

# A HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL LEAGUES.

## 6b. NATIONAL LEAGUE DIVISION TWO 1976-1977:

Division Two looked as though it would be even more competitive than ever, with several teams having the credentials to make a challenge for promotion.

Chief among them were relegated **Larsen Leeds**, **Stockport Belgrade** who had only just failed in the promotion play-off, **St. Luke's Exeter**, bidding to return to the top flight after relegation the year before, and ambitious **Epab Sunderland**, bidding to overtake neighbours Strongarm as the top team in the North East.

Sunderland (who had changed their name from Washington, but continued to play their fixtures in that town) were promoted by larger-than-life character Colin Bentley, a partner in the Insurance Brokers who sponsored the team, and captained by Dave Elderkin, both names which would feature strongly in the future of the game.

**Malory Lewisham** and **Nottingham** were hoping that their experience the previous year would stand them in good stead, while **Miles Mustangs**, **Morley** had a large following which would certainly help their cause at home.

It was difficult to detect a pattern in the first few weeks of the season, as the fixture list was somewhat lopsided, but it was clear that **Stockport** would take some beating, as they disposed of both **Nottingham** and **Derby** in successive fixtures. At Nottingham a 20-46 interval lead was converted into a 72-88 victory as Belgrade eased up. Youngsters Mike Lister and Phil Brazil led the visitors with 13 apiece, while Nottingham had Kevin Wright to thank for keeping them in contention with 28. Belgrade performed even better at home to Derby, cruising to an 81-51 victory, thanks to 25 from Steve Brooks, while ex-Loughborough Bob Amoroso hit 16 for the visitors.

Since Derby had comfortably disposed of **Malory**, 70-45 (pulling away from 30-all) in their first game, it gave some indication of the wide disparity within the division.

There was no fairytale start to life in the NBL for **Epab Sunderland**, as they led at home to **KCA Bury** only to be pegged back to 71-all to set up the first overtime game of the season. Despite having lost Steve Crewe and John Robison on five fouls in the final minute of regulation time, the Wearsiders still led 79-76 with 1½ minutes to play, led by Dave Elderkin, with 17, but Charlie Kibble, who had inspired KCA's comeback hit a game-high 31, and his team scored the last five points in overtime, to snatch the victory.

The following weekend, Epab made their longest trip of the season, down to **Exeter**, and it was a sobering experience as the young St. Lukes players built a 47-33 half-time advantage and held it to win 89-75 with Dave Ringham leading the way with 22, closely followed by Neil Whittam with 20. Steve Crewe was again prominent for Epab with 22.

Nor did it get any better for the newcomers as they stopped off in **Birmingham** on their way home, and went down 56-53 to the experienced Bulldogs on the Sunday. 0&3 was hardly the start that the Wearsiders had anticipated.

For Birmingham, however, it consolidated a good start, after shading a 71-75 victory at **Miles Mustangs, Morley** on the first weekend.

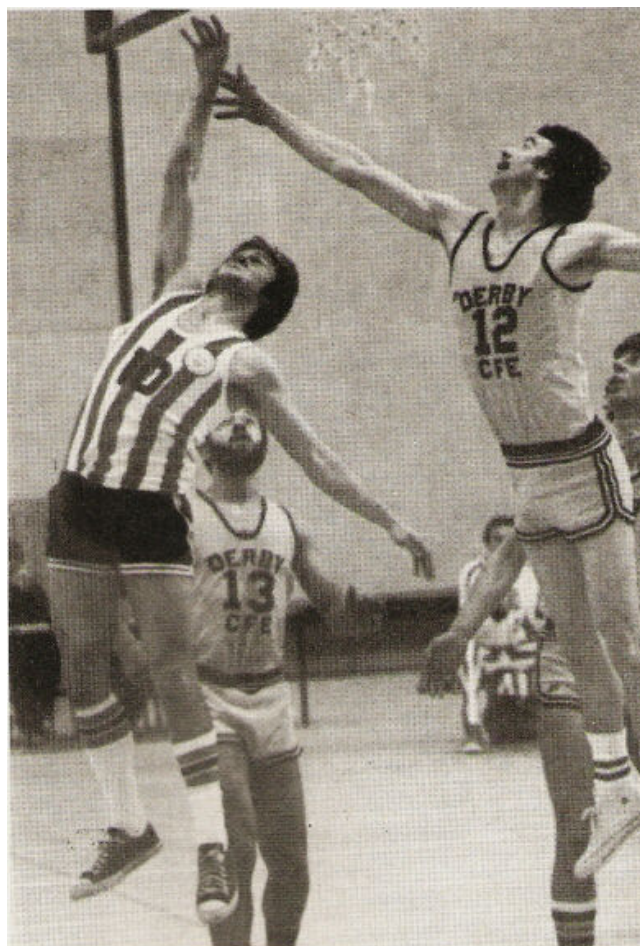
Looking to make amends the next week, Miles raced to a 61-41 interval lead against **Nottingham**, and seemed home and dry with five minutes remaining, as they led by 19. Paul Meade, though, was in unstoppable form for the Midlanders, hitting a new division 2 record of 45 points in the match, as he helped his side right back into the game.

