

A HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL LEAGUES.

3. TAKING OFF.

1973-1974:

If 1972-3 saw the League finding its feet, 1973-4 suggested that it was up and running!

Half of the eight teams came in with sponsorship - LLSK had become "Embassy All-Stars"; Liverpool lost the Wills' sponsorship, but picked up the name of a local motor dealer; and Doncaster and Manchester set up several Seasons not only of cross-Pennine rivalry, but also what was dubbed the "battle of the tyres", with the Panthers sponsored by local firm F.J.Wilson, and Giants by the national A.T.S.

Nor was that all - the League itself picked up its first sponsorship - as the **Clark's Men's Shoes National League**.

Another new name, that was to play a significant role for many years to come, made its first appearance, as Sutton became Sutton & Crystal Palace - and they went on to complete an undefeated League season, just pipping rivals Embassy to the title:

CLARK'S MEN'S SHOES NATIONAL BASKETBALL LEAGUE		1973-1974							
	Pl.	W.	L.	NR	For	Agt.	Pts.		
1	Sutton & Crystal Palace	14	13	0	1	1211	1013	27.5	
2	Embassy All-Stars	14	11	2	1	1298	1154	25.5	
3	London YMCA Metros	14	8	6		1131	1080	22	
4	Avenue (Edmonton)	14	8	6		1154	1078	22	
5	Wilson Panthers, Doncaster	14	7	7		1104	1058	21	
6	Loughborough All-Stars	14	5	9		1004	1020	19	
7	Liverpool B&K Motors	14	3	11		1050	1252	17	Replaced late
8	ATS Giants (Manchester)	14	0	14		883	1180	14	Re-elected

The first ever League meeting between the big London rivals had an unusual conclusion. Embassy were due to play at the brand new Sobell Centre in Islington, but it was not completed on time.

Nothing unusual there then. The game against Palace was thus switched to Newington Place, Elephant & Castle, in South London. During the second half, with Embassy leading 66-62, rain leaked in through the roof, and the match was abandoned as the court was unsafe.

Later in the season Palace comprehensively beat Embassy, 106-83, and when they completed the remainder of their schedule undefeated, while Embassy lost by eleven at Avenue, the incomplete game became irrelevant. Each team was thus awarded 1 ¹/₂ points (remember that a defeat entitled you to a point in those days) as they finished first and second.

Palace underlined their superiority in the Cup Final (played for the last time at the National Sports Centre ... at Crystal Palace), with a 120-100 victory over Embassy.

The strength of the London challenge was underlined by the fact that teams from the capital filled the first four places, with Metros in third, and the defending champions, Avenue, fourth.

Crystal Palace had brought Jim Guymon back, alongside another American, who was to make rather more of an impact (both positively and negatively) later as a coach - Tom Wisman.

Embassy, however, produced the League's leading scorer, in "Pistol" Pete Sprogis (yes, he had that nickname long before Pete Sampras!), who hit 426 points, at an average of just over 30 per game. The All-Stars also had Stu Turpie in the top ten scorers, with 240 points.

The first Season's leading scorer, Mike Gattorna, had seen his club Sheffield drop out of the League, but he had joined neighbouring Wilson Panthers, and finished seventh highest scorer in the country, with 259. He was joined in the 20-mile journey from Sheffield by a player who scored far fewer points, but whose defensive ability probably stopped nearly as many - Keith Rae.

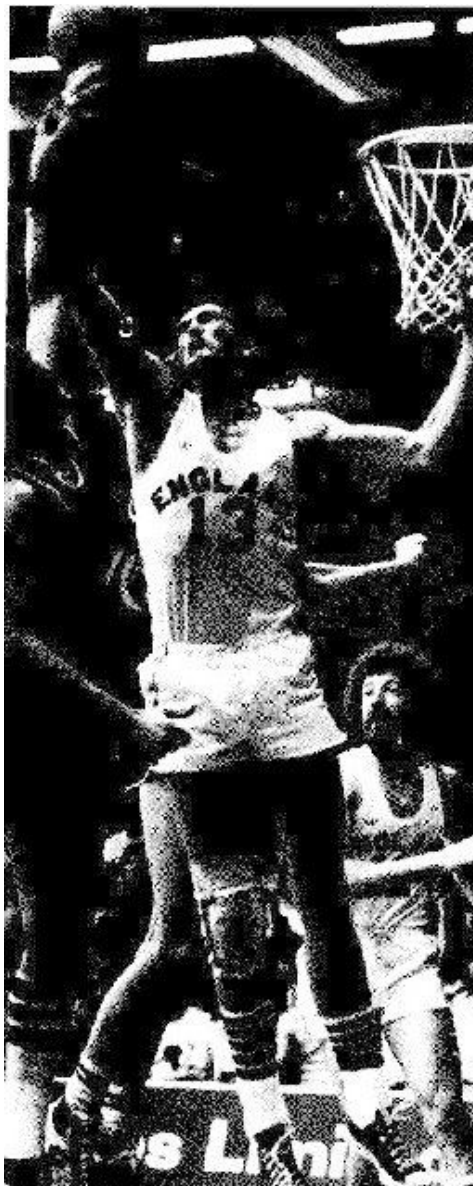
With Ian Day (the 4th highest scorer, with 279 points - just ahead of Guymon) also in the team, the Panthers came a creditable fifth in their first season in the competition.

Another player who was to make a much bigger impact later was the Doncaster team's first American import. Steve Pound played only one game before having to return to the States as a result of injury, but his 19 points was enough to put him into the League's top ten averages for the season.

