

A HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL LEAGUES.

6. 1976-1977.

The "Close Season"

As the teams began to gear up for the fifth season of the National League there was a noticeable quickening in the pace of change, with new names, new faces, and old faces in new places.

Cinzano SCP was the new handle for the defending double-winners, although they'd actually picked up the sponsorship, and used the title, just before the end of last season. And this time they were actually to play at Crystal Palace.

The team lost Ken Walton, to Manchester, but Vic Tinsley, who had been thought to have been rejoining the Giants after nearly a decade in the USA, ended up in London instead, as Palace bid to strengthen their team for a further assault on Europe, following the heroics of the previous campaign.

Tom Wisman, who had been player/coach three years previously, and who had been instrumental in bringing over Jim Guymon, returned to South London, this time just in a coaching capacity, but few people realised at the time that his histrionics would be as entertaining as anything to be seen on court!

The core of the team, Guymon, Saiers, Hall and Philp remained, and they captured two Scots, both G.B. Internationals - Jimmy Carmichael (from Boroughmuir), who was moving to London to work, and Willie Cameron. In spite of continued strengthening of their main challengers, they would begin the season as clear favourites.

The first of those challengers, **Embassy All-Stars**, had the same sponsor, but a new home as they pre-empted Wimbledon F.C. by 27 years to up sticks to **Milton Keynes**, where they would play at the brand new Bletchley Sports Centre. Clubs had moved home before, but usually to another Sports Centre not far from their original home, and Embassy were the first major League club to move their franchise any distance. Certainly Southern Pirates had uprooted from Portsmouth to play in Guildford, but that was before they had entered the League.

At the time the fan-base for most clubs was sufficiently small for this to have little impact (though, of course, the diehard few would disagree, and who can blame them). However, with hindsight it is unfortunate that this move was permitted, as it made it that little bit easier for other clubs, in later years, to uproot teams from their original home.

The venue would be different, but many of the players remained the same. Miles Gerrish had gone, but Sprogis, Shelley, Turpie and Acres remained, along with Magnus Moeran and Andy Sutherland, and they were joined by John Belk, from Doncaster. To this already potent combination were added two new Americans, Jerry Walker and Earl Hogue. Miles Aiken, the American who had coached that Summer's G.B. Olympic Team became coach/administrator, and it was clear that Embassy had their sights set on reclaiming the titles they had yielded to Palace the year before.

The name, and the Adwick leisure Centre venue, remained the same for **Wilson Panthers, Doncaster**, but there were huge changes otherwise. Americans Steve Pound and Dan Campagna were not returning, but far more crucial for coach Morris Wordsworth was the loss of no less than four English players - Belk had gone to Embassy, long-serving local player Stu Burton and GB International Mick Dudfield both retired, and John Rowland was planning to concentrate on his final year Examinations in medicine at Sheffield University. Ian Redford was also due to depart, to Nigeria, but in the event he remained with the club after all.

To tide the team over, Wordsworth managed to persuade veteran captain Keith Rae to postpone his planned retirement. He held on to Ian Day, and Paul Beasley, along with youngsters Mike Davis (a Junior Cup Winner with the club the previous season) and Chris Bycroft, while picking up Keith Hawkswell from relegated Leeds.

The key to whether the Panthers would continue to challenge for honours clearly rested with the two new 6' 7" Americans, Bryan Dunn and Wayne Metzger.

Team Fiat was the new handle for the **Coventry** team which had finished a creditable fourth in only their second season. They had retained the core of the youthful, but experienced, side, in Neville "elbows" Hopkins, Phil Hield, Steve Assinder and Robin Hall, and added John Dabrowski from second division Nottingham, and England Junior Fred Skepelhorn. They, too, had two new Americans, Darnell Harrell and Peter Jackson, both from Missouri. Coventry were many people's tip to be the team to watch if there were to be an upset to the balance of power.



Tom Wisman in unusual mode - sitting still long enough to make his point.