In the end, Mustangs' nailbiting 99-98 victory owed much to three missed shots from the line by their visitors in the closing minute.

Charlie Kibble was again prominent for **KCA** at home to **Malory**, leading his team with 29, but Clifton Bailey was outstanding for the visitors, and his 41 points helped them from 48-46 down at the half to a 77-94 victory.

Two teams who only played once in the fortnight were **Seensee Sonics** and **Larsen Leeds**, who met at Abingdon.

The relegated Lions had lost most of their top players during the close-season, and it showed, as the home side romped to a 100-49 victory, with Yusef Hedar contributing 19 points for the visitors - 40% of their total.



Steve Crewe (# 10) bends over backwards to score for EPAB against Derby.  
(Picture by Galdon Photos)



Stockport's Phil Brazil declines the offer to dance, from Geoff Watson of KCA.  
(Photo courtesy of Trevor Pountain)

In the next fortnight, **Stockport** were made to struggle on the road, but came through by the skin of their teeth twice, to maintain their 100% start.

At **Lewisham**, Belgrade broke clear in the second half, but a spirited rally by Malory brought them right back into the game, and the visitors had to hang on to win 67-71.

It was even closer the following week, at **Seensee Sonics**, where the game went to double overtime (the closest NBL match ever at that time).

The home side shaded a low-scoring first period 29-25, and though Stockport took the lead in the second half, the Sonics came again to lead 61-60, with a minute to play. This became 64-60 after a basket and bonus from Bob Spencer, before Graham Honeybone and Phil Brazil levelled the scores.

Another foul on Spencer by Frank O'Flynn (who had committed the previous one) gave the Sonics two shots to snatch the game, but this time both missed and overtime followed.

The teams were still level five minutes later, at 70-all, and it was nip and tuck through the second overtime, with the visitors edging 74 - 76 ahead in the final minute. Paul Bevis had the chance to take the game into a third extra period, from the line, but he missed his second shot, and Belgrade were home by one.

**Nottingham's** hopes of getting back into title

contention took a severe knock at home to **Birmingham**. Not only did the Bulldogs record a 63 - 75 victory, but the prolific Meade picked up a disqualifying foul after a fracas over the officiating, and picked up a two game suspension for his pains.

With **Stockport** having won their opening games, and **Miles** having lost theirs, their meeting at Stockport in late October seemed a home banker, especially as the hosts boasted a 100% home record in League matches. A 2 - 16 spurt by the visitors, however, put them in control and they never relinquished the lead, to run out 81 - 88 victors.

That left **St. Luke's** and **Birmingham** as the only two unbeaten teams in the division, as the former triumphed 103 - 80 over **Nottingham**, and the latter picked up at 68 - 78 victory at **Malory**.

These two met in **Exeter** in early November, and the home side took a commanding 31 - 13 lead. The Midlands then shook the travel-weariness out of their legs, and fought back to take the lead 47 - 48, but the effort had taken its toll and Lukes got back into their rhythm to maintain their unbeaten start, 72 - 58.

**Birmingham** must have been cursing the fixture computer, as their very next game was away at **Stockport**, but it was the visitors who led going into the closing stages, led by twenty points from Steve Starkey. Belgrade, however, retained their composure, and edged back ahead with a 70 - 65 victory that pushed the Bulldogs further off the pace.

The last weekend in November saw **Stockport** making the long journey down the M6 and M5 to take on the League leaders. Like Birmingham before them, Stockport found it difficult to get going, and after five minutes St. Luke's looked confident of remaining unbeaten as they led 11 - 0.



