

A HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL LEAGUES.

5d. INTO EUROPE, 1975-1976:

In the 1970s, the structure of European competition in basketball was a close reflection of that in soccer. There was the Champion Clubs' Cup (exclusively for National Champions), the Cup-Winners' Cup (which speaks for itself) and the Radivoj Korac Cup (equivalent to the UEFA Cup).

English teams had been entering these competitions for a couple of years already, but the middle of the decade marked the point when those entries began to become commonplace, and the 75-6 season clearly highlighted three facets of the English game - that clubs could manage to compete on court with Europe's elite ... but that the rest of Europe was still decades ahead in terms of the popularity of the sport, and the game was in a delicately balanced economic state on this side of the Channel.

Embassy All-Stars, as League Champions, entered the Champions Club's Cup, and on 20th November they entertained Transol of Rotterdam, at the Sobell Sports Centre. Although the English champions lost, the margin was so narrow (87-90) that it gave them hope for the return leg - hopes that were cruelly dashed a fortnight later as they were trounced 117-66 by the Dutch club!

It was a very similar story for Wilson Panthers of Doncaster, who made their first foray into Europe, in the Korac Cup. In front of a packed crowd at Adwick Leisure Centre the Yorkshire team stayed close to Berck, a small-town team from the North coast of France, but the experience of their opponents showed in the closing stages, as they edged out to a 16-point first-leg lead, 85-101.

Even so, Doncaster hoped that the firepower of Steve Pound, who continued to rewrite the domestic record-books, could swing the balance in the return. Here, too, the reality was very different, as the Panthers chartered a plane (probably left at Gatwick by the Wright Brothers!) to Le Touquet (which adjoins Berck) only to suffer a 123-68 humiliation in front of a delirious French crowd.

The real success, together with financial trauma, came at Crystal Palace, who had entered the Cup Winners Cup despite being beaten in the English Final, as Cup holders Embassy were in the Champions' Cup.

Not that anyone could anticipate how far they would go, as, with Jimmy Guymon struggling with a leg injury, Sutton & Crystal Palace trailed at home to Bus Fruit, Lier of Belgium, for most of their first game.

Ten points adrift in the first half, Palace had closed the deficit to five (31-36) at the interval, but with nine minutes to play found themselves eight points in arrears again. Fourteen unanswered points gave the home side the lead at last, but the visitors hit back to level the scores at 71, before Mark Saiers sank the final shot of the game to give his team a precious 73-71 advantage to take into the second leg.

In European terms that was far from a comfortable cushion, but in stark contrast to their two compatriots, Sutton managed to not only hold on away from home, but fought out a 59-67 victory to take them through to the second round.

That, though, was a blessing in disguise, as their financial problems began to surface. The club had a three-year deal linking them to Crystal Palace F.C., but the soccer club were £½ million in debt - chickenfeed by today's standards, but a serious cause for concern in 1975.

When the second round matches against Galatassaray of Turkey cost them upwards of £1,000, SCP found themselves deep in the financial mire.

To put that figure into context, my gross salary, as a teacher, for that year was £3½ thousand, so a one thousand pound debt was something that no club could afford (especially as spectator entry-fees were still below £1 for adults)!

Nor did it look as though Palace's investment had been spent wisely, as they returned home from Istanbul, after the first leg of the second round, nursing a fourteen point deficit, 77-91. Things, however, were about to change, dramatically, for the better.

"The time was 8.53 pm on Wednesday November 26th 1975" reported an excited Syd Lipski in "Basketball" magazine "The scoreboard showed Sutton 43 Galatassaray 29. There were 13 minutes and 21 seconds still to go ... the scores were now tied at 120-120".

The eventual result, 83-60, was a tribute to Palace's defensive rebounding, which kept the Turks from taking snap shots, and to Guymon's offensive skills. Even more importantly it put an English club into the quarter finals of a European club competition for the first time!

Palace now found themselves in a Pool with some of the biggest names in European sport. Estudiantes Madrid and Cinzano Milan represented European powerhouses Spain and Italy respectively, while SSV Hagen were the West German champions.

