

A HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL LEAGUES.

5b. THE INAUGURAL WOMEN'S LEAGUE.

1975-6:

Before we start, let's just clear up a question of nomenclature. Some people prefer to refer to "Ladies" basketball, and indeed several clubs include that term in their team names.

However, the male game could hardly be accurately described as "Gentlemen's" (and if you think it could be - you haven't seen a game lately!). Until it is, I shall continue to use the term Women as the accurate counterpart to Men. After all, I'd hate to be accused of being sexist!

If the Men's National League had had a difficult birth, then the Women's competition had faced even greater obstacles.

The Women's section of the Amateur Basketball Association was not formed until 1962, and the first Women's National Championship did not take place until the 1964-5 season.

Even as recently as the mid-60s there seemed to be more official concern with the way the players looked than in the quality of play. Richard Taylor tells us, in his excellent "Basketball review", published in 1980 "... *the women were encouraged to wear dresses...*" with the rider that "... *a preference for shorts and blouses by some teams is recognised and remains permissible.*"

Now I see where the description "Ladies" originated!

The first Women's Championship Cup Final, held at RAF Stanmore, was won by Malory, from London, 42-24.

On the losing Sheffield Hatters' side was a young player by the name of Betty Codona, who would go on to coach the team to an unparalleled thirteen National League titles, eleven National Cup successes and twelve Championships.

In fact, you could say that there were two future Hatters' coaches on court that day, as Betty was pregnant at the time, and elder daughter Vanessa succeeded her when she retired from the Sheffield hot seat.

The early years of competition were dominated by Malory, who won four of the first five Championship Finals. They would have won all five had they not made the mistake, in 1968, of playing an ineligible player. Their 49-43 victory over Abbey Wood in that year's Final became a 2-0 result to their opponents.

Abbey Wood won the 1970 and '71 Finals by more conventional means, but then lost the 1972 Final to Turnford Tigers at the start of a period which was to be dominated by the Tigers and the Eston (later Cleveland) Eagles.

In 1971, the Tigers, coached by Stuart Storey, had decided the time was right to enter the European Cup. Their optimism proved ill founded, as they came up against Clermont Ferrand, who were on their way to numerous Final appearances, and the French team proceeded to run up an aggregate victory by over 200 points!

There was, though, a positive outcome. It was whilst talking to the French that the Tigers' management realised just how far behind the rest of Europe we were! It seemed that every European country had a women's national league ... except England.

So, with the advent of the men's NBL, in 1972, Tigers wrote to the ABBA, asking them to form a national league for women. The reply was perhaps predictable, that there were just not enough clubs considered to be competitive, but the idea was at last in the open.

The 1974 Championship Final further highlighted the shortcomings in the Women's game, as the court in Walsall shared the hall with recreational badminton!

Discussions between the Tigers and Terry Moore, Coach to Cleveland, resulted in both clubs deciding to write, once again, to the Association. This time it was with more success, and the Women's NBL was formed in season 1975-76.

The Eagles were the reigning Champions (for the second year in a row) when the first Women's National League came into being in 1975. It began, (like its male counterpart, three years previously) with just six teams ... but only five were to make it through to the end of the season.

While the holding of the Tournament to choose its members had heralded the launch of the men's league, and had ensured publicity, the National Executive Committee of the Association chose the six participants for the inaugural Women's League.

The advent of a Women's National League was considered to be such a huge event that the first mention of it was in the autumn 1975 edition of "Basketball" (the official journal of EBBA), just as the campaign was about to tip off!

They did, however, honour the start of the Women's League by devoting the front cover to the subject but their nod in the direction of equality was rather negated by their choice of picture – a full page shot, not of a basketball player, but of a blonde model in a tight Speedo swimsuit!

It was certainly a strong line-up, though, with five of the founder members having reached the quarter finals of the Women's National Cup the previous season.

The three from that stage who didn't progress to the League were Doncaster Panthers, Nottingham and Solent Shrimps (perhaps lacking the height to compete!).

The two teams who had dominated the women's game between them for the previous three seasons were included - **Cleveland Eagles** (Championship Cup winners in 1974 and '75, and finalists in '73 and '70), and **Turnford Tigers** (runners up to Cleveland in the previous two seasons, victors over Eagles in '73, winners in '72, and beaten finalists in '71).

By this time both Malory and Abbey Wood had disappeared off the radar (not even entering the 1974-5 Cup), and the three "big name" teams were judged worthy of lining up alongside the "big two" were **Corvus Cornix**, **Southgate**, and **London YMCA** (the latter ensuring that they didn't emulate their male counterparts in missing out on their League's first season).

The final entrants were **Darlington VeeGees**, even though they had crashed out of the Cup in the first round.

These teams contained many players who were to become increasingly well known in the game. Both Cleveland and Turnford had five International starters.

Eagles boasted Ann Gollogly and Kay Goodwin, but they were very much team orientated, with an excellent team spirit engendered by coach Terry Moore. Though several players from their Cup winning team had moved away from the North-east, they still returned to train and play with the team.