(Photo: Eamonn McCabe)



The Coventry team proudly show off the new sponsorship of their pyjamas.

ATS Giants had climbed to their highest-ever fifth place the year before, and it was clear that they had designs on continuing their ascent into the elite. Walton had returned "home" from Crystal Palace, and Al-Malik Kaaba also came back, from Leeds. The Manchester team also planned to add Vic Tinsley, to the previous season's key English players, Steve Latham, Dick Powell, John Nono, John Allerston and Bob Park. That, though, was not to be, as the lure of European competition took Tinsley South instead, while Park went in the other direction - North-East to Strongarm.

Their continuity would stand them in good stead, but they, too, had two new Americans (both from Nazarene College, Oklahoma), John David Miller, and a certain young shooting guard who would make quite a name for himself that season - and well beyond ... Jeff Jones!

Loughborough were another team with a new name, as they bid for the longest title in the League as **Bowmer & Kirkland Loughborough All-Stars**, which they abbreviated to "Bowmer & Kirkland L.A.S.", or even just "B&K" for very-short.

Olssen, Pearce, Siddall, Wilson and Worcester were the key members of the nine returning players, while Peter Shaw was back as coach. The team had plenty of experience, but looked destined to struggle - a situation that was rectified soon after the start of the season, with the acquisition of two American players, Kevin King and Jimmy Smith.

Avenue had been slipping slowly but steadily down the table since they had won the inaugural league title, and had finished in the bunch with Loughborough, Strongarm and Metros, all on 6 wins and 12 losses.

As they stuck to their policy of sticking to home-bred players, this decline looked set to continue, despite stability (seven players returning) and experience (Collins, Hoy and Mann having been with them since that first campaign). Five new players (including Fred and Steve Munday) were added to the squad, and Len Hoy took up the mantle of player/coach.

The League's North-Eastern representatives were yet another team to have moved home, albeit a short distance, to become **Strongarm, Durham**, playing at Newton Aycliffe. Star American guard Gary Kloppenberg (8th highest scorer in the League the year before) had moved slightly further, though, to Holland, and this was likely to prove crucial.

Seven of their squad were returning, including Brian Ayre and Mal Liddell, and the five newcomers included Bob Park, who had finished his University course in Manchester. Avenue, however, had already shown that all-English squads were beginning to struggle, and ominously for Strongarm they had finished level with the Londoners even with Kloppenberg in the team!

YMCA Metros were also planning a move - back to their roots at the Central London YMCA ... but that was still in the process of being built, and any move would have to wait at least until Christmas. In the meantime they were actively seeking their first sponsorship deal, and began their love affair with weird and exotic titles, as **Magnet Wicksteed Metros**.

Coach Humph Long, who was to spend the next quarter century and more carving out an even bigger reputation in the development of Junior players, departed the coaching position, with Colin Gregg becoming yet another of the growing band of player/coaches in the division.

Also returning was the core of the previous year's solid English contingent, Mal Chamberlain, Paul Douglas, John Miller, Nick Startin and Pete Turner, and they were bolstered by the arrival of Colin Croft.

Aware, though, that they had only survived in Division One by virtue of their play-off victory over Stockport, the Metros used their sponsorship to bring over two Americans, Dave Miller and Alan Bunting - and the latter proved to be the first in a long succession of high-quality imports for which the club became noted.

Meanwhile, newly promoted **Vauxhall Motors** were pretty much an unknown quantity, and though they had gained automatic promotion as Division Two champions, they had just one International player (Bernie McGrath), and eight whose highest representative honour was County level.

They recognised, however, that the step up to Division One required special preparation, and the Luton based club brought in two Americans - guard Sherman Austin and forward Ken Pemberton - with latter destined to become a well-known and well-liked figure in the League over the ensuing seasons.

Over the past few years the main question had been which of Embassy and Palace would take the trophies. This year things seemed more open - though only up to a point!

"Basketball" magazine previewed the season under the headline "Five teams set to battle for top league honours", but in the article itself they considered that "The other half of the League could have problems keeping pace with the top five." Give or take the occasional hiccup, their predictions were not far wrong ... but then that was hardly rocket-science!