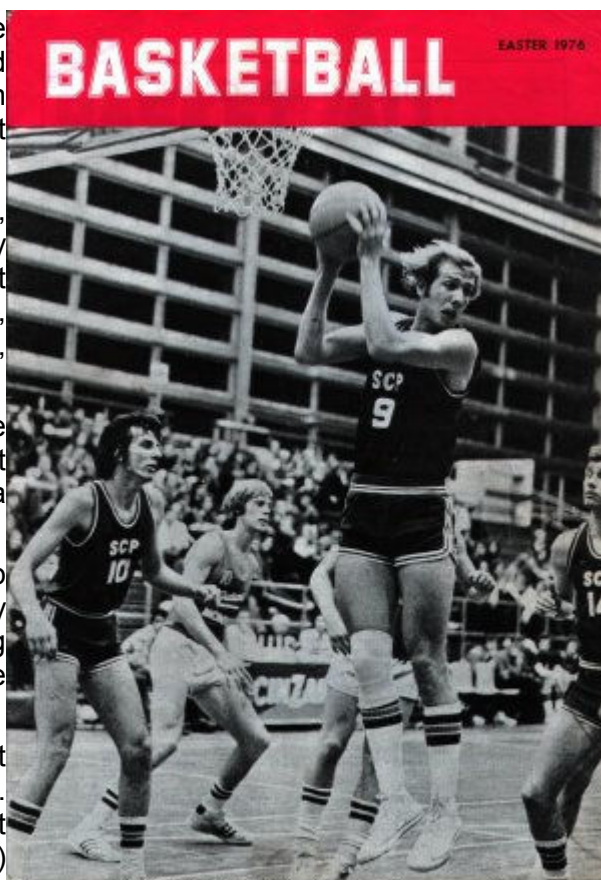
The first quarter final game took the Londoners to Madrid, to face a hostile crowd and a top class team. Though they stayed in touch with their hosts for a long while, Sutton hit a barren spell which saw them fall twenty points behind, and when they finally woke to the danger it was too late, as they went down 107-79.

Things were very different in the return game, the following week (pictured). With Guymon displaying perfect shooting with his first five attempts, Palace stormed into a 10-4 lead.

Mark Saiers, however, was in early trouble, picking up three quick fouls against Estudiantes' American Randy Meister, and Madrid used their defensive rebounding advantage to set up some pulsating fast-breaks to shade the half 41-47.

This was extended to ten points in the second half, but then Meister fouled out, and Sutton staged a comeback. With two minutes to play they were back in contention at 80-81, but as Guymon (35 points) and Ken Walton (17) fouled out, the Spaniards edged away again, to 83-87.

Brendan McCarthy, coming on as a substitute, halved the margin, and a 25-foot jump-shot on the buzzer, from Martin Hall, left the game level at 87-all.



The cover of EBBA's "Basketball" magazine shows Jim Guymon rebounding at home to Estudiantes Madrid, watched by Mark Saiers [#10] and Martin Hall [#14].
(Photo by R.J.Coles)



"Red" Robbins of Cinzano Milan goes bob-bob-bobbin over Ken Walton (#13) as Martin Hall (#14) looks on.
(Photo R J Coles)

Unfortunately for the home side, these Pool games were played as home and away legs of a single match, and so, instead of the game going to overtime, history records a 166-194 defeat on aggregate.

However, the players had the satisfaction of knowing that they had shown their quality in a European quarter final, and had held one of the top teams (who went on to win the Pool) to a drawn leg.

Perhaps that gave them misplaced confidence, as the following week they painstakingly built a 25-19 lead at home to Cinzano only to hit a cold spell, which enabled the Italians to hit twelve unanswered points to take control of the game.

Leading 39-45 at the half, Milan played steadily at the restart, taking no chances as they built a 55-64 cushion.

It appeared to be all over for the home side, but Mike Sylvester fouled out for Cinzano at the mid-point of the half, and Palace rallied to hold the final margin to eight points, 73-81.

And so to Milan the following weekend. Very few European teams go to Italy with realistic hopes of victory, and the best that an English team could hope for was to avoid total humiliation.

Add to that the fact that there were riots at the shut-down British Leyland plant in Milan, and it was hardly an auspicious time for an English team to be showing their faces. SCP travelled as the biggest underdogs since a young lad called David courted certain disaster against Goliath.

That, though, turned out to be a very apt comparison, as the final scoreline in that second leg read "Cinzano Milan 82, Sutton 89"! David had done Goliath again.

Indeed, the shock could have been even greater, as the English representatives had led by fifteen at the half, and their seven point victory meant that they had lost the aggregate tie by just a single point ... 162-163.

In their final pair of matches, a home victory (96-86) over SSV Hagen proved just enough for Palace to take with them to Germany, where they went down 74-83, for a one-point aggregate win that gave them third place in the table.

Milan, meanwhile, went on to beat Skopje in the semi-final, and then lifted the Cup itself in the Final in Turin.

	Pl	W.	L.	For	Agt.
1 Estudiantes Madrid	3	3	0	576	507
2 Cinzano Milan	3	2	1	543	513
3 Sutton & C.Palace	3	1	2	498	526
4 S.S.V. Hagen	3	0	3	494	565

Crystal Palace had done themselves, and English basketball, proud and could even look back on what might have been!

Their efforts, though, also proved to have had a practical benefit, for among the Italians to have been duly impressed by their performance were the moguls from Milan's sponsors, and for the following season the South London team would take the court as "Cinzano SCP" – to the huge relief of their accountants.

Acknowledgements:

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