Tigers had Andrea Warner, who had been capped as a full England senior International, as a fifteen year old. She had joined Tigers when Malory had folded, as did the player who was to become the first Women's "Player of the Year", Jackie Wainwright. Jackie had won 38 consecutive International caps (starting in 1965, in only the second ever England Women's International match), and had captained her country a record 26 times.

The Tigers, now coached by Roy Birch, were also strengthened by the appearance of 6'-0" Volleyball International Joan Last - who could reach the rim with both hands from a standing jump!

At Cambridge, **Corvus Cornix**, run by Ken and Di Charles, had Anita Curtis, described at the time, by "Basketball" magazine, as "the fast improving young International centre". They had two Australians in their squad, but the majority of players were home-grown, having developed through the Charles' devotion to mini-basketball.

Darlington Vee Gees, playing out of Middlesbrough, had a young and enthusiastic team, which was strengthened early in the season by the acquisition of Alena Golemberska.

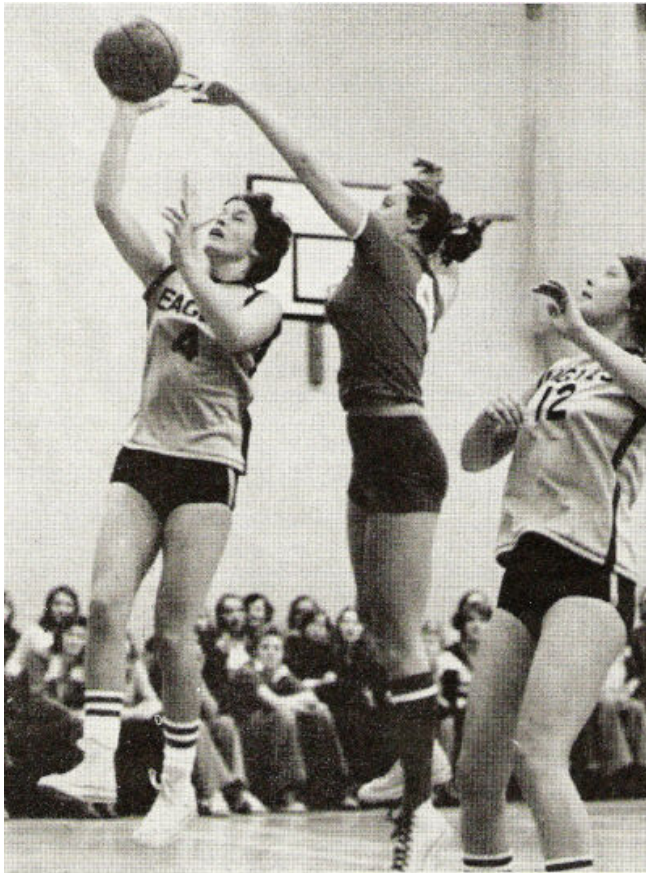
London Y Bobcats were a well established outfit, who (like their male counterparts) were playing in "exile" while the new Central YMCA was being built (very slowly!); their matches were shared between the Sobell Centre and the new Harrow Leisure Centre.

Finally, **Southgate**, another well-entrenched club, were to play at Hatfield.

The Season got off to an inauspicious start on 5th October, when Darlington encountered dreadful travel problems (details of which I'm unable to find!) on their way to Turnford, and arrived an hour after the scheduled 2.00pm tip-off.

The match was to be played as a double-header with the Avenue/Embassy men's game, and that was due to begin at 4.15! The officials had thus decided (before Darlington arrived) that the match would have to be a shortened one, and the young, travel-weary Vee Gees duly went down 34-19.

Things improved dramatically the following week, when Turnford were again in action - this time at Cambridge. In a close and exciting game, the home side held a one-point lead at the interval, but the Tigers raced into an early lead in the second period. Anita Curtis (18 points) led a spirited fightback, but Corvus Cornix fell just short at the final buzzer, 53-55. Andrea Warner hit 17 for the visitors.



Eileen Moore of Cleveland escapes the attentions of Darlington's Chris Knight as she drives to the basket. [Galdon Photos]

By the time the season was five matches old it was already clear that one of the "big two" would take the title. Tigers and Eagles both had 5&0 records, while their closest challenge came from Corvus, who stood 2&3! The other three teams were all on 1&4.

Cleveland ran up the first "ton" in Women's NBL history when they took a 39-101 victory at Darlington in mid-November, but the big match came a month later, with the visit of the Tigers to Stockton.

The game began badly for the visitors, as Jackie Wainwright slipped and wrenched her knee on the game's first offence, and she took little further part in the match.

The Tigers, though, discovered that they had a more-than-adequate back-up, as Joan Last came off the bench to take up the slack.

With the home side running up early fouls (they committed six in the first three minutes), Turnford pulled out an early 12-27 lead, and went into the break 22-38 to the good.

