

YOU decide who faces the drop

THE BIG PICTURE

WITH ANTHONY VICKERS



AFTER FA Cup heartbreak, Boro must bounce back and claw their way out to safety in the closest relegation battle in years. Could they get dragged down? With Derby and Fulham as good as down, who will be the third team to go through the trap-door?

BATTERED Boro must now dust themselves off ready for a cut-throat relegation battle. We must sweep aside the debris of shattered dreams and broken hearts after the Cardiff debacle and immediately focus on the next 10 games because being dragged through the trap-door would be an unmitigated disaster. The nagging fear is that any kind of FA Cup exit hangover will have debilitating impact on their form and jeopardise Boro's top flight status. Gareth Southgate's side do not have the kind of healthy cushion needed to protect them if they go into a tailspin after what has been a disastrous, season-wrecking week. Two defeats have thrown the season into chaos. Had they won against Reading and Cardiff, Boro would have been a healthy seven points clear of the Royals now, with a game in hand, all but safe and planning for Wembley.

Instead, a Reading side that looked favourites to go down are just one point behind and look to have the fire needed to survive while the FA Cup defeat has left Boro in disarray and the season poised to descend into back-biting, despair, finger-pointing and anger. But the recriminations can wait. Boro have 10 games to save the season and it is the players who let us down against Cardiff that will have to do it. It sounds trite and clichéd but it is time to concentrate on the league. And let's be honest, Boro now look increasingly vulnerable.

BORO
12th (29pts) Pts

A Aston Villa	
A Arsenal	
H Derby	
A Chelsea	
H Man Utd	
A Tottenham	
H Bolton	
A Sunderland	
H Portsmouth	
H Man City	
29+	
TOTAL	

WIGAN
13th (28pts) Pts

H Bolton	
A Blackburn	
A Portsmouth	
H Birmingham	
A Chelsea	
H Tottenham	
H Reading	
A Aston Villa	
H Man Utd	
28+	
TOTAL	

READING
14th (28pts) Pts

A Liverpool	
H Birmingham	
H Blackburn	
A Newcastle	
H Fulham	
A Arsenal	
A Wigan	
H Tottenham	
A Derby	
28+	
TOTAL	

NEWCASTLE
15th (28pts) Pts

A Birmingham	
H Fulham	
A Tottenham	
H Reading	
A Portsmouth	
H Sunderland	
A West Ham	
H Chelsea	
A Everton	
28+	
TOTAL	

SUNDERLAND
16th (27pts) Pts

H Chelsea	
A Aston Villa	
H West Ham	
A Fulham	
H Man City	
A Newcastle	
H BORO	
A Bolton	
H Arsenal	
27+	
TOTAL	

BIRMINGHAM
17th (26pts) Pts

A Portsmouth	
H Newcastle	
A Reading	
H Man City	
H Wigan	
H Everton	
A Aston Villa	
H Liverpool	
A Fulham	
H Blackburn	
26+	
TOTAL	

BOLTON
18th (25pts) Pts

A Wigan	
A Man Utd	
H Man City	
H Arsenal	
A Aston Villa	
H West Ham	
A BORO	
A Tottenham	
H Sunderland	
A Chelsea	
25+	
TOTAL	

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downloaded at gazettelive.co.uk

A pointless return from games away at Aston Villa tomorrow and Arsenal on Saturday will make the Riverside rumble with Derby a must-win game. In the aftermath of Cardiff many hurt supporters were swearing they would not go to that one and predicting a sub 20,000 crowd - yet arguably it is a bigger game with far greater implications and where the team need a crowd to sting them into action.

Boro also face Bolton and Sunderland in six-pointer basement battles where the war will be won or lost. Right now spirits are low and many will be fearing Boro are holed below the waterline - but believe it or not there are other sides in an even worse predicament, with worst form and with far worse run-ins. Look at Newcastle: they are without a win in nine - two points from 27 - and look to be disintegrating by the week.

