

A photograph of a shirtless male football player celebrating with his arms raised in a stadium. The player is wearing a dark-colored football kit. The background shows a blurred crowd of spectators and a clear sky with some clouds. The overall tone is energetic and celebratory.

The Football Fever Report

By Littlewoods Football Pools

Available at www.footballpools.com

January 2007

Introduction

Welcome to the first '**Football Fever Report**', a unique, in-depth study into the stresses and strains of being a loyal follower of one of the current 92 Premiership and Football League clubs.

Statisticians at Littlewoods Football Pools have analysed the histories – both on and off the pitch – of each of the 92 clubs in order to determine, for the first time, which teams cause their fans the most stress and anxiety.

The criteria under which the club-by-club analysis has been conducted was based on initial research amongst football supporters, who were asked to identify which factors caused them anxiety/nervousness when following their team's fortunes.

Among the key 'stress factors' named by fans were:

The 'yo-yo effect', ie regular movement between divisions/leagues due to promotions and relegations

Narrowly missing out on promotion and/or relegation

Failing to win at home

Losing matches from a winning position

Losing in play-offs, particularly finals

Being involved in penalty shoot-outs, and cup ties which go into extra-time

Financial problems at the club, leading to uncertainty over its future and a detrimental effect on team performances

Changes in club ownership

Frequent changes in manager

The experts at Littlewoods Football Pools have analysed each team and used a sophisticated scoring system to mark them across all the stress factors identified. Each team has then been ranked accordingly, with the team believed to be the most stressful to follow ranked as number 1, the second as 2 and so on.

Although more weight has been given to each club's more recent history (10-15 years being the average length of time a current supporter has been watching his or her favourite team), for certain criteria the club's post-War record has been taken into consideration.

The scores for each club have also been weighted to take account of fans' expectations, as the initial research showed that fans who expected their team to do particularly well, or particularly badly, each season were less likely to suffer from nervous anxiety during the course of the season.

Executive Summary

Warning: Watching Notts County, MK Dons or Carlisle United can seriously affect your health!

Football managers will say frequently that it's harder to manage a team at the bottom of the league than one at the top.

Judging by the results of the first-ever **Football Fever Report**, it's also true to say that supporting a team near the foot of the league is harder than supporting one that's always at the top.

Of the 20 most stress-inducing clubs in the English leagues, only one (Portsmouth) is currently in the Premiership and nine are in League Two. Eleven of the top 20, however, have had at least one season in the Premiership, which illustrates perfectly the rollercoaster ride of emotions that so many football fans exist on.

On the other hand, those of a particularly nervous disposition should consider supporting one of the so-called 'Big Four'. Our study shows that following Chelsea, Manchester United, Arsenal or Liverpool is less stressful than watching the likes of Darlington, Crystal Palace or Coventry City. Winning regularly, it seems, is very relaxing!

For supporters of those 20 most stressful teams, witnessing their idols being relegated is a more regular occurrence than seeing them promoted. They have celebrated 17 promotions over the past 10 years, but between them they have endured the misery and heartache of relegation on almost 40 occasions.

Promotion, not surprisingly, tends to generate euphoria amongst supporters, but the effect can be short-lived, as fans worry about how their team will perform at the new level. Relegation, on the other hand, can bring more long-lasting gloom, as supporters get used to life in a lower league.

But our research indicates that the greatest anxiety for fans comes not from being promoted or relegated, but by just missing out on either. The excitement and tension of a push for the play-offs, or a relegation dogfight, can be almost unbearable for fans. Just ask supporters of Hartlepool United or Nottingham Forest, who were involved in final-day dramas at either end of Coca-Cola League One last season, or those of Swansea City, who lost the subsequent League One play-off final on penalties.

The recent histories of those most stressful clubs tend to be full of stories of near-misses on the pitch, and uncertainty off it. Looking at the clubs in the top half of our table, a considerable number have had financial difficulties – often leading to periods in administration – and many have seen changes of ownership. Clubs have dropped out of the Football League and come back in again, moved grounds, put grounds up for sale, re-constituted, and, in one famous case, even de-camped to a different town and started playing under a new name. The fans, meanwhile, can only look on anxiously and wonder what this means for their prospects on the park. The answer, as history tends to indicate, is not a positive one.

That said, many fans will suggest, quite rightly, that far from being stressful, supporting your team is a mixture of fantastic highs and dreadful lows, but having something to talk about and for others to be talking about you is what they really enjoy!

This report will generate much debate amongst football fans and, such is the nature of club loyalty, many will disagree with our findings.

But then where would football be without healthy debate?

The Football Fever Report – The Top 50

1 **Notts County** League Two

It's largely been "one for sorrow" for the Magpies. The oldest club in the Football League have been through more managers (35) since 1945 than any other team except Wigan Athletic (36). Previous holders of the post include Sam Allardyce, Neil Warnock and Howard Kendall. Through promotion or relegation, the club have switched divisions 29 times – a Football League record. The last 10 years have brought two relegations and an average league position of 14th, and last season their Football League survival was only assured on the last day when they drew at home to Bury, while Oxford United lost at home to Leyton Orient.