Rule changes.

There were also new rules for the players to assimilate. At this time, international travel was still not an everyday occurrence, while e-mail and video-conferencing were still in the realms of science fiction, and so FIBA used the opportunity of the Olympic Games every four years to convene and "tweak" the playing regulations to enhance the game.

The key change, this time, involved free-throws. The bonus shot, after a foul and successful basket, was introduced.

Yes, up until then if a player was fouled in the act of shooting and still scored, the only penalty was the foul recorded against the offending player. If Mike Shaft had been commentating in those days he'd have been hard put to sound enthusiastic about "And None!"

The other change was to the penalty if the shooter was fouled and the shot missed. The penalty had been two shots, but these were replaced by "three for two". If the fouled player sank both the first two free-throws then that was all that they took, but if either or both of the first two was missed, the player was awarded a third attempt to score!

I can think of a few players nowadays who would love to see that rule resurrected. Again, though, "How many shots? Three for two!" doesn't really have ring to it!

The intention was to reduce the incentive to deliberately foul a player in the act of shooting if you knew that their free-throw percentage was low. Nothing comes without a price, however, and in this case it tended to devalue one of the game's key skills – effectively putting a 67% foul shooter on the same footing as one with a 100% record.

The 3-for-2 rule did not apply, however, to Intentional Fouls, Technical Fouls or fouls when the offending team was in the penalty (ten fouls per half at that time); in all those cases still only two shots were taken.

Room at the top?

The first weekend of the season, 25th/26th September, suggested that the pundits had generally got it right, as the top-tipped teams all cruised past their less highly-rated opponents.

At Sale, **ATS Giants** took charge before the break against **Metros**, to lead 54-46, and ran out comfortable 100-74 winners, with 34 points from GB top-scorer Steve Latham, while new American David Miller hit 20 for the Londoners.

Things were even more one-sided at Crystal Palace, where **Cinzano's** GB players, Martin Hall (20) and Paul Philp (17) helped them to destroy **Strongarm**, outscoring their opponents more than two to one, 117-56, despite a game-high 22 for debutant Bob Park.

Not to be outdone, **Embassy Milton Keynes** made their debut at their new home, the next day, with a 22 point victory in the local "derby" against newcomers **Vauxhall Motors**. The newly promoted team acquitted themselves well in the first half, to keep up with their hosts, but new signings Walker and Hogue got into gear in the second half and Embassy pulled away to a 74-52 victory.

Wilson Panthers showed their potential, too, when **B&K Loughborough** visited Adwick. Bryan Dunn added to the growing impact of new American imports, as he hit 31 points for the home side on his debut, but Ian Day (28 for Panthers) and Carl Olssen (31 for Loughborough) showed that good Englishmen could still make a major contribution. Panthers' 109-74 victory sounded a clear warning to their rivals that they intended to be in the hunt for honours.

The second weekend brought **Avenue** and **Coventry** into the action.

The former were at home to Metros in what had often proved a hard-fought London "derby", but the inaugural League champions could find no answer to their visitors' new Americans, and Allen Bunting and David Miller hit 34 and 29 points respectively in the 59-95 thrashing, while Adrian Acres, with 15, was the only Avenue player to reach double figures.

In Newton Aycliffe, Pete Jackson and Darnell Harrell continued the theme of dominant Americans, as **Fiat** went on the rampage to pull out a 34-55 half-time advantage over hosts **Strongarm**.

In spite of a career-high 39 points from Bob Park, the home side went down 81-104.

