

A HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL LEAGUES.

4. ONWARDS AND UPWARDS.

1974-1975:

By its third Season the National League was becoming well established, and proving wrong the doubters who had questioned the wisdom of setting up the only national league competition in any amateur sport.

Those doubters might have pointed to the late withdrawal of Liverpool (so late that their fixtures were still included in the league handbook). That, though, would be to ignore the increasing demand for membership of the League - which was clearly indicated by the readiness with which Cleveland Strongarm stepped into Liverpool's place at very short notice.

Many teams now included American players in their squad.

Granwood, Coventry had Bob Howell; Embassy brought over Steve Schmitt, a 6'10" Centre with a pony tail, alongside Berni Dignan at Forward; Palace also boasted two Americans, with Guymon back again, partnered this time by 6'7" Mike Stewart; and Doncaster confirmed their ambitions, with Canadian Ricky Cassey, and American Mel Brown, though the latter lasted just one game before homesickness took him back across the Atlantic!

London Metros, not to be outdone, brought in their own foreign signing for the second half of the Season - the commentator's nightmare, Juan Salazar de Cardenas, from Peru.

There were still a considerable number of quality English players around, though. Manchester Giants enhanced their competitiveness with the capture of Steve Latham when Liverpool dropped out, and they brought Ken Walton up from Crystal Palace. Meanwhile Ian Day (who was originally from Southampton) moved back South from Doncaster, to join Palace. Loughborough still had Carl Olssen, and among the others were John Dabrowski, and Richard Pearce (later to become better known as "Hissing Dick" Pearce, the top-grade referee).

The influx of foreigners, though, was not without its critics, who claimed that English players were being deprived of court time. (See, there really is nothing new in basketball!). Chief among the critics were inaugural champions, Avenue, who declared a deliberate policy of playing with an all-British squad. Best known among these were Len Hoy, Rick Mann and Vic Collins.

Another sign of the League's growth was the improvement in many of the playing facilities. Embassy were now settled in at the Sobell Centre, and Doncaster had returned "home", from Worksop, with the opening of Adwick Leisure Centre.

Adwick was actually a by-product of the local government reorganisation of 1974. The Urban District Council of that name was about to be absorbed by the new Metropolitan Borough of Doncaster, and they were loath to see the financial reserves, which they had prudently accumulated over many years, disappear into the larger pot. They felt that their money should be spent on something which would be of long-term benefit to their immediate area ... and the result was the first purpose-built Leisure Centre in Doncaster.

The Season duly tipped off on 5th October (it still surprises me how short the Season was in those days!), with a resounding 86-108 victory for Embassy at newcomers St. Luke's Exeter. It finished on 23rd March, with Embassy clinching the League title with a 114-72 win in the return fixture.

CLARK'S MENS' SHOES NATIONAL BASKETBALL LEAGUE				1974-1975		
	Pl.	W.	L.	For	Agt.	Pts.
1 Embassy All-Stars	18	17	1	1799	1458	35
2 Sutton & Crystal Palace	18	16	2	1606	1407	34
3 Wilson Panthers, Doncaster	18	11	7	1473	1393	29
4 Avenue (Edmonton)	18	10	8	1413	1472	28
5 Granwood, Coventry	18	8	10	1490	1457	26
6 London YMCA Metros	18	8	10	1498	1503	26
7 Loughborough All-Stars	18	8	10	1446	1402	26
8 ATS Giants (Manchester)	18	7	11	1359	1352	25
9 St. Luke's Exeter	18	3	15	1344	1628	21 To new Division 2
10 Cleveland Strongarm	18	2	16	1439	1795	20 Won NIT

Defending champions Crystal Palace had a scare in late October when they visited Sale, the home of ATS Giants, and they scraped a mere 65-66 victory.

Despite that early scare, by mid-November, Palace and Embassy were the only remaining unbeaten teams.

Then came a big shock, at a rare midweek game. Palace, who had played their first three home matches at Crawley, were making their season's debut at their titular home, with the visit of League newcomers St. Luke's, on 20th November.

With Palace standing 5&0, and Exeter 0&5 (having lost their games by an average of 22 points), the result seemed a foregone conclusion. So, "Sutton & Crystal Palace 63, St. Luke's Exeter 69" sent a thrill of excitement through the basketball community (with the exception, of course, of anyone connected with the South London club!).