2 **MK Dons** League Two

From the Premiership to League Two in just six years. The Dons (formerly Wimbledon) have certainly put their fans through the wringer over the years. If upping sticks from south London and moving to Milton Keynes (losing a huge chunk of their fan base in the process) isn't enough, they also manage to stress out their fans by having the worst home record in English football – since the War they've failed to win 44% of their home matches. Add to that three relegations in 10 years – plus a narrow escape on goal difference – debts of more than £20m and a period in administration, and you can see why the Dons rate so highly (or should that be lowly?) in our league. AFC Wimbledon, on the other hand, have gone from the Combined Counties League to the Premier Division of the Ryman League in just four years, winning five trophies along the way. How long, we wonder, before they meet in the Football League?

3 **Carlisle United** League One

If you're a Cumbrians fan, you'd be advised to get a check-up before the start of every season. The Brunton Park side's average league position over the past 10 years (15th) was the worst in the English game, and in that time they were relegated twice and promoted twice. During that period they lost an average of 18 points a season in games where they scored first. In recent times they've been in administration and fallen out of the Football League completely. In fact, that should have been the second time they'd dropped into the Conference, but in 1992 Carlisle (who finished 24th and bottom) were saved from that fate by Aldershot (23rd) going bankrupt. Oh, and in the 1990s former chairman Michael Knighton appointed himself manager. Never a dull moment in Cumbria.

4 **Darlington** League Two

You need a strong constitution to be a Quakers fan. A convicted criminal as chairman, a period in administration and one of the worst defensive records in football are just a few of the reasons why fans' loyalty has been stretched to the limit over the years. Only MK Dons are less likely to win at home than Darlo, and only Charlton and local rivals Hartlepool have conceded more goals since 1946. In that time the club has had more managers than any team except Wigan and Notts County. Two play-off final defeats (both 1-0) are the closest Darlington have come to promotion in the past 10 years. They also made history in December 1999 by losing in the FA Cup second round and then being picked out as "lucky losers" to replace Manchester United, who went to play in the FIFA Club Championships. The Quakers' "prize" was a trip to Villa Park, where they lost 2-1 to Aston Villa.

5 **Swindon Town** League Two

It's only just over a decade ago that Swindon were a Premiership side, but the past 10 years have been tough going for fans at the County Ground. Relegation from the top flight in 1994 was followed by a second successive drop, and although promotion from Division Two was secured a year later, the team struggled in Division One in the next three seasons, finishing 19th, 18th and 17th. In 2000 came relegation, and a year later Swindon avoided another 'double relegation' by just one point. A glimmer of hope came when the play-offs were reached in 2004 – ending in a semi-final loss to Brighton – but last term Town became the first club to drop into the bottom tier of the Football League having once been in the Premiership. We bet Robins' fans can hardly believe it.

6 **Bury** League Two

Bury's most recent trophy win was the National Black Pudding Throwing Championships in 2005. For the football team, you have to go back to 1997, and the old Second Division title. 'The Shakers' have won the FA Cup twice – in 1900 and 1903 (the 6-0 win against Derby is still a Cup Final record) – but their more recent history is one of mid-table mediocrity. Expectations rose in 1995 when the club reached the Third Division play-off final, but they lost 2-0 to Chesterfield. Their period in the old First Division lasted two seasons, ending in relegation...by one goal. The club went into administration in March 2002 a year after being put up for sale by the High Court due to mounting debts. Relegation followed shortly afterwards. Stress levels rose dramatically for Shakers fans in December 2006 when the club was thrown out of the FA Cup for fielding an ineligible player.

7 **Crewe Alexandra** League One

Two relegations in 10 years, an average finishing position of 14th, the longest run of games without a win (30) in English football, and one of the worst post-War home records in football all add up to an emotional rollercoaster for Crewe fans. They may have been named 'Most Admired Club' in the Football League earlier this year, but they were also relegated to League One, having maintained their status the previous season only on goal difference. The only constant is manager Dario Gradi, now in his 23rd year at the club.

8 **Portsmouth** Premiership

On the field or off, hardly a day seems to go by without Portsmouth making the headlines, and rarely for the right reasons. No wonder it is the most stressful Premiership club to follow. The early 90s started brightly, with the team narrowly missing out on promotion to the Premiership, but the controversial sacking of Jim Smith was followed in 1996, and 1998, by near-relegation to the Second Division. Smith returned as assistant to Harry Redknapp in 2002, and promotion to the Premiership followed a year later. But the last two seasons have seen Pompey come close to relegation, and off the field there have been several changes in the manager's office, and also in club ownership. Things seem to have settled with Redknapp back at the helm, but the last two decades have been unsettling for supporters widely regarded as among the most passionate in football.

9 **Stockport County** League Two

Stockport share, with Carlisle United, the distinction of having the lowest average league position over the past 10 years – 15th. That period began strongly, however, with promotion to the top tier of the Football League in 1996-97, the same season County reached the semi-finals of the League Cup, eventually losing to Middlesbrough over two legs. In their first season in the First Division, Stockport came close to the play-offs, but by 2002 they had been relegated. Another drop followed in 2005 to the 'revamped' League Two. That same year, supporters took over the club, after two years under previous owners led to a £4m loss. Last season, relegation to the Conference was avoided on the last day, thanks to a 0-0 draw at champions Carlisle.