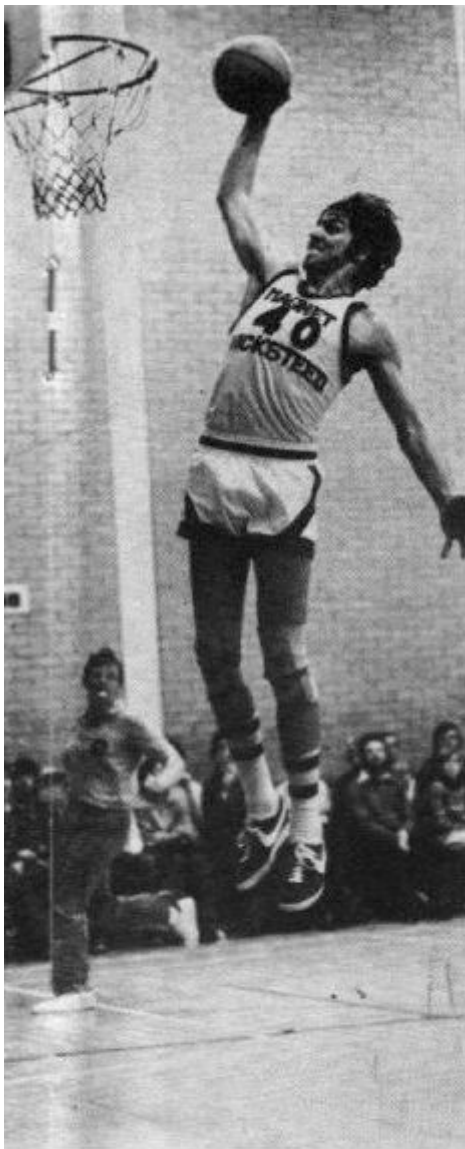
At **Loughborough** the game was virtually over by the mid-point of the first half, as **Cinzano** led 11-35, and 32 points from Saiers coupled with 22 from Paul Philp helped the defending champions to cruise to victory.

According to the report in "Basketball", Richard Pearce's 19 points for the home side "kept the scoreline respectable". 69-101 is respectable? I'd hate to see their idea of a blow-out!

Wilson Panthers were in confident mood as they travelled to Bedford to take on **Vauxhall**, and despite an ankle injury to Ian Day in the second minute, they seemed well on course as they opened a 10-20 lead before the middle of the first half.



Pete Jackson of Fiat shoots two points against Strongarm (Galdon Photos)



Metros' Allen Bunting executes his favourite move.
(Photo: Mike Street)

At that point the visitors allowed their concentration to slip, while at the same time Kenny Pemberton began to step up for the home side, and at the mid-point of the half they were back to 15-20, with Doncaster in the penalty, on 10 team fouls.

Despite restoring a double-digit lead, the Panthers were pegged back again, and at the interval their lead was a mere 33-36. Within five minutes of the restart Vauxhall were level, at 44-all, and there was no more than a couple of points between the teams for the remainder of the game.

With eight minutes remaining the home side took the lead for the first time, 58-56, as Wayne Metzger fouled out and Ian Day picked up a Technical Foul. An upset appeared a distinct possibility.

It was nip and tuck to the buzzer, and level at 74-all with 31 seconds to play, when a jump-ball was called, at the Panthers' defensive end. Vauxhall won the tip, but their hopes were dashed as they lost possession, and Doncaster began a patient build-up to ensure that they took the last shot. Bryan Dunn took it, and though his attempt rimmed out Ian Redford became the hero of the day as he tipped in the rebound for a 74-76 victory, despite a game-high 31 from Pemberton.

With so many teams contesting the top places it was inevitable that there would be an early clash between two of the contenders, and it came at **Milton Keynes**, on 3rd October, with the visit of **ATS Giants**.

The Giants jumped out to an early 8-14 lead before Embassy got into gear, and built a 10-point interval margin. The Giants, with JD Miller in fine form, edged back until, with six minutes remaining they trailed by just four points, 73-69.

The bad news for the visitors was that Steve Latham had just fouled out, but the home side's lack of depth was showing as they had used just seven players - all of whom were now on four fouls!

Somehow Milton Keynes avoided any further fouls, despite defensive pressure that restricted their opponents to just two points, and Peter

Sprogis stepped up to take his game tally to 29 and his team to a 94-71 victory.