And Bolton have the run-in from hell: nine out their 10 are tough games against teams with something to fight for - and they have the distractions of the UEFA Cup. For now. They go to in-form Wigan, then Manchesters City and United, Arsenal, Villa, Chelsea and Spurs... plus a trip to Boro that could be do-or-die. For my money it is anyone from

those two to plunge into the abyss with Boro staying up on default. Again. But the dog-fight is balanced on a knife-edge now and only four points cover the seven teams scrapping to avoid the black spot. Any side that suffers a wobble now could find themselves in the sticky stuff with time fast running out. Gulp. But if a team can dip into their

reserves of fighting spirit and put together a run of results then they can escape the mire by clawing over the bodies of their less robust rivals. It is too close to call... but we are asking you anyway. Who do YOU think will go down? It may be that smarting fans will now see no hope of redemption for Boro and take revenge by voting for them. It may be that wishful thinking will

see old rivals Newcastle clicked into touch. Here are the remaining fixtures of the seven teams playing Russian roulette. Weigh up where you think they may pick up points and tot up how many you believe they will finish with. Then go to www.gazettelive.co.uk and click on your tips for the drop so we can put some figures on who Teesside thinks will go down.

HOW TO PLAY
 ■ Predict your points per game tally for each of the hotspot contenders
 ■ Add them up
 ■ Add them to the current points tally
 ■ Go to gazettelive.co.uk and click on "your relegation"
 ■ Tell us who you predict will go down

BARCLAYS PREMIERSHIP
CURRENT FORM, LAST 6 GAMES

	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
Liverpool	5	1	0	16	3	13	16
Chelsea	4	2	0	9	1	8	14
Everton	4	2	0	7	1	6	14
Man Utd	4	1	1	14	4	10	13
Arsenal	3	3	0	11	4	7	12
Tottenham	3	2	1	11	5	6	11
Portsmouth	3	1	2	7	7	0	10
Aston Villa	2	3	1	11	8	3	9
Blackburn	2	3	1	7	5	2	9
BORO	2	2	2	6	6	0	8
Wigan	2	2	2	3	3	0	8
Sunderland	2	1	3	4	5	-1	7
Birmingham	1	3	2	8	8	0	6
Reading	2	0	4	4	6	-2	6
Bolton	1	2	3	4	8	-4	5
Fulham	1	2	3	3	7	-4	5
Man City	1	2	3	4	9	-5	5
West Ham	1	1	4	2	14	-12	4
Derby	0	3	3	3	10	-7	3
Newcastle	0	1	5	3	17	-14	1

Which manager will

WHO HAS the bottle for the battle? With the relegation dogfight coming to the boil it could come down to which of the beleaguered bosses can keep their nerve in the Premiership pressure cooker. They will need to organise and inspire their troops to scrap for precious points and will need the steel to take big decisions: to stick with or drop "stars" who fail to produce, to abandon the tactical shapes that haven't been working and to keep it solid in the hope of a draw or gamble and give it a go in the crucial basement battles against their fellow strugglers.

In the £60m scrap for survival who has the experience, the ingenuity and the luck to avoid falling into the abyss? Here we look at the contenders.
 ■ **GARETH SOUTHGATE:** A relative rookie, Southgate faces his biggest test yet as he tries to pick up a team left deflated after an FA Cup exit to Cardiff. In his debut term he found himself in a similar position but remained cool as Boro edged away from the drop with two games to spare.
 ■ **KEVIN KEEGAN:** The pressure is mounting on the mis-firing Messiah after a run of nine games

keep their nerve and stay up?

without a win. He has a track record of walking away when things go wrong. How he reacts in an almost unknown landscape could be decisive.
 ■ **STEVE BRUCE:** Seasoned basement battler Bruce has twice escaped from the dogfight with Birmingham - and once been sucked down - so he knows that it is a fine line between success and failure.
 ■ **STEVE COPPELL:** Coppell was twice relegated with Crystal Palace and resigned at Manchester City citing stress. But he has stuck to his task to battle back from second season syndrome and

after losing eight in a row two wins on the bounce have offered hope.
 ■ **ROY KEANE:** Simmering, demanding and scary, the former Manchester United hardman has a no-nonsense line that has seen players dropped and shipped out for disciplinary misdemeanours. His force of will drove Sunderland to promotion last term but the Premiership is harsh terrain for such raw material and shrewder man-management may be needed in the run-in.
 ■ **ALEX MCLEISH:** The ex-Rangers and Scotland boss won on his debut at Brum, but since then

his defensive high tempo work ethic has failed to spark a revival. Having been a big fish in Scotland he will find the Premiership pond a far more hostile environment and must adapt quickly if City are to survive.
 ■ **GARY MEGSON:** His route one football and abrasive public persona have not endeared Megson to fans at his previous clubs - he took West Brom up and then back down amid boardroom and dressing room dissent - although that would be forgiven if he can keep Bolton up after a disastrous start under Sammy Lee.