10 **Grimsby Town** League Two

If you're a Grimsby fan, chances are you spend every season biting your nails. In the past 10 years, Town have been relegated three times – including in successive seasons (see position 40 in our table for details of the Mariners most dramatic drop) – and narrowly avoided relegation on three other occasions. They have also been promoted once and lost a Division Two play-off final last term. They won the Football League's Auto Windscreens Trophy nine years ago, but haven't gone beyond the fourth round of the FA Cup since 1996, and it's over 20 years since the Mariners reached the League Cup quarter finals.

11 **Crystal Palace** Championship

Long-standing Palace fans won't like it, but historically Selhurst Park is one of the easiest grounds for visiting teams to get a result, with more than 42% of post-War games producing a draw at worst for the away side. Not winning at home is a sure-fire cause of stress for fans, but then so are relegation fights and play-off finals, and Palace have had their fair share of those in recent times. Two promotions to the Premiership, in 1997 and 2004, both came via the play-offs (after finishing sixth each time), but on both occasions the club dropped back into the Football League again. In 2001, Palace came close to relegation to Division Two, and last season they lost in the Championship play-off semi-finals. In the FA Cup, Palace have won only five matches in the past 11 seasons. Doctors in south London must be up to their ears in blood pressure tests.

12 **Bradford City** League One

Life is relatively calm at Valley Parade at the moment, but City fans have had a torrid time following their club in recent times. The nadir was undoubtedly promotion to the Premiership in 1999, but survival in the top flight was secured only on the final day of the following season, with a 1-0 win against Liverpool. A year later came relegation back to the Football League, and the start of horrendous financial problems, culminating in a period of administration in 2002 which almost caused the club to fold. Relegation to what is now League One followed in 2004.

13 **Walsall** League Two

One of five clubs to have been relegated three times in the past 10 years, Walsall had actually enjoyed a glory period in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with a promotion, decent cup runs and a move to a brand new stadium. Then came a series of relegations before fans saw an upturn in fortunes. Promotion in 1999 to Football League Division One was followed the next season by relegation on the final day at Ipswich. The year after came promotion again, via the play-offs, but three years later came another relegation back to the third tier of English football, and in 2006 Walsall dropped into League Two. If ever a club needed to show bouncebackability...

14 **West Bromwich Albion** Championship

After what they've been put through in the past seven years, it's remarkable that Baggies fans are still bouncing. Relegated twice from the Premiership, winning promotion either side of the first relegation, losing a play-off semi-final and avoiding the dreaded drop by one place – not once, but twice (on the first occasion, relegation was only averted by beating champions Charlton on the final day, and in 2005 came that sensational last day win at home to fellow strugglers Portsmouth). In the past 10 years Albion have had eight cup ties go into extra time – winning five and losing three – and they have also won a League Cup match on penalties. Fans of a nervous disposition should stay away from The Hawthorns!

15 **Coventry City** Championship

Only once since 1989 have the Sky Blues finished higher than 11th in the league, and only twice since 1979. Fortunately for their fans, only once in the past 20 years has the team been relegated (from the Premiership in 2001), but on four occasions they have come perilously close. City escaped relegation to Division Two by only four points in 2003, after failing to win any of their last 12 games, and two seasons later the margin was just two points. Coventry, FA Cup winners in 1987, have been knocked out of the competition at the fourth round stage in each of the last four seasons. In 1998 they reached the quarter finals, only to lose to Sheffield United on penalties.

16 **Barnsley** Championship

To anyone outside South Yorkshire, being a Barnsley fan may not strike them as being particularly stressful, but consider this: in the past 10 seasons, Barnsley have lost 197 points in matches where they have scored first. Only Scunthorpe United and Blackpool have worse records. Put another way, the average of almost 20 points lost per season would have guaranteed Barnsley two extra promotions in that period, saved them from relegation twice and given them four additional play-off appearances. Barnsley fans have had to endure three FA Cup third round replay defeats in the past five seasons, but nothing could have been more stressful than last season's League One play-off final with Swansea, which the Tykes won 4-2 on penalties after a 2-2 draw. This season the Tykes have found themselves one of the favourites for relegation - no surprise, then, that Andy Ritchie lost his job as manager.

17 **Oldham Athletic** League One

Few, if any, Latics fans will snigger at Barnsley's record when scoring first in league matches, seeing as their team's record is only marginally better. If regularly throwing away potential victories weren't bad enough, Oldham also make the upper echelons of the stress league by having one of the worst goals against records in football. They also avoided relegation to what was then Division Three by one point in 1999, and again by the same margin in 2005. On the second occasion, survival was secured on the last day of the season with a 2-1 win at home to Bradford City. In the last 10 FA Cup competitions, Oldham have made it past the third round stage only once, having made the semi-finals twice in the early 1990s.

