

# A HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL LEAGUES.

## 2. TIP-OFF.

### 1972-1973:

So it was that the re-launched National Basketball League tipped off its first campaign in October 1972.

An interesting aspect of the League in that first Season (and for the next four) was that two points were awarded for a win – and one for a defeat!

This suggests to me that the organisers were concerned about the possibility of unfulfilled fixtures, and built in an incentive for clubs to ensure that they did not default.

There were two aspects of the Season that gave an indication of the way that the League would develop, and they both involved Liverpool, run by the flamboyant Vaughan Thomas.

Liverpool were the first club to incorporate a sponsor's name into their title, playing as Bruno Roughcutters, in recognition of their funding from WD & HO Wills, one of whose products was Bruno Roughcut tobacco.

The other "first" concerned the use of overseas players. There had been Americans in English teams before (Oxford University, in particular could often field at least nine!), but they were all amateurs who happened to be over here on other business, and were recruited to play for local clubs.

Liverpool was the first club to import an American, Larry Meek, specifically to play basketball! I wonder if they can have had any idea what they were starting?

That first Season produced a more dramatic finish than any of its organisers or participants could possibly have envisaged.

Avenue had suffered just one defeat all Season, 89-84 at London rivals Sutton. Though Liverpool had only lost twice (Sutton also claiming their scalp, 88-76), one of those defeats was at home to Avenue, 79-91.

The Londoners thus went into the final game of the Season full of confidence, only to suffer their sole home reverse of the campaign - 77-80, to Liverpool, who thus tied with them at the top of the table!

Under current rules, of course, Avenue would take the title by virtue of a better record in the games between the tying teams.

However, that rule was not in place at the time, and a play-off ensued, in which Avenue showed their class with a 27 point thrashing of their rivals.

1972-3 title play-off:	
Avenue (Leyton)	92
Bruno Roughcutters (Liverpool)	65



Willie Cameron (Liverpool) grabs the rebound from Len Hoy (Avenue). Steve Latham (#24 Bruno) watches in the background.

NATIONAL BASKETBALL LEAGUE		1972-1973					
		Pl.	W.	L.	For	Agt.	Pts.
1	Avenue (Leyton)	10	8	2	878	758	18
2	Bruno Roughcutters (Liverpool)	10	8	2	747	719	18
3	Sutton	10	6	4	798	758	16
4	Loughborough All-Stars	10	5	5	754	748	15
5	Sheffield YMCA Scorpions	10	3	7	821	769	13
6	RAF Fliers	10	0	10	635	825	10

Not that the whole Season was just about the top two.

Sutton and Loughborough both put in creditable performances throughout, and Sheffield, despite losing all but three games, could boast the league's top scorer, in Mike Gattorna, who hit 289 points in his ten matches.

losing every match - by an average of 19 points.

Only the RAF were a disappointment,

Liverpool's England International Steve Latham was the second highest scorer in the competition, with 213 points, and other players who were to have a formative influence on the League's early years also featured highly.

Avenue had Rick Mann in 3rd place (191 points), and Len Hoy in 7th (166); Carl Olsson hit 190 in 9 games for Loughborough to finish 4th; and Bob Mackay led the way for Sutton (6th, with 186 from 9), with a young Kenny Walton in 11th (134 from 9).

## THE NATIONAL CUP:

The National League teams did not have it all their own way in the National Championship Cup, however, as the London Latvians (LLSK) staked their claim for a place in the new elite.

Beating four of the six League teams on their way to lifting the Cup, the North London based team thus became the last non-league side to lift the Cup. Interestingly this mirrored soccer, where the last non-league team to win the FA Cup, Tottenham Hotspur, also hailed from North London!

CLARK'S MEN'S SHOES NATIONAL CUP, 1992-1993				
First Round	Second Round	1/4 Final	Semi-Final	FINAL
Cambridge	(x) 73 }			
London Poly.	(x) 72 }	Cambridge	(x) 61 }	
			} YMCA Metros	79 }
YMCA Metros	(x) 68 }	YMCA Metros	(x) 77 }	
Derby CFE	(x) 48 }			} LLSK
		RAF Fliers	(1) 51 }	LLSK
LLSK	(x) 76 }	LLSK	(x) 75 }	
Loughborough A-S	(1) 75 }			} LLSK
		Bruno, Liverpool	(1) 66 }	
Stretford	(x) 77 }	Stretford	(x) 64 }	Liverpool
Exeter University	(x) 48 }			} Liverpool
		Doncaster Panthers	(x) 90 }	Doncaster
		Manchester YMCA	(x) 58 }	
		Oxford University	(x) 87 }	
		Romford YMCA	(x) 84 }	Oxford Uni.
				} Sutton
		Avenue	(1) 68 }	Sutton
Southern Pirates	(x) 54 }	Sutton	(1) 70 }	
Sutton	(1) 76 }			} Sutton
		St.Luke's Exeter	(x) 90 }	
Sheffield Scorpions	(1) 98 }	Sheffield Scorpions	(1) 92 }	Sheffield
Vauxhall Motors	(x) 76 }			} Sheffield
		Walsall Dons	(x) 74 }	Walsall Dons
		Malory Lewisham	(x) 54 }	

Drawn at home to Loughborough in the First Round, LLSK scraped through by a single point, 76-75, before easily disposing of RAF Fliers, 75-51, on the road in the Second Round.