After **Wilson's** scare and **Giants'** defeat the meeting of the two Northern challengers, at Sale, took on an even greater significance.

The home side got off to a flier, pulling away from 16-12 to 28-16 by the mid point of the first half, and leading by around ten points for the next five minutes. Then Dunn and Metzger hit their stride for the visitors; it took just three minutes for them to level the scores, and they went into the break 42-45 ahead.

The Giants raised their defensive intensity in the second half, to edge ahead 60-57 after ten minutes, but they could not break away, and were still just 74-68 in front with six minutes remaining ... and still with four minutes to play, as the two defences cancelled each other out.

It was the Panthers who needed the points, though, and as they concentrated on offence, the Giants took advantage to run a series of fast breaks to seal the victory 85-70, led by Jeff Jones and Steve Latham with 26 apiece.

At Edmonton, **Avenue** received another lesson in the growing gulf between top and bottom of the League, as **Embassy** led 33-54 at the half and romped to a 67-105 victory. Peter Sprogis and Earl Hogue shared 54 points, but despite all ten Avenue players scoring, their highest tally was 16, by Acres.

Loughborough were expected to dispose of **Strongarm** at home, but the visitors had other ideas, stunning their hosts with a 22-44 opening, with Brian Ayre in good form. Carl Olsson (28 points) and Richard Pearce (24) hauled B&K back into contention, closing to within three points, but Durham held on to win 78-87 - without making a single substitution in forty minutes!

The North-Easterners nearly pulled off another shock the following day, at Adwick. Doncaster seemed to have recovered from their defeat the night before, as they led 39-24, but as coach Wordsworth began to rest his starting players, the visitors, led by Bob Park, crept back to trail by five. The **Panthers** stepped up again, however, in the two minutes before the interval, and Brian Dunn already had 26 points as they led 61-52.

Stongarm, though, had gained in self-belief, and they stayed in touch, 67-64, 77-70, and 82-80. Mal Liddell, Geoff Bradley, Brian Ayre and Bob Park were all outstanding for the visitors, and as Doncaster stuttered, the final six minutes was filled with tension, as Keith Rae fouled out for Panthers, to be followed by Liddell - but not before Strongarm had taken the lead.

Bob Park (31 points) and Bryan Dunn (32) followed their team mates to the bench with four and two minutes remaining respectively, and there was nothing to choose between the teams at 90-all. Once again the Panthers had the final 30-second possession, with the teams still level, and again they ran down the clock, and this time it was Ian Day who hit the winning shot for a 94-92 victory. Two close calls against lowly opponents in as many weeks, though, had many pundits wondering whether Doncaster had the stomach to stick with the leaders.

Magnet Metros were still playing at Romford, as their new venue was not yet ready, and they surprised the visiting **Team Fiat** as David Miller, Allen Bunting and Pete Turner helped them to a 41-32 lead, but a strong finish to the half by the visitors gave them nine unanswered points and a level game at 41. Metros stayed close, but 27 points from Harrell and 25 from Jackson helped Coventry to narrowly retain their unbeaten record, 83-88.

There were no such scares for **Crystal Palace** as they opened with a 12-27 blitz in the first ten minutes at **Vauxhall**, pulled away to 27-50 at the break, and cruised to a 56-97 victory. Saiers (27) and Philp (20) again led the way for Cinzano.

Week four began with the sternest test yet for **ATS'** title ambitions, as **Cinzano** came to call. The Giants were restricted by the absence of John D Miller, and though Palace were without Willie Cameron, it was the home side who felt the absence more keenly.

The champions' pressure defence and fast-breaks had the Giants reeling early on, and though they fought back in the later stages, the game had already gone away from them, and they went down 74-108. Steve Latham continued to show his value to Manchester, with 28 points, but every one of Palace's players hit four points or more, with Jimmy Guymon recording a game-high 29.

At the other end of the table **Vauxhall** visited **Strongarm** with both teams knowing that the result could have a crucial bearing on the relegation battle. The home side had marginally the better of the first half, to lead 46-44, but Ken Pemberton (with a game-high 34) led the Vauxhall charge in the second half as they recorded their first Division One victory, 82-95.