Linda Madden led an Eagles' fightback in the second half, but the home side soon had players beginning to foul out.

Darlington looked in better shape at the start of their visit to Cleveland (obviously preferring the shorter journey!), and they led the Cup holders 11-12.

Then the Eagles got into their stride; they restricted their neighbours to just sixteen more points, while pouring in fifty-five themselves, for a resounding 66-28 victory.

Both Cleveland and Turnford were becoming adept at overcoming slow starts to storm to eventual victory. The Eagles visited Islington in mid-October, to play the Bobcats, and recovered from a 15-14 start to go 18-44 ahead, and win 34-64.

On the same day Tigers trailed 12-13 at home to Southgate, then hit 19 unanswered points, and went on to a 74-43 victory.

Darlington finally came good at home to Corvus, recording a 76-56 win, with new signing Golemberska (who had found there was no National League team near her East Midlands home) hitting 29 points. In their next match, Corvus recorded their first victory, with a narrow 40-39 home success over Bobcats.



Joan Last (# 9) gets her shot away as Tigers beat Eagles with a ten point victory at Stockton. [Galdon Photos]

Turnford led 50-67 with four minutes remaining, but then sat back to protect their lead, rather than trying to increase it, and the final 57-67 scoreline gave Cleveland hope that they could still overtake their rivals in the return fixture.

The fixture list decreed that that game was the very next match for both teams - albeit four weeks later, after the Christmas/New Year break.

There was to be no turnaround for the Eagles, however, as Tigers led 30-24 at the break, and retained their unbeaten record, despite a late Cleveland fightback, 58-52.

By this time, unfortunately, the League was down to just five teams.

Darlington's travel problems at the start of the season had proved not to be an isolated occurrence, and after just six games they had been expelled for "failure to fulfil their fixtures".

Tigers' second victory over Cleveland left them with only two games to play, and thus effectively wrapped up the title for them.

They duly beat Southgate the following week, but their final game followed another four week lay-off, and they nearly blew their perfect record as YMCA Bobcats led them by 3 at Islington, with five minutes to play.

The Tigers recovered, to win 41-45, and thus became the first team in NBL history to complete a perfect league campaign. Crystal Palace had gone undefeated in the 1973-4 men's league, but that had included one void game (when rain stopped play)!

Two months later, on their home court at Pickett's Lock, Turnford extended that 100% record when they regained the National Championship Cup in the final against Cleveland, thus setting the standard for future teams, with an inaugural League and Cup "double".

Women's National League							
1975-1976							
	Pl.	W.	L.	For	Agt.	Pts.	
1	Turnford Tigers	8	8	0	488	392	16
2	Cleveland Eagles	8	6	2	507	366	14
3	Corvus Cornix (Cambridge)	8	3	5	414	444	11
4	Southgate	8	2	6	375	499	10
5	London YMCA	8	1	7	303	386	9
	Darlington Vee Gees	6	1	5			7 Expelled mid Season

This being basketball, in which nothing is ever simple if it can possibly be made complicated, the format for the following season was still in a state of flux as the first Women's League ended.

Six teams had applied to enter the league for 1976-7 - the five which had survived the first season, plus Nottingham.

So, what do you do if you only have six applicants? Seems logical that you'd go with those six, right?

Wrong!

What you actually do (or rather, what the Association actually did) is to conclude that there are insufficient applications at that time to warrant the expansion of the League – and write to sixteen others to ask if they'd like to apply for consideration!

To that end, they invited sixteen clubs to apply – Avon (Frome), Billingham, Birmingham, Bourneville, Brighton, Chelmsford, Darlington (perhaps surprisingly!), Doncaster, Highbury, Kirkby, Liverpool, Luton, Rochdale, Sheffield, Solent, and Waltham Abbey.

The proposal (if there were enough new applicants) was to have a First Division of five teams (the current top four, plus one to be decided), and they would play each other twice at home and twice away.

There would be a regionalised Division Two, with up to four teams in North and South Leagues, and "there might be some form of play-off between the regional champions".

Two teams (I believe) did not accept the invitation to apply, and of the fourteen who did, half of them were chosen ... to play each other once in a single Division Two.

As for Division One, that was expanded to eight teams, rather than five, with the inclusion of three teams from Scotland!

Even then, though, things did not work out as planned, as Rochdale followed the pattern set by some men's clubs in previous years, and dropped out before the season began.

Radcliffe Wildcats were brought in to replace them, despite concerns from the other clubs that they may not be strong enough to compete.

New admissions (Div. 1):

Edinburgh All Blacks
Polonia (Edinburgh)
Boroughmuir Aces (Edinburgh)

New admissions (Div. 2):

Avon Wanderers
Chantry Bobcats (Ipswich)
Liverpool Ajax
Norwich Coe-Stars
Nottingham
Rochdale Withdrew late
Waltham Abbey Griffins
Radcliffe Wildcats Late replacement

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