The Quarter Final brought them a visit to the renowned Cup fighters, Central YMCA, who already had eight Championships to their name. The result was another scalp for LLSK, 79-81. Then came the semi-final, and the biggest scalp of all, Liverpool Roughcutters, with a 113-108 victory in overtime! Peter Sprogis (soon to dominate the League scoring charts) hit 51 points for the victors - and this in the days before the 3-point arc was even thought of!

Sheffield had avoided League opposition until the semi-final, when they came up against Sutton (who had put holders Avenue out in the Second Round, 70-68), and the Scorpions gave the Londoners a run for their money before succumbing 105-102.

That brought about a Final between Sutton and LLSK, starting a rivalry which was to dominate the rest of the '70s. Sutton began as favourites, and led by five going into the final minute at Crystal Palace National Sports Centre. Latvians, however, scored the last three baskets (with Sprogis, who led all scorers with a more modest 28, hitting the winner).

## NATIONAL INVITATION TOURNAMENT, 1973

The end of the Season saw the end of National League involvement for both RAF Fliers and Sheffield Scorpions, as the Association held a National Invitation Tournament to determine the replacement and expansion teams.

Liverpool, as holders, were invited back, even though they had finished as League runners-up, but Sheffield (beaten finalists the year before) and RAF Fliers were there in a very different capacity - attempting to retain the League status! The Tournament was held at Deeside, the home court of the Liverpool team.

This time the teams had "only" to face four matches in the two days, rather than three a day, with the Saturday given over to matches in three Pools of three.

The newly crowned Cup Champions, LLSK, won both matches in their Pool, as did Metropolitan London YMCA in theirs, and Stretford in the third group. Unfortunately, I don't have any of the detailed results from these pools (yet?), nor do I have information on which of the other contestants was in which pool, except that London Metros shared a pool with Liverpool.

N.I.T. Pools						
	LL	?	?	P.	W.	L.
LLSK	x			2	2	0
?		x		2	1	1
?			x	2	0	2
	Y.	Liv.	?	P.	W.	L.
London YMCA Metros	x			2	2	0
Bruno, Liverpool		x		2	1	1
?			x	2	0	2
	St.	?	?	P.	W.	L.
Stretford	x			2	2	0
?		x		2	1	1
?			x	2	0	2

The defending NIT champions must have had the best record of the second placed teams in the pools, as they went through to the semi finals, where they came up against London YMCA again!

This time it was the Merseysiders who were successful, and they thus played in the second consecutive NIT final.

Their opponents, LLSK, had already comprehensively disposed of Stretford, but the final was a close-run affair. The London club had the better of the early exchanges, leading 25-14, and though Stu Turpie picked up four quick fouls, Nigel Acres picked up the defensive role well, and (as Basketball magazine reported, damning with faint praise), he "proved that given the space he could also score".

At the interval, LLSK seemed to be cruising to victory, 56-40. Perhaps it was this that caused their defence to relax in the second period, but it did so at the precise moment that Liverpool's attack found its flair - a combination which enabled the holders to edge ahead.

Stu Turpie was brought back to add much-needed resolve to the LLSK defence, and Sprogis and his fellow guard Robbie Stephens edged them back into the lead. The closing minutes remained tense, but the Londoners' held their nerve, to pick up their second trophy of the season - by a mere three points.

Semi Finals	Final
Stretford	72}
LLSK	91} LLSK 95 }
London YMCA Metros	64} Bruno Roughcutters 92 }
Bruno Roughcutters	75}

National Invitation Tournament placings	
1 LLSK (Embassy All-Stars)	Selected
2 Bruno Roughcutters (Liverpool) (Holders)	
3 London YMCA Metros	Selected
4 ATS Giants (Stretford)	Selected
5 Wilson Panthers, Doncaster	Selected
6 Southern Pirates	Not selected
7 Sheffield YMCA Scorpions	Not selected
8 R.A.F. Fliers	Not selected
9 West Midlands	Not selected

It was thus no surprise that LLSK were selected for entry to an expanded National League.

Also chosen were the two beaten semi-finalists, Stretford and London YMCA Metros.

The latter had been formed as a result of a merger between Central and Romford YMCAs, while the former's premises were being rebuilt. Thus the most successful team in English Basketball thus far (with eight National Cup successes to their name) finally joined the National League.

With Sheffield Scorpions and RAF Fliers finishing seventh and eighth respectively they lost their league status, while Sheffield's neighbours, Doncaster Panthers (who had found a home, at Worksop, just south of Doncaster, that met the League's criteria) took the final vacancy.