

# A HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL LEAGUES.

## 1. IN THE BEGINNING.

### THE 1960s

Although the National Championship Cup had been in operation since the formation of the Amateur Basketball Association (ABBA) in 1935, the first real attempt to form a National League in England had to wait for a further 25 years. In February 1960, an inaugural meeting, to investigate the idea of a National league, was held, at the Birmingham Athletic Institute.

From where the initiative had originally come is not clear, but the invitations were sent out by the Association's Assistant Secretary, Huw Clayton-Jones. The meeting set up an "England Amateur Basketball League" committee, with Brian Coleman (later the Association's Technical Officer) as its General Secretary, and Morris Wordsworth (the Doncaster Coach, later to coach the national team and to become an EBBA director) as Treasurer.

The committee had grand plans, for a two division competition, but there was an indication of two of the major problems that were to beset the League right up to the present day, when fears over travelling expenses led to several teams dropping out!

It must be remembered, however, that this was in the days when there were still only three motorways in the country (the Preston by-pass, M6; a short stretch of the M1; and the Doncaster by-pass, A1(M)), and so travel really would have been expensive ... and time consuming.

The result was that the renamed "National Basketball League" tipped off in early October 1960, with nine members – Borehamwood Bullets, Watford Royals, Nottingham Dodgers, Aspley Old Boys (Nottingham), Birmingham Athletic Institute, Birmingham Dolobran, Doncaster Panthers, Manchester YMCA Comets, and Billingham Tech.

Most of these names will be unfamiliar to modern basketball fans, but they were among the top provincial sides in the country at the time. Dolobran had won the National Championship Cup (then the premier competition in the country) in 1951, and finished as losing finalists in '52, '53, '55 and '59, while Aspley were the 1959 winners.

The key word, though, is "provincial", as the London teams felt that they had strong enough competition in their own London League, and they all shunned the new "national" competition. Since the two strongest teams in the country in the '60s were London based (Central YMCA and London Poly.), this had a detrimental effect on both the standard of the National League, and on general perception of it. Between 1952 and 1964, London teams won all but one of the National Championship Finals!

The new League pressed on undaunted, and its quality was shown when eight of their number reached the last 16 of the National Championship, but that title remained in London, with the University beating Central YMCA 68-59 in the Final, held at South Ruislip.

The national league comprised the same nine teams in 1961-2, but without the London clubs its prospects were slim, and two seasons later there were just five members.

That prompted a re-think, and a regionalisation (there really is nothing new in basketball!), and in 1965-6 there were three sections, with a total of 16 teams, including two from Scotland.

In 1966 the "foreign" element was recognised, with a change of name to the British Basketball League (there really is nothing new ... etc.), and in '69 it became the "Rose Bowl".

Despite the fact that there were forty entries for this competition, it had clearly ceased to be a national "League", despite the appointment of a full-time administrator (Mel Welch).

By 1972, the Scots had their own thriving National League, though also competing in the "Rose Bowl", and when a London team, Sutton, defeated Edinburgh's Boroughmuir Barrs in the 1972 Final, the Basketball Association decided that it was time to relaunch the idea of an English National League.

There was still some opposition to the idea. Several people pointed out that no other amateur sport had a national league – not Hockey, not Rugby Union; the only national leagues were in the professional sports, such as Soccer and Rugby League (and the latter was hardly truly national, as it was restricted to Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cumbria).

## THE NATIONAL INVITATION TOURNAMENT

Undaunted, but learning from the possible over-ambition of the earlier venture, The Basketball Association pressed ahead, and held a "National Invitation Tournament", at Bingham outside Nottingham, to select the inaugural participants.

There was a good geographic spread among ten teams that took part in the two-day event. London was represented by Avenue (the Cup holders) and Sutton (the previous year's beaten Cup Finalists), while Sussex Chevrons and St. Luke's Exeter were also Southern-based; Loughborough All-Stars and West Midlands appeared for the Midlands, and Liverpool, Stretford and Sheffield represented the North. RAF Fliers had no specific location, but had plans to take their games around the country, if selected.

Doncaster Panthers were one of the leading teams to be disappointed, and not to be given a place in the NIT, as they did not, at that time, meet all the criteria. I believe that their biggest problem was lack of a suitable venue for the standard of competition that was envisaged.

Unfortunately it's now very difficult to obtain full results for the Tournament (I don't even know how the Pool stage was organised), but there is enough information available to give what I hope is an understandable explanation.

<b>Pools:</b>	Av.	Liv.	Lou.	RAF	Sh.	St.L.	Str.	Sus.	Sut.	W.M	P.	W.	L.
Avenue	x				x						3		
Liverpool		x			x						3	2	1
Loughborough			x		x						3		
RAF Fliers				x	x						3		
Sheffield Scorpions	x	x	x	x	x	96-65	73-59	x	79-71	x	3	3	0
St. Luke's					65-96	x					3	2	1
Stretford					59-73		x				3		
Sussex Chevron					x			x			3	2	1
Sutton					71-79					x	3		
West Midlands					x					x	3		

The first stage had the teams divided into (two?) Pools, and playing three games each.

Sheffield Scorpions (who included England International and Tournament top scorer Mike Gattorna) had a great first day, winning all three of their games, with Liverpool (including Steve Latham), Sutton, Sussex and St. Luke's all having lost just once. It looks as though Stretford and West Midlands probably failed to win a game at this stage, as they were the two who failed to progress to the next stage.

<b>Quarter Finals:</b>	<b>Semi Finals:</b>	<b>Final</b>
Liverpool 74 }		
St. Luke's 67 }	Liverpool	74 }
		} Liverpool
Sussex Chevron 72 }	Sussex Chevron	67 }
RAF Fliers 53 }		
Sheffield 81 }		
Loughborough 65 }	Sheffield	89 }
		} Sheffield
Avenue 73 }	Avenue	61 }
Sutton 68 }		
		71

The second day saw the surviving teams progressing to the knock-out stages, and it looks as though the teams were seeded according to their performance in the Pool stage.

Liverpool, Sussex, Sheffield and Avenue all progressed to the semi-finals.

The Final, between Liverpool and Sheffield, proved to be an excellent advert for English basketball, despite the fact that

the players must have been well knackered as they played their sixth game in thirty-six hours.

Sheffield played aggressive defence, coupled with fast-breaking attack, usually led by Gattorna, while Liverpool relied on a slower build-up, orchestrated by Vaughan Thomas, while Latham dominated the boards. In a tense second half key players from both sides began to foul out - most crucially Mike Gattorna for Sheffield. Despite that, the Scorpions pulled back to within three points, but Liverpool played out the final minute to lift the trophy.

It seems as though must also have been a third/fourth place match, as the teams were then ranked according to their performance in the tournament.

<b>National Invitation Tournament placings</b>		
1	Liverpool	Selected for National League
2	Sheffield Scorpions	Selected for National League
3	Avenue	Selected for National League
4	Sussex Chevron	Not selected
5=	Loughborough All-Stars	Selected for National League
5=	RAF Fliers	Selected for National League
7=	Sutton	Selected for National League
7=	St. Luke's, Exeter	Not selected
9	Stretford	Not selected
10	West Midlands	Not selected

There were still strict criteria to be met, in addition to playing strength (again, there's nothing new in basketball!), for a team to be accepted into the inaugural National League, and six of the top seven in the NIT were chosen.

The League was as nearly national as it was possible to be with such small numbers, with two teams from London, one from the East Midlands, two from the North, and one peripatetic.

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