18 **Leeds United** Championship

Leeds fans who "lived the dream" are probably wondering when they will wake up from their current nightmare. Since the heady days of that 2001 Champions League semi-final, the Elland Road faithful have had to endure four changes of manager, two changes of ownership, a flirtation with administration, a relegation (plus a near miss), a play-off final defeat and losing an FA Cup penalty shoot-out to Wigan. And now fans wonder if the club will fall into football's third tier for the first time in its history. Mind you, even in the heyday of the early 1970s, Leeds supporters became more used to second place finishes and semi-final defeats than they did trophy wins. And who could forget Colchester United or Sunderland? Good news is that only Liverpool, Manchester United and Arsenal can boast better home records since the War.

19 **Sheffield Wednesday** Championship

Two relegations and a promotion in the past seven seasons, plus a couple of narrow escapes, have made it a torrid time for Owls fans. The club ended the last millennium as a Premiership side - having been founder members - but since then they have never been close to regaining top flight status. Wednesday's Cup record has been relatively good, regularly reaching the latter stages of the FA Cup and League Cup (and both finals in 1993), but as recently as 2004 they went out of both competitions in penalty shoot-outs. Up to the start of this season, Wednesday had conceded four goals in each of their last four cup games.

20 **Hartlepool United** League Two

Only Charlton have conceded more goals since the War than Hartlepool, and only a handful have a worse home record than the Victoria Park club. Surprisingly, perhaps, Hartlepool's average league position (8th) in the past 10 years is better than that of Everton, Portsmouth and Crystal Palace, but the statistic tells only half the story. In the late 1990s they flirted with relegation on several occasions (including avoiding a drop into the Conference by three points), but in the past seven seasons they have finished in the play-offs five times, were promoted once and relegated once. The first four play-off campaigns ended in elimination at the semi-final stage, but in 2005 they reached the League One final, losing 4-2 to Sheffield Wednesday after extra time, having led 2-1 with just 10 minutes of normal time remaining. A year later, they were relegated. As Sky Sports' Jeff Stelling will tell you, it's not easy being a Pools fan.

21 **Chester City** League Two

Since the early 1990s, Chester City have had a yo-yo existence. Three relegations, two promotions and two play-off berths since 1993, and their only two seasons in Football League Division Two both ended in an immediate return to the League's bottom rung. Even worse, in 2000 Chester dropped into the Nationwide Conference, taking four seasons to claw their way back into the Football League. In fact, in 2002 they narrowly avoided a drop into the Northern Premier League (with five games left, they were outside the drop zone only on goal difference). Last season, hopes of promotion to League One evaporated following a run of one win in 19 games, which saw them drop from fourth place to 24th and bottom (they eventually finished 15th). At least Chester have a decent FA Cup record, reaching the third round five times in the last nine seasons.

22 **Queens Park Rangers** Championship

Three times in the past 10 years QPR have clung onto their position in the Football League's top tier by the skin of their teeth, including on one occasion by a single point, and another on goals scored (four teams finished on 47 points, with Bury the team to lose out). In 2003 Rangers finished fourth in Division Two, but lost in the play-off final to Cardiff City by a single goal in extra time. A year later they achieved promotion, finishing second behind Plymouth Argyle. QPR spent the 2001-02 season in administration, and stories of further financial problems have circulated in more recent times.

23 **Shrewsbury Town** League Two

The nerves are frequently jangling in this Shropshire town. Four relegations since 1989, plus a string of dangerous dalliances with the drop, have made supporting the Shrews tough going. The only respite in recent times was the successful return to the Football League after a season in the Conference, but that required nerves of steel for players and fans alike, as Town won a penalty shoot-out against Aldershot at the Britannia Stadium. Shrewsbury have gone out of the FA Cup at the first round stage in four of the last six seasons, including a defeat two years ago to Southern League side Histon FC.

24 **Northampton Town** League One

It's never dull at the Sixfields Stadium. Since Northampton moved to their new ground in 1994, they have been relegated twice, promoted three times (including a play-off final win against Swansea in 1997), made the play-offs another three times (reaching the final again in 1998, but losing to Grimsby Town) and flirted with relegation twice. Last season they finished runners-up in League Two to Carlisle United, after an unbeaten run of nine games that took them from fifth spot. The Cobblers have also had seven managers in the past 10 years. Keep taking the medication.

25 **Manchester City** Premiership

Once the archetypal 'yo-yo club', in seven seasons between 1995 and 2002 City were relegated three times and promoted three times. They went from the Premiership to Division Two and back again. The reason they do not figure higher in our Top 50 is that City now seem to be a much more stable club, more likely to be found mid-table than scrapping at either end of the league. Nor have there been any cup shocks since Division Two Cardiff City beat the Premiership boys in the FA Cup fourth round in 1994. The Blues also appear to have put the brakes on the managerial merry-go-round. There were six new name plaques on the boss's door in the 1980s, and the same in the 1990s, but so far in this decade there have been only two. Stuart Pearce will be hoping it stays that way.

26 **Swansea City** League One

Swans fans have been on an emotional rollercoaster since 1996. Two relegations, two promotions and three unsuccessful appearances in play-offs add up to a heaped tablespoon of stress for supporters. Add to that concoction three finishes in the lower reaches of what was the Nationwide Third Division (including a last day win in 2003 that kept the Swans out of the Conference), plus a long-running battle over club ownership, and you can see why Swansea City figure so highly in our league. An interesting statistic from 1995-96 – which ended in relegation to the Third Division – was the number of managers the club had during the season: four, a Football League record.