By some vagary of the fixture list, the return match at Exeter was just three days later, on the Saturday, and some semblance of "normality" was restored, with an 85-108 scoreline, but the damage to Palace's reputation, and to their hopes of retaining the title, had already been done.

Both the reputation, and the aspirations, were duly restored on 15th December, with the visit of the undefeated Embassy All-Stars to Crawley. Palace came out on top, 90-87, to draw level with their rivals at the top of the table, and everyone immediately began looking forward to the return fixture.

Before then, though, there were scares to come for both of the "big two", notably up at Doncaster. Palace's visit to Adwick marked the post-festive restart, on 12th January, and they knew that they had to try to improve their indifferent away form.

That certainly wasn't the case by the half-time interval, with the Panthers leading 37-28, and the home side extended their lead to 52-36 in the second half. At last Palace realised that they were in a game, and they fought back to level at 58-all, with four minutes to play. Again Doncaster went ahead, 64-60, but the final four points of regulation time went to Jimmy Guymon, and the match went into overtime. The extra five minutes proved just too much for the Yorkshire side, and Palace scraped home, 72-77.

That match was notable for one other factor ... it was the first basketball game I'd ever attended - and what a way to start!

At the time I had little idea that 33 years (and 2,200 matches!) later I'd be sitting down to write about the game. Nor did the wider basketball public (nor a succession of bank managers) realise what they'd have to put up with in the meantime!

Three weeks later it was the turn of Embassy to visit Doncaster, and another thrilling tussle ensued. The visitors just shaded the first half, 43-44, but by the mid-point of the second period they looked to be in control, at 55-68. Then the Panthers struck a rich vein of form, and with the home crowd roaring them on they outscored their opponents 34-18 in just 8½ minutes! 89-86 to Doncaster, with 90 seconds to play.

Steve Schmitt, however, showed his class near the basket, as he sank the last six points of the game (to finish with 38), as he eased the visitors to an 89-92 victory. Ricky Cassey's game-high 39 for the Panthers could hardly compensate for the ultimate disappointment.

And so the stage was set for what was to be virtually the League title decider, with the visit of Crystal Palace to the Sobell Centre, Islington, on Sunday 16th February. The increasing status of the match, and of basketball itself, was shown by the record crowd, of nearly 2,000, who turned out for the eagerly awaited clash.

Palace were without the services of 'flu victim Fred Petty, and the absence of his 7'1" frame under the basket was undoubtedly a disadvantage. However, in a game in which there were never more than 6 points between the teams, Embassy led by just one, 46-45, at the end of the first half.

Early in the second half the impetus seemed to have swung firmly in favour of the home side, when Palace's Martin Hall was disqualified for a foul on Bernie Dignan. This, though, seemed to spark the visitors into action, and eight unanswered points took them ahead, 72-78, with nine minutes to play.

Embassy edged back, despite the loss of Stu Turpie and Dave Shelley on five fouls, and when Ian Day fouled out, with a foul on Sprogis, the latter brought the margin back to a single point, with two from the free throw line.

Steve Schmitt levelled the game at 90-all, and it was finely balanced going into the final minute.

Young Magnus Moeran, in the game for Embassy as others had fouled out, committed a foul on Jim Guymon, and, with both teams in the penalty (ten team fouls per half in those days), the American stepped to the line with a chance to put his side in control.

Guymon sank just one of his two free throws, for a 90-91 Palace lead, and that was soon wiped out, as Bernie Dignan hit one of two from the stripe for the home side. 91-apiece.

With the clock ticking down overtime looked odds-on, until with just one second remaining Guymon unaccountably fouled Moeran.

The nerves must have been jangling as the youngster stepped to the line, but he kept his cool to slot home both shots for an amazing 93-91 Embassy victory.

The All-Stars now had the destiny of the title in their own hands, but they were still not home and dry. Palace's 3-point victory in the earlier meeting meant that a slip by Embassy in their final four games would hand the initiative back to their South London rivals.

Close matches at Granwood (88-95) and at home to ATS (102-94) brought Embassy closer to their goal, while Palace were living even more dangerously, 76-79 at Coventry. Embassy's visit to Avenue was even more convincing (69-109), and when Palace scraped through their last game (82-88 at Loughborough) they could only sit and wait for Embassy's Sunday result at home to Exeter.

