

A HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL LEAGUES.

5f. INTO EUROPE, 1976-1977:

MEN'S CHAMPIONS' CUP

Well before soccer invented the "Champions League", basketball in Europe had adopted a format that enabled teams to play a number of matches.

The Men's Champions' Cup introduced Preliminary Pools in 1976, with the Pool winners progressing to a six-team Final Pool, and a Final between the top two from what "Basketball" described as "a veritable European super-league".

The first match of the campaign turned into a tragi-comedy for **Cinzano SCP**, as the now-seasoned campaigners set off for Switzerland, to play **Federale Lugano**.

Jimmy Carmichael missed the flight to Basle, and had to make his own way to join up with the team, but not before having picked up a ticket for speeding in a bus lane in a futile attempt to reach the airport on time.

At least his delay saved him from sharing his team-mates' experience on top of the Gotthard Pass, where they were only half an hour away from being stranded at the inn, by the snow!

Arriving in Lugano, looking forward to relaxing after their gruelling journey, SCP found themselves, instead, locked in furious debate with the local TV producer.

He was insisting that the advertising on the front of their shirts must be removed, or he would refuse to show the game.

In fact this was still the rule in England, where broadcasting regulations forbade advertising except in the set commercial breaks (and altogether on BBC), and both Cinzano and Embassy had had to "cover up" in the televised Cup Final.

However, two things weighed in SCP's favour this time - that shirt advertising was far more common in Europe, and that basketball was far more popular, so that television needed the game.

Since their sponsor was far more interested in European exposure, and competition, than in how SCP fared in the comparatively minor English League, the club dug in their heels, and flatly refused to remove the advert. Realising that he would lose viewers (and even, perhaps, risk his job), the producer was forced to climb down.

So, first blood went to Sutton, but things continued to refuse to go their way during the game itself, and they lost Willie Cameron midway through the first half, as he departed to hospital for treatment to damaged knee ligaments.

Even so, the English champions still only trailed by seven at the half, and fought their way into the lead during the second period, until the Swiss team's non-nationals stepped up. American Stu Johnson hit a game-high 41 points, and Mexican veteran Manuel Raga added 35, contributing 78% of their team's tally and helping them to snatch a five point victory, 97-92.

There was no relief for Palace the following week, as they played host to Championship favourites, **Real Madrid!**

As "basketball" commented at the time, *"Cinzano could not match the brilliant Spaniards, with their naturalised Americans Wayne Brabender and Clifford Luyk giving them a marked advantage over squads that have to make do with just two foreign players."*

That remark (about "having to make do with just two foreign players"), raised a storm of controversy, in the already heated debate over restriction of foreign players, but the reality was that the 2,000 fans who packed into the National Sports Centre at Crystal Palace showed that there was a real desire to watch top class competition.



Jim Guymon is closely patrolled by Coughran and Brabender of Madrid, while team-mate Vic Tinsley hurries to catch up. [Photosport]

A 46 point home drubbing left Palace struggling at the foot of the Pool, but they proceeded to show their class and determination with a stunning 39 point road victory over **Sporting Lisbon**, in Portugal, and followed that up with revenge at home to **Lugano**, by 14.

The inevitable away defeat in **Madrid** followed, and though Cinzano made heavy going of their final game, at home to **Lisbon**, winning by just three points, they finished level on points with Lugano, taking second place by virtue of points difference in the games between them.

Palace had shown that they could live with all but the very best European opponents, but, as they went through the domestic season undefeated, success in Europe became the new Holy Grail - and their player recruitment in pursuit of their dream was to have a profound, and lasting, impact on the game in England.

MEN'S CHAMPIONS' CUP			
Federale Lugano (Swit.)	97 - 92	Cinzano S.C.P.	
Cinzano S.C.P.	75 - 121	Real Madrid (Sp.)	
Sporting Lisbon (Port.)	76 - 115	Cinzano S.C.P.	
Cinzano S.C.P.	112 - 98	Federale Lugano (Swit.)	
Real Madrid (Sp.)	112 - 79	Cinzano S.C.P.	
Cinzano S.C.P.	95 - 92	Sporting Lisbon (Port.)	