Dave Bent added 26 for the Motors, while Ayre and Park shared 46 for Durham.

Metros made **Embassy** work hard at Milton Keynes, as they held the scores close in the first half, but once again Hogue (31) and Walker (20) showed their power in the second period, while Bunting was restricted to just 23, as the home side ran out 89-67 victors.

Doncaster seemed to have their game well sewn up against visiting **Avenue**, as Wayne Metzger led them into a 41-20 lead, but with Dunn and Day rested on three fouls, the visitors sensed their chance, and edged back to 41-26 at the interval.

Dunn responded at the start of the second, to lead Panthers into a seemingly unassailable 71-41 lead, with eight minutes remaining, but then came the obligatory Doncaster 4th-quarter stutter, and four minutes later the lead had been halved, at 74-59 as Rick Mann (18) led the Avenue revival.

Doncaster held on, however, to seal the victory, 88-68, led by Dunn's 38 points, half of which had been scored after picking up his fourth foul. Indeed, the margin of victory, and Dunn's total, should have been greater, as "Pawprint" reported at the time "... his final basket, from a steal a few seconds before time, went unnoticed by the scorers, who

were still logging the previous basket, and the referee did not ensure that his signal had been acknowledged by them."

In the fifth week of the campaign **Avenue** were given little chance of opening their account at home to **Cinzano**, and so it proved, as Guymon and Saiers went to town, hitting 29 of their team's first 34 points on the way to a 43-62 lead. The Edmonton team at least looked as though they would avoid a blow-out, but those hopes were cruelly dashed by 24 unanswered points from Palace, who went on to a more than convincing 56-100 victory.

Even worse news for Avenue came from **Loughborough**, who left the erstwhile champions as the only point-less team (some said in more ways than one) with a hard-fought victory over fellow-strugglers **Vauxhall**. Pemberton (35) seemed to have put the promoted team in control, as they built a 16 point lead, but they went eight minutes at the start of the second half without scoring, and Richard Pearce's 27 points helped the All-Stars to their first victory, 77-75.

Miller was still missing for ATS when they visited Durham, and with two defeats already they knew that another one at this stage would destroy their challenge. The Giants stood firm, however, and despite 20 points from Mal Liddell, Strongarm went down 83-94, as Steve Latham stepped up for the visitors with 31.

Allen Bunting was beginning to make a high-scoring name for himself at Romford, but despite leading the **Metros** with 25 in the home game against **Doncaster** his team were still on the wrong end of a 70-82 scoreline as Ian Day led the Panthers to victory with 24, closely followed by Metzger (23) and Dunn (21).

The biggest game of the week was at Coventry, where two of the three remaining unbeaten teams went head to head, and fittingly it required the first extra time of the season to separate **Fiat** and **Embassy**.

The visitors shaded the first half 35-37, but, roared on by a partisan home crowd, Fiat came back to lead by as many as seven in the second. Sprogis and Hogue pulled Embassy back, and into the lead at 68-72, but six unanswered points (Pete Jackson, Phil Hield and Darnell Harrell) gave the home side the edge, 74-72, with seconds to go, and possession.

A violation under pressure turned the ball over to the visitors, but with time running out a missed shot and a scramble for the ball resulted in a jump-ball, between 6' 4" John Dabrowski for Fiat and 5' 11" (height and circumference) Dave Shelley for Embassy. Fiat looked home and dry, but Neville Hopkins stepped into the circle too early, and from the resulting sideline ball Earl Hogue hit a jump-shot to tie the scores as the buzzer sounded.

For three minutes in overtime the teams remained neck and neck, but Embassy showed their big-match experience to hold their nerve in the clutch and snatch a four point victory, 86-90.

With nearly a third of the season gone, the table had an ominously familiar look.