Loughborough (in 6th place) had their own English star, in Carl Olssen (261 pts. - 6th highest in League). However, Liverpool's Steve Latham (3rd in the League with 311 points) could not prevent his team from finishing next to bottom, with only two victories over bottom club Manchester, and one at Metros to show for their season's efforts.

North-Western neighbours ATS Giants had a torrid baptism, failing to record a single League victory in their first season, although they came close on the road, losing by four at Avenue (60-56), five at Doncaster (73-68) and six at Liverpool (89-83).

Thus it was Manchester who faced the prospect of losing their newly-won League status when they lined up against the hopeful aspirants in the National Invitation Tournament, held at Deesside.



Steve Latham of Liverpool (13) backed up by Carl Olssen of Loughborough (14), playing for England.

NATIONAL INVITATION TOURNAMENT, 1974

Pool A	ATS	Mal	War	WY	P.	W.	L.
ATS Giants	x	62-48	51-77	61-48	3	2	1
Malory Lewisham	48-62	x	47-74	55-45	3	1	2
Warwickshire	77-51	74-47	x	70-49	3	3	0
West Yorkshire	48-61	45-55	49-70	x	3	0	3

Pool B	Cl	Liv	St.L	Vau	P.	W.	L.
Cleveland Strongarm	x	66-74	56-61	53-48	3	1	2
Liverpool	74-66	x	55-53	58-52	3	3	0
St. Luke's	61-56	53-55	x	60-56	3	2	1
Vauxhall Motors	48-53	52-58	56-60	x	3	0	3

FINALS				
1	Warwickshire	74-67	ATS Giants	2
3	Liverpool	82-69	St. Luke's Exeter	4
5	Cleveland Strongarm	88-75	Malory Lewisham	6
7	West Yorkshire	93-87	Vauxhall Motors	8

NIT ranking order		
1	Warwickshire (Coventry)	Admitted
2	ATS Giants (Manchester)	Readmitted
3	Liverpool	Readmitted - Withdrew late
4	St. Luke's, Exeter	Admitted
5	Cleveland Meteors	Late replacement for Liverpool
6	Malory, Lewisham	Not admitted
7	West Yorkshire	Not admitted
8	Vauxhall Motors	Not admitted

In the event, the Giants acquitted themselves well, finishing second only to the highly successful Warwickshire County squad, who were thus admitted to the League, becoming Coventry in the process.

Manchester thus retained their status, and they were joined by St. Luke's College from Exeter.

It was only much later, only a few weeks from the start of the following Season, that Liverpool announced that they were unable to continue, and Cleveland Meteors were given a last minute ticket to the National League.

NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP CUP, 1974

CLARK'S MEN'S SHOES NATIONAL CUP, 1973-1974			
<u>First Round</u>	<u>Second Round</u>	<u>1/4 Final</u>	
Malory Lewisham (x) 73 }			
London University (x) 78 }	London University (x) 100 }		
	Exeter University (x) 52 }	London University (x) 61 }	
Vauxhall Motors (x) 80 }			
Cambridge (x) 47 }	Vauxhall Motors (x) 65 }	Sutton & Crystal Palace (1) 101 }	
	Sutton & Crystal Palace (1) 89 }		
	Avenue (1) 75 }		
	Wilson Panthers, Doncaster (1) 69 }	Avenue (1) 77 }	
	London YMCA Metros (1) 84 }	London YMCA Metros (1) 78 }	
	ATS Giants (1) 75 }		
St.Luke's Exeter (x) 77 }			
Wolverhampton (x) 76 }	St.Luke's Exeter (x) 84 }		
	Embassy All-Stars (1) 104 }	Embassy All-Stars (1) 102 }	
	Liverpool (1) 100 }	Liverpool (1) 80 }	
Sheffield Scorpions (x) 57 }	Birmingham (x) 63 }		
Birmingham (x) 58 }			
	Loughborough All-Stars (1) 90 }		
Cleveland Meteors (x) 88 }	Cleveland Meteors (x) 62 }	Loughborough All-Stars (1) 72 }	
Sheffield University (x) 79 }			
	Oxford University (x) 91 }	Oxford University (x) 54 }	
	Southern Pirates (x) 86 }		

With the League still in its infancy, the National Championship was still considered by many to be the premier competition.

There was to be no repeat this year, however, of the previous season's upset, with a non-league team winning the competition.

The eight League teams were given a bye into the second round, and at that stage they disposed of six of the non-leaguers who had qualified from the first round.

<u>Semi-Final</u>	<u>FINAL</u> <u>@CPNSC</u>
Sutton & Crystal Palace 82 }	
	} Sutton & C. Palace 120
London YMCA Metros 69 }	
Embassy All-Stars 85 }	
	} Embassy All-Stars 100
Loughborough All-Stars 60 }	

The only two teams from outside the league to reach the quarter finals, Oxford University and London University, did so by beating non-league opponents.

The closest matches in round 2, as might be expected, were those between league rivals. Inaugural League champions Avenue edged past Doncaster Panthers by six points, while eight-times winners London YMCA Metros overcame Manchester by nine.

These two then met in the quarter finals, and when Metros (who had finished third in the league) put out Avenue (fourth) it was sixth-placed Loughborough who gate-crashed the top-four party in the semis.

To nobody's great surprise the Final was a re-match of the previous season's event, and Sutton and Crystal Palace gained revenge with a comprehensive 120-100 drubbing of Embassy in the match that was held at Crystal Palace.

In just the second season of the League's existence, Crystal Palace had become the first team to complete the League and Cup double ... and as it turned out, it was to be the first of many!

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