The Islington team made no mistake, and the Sobell Centre celebrated a convincing 115-84 victory, and Embassy's first League title.



Nigel Acres (10), Paul Philp (6) and Stu Turpie (14) invent synchronised swimming ... without the water. Admiring their grace are Jim Guymon (left) and Bob MacKay (right).

Leading scorers, 1974-1975 Overseas players in red.

Player	Team	Points	Games	ppg
1 Steve SCHMITT	Embassy	530	18	29.4
2 Peter SPROGIS	Embassy	506	18	28.1
3 Jimmy GUYMON	C. Palace	501	18	27.8
4 Bob HOWELL	Coventry	446	18	24.8
5 Mike DUDFIELD	Exeter	440	18	24.4
6 Ricky CASSEY	Doncaster	410	18	22.8
7 Steve LATHAM	Manchester	382	18	21.2
8 Richard PEARCE	Loughborough	344	18	19.1
9 Rick MANN	Avenue	328	15	21.9
10 Carl OLSSON	Loughborough	327	17	19.2
11 Pete TURNER	YMCA	319	17	18.8
12 Stu TURPIE	Embassy	268	18	14.9
13 Berni DIGNAN	Embassy	262	17	15.4
14 Mal LIDDELL	Cleveland	256	17	15.1
15 Mike GATTORNA	Doncaster	255	17	15.0

NATIONAL INVITATION TOURNAMENT, 1975:

At the end of the National League's third Season there was sufficient interest from clubs for the Association to agree to expand to a two division League.

With a record number of 16 new applicants, a system had to be devised which would:

- decide who stayed in Division One;
- decide who dropped down to Division Two;
- decide who (if anyone) came into Division One;
- decide which new teams would enter Division Two.

This being basketball, the system, of course, had to be as complicated as possible, to avoid the remote possibility that anyone, then or in the future, might understand it.

A National Invitation Tournament was thus set up, to be held at the Sobell Centre in Islington, on the weekend of 9th-11th May 1975. The competitors would be the bottom two teams in the current league, and ten of the sixteen new applicants.

Six applicants were considered strong enough (both on and off court) to progress straight to the NIT. These were:

Birmingham Bulldogs;
Derby College of Further Education;
Larsen Lions, Leeds;
Liverpoly Sportsmen;
Nottingham;
Vauxhall Motors.

That left four to be chosen to compete in the NIT, from ten remaining applicants. These were paired off in a series of Pre-Qualifying games:

Bromley	v.	Stockport
Rochdale KCA	v.	London Poly.
Malory (Lewisham)	v.	S.C. Washington
Oxford City	v.	Pirates (Guildford)
RAF Fliers	v.	SCP '71

The pairs played home and away, and were then judged not just on playing ability, but also on their organisation and promotion of the games. The four teams shaded red above were successful.

Cleveland and St, Lukes Exeter had been unfortunate enough to occupy the final two places in the existing League, and so they found their Season extended - from the end of March, when the League finished, to the second weekend in May – to compete in the NIT!

In the event, Liverpoly Sportsmen did not participate, and they were replaced in the Tournament by Rhondda ... who had not been listed among the original applicants!

In the initial stages, the teams were divided into four pools of three, but I only have (incomplete) results from two of them:

	Bir.	Cle.	Mal.	P.	W.	L.
Birmingham	x	35-46	?	2	?	1?
Cleveland	46-35	x	79-54	2	2	0
Malory	?	54-79	x	2	?	1?

	Ex.	Gui.	Nott.	P.	W.	L.
Exeter	x	40-73	L	2	0	2
Guildford	73-40	x	90-42	2	2	0
Nottingham	W	42-90	x	2	1	1

The teams then moved on to the second phase, the format for which eludes me completely!

Cleveland beat Vauxhall (69-51) and Leeds (69-45). Guildford narrowly disposed of Stockport (56-55) and Malory (54-44), to meet Cleveland in the Final, which the Teesside team won handsomely, 91-53, to retain their Division One status.

Leeds beat Stockport (72-51) in the 3rd/4th place match; Malory beat Vauxhall (52-50) for 5th; and Nottingham edged out Birmingham for 7th.

