Skerries.

Inchicore also seem to be safe enough, on 23.5 points, while **Aer Lingus** have slipped dangerously close to the relegation dog-fight, on 22 points after nine rounds, as they continue to have difficulties fielding a full team. January was something of a red-letter month for them, as they came agonisingly close to getting a result from Gonzaga and Gorey, losing both games by a half-point margin. I suspect that the question neutrals will be asking is "what could have been?" as Aer Lingus' players, under the stewardship of Jim Kenny, have shown class in pulling off some excellent individual results.

The four remaining teams – St. Benildus, Bray/Greystones, Drogheda and Celbridge, are all yet to cross the 20 point threshold, and are arguably the teams with the most on the line over the coming months. **St. Benildus** lead the pack on 19.5, but face a difficult trip to Gorey in the next round. A 4-2 win over Elm Mount in round 8 has given them a bit of breathing room, but safety will have to be earned the hard way against Seamus Halpenny's side. **Bray/Greystones**, meanwhile, are on 19 points, having played an extra game. However, they seem to have found form at just the right time, picking up their first two wins of the season in rounds 8 and 9 with defeats of Elm Mount and relegation rivals Celbridge. They also face Gorey in their next match, and will need to pull off an unexpected win if their survival push is to be maintained.

Drogheda sit half a point further back, on 18.5, but have played only seven rounds. Michael Pentony and Alan Dee, who both débuted against Skerries, should prove to be a shrewd additions to the squad by captain Pat Scanlan, and the Louth side now look to be strong enough to stay up and possibly even return to the mid-table spot they held at the turn of the year. **Celbridge**, propping up

the table on 17 points, look to have a serious battle on their hands to climb out of the relegation zone. Their match against Drogheda on the 19th of March may make or break their season, with Gonzaga and Inchicore to play after that.

Individually, **John Loughran** of Skerries still leads the points table. Loughran, having an outstanding season, is unbeaten on 7.5/8, having kept his 100% record longer than any other player across the leagues. His first draw came against **David J. H. Murray** of Gonzaga, who alongside Gorey's **Eddie Humphrey** is tied for third on 6/8. Both players will look to overtake Elm Mount's **Sean Loftus**, who is outright second on 6.5/9. A further five players are still in contention for a board prize on 5.5 points: **John P. Dunne** (Ballinasloe), **Greg Coyle** (Elm Mount), **Ben Cullen** and **Andy Keenan** (both Gonzaga) and **Manuel Gardenes** (Gorey). **Ernie McElroy** (Royal Lopez) has also scored 5.5, but cannot win a board prize as his team have only two games remaining.

Individually, there have also been several upsets: **Eugene McMorrow** (Elm Mount) held Gardenes, rated 2006, to a draw, while **Christy Spellman** (Inchicore) achieved the same against Marc Lincoln (Gonzaga; 1702). In the Aer Lingus-Gonzaga match, the hosts achieved two fine results, **Mick Keogh** beating Ray Byrne (1801) on board 1 and **Arthur McSwiney** drawing to Murray.

To conclude, then, the next two rounds will prove vital for the team in and around the drop zone as the fight to stay up intensifies. At the top, Gorey will be relying on Gonzaga to slip up in order to reel them in. At the same time, they'll need to string together some high scores to stave off the challenges from Skerries and Ballinasloe. The Leinster Leagues controllers have put together an extremely exciting final round of matches on "Super Sunday" - the 17th April, and the O'Hanlon will certainly play host to some high-octane clashes, with promotion, relegation, and board prizes all on the line.

Andy Keenan (Gonzaga C. C.)