TABLE	PI	W.	L.	Pts
1 Real Madrid	6	6	0	12
2 Cinzano S.C.P.	6	3	3	9
3 Federale Lugano	6	3	3	9
4 Sporting Lisbon	6	0	6	6

MEN'S CUP WINNERS' CUP

While Palace were strutting their stuff in the "Champions' League", **Embassy All-Stars** were showing that English basketball as a whole had progressed, as they became the first English team to win a competitive match against a French team, with their four point home victory over **Villeurbanne**.

That, though, was not enough to take them through to the second round, as the French showed the importance of home advantage, romping away to a 23 point victory in the second leg.

To rub salt into Embassy's wounds, the Scots' entrants in the Cup Winners' Cup did progress to the next stage, although to be fair they did only face opposition from Iceland in the First Round.

Boroughmuir relied on a hefty 27 point home victory to see them through, only shading the away leg by one point.

Their "reward" for that success was a Second Round match-up with **Juventud Badalona**, from Spain, and a first leg 45 point hammering at home sealed the Scots' fate (to such an extent that "Basketball" magazine didn't bother reporting the second leg score).

CUP WINNERS' CUP			
First Round	Embassy All-Stars	87 - 83	AS Villeurbanne (Fr.)
First Round	AS Villeurbanne	109 - 86	Embassy All-Stars
First Round	Boroughmuir Barrs	86 - 59	UMFN Njardik
First Round	UMFN Njardik	77 - 78	Boroughmuir Barrs
Second Round	Boroughmuir Barrs	66 - 111	Juventud Badalona (Sp.)
Second Round	Juventud Badalona (Sp.)	?	Boroughmuir Barrs

RONCHETTI CUP

It was not only the men who competed in Europe this year, as **Southgate**, who had finished fourth out of five in the inaugural Women's League, entered the Ronchetti Cup, the second-ranked Women's competition in Europe.

Their coach, Vic Kerton, wrote about the experience in "Basketball" magazine, and he highlighted the differences between their German opponents in the Second Round (the Londoners having had a bye in Round One) and themselves.

These included:

The benefit of Bayern Munich FC's administrative staff working for the basketball team, with experience of big match promotions, and the ready availability of office equipment - while Southgate had to rely on players and volunteers for everything from fundraising to issuing press releases.

The biggest difference, though, was in the facilities available, with Munich having free access to the Bayern Munich Hall for training, and to a nearby arena for their matches, while they were also provided with footwear, clothing, balls, laundry, physiotherapy, a sauna ... and club medical treatment.

Despite all these advantages, and the fact that Bayern had the pick of Bavaria's best players, Vic was rather less complimentary about their play. Their players were, indeed "... fitter, and more athletic and generally bigger ..." but they "... did not appear as tactically sophisticated as Southgate" and "could not match the skills of our best players."

Nonetheless, with the English girls seeming somewhat overawed, the Germans built a substantial first half lead, despite playing "... a zone defence throughout ..." and relying "mainly on one good guard and two very tall pivots." In the second half, the Southgate players rallied, realising that they were not quite such underdogs as they had imagined, but they still finished the game 21 points adrift.

The second leg, at Pickett's Lock, was a very different affair. Apart from the total lack of interest from the local borough council (as opposed to the civic reception accorded to them in Munich) the staging of the game was, apparently of a much higher standard than in Germany, with four times as many spectators, a match programme, and a great atmosphere.

Even match announcer Steve Pearl was described as "great" by Kerton.

This time Southgate also put together a much improved performance, and their eleven point home victory, though not enough to take them through to the quarter final, at least showed that they could compete, despite the obstacles that the club faced.

RONCHETTI CUP (2nd Round)

Bayern Munich (W. Ger.)	72 - 51	Southgate T.C.
Southgate T.C.	65 - 54	Bayern Munich (W. Ger.)

After the praise that the Southgate coach had heaped on the Germans' professional organisation, the biggest irony of all was that Munich then withdrew from the competition – after all the quarter-final group fixtures had been arranged!

EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIPS

It was not only the clubs which were involved in European competition, but also the National teams.

Hopes were high in England, as the Qualifying Round of the 2007 competition was staged at Hemel Hempstead, as the "Basildon Bond Tournament", and "Basketball" magazine heralded the event with the headline "England set for success in European Championships".

Eight teams were to compete, from 7th to 11th April, and would be divided into two Pools of four for the first stage. The top two at the end of the Tournament would progress to the Challenge Round (in Sweden or Finland) at the end of May. Two teams from each of the Challenge rounds would go forward to the Finals, in Belgium, in September.

In addition to the obvious home advantage, the fact that England had beaten all seven of the other visitors "at some time in recent years" was put forward as good grounds for optimism.

That optimism faced its first test even before the first game, when captain Steve Latham severely damaged his knee ligaments in training.

Incredibly, Latham was still risked in the first game, against **Iceland**, but within thirty seconds he was on the floor in agony, and played no further part in the event.

Without one of their key inside players, England struggled to cope with 7' 1" junior Petr Guomundsson, who hit 35 points on his senior international debut!



Had the youngster had better players around him things could have been much worse for England, but the Icelanders' over-enthusiastic defensive tactics led them into foul trouble that resulted in five of their number fouling out before the end of the game.

With Ian Day adding to England's injury woes, as he damaged his ankle during the game, it was Ken Walton who kept the hosts in the game, leading his side with 21 points. The introduction of Bob Park midway through the second half gave England's play a directness that it had previously lacked, but the 93-85 victory was greeted with more relief than jubilation.

In the other Pool, Scotland had opened the day's proceedings with a convincing victory over Denmark. Earlier in the year the Scots had lost a "friendly" in Copenhagen, but this time the veteran Bill McInnes combined with "rising young star" Bobby Archibald to guide their team to a 100-77 victory.

Ireland looked as though they would make it a hat-trick of wins for the British Isles, and to record their first-ever win over continental opposition, as they led Luxembourg by two with eight minutes remaining on the clock. Seven minutes and fifty-two seconds later they scored again, but by that time Luxembourg had added 16 points to take the game.

With Austria having beaten Portugal on the first day, England's meeting with the Iberians was crucial to their hopes of qualification. This time it was the turn of Martin Hall to shine, with 25 points, and a much better England performance saw them through comfortably by a margin of 21.

With Austria having cruised past Iceland by 33 (thanks in no small part to another high foul count by the Icelanders, including a Technical Foul by Guomundsson to record his fifth), both they and England had secured their semi-final berths with a day to spare.

Scotland also secured their second victory, as they dominated the first half to lead Ireland 50-34 at the break, and they were able to give their bench players an extended run in the second half, as they won by eleven.

A third victory, on the final day of Pool games, gave Scotland a perfect record, and top place in their group.

A tight first half saw Luxembourg stay in contention at just seven behind, 38-31, at the interval, but a scoring burst early in the second period took the Scots away to 56-37, and they were never threatened from then on.

The big game to close day three was the meeting between the other two unbeaten teams, England and Austria. Ian Day suited up for the hosts, but his ankle was still suspect, and he played no part in the game.

England stayed in touch for the first eight minutes, to trail 14-16, when they called a Time Out. That move backfired spectacularly, as they recorded just two points (from the line) in the next ten minutes, while Austria added 17, to lead 16-33.

England's dire outside shooting brought them a mere 28% return for the game, but their pressure defence was outstanding, and with nine minutes remaining in the game they were incredibly back in contention, trailing by just five points.

As England continued to struggle to convert possession into points, however, the Austrians found space to run the fast break, and as England collapsed the final margin became twenty points.