Although Panthers topped the table they had played a game more than most of their rivals, and it was the one point for a defeat that put them there. The only two unbeaten teams were Palace and Embassy, and it looked as though the title may once again come down to the results between these two.

Giants and Fiat completed a top five who had already established themselves in a league of their own, as the strugglers in the bottom half of the table could muster just four wins between them.

	Division One @ 24 Oct. 1976	Pl.	W.	L.	Pts.
1	Wilson Panthers, Doncaster	6	5	1	11
2	Cinzano SCP	5	5	0	10
3	Embassy All-Stars	5	5	0	10
4	ATS Giants (Manchester)	5	3	2	8
5	Team Fiat, Coventry	4	3	1	7
6	Strongarm, Durham	6	1	5	7
7	Magnet Wicksteed Metros	5	1	4	6
8	Vauxhall Motors, Bedford	5	1	4	6
9	Bowmer & Kirkland L.A.S.	5	1	4	6
10	Avenue	4	0	4	4

As the second third of the season approached, the big questions were whether any of the chasing three could topple either of the big two, and whether any of the bottom five could make a move away from the relegation zone.

Wilson Panthers gave an emphatic answer to the first question, at the end of October, as they turned over **Embassy Milton Keynes** at a packed Adwick Leisure Centre.

Embassy shaded the early exchanges, to lead 17-18, but Ian Day was in sparkling form, as he hit sixteen points in a 12 minute spell, and the Panthers led 30-23 six minutes from the break. Sprogis then began to escape Day's defensive attentions, and a series of fast breaks rallied the visitors, but at the half the home side still led 44-40.

The second half continued to ebb and flow, with the Panthers pulling out to 55-47, only to be reined back in, 59-58. Wilson continued to hold a small advantage, until Miles Aiken introduced Stu Turpie for the first time. Turpie's physical presence (and physical play) turned the game, as four unanswered points gave the All-Stars a 74-75 lead four minutes from time.



Peter Sprogis (#5) admires Wayne Metzger's reverse lay-up to avoid the attentions of Earl Hogue.

Photo courtesy: Wilson Panthers

Embassy still had time to level the scores, but as the game clock reached 30 seconds, Panthers stole the ball, and spent 25 seconds of quick-fire passing, to retain possession. With seconds remaining Dunn took the shot, and though he hit the ring, Metzger was on hand to tip in for an 83-79 victory.

Two days before, in a rare Friday night game, **Cinzano** had maintained their unbeaten start, with an 89-72 victory over **Metros**, and now, with Embassy's defeat at Doncaster, Palace were the only team boasting a 100% record.

ATS Giants, with Miller back, looked odds-on favourites at home to **Bowmer & Kirkland Loughborough**, but the All-Stars had strengthened their squad with new American Jim Smith, and the visitors held the scores to 34-all before ten unanswered gave the Giants the interval lead.

Jones and Miller shared 38 points for the home side, as they edged to a 74-67 win, but both were outscored by Smith (21) and Olsson (20) for Loughborough.

Even more galling for the Midlands' side was that **Avenue** picked up their first win of the season, at home to **Strongarm**. It was a classic all-round team performance by the Romford outfit, as all their players recorded points, and though none scored more than twelve they had four players, Wilmot, Mann, Elias and Gregg, all with that tally. For Durham, Park's 21 and Ayre's 19 proved to be in vain as they went down 80-68.

Final game of the weekend was at Bedford, where **Vauxhall Motors** looked good as they held **Fiat** to 40-41 at the interval, and 71-all with five minutes remaining. However, Kenny Pemberton had already fouled out, and Harrell (32) and Hopkins (28) led the visitors to a somewhat flattering 75-95 victory.

At last, at the beginning of November the big two met for the first time in the season, as **Cinzano** paid a visit to **Milton Keynes**. Traditionally these games could be quite feisty affairs, but this time the controversy began even before the tip off.