27 **Lincoln City** League Two

If the play-offs were designed to fray the nerves of football fans, Lincoln City followers will have seen their nerves totally disintegrate over the past four seasons. Each time, the Imps have made it through to the post-season party, only for their promotion hopes to disappear faster than a Premiership manager at Panorama's Christmas party. Twice they were beaten in the semi-finals, but twice they made it to the Millennium Stadium, only to lose to Bournemouth and Southend. Anyone want to take bets on Lincoln's luck changing this season?

28 **Rotherham United** League One

Two relegations, two promotions, a play-off defeat, a survival on goal difference and another escape by just two points – the last ten years of Rotherham United, in a nutshell. Last season was a prime example, with safety in League One secured only after a nail-shredding 0-0 draw with MK Dons who, consequently, were relegated. And if that wasn't enough, the Millers' recent financial woes mean they started the 2006-07 season with a 10 point deduction. Their most famous fans are the Chuckle Brothers, but there's not much to laugh about these days at Millmoor.

29 **Torquay United** League Two

Torquay actually finished bottom of the Football League in 1996, but avoided relegation to the Conference because Stevenage Borough's ground failed to pass a Football League inspection. A year later they ended up just three points off the bottom, but the following season finished a surprising fifth, losing in the play-off final at Wembley to Colchester United. If Torquay fans thought that was the start of something good they were sadly mistaken, as the next season saw their side finish 20th, just five points above bottom-placed Scarborough. Since 2000 Torquay have finished 19th or lower in four of the six seasons, interspersed with a third place finish in 2004 and promotion (on goal difference) to League One. It was a short stay in League One, however, with relegation back to League Two after just one season. Phew!

30 **Port Vale** League One

Between 1995 and 2005, Vale finished their league campaign in 17th place or lower on no less than six occasions, although they were relegated only once (in 2000). In 1999, they escaped relegation to Nationwide League Division Two on goals scored, and in 2004 they missed out on the Division Two play-offs on goal difference. In the FA Cup, Port Vale had a run of third round games in the late 1990s against Blackburn Rovers, Arsenal, Liverpool and Leeds United. They lost all four ties, and then the following season they lost in the first round to non-league Canvey Island. Vale are another club who were put into administration (in December 2002, with more than £2m of debts).

31 **Doncaster Rovers** League One

Since relegation to the Conference in 1998 (after a record-breaking season of 34 league defeats), the sun has shone fairly brightly for Donny Rovers. Promotion back to the Football League – via the play-offs – after five years in the Conference was followed by promotion to League One, where they have remained for the past three years. It's off the field where Rovers have had most of their recent problems. Financial scandals, and a court case involving a plot by the club's former chairman to burn down the Belle Vue ground, threatened to send Rovers to the wall, but miraculously they survived.

32 **Wrexham** League Two

Another club where fans have had to endure more troubles off the field than on it. In late 2004 the club went into administration with seven-figure debts, and became the first club to be docked 10 points as a result, immediately dropping them from 16th place to 22nd. Not surprisingly, the deduction led to Wrexham's relegation from League One. That same season, they won the LDV Vans Trophy with a 2-0 final win over Southend. Wrexham have had a miserable time in the FA Cup in recent years, losing in the first round in five of the last six seasons.

33 **Hull City** Championship

Mid-table mediocrity is not a phrase you associate with Hull City these days. The last 11 years have seen two relegations, two promotions (in successive seasons) and a few survival scraps, including almost slipping out of the Football League in 1999. At that time, rising debts threatened to cripple the club, but a takeover in 2001 helped clear debts and bring security to the Tigers. In late 2002, the club moved from Boothferry Park to the impressive new KC Stadium. Two years later, Hull City had leapt two divisions and were now in the Coca-Cola Championship.

34 **Brighton & Hove Albion** League One

Brighton fans must wonder how following any other club could be more stressful. Since 1996 they've seen their team relegated three times, promoted three times in four seasons (twice as champions), twice finish one place off a drop into the Conference (once only by a better goals scored record) and two seasons ago escape relegation from the Championship by one point. Off the field it's been just as eventful, with a ground sale, a ground share, temporary home and then a move to Withdean Stadium. Debts rose, but The Seagulls avoided administration.

35 **Brentford** League One

Don't mention Reading or penalty shoot-outs to Bees supporters. Both have caused Brentford fans heartache in recent seasons. In the last game of the 2001-02 season, Brentford needed to beat Reading to leapfrog them into second place and claim automatic promotion to Division One. With 13 minutes to go, the Bees led 1-0 and Griffin Park held its collective breath. Then Jamie Cureton equalised for Reading and Brentford had to settle for the play-offs, eventually losing 2-0 in the final to Stoke. They made the play-offs again in 2005 and 2006, but lost in the semi-finals on both occasions. Since 1991, Brentford have been promoted twice, relegated twice and had six appearances in play-offs (losing in two finals). And the penalty shoot-outs? Since May 1995, Brentford have been involved in seven shoot-outs, losing four and winning three. In that period they also lost three cup ties in extra time. Ouch.