Brendan Kennedy (St Lukes) shoots over Ian Capewell (Birmingham Bulldogs). [Photo Barrie Eveleigh]

When Stockport did get into gear, however, they began to restrict Exeter's scoring, and edged into a 35- 36 interval lead. The game did not remain on a knife edge for long, however, as Belgrade's noted defensive ability restricted their hosts to just 20 second half points, and the visitors romped to a 55 - 79 victory.

By Christmas **EPAB** led the table, but only by virtue of having played two more games than anybody else. In those days a defeat gained one point, and Washington's five losses gave them enough points to be two clear of **St. Luke's** and **Stockport**, who had just a single defeat apiece.

**Miles Morley** had four defeats from ten starts and **Birmingham** three from nine, but no other team had a better than even record ... while relegated **Leeds** still awaited their first Division 2 victory after eight games.

On the New Year restart, **St. Luke's** were looking vulnerable at home to **Derby**, as Tim Rudge (who finished with 29 points) helped the visitors to a 36 - 46 interval lead. Whatever Vic Ambler said to his team in the locker room it had the desired effect, as **Exeter** hit 12 straight points after the break, and Lee Palmer (24) led them to an 87 - 76 victory.

**Stockport** looked in similar trouble at home to **EPAB**, with the visitors opening an 18 - 25 advantage, but then Belgrade's famed defence began to do its job, and they restricted the Wearsiders to just 33 more points, to run out easy winners, 85 - 58.

And so it continued as the season progressed, as the chasing pack slipped further and further adrift, though long-distance travel nearly took its toll on **St. Luke's** when they visited **Bury** and trailed by ten, only to edge a narrow 83 - 85 victory.

The leading two remained undefeated throughout January and February, by which time the only remaining question was which of them would go up as of right, and which would face a play-off against the next to bottom team in Division One.

The big two met in **Stockport** on 13th March for the game which would go a long way towards answering that question. In a tense and exciting game Belgrade completed the "double" over their rivals, with an 84 - 78 victory, and although **Luke's** won at **Birmingham** (69 - 85) on their way home the following day (to complete their programme) they knew that only defeat for Stockport in both their remaining fixtures would change the destination of the title.

**EPAB** raised Devonian hopes the following weekend, when they edged a 66 - 65 victory over **Stockport**, which meant that Belgrade still had to win their final home game, against **Nottingham**, on the final day of the season. Having come this close, those, Bill Beswick's side were not going to let automatic promotion slip away, and their highest score of the season (109) and their biggest margin (51) ensured that they could avoid the trauma of the play-off!

<b>NBL Division Two, 1976-1977</b>		<b>Pl.</b>	<b>W.</b>	<b>L.</b>	<b>For</b>	<b>Agt.</b>	<b>Pts.</b>	
1	<b>Stockport Belgrade</b>	20	18	2	1673	1358	<b>38</b>	<b>Promoted</b>
2	<b>St.Luke's, Exeter</b>	20	18	2	1801	1467	<b>38</b>	<b>Promoted after play-off</b>
3	<b>Miles Mustangs, Morley</b>	20	13	7	1805	1703	<b>33</b>	
4	<b>Epab, Sunderland</b>	20	13	7	1646	1485	<b>33</b>	
5	<b>Birmingham Bulldogs</b>	20	11	9	1697	1552	<b>31</b>	
6	<b>Seensee Sonics, Oxford</b>	20	10	10	1538	1477	<b>30</b>	
7	<b>KCA Bury</b>	20	8	12	1687	1722	<b>28</b>	<b>Merged with Blackpool</b>
8	<b>Malory, Lewisham</b>	20	7	13	1622	1709	<b>27</b>	<b>Failed Qualification Series</b>
9	<b>Nottingham</b>	20	6	14	1567	1821	<b>26</b>	<b>Re-qualified</b>
10	<b>Derby CFE</b>	20	4	16	1368	1522	<b>24</b>	<b>Re-qualified</b>
11	<b>Larsen Lions, Leeds</b>	20	2	18	1410	1944	<b>22</b>	<b>Failed Qualification Series</b>

#### **Promotion/Relegation Play-off**

**Avenue (9th, Div. 1)**

**73 - 75**

**St. Luke's Exeter (2nd, Div. 2)**

Having finished their League campaign a fortnight before the end of the season, St. Luke's faced a month's lay-off from competitive action before facing up to Avenue in the crucial play-off match.