Derby, in 9th, were the highest placed team to be declined a place in the League, although Exeter (10th) were accepted into Division 2; undoubtedly it was felt that relegation from the top division was penalty enough! Rhondda and Oxford brought up the rear.

Interestingly, the Tournament's top scorer, and MVP, was John Dabrowski ... who had played Division One 'ball for Loughborough all Season (and, indeed, had finished 24th in the Division 1 scorers). It seems that no objection to his participation for Nottingham was made at the time - but it still seems rather strange in retrospect!

Now, if St.Lukes had only asked Sprogis to guest for them ... or Oxford had borrowed Schmitt for the weekend ...

NIT (League Qualification) - at Sobell Centre, 9-11 May

	Team	Result	Route to NIT
1	Cleveland Strongarm	Remained in Division 1	From Div. 1
2	Guildford Pirates	Admitted to new Division 2	Qualified
3	Larsen Lions, Leeds	Admitted to Division 1	Selected
4	Stockport	Admitted to new Division 2	Qualified
5	Malory, Lewisham	Admitted to new Division 2	Qualified
6	Vauxhall Motors, Bedford	Admitted to new Division 2	Selected
7	Nottingham	Admitted to new Division 2	Selected
8	Birmingham Bulldogs	Admitted to new Division 2	Selected
9	Derby C.F.E.	Not admitted	Selected
10	St. Luke's Exeter	Relegated to new Division 2	From Div. 1
11	Rhondda	Not admitted	Late addition
12	Oxford City	Not admitted	Qualified
	Liverpoly Sportsmen	Did not participate	Selected
	Bromley	Not selected for NIT	Did not qualify
	London Poly.	Not selected for NIT	Did not qualify
	RAF Fliers	Not selected for NIT	Did not qualify
	Rochdale KCA	Not selected for NIT	Did not qualify
	S.C. Washington	Not selected for NIT	Did not qualify
	SCP '71	Not selected for NIT	Did not qualify

So, all seemed to be sorted, but this being a basketball event, it couldn't end without some controversy. The exact sequence of events is unclear, but as far as I can make out it went something like this.

Guildford, who had finished as runners-up in the Tournament, felt that they had earned the right to a place in Division One for the coming Season. The "National League Selection Sub-committee" on the other hand were not certain, as Leeds had not met Guildford during the event, and had put up a better showing against Strongarm (losing by 24) than had the Pirates (who lost by 38).

It was thus suggested that Leeds and Guildford meet in a play-off, to determine which of them would play in Division One. I'm unclear whether the Pirates declined to do so, or whether they were unable to decide a date and/or venue.

However, the upshot was that the Lions were awarded the Division 1 place, without the game taking place. It may well have been that Guildford also went on to suggest that the Committee were making it up as they went along!

Naturally Guildford appealed the decision, and the appeal was considered by the Association's full National Executive, in a five hour session, on 28th June. Its judgment on the issue seemed straightforward, ruling that "The decisions of the ... Sub Committee are ratified ... and the appeal is therefore not upheld."

The Executive went on to censure Guildford for "lack of co-operation in the organisation of the play-off match" and on "certain member or members of the club in disseminating misleading information."

Having ratified the decision, and given Guildford a severe slap on the wrist, the executive then went on to effectively overturn its own decision!

"No club should achieve such important status by default", they said, and so "in the best interests of basketball and in the spirit of the competition" it was decided "in this instance" that "a play-off be arranged, to take place on Saturday 13th September, 1975, at Lilleshall, subject to confirmation."

That play-off was finally won by Leeds (though I don't have either the score or the margin), but the end result was that the Lions had just three weeks to recruit players to strengthen their team for a Division One campaign, while Guildford still felt thoroughly aggrieved!

Why did "Liverpoly" not participate?

How and why were Rhondda chosen instead?

How was the second stage of the NIT organised?

Does anyone out there have any of the missing results?

If anyone has the answer to any of those questions (or any other information which may add to this history), please feel free to contact webmaster@pawprint75.co.uk

Acknowledgements:

Many thanks to:

Morris Wordsworth

"Basketball" Magazine, Vol.14 No.4, Easter 1975; ed. Mel Welch, published EBBA.

"Basketball Review 1980-1981", ed. Richard Taylor