36 **Huddersfield Town** League One

Anyone who has followed Huddersfield Town over the past six or seven seasons can be forgiven for wanting a peaceful, relaxing campaign in League One this time around. It would certainly make a change. Since the start of the millennium Town have been relegated twice, promoted once – via a penalty shoot-out against Mansfield Town in the 2004 Division Three play-off final – and been in two other play-off campaigns, losing in the semi-finals in 2002 and again in 2006. They also missed out on the play-offs by two points in 2000, and by just one point in 2005. Off the field, Town faced the threat of liquidation in 2003 and went into administration, but a deal over the outstanding debts was done and Huddersfield recovered.

37 **Colchester United** Championship

Colchester are in English football's second tier for the first time in their history, so what's so stressful about that? Well, given their recent history, the odds on the U's staying in the Championship for long look slim. Between 1998 and 2005, Colchester finished no higher than 11th, and in five of those seven seasons they ended up 15th or lower. On three occasions their safety was in doubt until the final weeks of the season. However, fans of the U's might be feeling a little more relaxed, given the outstanding performance last season (including a club record 10 wins in a row) to finish a strong second to Southend United in League One. However, they scored only 19 goals in 23 away games – the lowest total in the top half of the table. In the FA Cup, fans' excitement was at fever pitch last term, with United taking the lead against Chelsea in a 5th Round tie at Stamford Bridge, but the Blues rallied to win 3-1.

38 **Derby County** Championship

The Rams' heyday may have been the early 1970s, with Cloughie at the helm, but they're clearly still capable of giving their fans the jitters on a regular basis. Between 1999 and 2006, Derby finished in the bottom five of their division in each season but one. On that occasion they finished a surprising fourth and made the Championship play-offs, only to lose to Preston in the semis. Those nervy seasons in the bottom reaches included three seasons in the Premiership, the last one (2001-02) seeing them relegated after finishing one off the bottom. Two years later, in what was then the Nationwide Division One, the Rams finished just one point clear of relegation, and last season they were two places above the drop.

Dropping from the Premiership led, inevitably, to cash problems at Pride Park, which were only relieved earlier this year with the arrival of a new consortium at the club.

39 **Leicester City** Championship

Two Premiership relegations, a penalty shoot-out defeat and a period in administration have made following Leicester City fairly stressful. When it comes to winning home games, the Foxes are in the bottom 10% of English clubs, and their goals against record is also one of the worst in the country. Martin O'Neill led them to four successive top 10 Premiership finishes in the late 1990s – plus League Cup wins in 1997 and 2000 – but after he left for Celtic in June 2000 a decline set in. In 2002, Leicester City were relegated to the First Division and that, combined with the move to a new stadium, precipitated the club going into administration. Promotion back to the Premiership was secured in 2003, but relegation followed the season after. City have had five managers since O'Neill left in 2000.

40 **Chesterfield** League One

Since being promoted from Division Three in 2001, the Spireites have been perennial strugglers in English football's third tier, finishing no higher than 16th in the last five seasons. Over the past four years they've finished no more than six points off relegation, and in 2004 they completed the 'Great Escape'. With one game left, Chesterfield were in the relegation zone, but they were among five teams who went into that final day not knowing if they'd go down or stay up. The Spireites were being held 0-0 by Luton at Saltergate with just two minutes left, and other scores meant they would be relegated. But striker Glynn Hurst popped up with a late, late winner. Chesterfield leapfrogged Grimsby to safety, condemning the Mariners to Division Three football.

41 **Watford** Premiership

Play-off finals are normally nerve-wracking affairs for fans, so Watford's faithful must have been delighted that last season's decider for a place in the Premiership was so one-sided. So while Leeds fans were grinding their teeth in frustration, the Watford contingent were having a party. But Hornets followers aren't immune to stress. The previous season Watford finished just two points off relegation, and since 1996 they have been relegated twice and promoted on two other occasions – including another play-off success in 1999, against Bolton at Wembley. Only once since 1997 have Watford made it past the third round of the FA Cup, but that year (2003) they made it all the way to the semi-finals, eventually losing narrowly to Southampton at Villa Park.

42 **Charlton Athletic** Premiership

Which club has the worst post-War defensive record in English football? Yep, it's the Addicks. And they also have one of the worst home records in the game, so following Charlton over the years guarantees a bumpy ride for fans. The late 1990s were particularly eventful, with two promotions, a relegation and a play-off spot in the space of five seasons. The 1998 Division One play-off final against Sunderland was a classic for the neutrals, but over two hours of total tension for fans of both sides. After extra time it was 4-4, but the Addicks kept their nerve to win a dramatic penalty shoot-out 7-6. Since returning to the Premiership in 2000, Charlton have achieved mid-table respectability. Whether that can be maintained in the post-Curbishley era (three managers already this season) remains to be seen. Charlton's financial problems have been well documented, including a spell in administration in 1984 and a temporary move away from The Valley in 1985 – only returning in 1992 after significant ground improvements had been made.