Pool A					P	W	L	Pts
England	93 - 85	Iceland						
Austria	69 - 53	Portugal	1	Austria	3	3	0	6
Austria	107 - 74	Iceland	2	England	3	2	1	5
England	83 - 64	Portugal	3	Iceland	3	1	2	4
Iceland	83 - 65	Portugal	4	Portugal	3	0	3	3
England	43 - 63	Austria						

Pool B					P	W	L	Pts
Scotland	100 - 77	Denmark						
Ireland	58 - 72	Luxembourg	1	Scotland	3	3	0	6
Denmark	83 - 64	Luxembourg	2	Denmark	3	2	1	5
Scotland	85 - 74	Ireland	3	Luxembourg	3	1	2	4
Scotland	73 - 57	Luxembourg	4	Ireland	3	0	3	3
Denmark	84 - 61	Ireland						

5th-8th					P	W	L	Pts
Portugal	68 - 59	Luxembourg	5	Iceland	3	3	0	6
Iceland	91 - 83	Ireland	6	Luxembourg	3	1	2	4
Ireland	76 - 69	Portugal	7	Portugal	3	1	2	4
Iceland	107 - 88	Luxembourg	8	Ireland	3	1	2	4

Martin Hall (17) was the only player to record double digits for England, but five players did so for Austria. Both teams took 60 shots from the field in the match, but while England had converted just seventeen, their opponents had hit 50% of their attempts!

England still qualified for the semi-finals, but second place in the Pool meant that they would be facing their old rivals Scotland, who had beaten them three times in their last four meetings.

With Ian Day back in the side England looked in better shape, and they made a blistering start to the semi-final.

Hitting the first nine points, England raced away to lead by nineteen, 27-8, after eight minutes, forcing coach Abe Wood to call his second Time Out.

That steadied the Scots somewhat, as McInnes managed to find the net from impossible positions, but England still led by fifteen (29-14) when Willie Cameron picked up his fourth foul and made his disconsolate way to the bench.

Anyone who started counting chickens at that point had clearly forgotten England's collapse the previous day, and sure enough they proceeded yet again to fail to find the basket from the field for ten minutes! By this time the Scots had found renewed confidence, and at the interval it was they who led, 33-36.

After a close start to the second half, calamity appeared to strike the Scots, as McInnes left the game on five fouls, but his young team-mates responded magnificently to blitz twenty points past England to take control of the game, 57-75.

Only when the game was beyond them did England seem able to relax sufficiently to raise their scoring, but the 15-4 run to close the game was too little too late,

Semi Finals		
Austria	109 - 68	Denmark
Scotland	79 - 72	England
3rd/4th		
England	123 - 80	Denmark
Final		
Austria	79 - 69	Scotland

To their credit England responded to take third place with a comprehensive demolition of Denmark that not only recorded a Tournament high-score of 123 but also set a record for an England team in a full international.

That, though, was scant consolation for having missed out on a top two place and a trip to the Challenge Round.

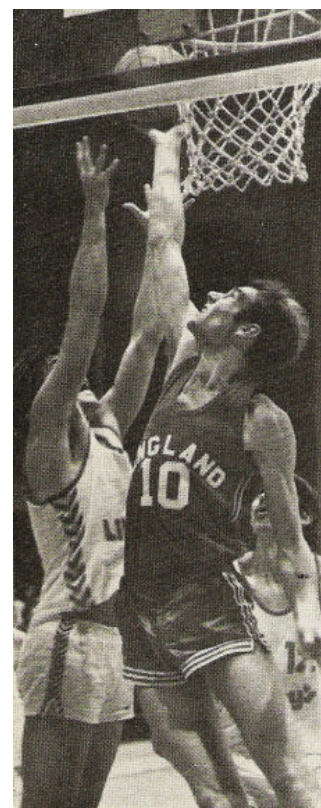
That disappointment was, of course, made all the more bitter by the fact that Scotland did go on to that next stage.

Amid the inevitable post-mortems (mainly focussing on the alleged effect of American players in the league!) the key impact of the League seems to have been overlooked.

A well organised and well supported club competition now meant that England was now in a position to host a successful and well-attended European event.



Paul Philp drives through the Danish defence.
[Trevor Pountain]



Martin Hall goes to the basket against Denmark.
[Trevor Pountain]

Acknowledgements:

Many thanks to:

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

"Basketball" Magazine, Vol.15, 1975-1976, ed. Mel Welch, published EBBA

Trevor Pountain, for permission to use his photographs