To make matters worse, Exeter's American, Lee Palmer, severely dislocated the middle finger of his shooting hand on the afternoon before the game, and was advised that he should not play. The odds looked stacked against the Division 2 side as they took on the 1973 League Champions.

With so much at stake the match was never going to be a classic, but exciting it certainly was, as there was never more than six points separating the teams, and the lead changed hands no less than sixteen times.

Then there was the little matter of the "nothing but net" buzzer-beater from the halfway line by Exeter's Junior International Neil Whittam to bring the crowd to their feet at the end of the first half.

With two minutes remaining in the game, Luke's pulled out a five point lead, 75 - 70, and both sides proceeded to hold each other at bay as the clock ticked down.

Avenue narrowed the gap with a free-throw, and as Exeter attempted to play out time the First Division side gained a steal, but as their shot dropped home the buzzer sounded, and St. Luke's had secured a return to Division 1, by 75 points to 73.

I suspect that Lee Palmer didn't have to buy many drinks himself that night, after ignoring medical advice not to play, and hitting thirty points in the game!

<b>DIV. 2 LEADING SCORERS, 1976-1977</b>			
	<b>Player</b>	<b>Team</b>	<b>Points</b>
1	<b>Cliff BAILEY</b>	Malory	<b>459</b>
2	<b>Charlie KIBBLE</b>	KCA	<b>452</b>
L	<b>Yuseph HEDAR</b>	Leeds	<b>429</b>
4	<b>Paul MEADE</b>	Nottingham	<b>378</b>
5	<b>Colin HOPE</b>	Miles	<b>349</b>
6	<b>Barry BIRD</b>	Birmingham	<b>346</b>
7	<b>John ARTHURWORRY</b>	Miles	<b>340</b>
8	<b>Neil WHITTAM</b>	St. Luke's	<b>324</b>
9	<b>Steve CREWE</b>	EPAB	<b>317</b>
10	<b>Louie ROSS</b>	Stockport	<b>315</b>
11	<b>Bob AMOROSO</b>	Derby	<b>292</b>
12	<b>Lee PALMER</b>	St. Luke's	<b>277</b>
13	<b>John ROBISON</b>	EPAB	<b>275</b>
14	<b>Chris LEATHLEY</b>	Miles	<b>272</b>

## League Qualification

Derby CFE	Re-qualified
Nottingham	Re-qualified
Hemel Hempstead	Qualified for Division Two
Leatherhead (Sutton)	Qualified for Division Two
Bromley	Admitted to Division Two - late replacement for Strongarm
Malory, Lewisham	Failed to re-qualify
Larsen Lions, Leeds	Failed to re-qualify
Blackpool Telefusion Pacemakers	Failed Qualification Series (but then merged with Bury)
Brighton	Failed Qualification Series
Riversdale ATAC	Failed Qualification Series

The end of season qualification series took on a new format, with the six applicants divided into two groups of three, playing a round-robin, and then the top two from each group taking on the bottom four finishers from Division Two.

Unfortunately I don't have any of the results from these games, nor even who finished where in the Pools, who played whom and where. If anyone has any of these results, please let us know, at [webmaster@pawprint75.co.uk](mailto:webmaster@pawprint75.co.uk).

What is clear is that both **Hemel Hempstead** and **Sutton** successfully negotiated the hurdles - and each was to have a big impact on the League, though in very different ways.

**Bromley**, reckoned to be one of the top non-league outfits of the time, initially failed to make the breakthrough, but they were probably one of the teams who made it through the group stage, as they were later admitted, to make up the numbers, when Strongarm (relegated from Division One) pulled out.

**Blackpool**, too, failed to qualify, but they found a different route into the League, as they arranged a merger with struggling Bury.

Of the teams fighting for survival, East Midlands rivals **Nottingham** and **Derby** both won their sudden-death play-off matches, while **Leeds** completed a remarkable fall from grace, as the team which had been in Division One the year before slipped out of the League.

**Acknowledgements:**

Many thanks to:

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

"Basketball" Magazine, Vol.16, 1976-1977, ed. Mel Welch, published EBBA

Doncaster Panthers' match programmes

"Pawprint" Magazine, Vol. 2, 1976-1977

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