43 **Bristol Rovers** League Two

City fans may not agree, but fans of bitter rivals Bristol Rovers have, in our opinion, more reason to have frayed nerves from following their team. Whilst City's average league position over the past 10 years was third, Rovers averaged 12th, but in three of those seasons they finished 20th or worse. In 2001 they finished 21st in Division Two and were relegated, and a year later they were just one place away from relegation to the Conference, after winning just one of their last 16 games. Rovers made the play-offs just once in those 10 years – losing in the semis in 1998 to Northampton Town – although they were just two points away from the play-offs in 2000. In the FA Cup, Rovers fans have endured a few nail-biters, going out of the tournament in the last five seasons by the odd goal.

44 **Preston North End** Championship

You join the league...you win the title in your first two seasons...then nothing for 106 years. In fact, Preston haven't even been in English football's top flight since 1961. Three times in the last six years they've made the First Division/Championship play-offs, but twice they've lost in the final and once (last season) in the semis. In fact, Preston have made six play-off appearances since 1994, and have yet to win promotion. Wonder what would have happened if David Beckham – who made his league debut while on loan at Deepdale – had signed permanently for the club?

45 **Millwall** League One

Going to The (New) Den has been stressful in the past for visiting fans, but for the home supporters it's been the proverbial fortress. Remarkably, only six clubs – including three of the 'Big Four' – have a better post-War home record than Millwall, and the Lions have a superior goals against record to the likes of Spurs, Aston Villa and Chelsea. Millwall make our Top 50 because of their see-saw league performances over the past 10 years. Relegated twice, promoted once and two play-off appearances – both ending at the semi-final stages. There was also the small matter of an FA Cup Final appearance in 2004, which ended 3-0 to Manchester United. That followed a tense 1-0 semi-final win against Sunderland. Millwall are another club who have had a period in administration, which was followed by new (and now former) chairman Theo Paphitis suggesting the team play in grey shirts. The plan was dropped when fans objected. Even 'Dragons' don't mess with Millwall supporters!

46 **Leyton Orient** League One

If stress is more likely to occur at the bottom of the table than the top, Leyton Orient deserve their place in our Top 50. In five seasons out of six at the start of the millennium, the O's finished no better than 18th in Division Three. In between they reached the play-off final twice, losing on both occasions. Promotion out of the bottom division came eventually last season, secured with an incredibly tense 3-2 win at Oxford – the winner, from Lee Steele, came five minutes into injury time. Off the field, the last 10 years or so will be remembered for Orient almost going bust, until 'Snooker Loopy' Barry Hearn came in with a rescue package.

47 **Nottingham Forest** League One

The late 1970s and 1980s saw Forest perpetually challenging for domestic honours. Between 1977 and 1989 they finished in the top five of the First Division on eight occasions, although they won the title only once. Contrast that with 1993 (and Brian Clough's departure) to 2005 – four relegations and only four top 10 finishes. Promotion to the Premiership was secured twice; the first return lasting three seasons, but the second only one. Last season Forest missed out on the League One play-offs by two points. They were in a play-off position with three games to go, but fans' hopes were dashed as Forest failed to win any of those last three matches and Swansea overtook them to claim the final play-off spot.

48 **Wycombe Wanderers** League Two

The Chairboys – how's that for a nickname? – made an immediate impact when they arrived in the Football League in 1993, winning promotion to Division Two at the first attempt (via a Wembley play-off victory against Preston). Unfortunately that impressive start wasn't maintained, and for 10 seasons the Wanderers struggled in Division Two, flirting with the relegation zone on more than one occasion. They were relegated to the new League Two in 2004, and despite a play-off appearance last season (losing to Cheltenham Town in the semi-finals) that's where they remain. Wycombe have been involved in five penalty shoot-outs in the past 10 years, winning three and losing two, and also lost two LDV Trophy ties on the golden goal rule. The club reached the FA Cup last four in 2001, only for fans to see their hopes of final glory dashed by Liverpool in their semi-final.

49 **Gillingham** League One

They may have had two promotion campaigns and a relegation in the past 10 years, but most Gills fans are probably still recovering from what is probably the most dramatic play-off final to be played since the end-of-season shoot-out was introduced by the Football League some 20 years ago. In that memorable 1999 Division Two play-off, Gillingham led Manchester City 2-0 with just three minutes left. Not surprisingly, their fans were celebrating, but when City pulled one back there must have been nervous glances in the stands. Those will have multiplied when the referee added on six minutes of injury time, during which City equalised. The game eventually went to penalties, with City winning 3-1. The Gills returned to Wembley a year later, this time turning the tables to beat Wigan 3-2 in extra time. For those reasons alone, Gillingham deserve their top 50 place.

50 **West Ham United** Premiership

Why Hammers fans are associated with such a relaxing pastime as blowing bubbles is beyond us, seeing as they've lost four cup ties on penalties since 1998, including last season's FA Cup Final defeat to Liverpool. Doesn't get much more stressful than that. The Hammers faithful must also hate playing London sides in cup games – on seven occasions between January 1998 and October 2004 they lost to rivals from the capital. They also lost to Crystal Palace in a Division One play-off final in 2004.

And the rest...

