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FOOTBALL: National League status is preserved



Wealdstone celebrate going 3-0 up against Halifax

Image: Jon Taffel

Stones boss relieved to secure last-day survival

WEALDSTONE manager Neil Gibson described a feeling of "relief" after the Stones narrowly avoided relegation on the final day of the National League season with a 3-1 win over Halifax Town.

After flying out of the blocks and taking a 3-0 lead in 25 minutes with goals from Jack Cook, Kallum Cesay and veteran Mustapha Carayol, the Stones received the news they had been dreading.

With Wealdstone in the relegation zone at the start of the day, their fate was out of their hands, and Dagenham & Redbridge took a first-half lead against Solihull Moors.

However, attentions turned back to Damson Park when Solihull equalised on 75 minutes.

Dagenham would go on to draw 1-1 and thanks to the Stones recording a 3-1

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victory over Halifax, Gibson's side preserved their National League status for another season at the expense of their London rivals.

"The overriding sense is relief. That's the emotion behind it, because obviously this football club and Rory Fitzgerald (chairman) particularly gave us the opportunity at the end of January with 20 games to go," a gleaming Gibson told the club website.

"Wealdstone were in the relegation zone at that time, and I would've felt a lot of responsibility had we not stayed up.

"The players, the staff and everyone around the football club have been ab-

solutely fantastic, really welcomed us in. It was something I was desperate to ensure, that we retained our National League safety.

"All that is down to the players. They've absolutely cranked it up in terms of their understanding of the importance of this game, which is probably something we didn't do great in the last couple of weeks. We needed a little bit of help, but as long as we did our job, we knew that was the opportunity (to stay up)."

A win on the final day was just about as much as the Stones could do, but with news of what was happening in the other game between former boss Matt Taylor's Solihull Moors and Dagenham, anxiety started to swirl around Grosvenor Vale.

Gibson added: "We're a better team when we're on the front foot. Today wasn't a day for sitting back and trying to see where we were and letting the game unfold.

"So, credit to the players. They trained with a real intensity all week to get themselves ready for that, and we wanted to come flying out the blocks.

"It's weird; we got ourselves 3-0 up in the first half, and if we're honest, it could have been four or five, and then the ground goes quiet.

"You think 'That's not a good sign.' Dagenham had got themselves in front, but we said at half-time, 'Whilst it's 1-0, Solihull Moors are a very good team, and they're going to get opportunities to get back into the game', so we had to take care of our part of the bargain."

Hollman's maiden ton helps in win

MIDDLESEX COMPLETE EXCELLENT RUN CHASE AGAINST KENT



Luke Hollman

Image: Ray Lawrence

LUKE Hollman's maiden century paved the way for Middlesex to snatch a dramatic victory as they edged past Kent in a see-saw Rothesay County Championship classic at Lord's. Bowled out for 129 on the opening day, Kent looked favourites after setting a stiff target of 365 and reducing their hosts to 81 for three overnight – but Hollman's diligent knock of 103 anchored a remarkable fightback.

The 24-year-old shared key partnerships with Stephen Eskinazi (41) – who retired hurt with a back spasm but returned later – and Jack Davies (59), only for leg-spinner Matt Parkinson to turn the contest back in Kent's favour, dismissing Hollman and Davies in quick succession. It needed an unbroken ninth-wicket stand of 52 between Toby Roland-Jones and Zafar Gohar to wrap up a record Middlesex run chase against Kent, the latter slog-sweeping Parkinson (3-105) for six to secure victory with six balls left. Hollman said: "It's a bit of an anomaly, me coming in this high up the order, but I know the skills I've got with the bat and the hard work I've put in during the last six to nine months.

"A lot of credit goes to the guys in Adelaide, where I played grade cricket, for giving me the opportunity to improve and bat higher up the order. I came back really confident in my game and the clarity that I've gained with my batting. "Rojo and Zafar were unbelievably composed to get us over the line in such a crucial game. With Zaf, you could almost argue he had some making up to do, for doing that against us for Gloucestershire last year!

"It was pretty special and to chase north of 350 on the final day of a four-day game is a pretty rare moment. Jack Davies also did absolutely brilliantly, shifting the momentum of the game at a crucial point."