- | | | | |
|----|--------------------------------|----|---------------------------|
| 51 | Rochdale | 72 | Cheltenham Town |
| 52 | Cardiff City | 73 | Middlesbrough |
| 53 | Southend United | 74 | Fulham |
| 54 | Barnet | 75 | Wigan Athletic |
| 55 | Peterborough United | 76 | Blackburn Rovers |
| 56 | Scunthorpe United | 77 | Accrington Stanley |
| 57 | Luton Town | 78 | Sheffield United |
| 58 | Plymouth Argyle | 79 | Macclesfield Town |
| 59 | Mansfield Town | 80 | Reading |
| 60 | AFC Bournemouth | 81 | Bristol City |
| 61 | Bolton Wanderers | 82 | Newcastle United |
| 62 | Tranmere Rovers | 83 | Tottenham Hotspur |
| 63 | Southampton | 84 | Boston United |
| 64 | Stoke City | 85 | Aston Villa |
| 65 | Sunderland | 86 | Birmingham City |
| 66 | Hereford United | 87 | Everton |
| 67 | Blackpool | 88 | Chelsea |
| 68 | Burnley | 89 | Manchester United |
| 69 | Norwich City | 90 | Yeovil Town |
| 70 | Ipswich Town | 91 | Arsenal |
| 71 | Wolverhampton Wanderers | 92 | Liverpool |

League-by-league

Barclays Premiership

- 1 **Portsmouth (8)**
- 2 **Manchester City (25)**
- 3 **Watford (41)**
- 4 **Charlton Athletic (42)**
- 5 **West Ham United (50)**
- 6 **Bolton Wanderers (61)**
- 7 **Middlesbrough (73)**
- 8 **Fulham (74)**
- 9 **Wigan Athletic (75)**
- 10 **Blackburn Rovers (76)**
- 11 **Sheffield United (78)**
- 12 **Reading (80)**
- 13 **Newcastle United (82)**
- 14 **Tottenham Hotspur (83)**
- 15 **Aston Villa (85)**
- 16 **Everton (87)**
- 17 **Chelsea (88)**
- 18 **Manchester United (89)**
- 19 **Arsenal (91)**
- 20 **Liverpool (92)**



Coca-Cola Championship

- 1 **Crystal Palace (11)**
- 2 **West Bromwich Albion (14)**
- 3 **Coventry City (15)**
- 4 **Barnsley (16)**
- 5 **Leeds United (18)**
- 6 **Sheffield Wednesday (19)**
- 7 **Queens Park Rangers (22)**
- 8 **Hull City (33)**
- 9 **Colchester United (37)**
- 10 **Derby County (38)**
- 11 **Leicester City (39)**
- 12 **Preston North End (44)**
- 13 **Cardiff City (52)**
- 14 **Southend United (53)**
- 15 **Luton Town (57)**
- 16 **Plymouth Argyle (58)**
- 17 **Southampton (63)**
- 18 **Stoke City (64)**
- 19 **Sunderland (65)**
- 20 **Burnley (68)**
- 21 **Norwich City (69)**
- 22 **Ipswich Town (70)**
- 23 **Wolves (71)**
- 24 **Birmingham City (86)**



Coca-Cola League One

- 1 **Carlisle United (3)**
- 2 **Crewe Alexandra (7)**
- 3 **Bradford City (12)**
- 4 **Oldham Athletic (17)**
- 5 **Northampton town (24)**
- 6 **Swansea City (26)**
- 7 **Rotherham United (28)**
- 8 **Port Vale (30)**
- 9 **Doncaster Rovers (31)**
- 10 **Brighton & Hove Albion (34)**
- 11 **Brentford (35)**
- 12 **Huddersfield Town (36)**
- 13 **Chesterfield (40)**
- 14 **Millwall (45)**
- 15 **Leyton Orient (46)**
- 16 **Nottingham Forest (47)**
- 17 **Gillingham (49)**
- 18 **Scunthorpe United (56)**
- 19 **AFC Bournemouth (60)**
- 20 **Tranmere Rovers (62)**
- 21 **Blackpool (67)**
- 22 **Cheltenham Town (72)**
- 23 **Bristol City (81)**
- 24 **Yeovil Town (90)**



Coca-Cola League Two

- 1 **Notts County (1)**
- 2 **MK Dons (2)**
- 3 **Darlington (4)**
- 4 **Swindon Town (5)**
- 5 **Bury (6)**
- 6 **Stockport County (9)**
- 7 **Grimsby Town (10)**
- 8 **Walsall (13)**
- 9 **Hartlepool (20)**
- 10 **Chester City (21)**
- 11 **Shrewsbury Town (23)**
- 12 **Lincoln City (27)**
- 13 **Torquay United (29)**
- 14 **Wrexham (32)**
- 15 **Bristol Rovers (43)**
- 16 **Wycombe Wanderers (48)**
- 17 **Rochdale (51)**
- 18 **Barnet (54)**
- 19 **Peterborough United (55)**
- 20 **Mansfield Town (59)**
- 21 **Hereford United (66)**
- 22 **Accrington Stanley (77)**
- 23 **Macclesfield Town (79)**
- 24 **Boston United (84)**