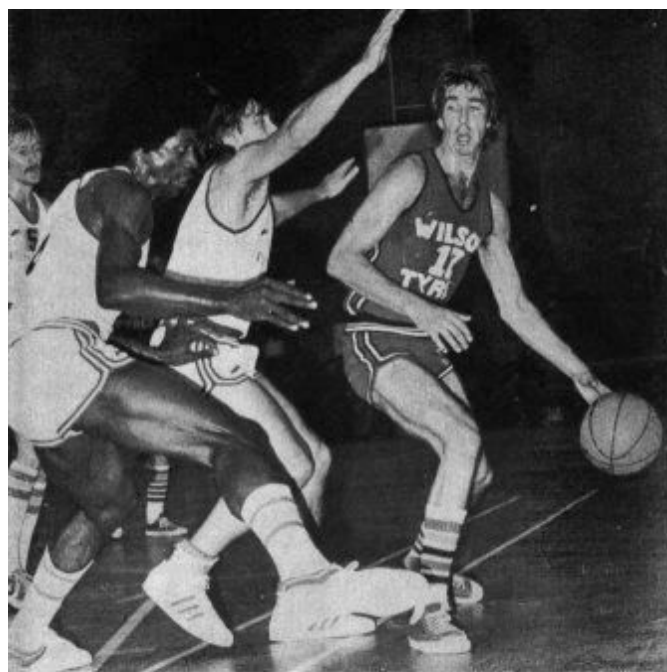
The scheduled match officials (Dave Turner and Malcolm Heath, according to the season's handbook) managed to misinterpret the start time for the match, and by the time they arrived at the venue Commissioner Terry Barnett had

The lead swung to and fro, and a thrilling climax was guaranteed, as the visitors still led by one going into the final minute. Dunn scored for Panthers, and was fouled, to give a bonus shot for a two-point lead, 79-77. Before the advent of the 3-point line, and with a 30-second shot-clock, this seemed enough to ensure that Doncaster should at least avoid defeat in regulation time.

Turpie, though, had other ideas, as he sank a basket at the other end with 49 seconds on the clock, levelling the scores and drawing the foul as he did so.

Stepping to the line for the bonus shot, the Embassy veteran hit the rim, and as Dunn went in for the rebound he was fouled.

With Milton Keynes on ten team fouls, the long walk to the other end of the court ensued, and Dunn hit both bonus shots to restore the home side's two-point lead.



Ian Day leads his Embassy opponents in a rousing chorus of the "hokey-cokey"

followed the rule book to appoint two other officials who were in the crowd - Harry Keats and John Symons, both of whom were FIBA qualified.

The game itself was exciting throughout, as Cinzano began in their usual all-action style, but with Mark Saiers well marked, Embassy were only two points adrift at the interval. The scores remained close throughout the second half, and Embassy edged into the lead only for Guymon to respond for Palace, and with three minutes remaining Hogue (21 pts) and Sprogis (23) levelled the scores at 80-all.

Guymon (28) and Paul Philp (22) hit the baskets that restored a four point, 80-84, lead for Cinzano, and though Milton Keynes hit the final three points of the game it was not enough.

Having participated in a thrilling encounter, Embassy proceeded to lose the additional admirers they'd gained as they signed the scoresheet "under protest", complaining that the change in match officials had disadvantaged them!

The other big game of the weekend was at Coventry Sports Centre, of which "Pawprint" commented, at the time, "... much plusher than we're used to, but if they'd spent rather less on cushions and carpets, and more on the structure holding the seats, the latter may not have swayed so alarmingly in the excitement!"

Excitement there certainly was, as **Fiat** led 49-44 at the interval, and at 60-47 appeared to have the game against **Panthers** well under control. Ian Redford, however, exerted a steadying influence on the visitors, and steadily they edged back, until with four minutes remaining the scores were level at 86-all.

"Basketball" reported that Brian Dunn scored that basket, but "... finished in the crowd." Pawprint, though, was rather more damning (and, of course, not at all biased!), as it noted that Dunn had been "... bundled beyond the end of the court...", and added that "the proximity of the chairs could have caused an even greater injury".

Be that as it may, Brian played on, not realising that his wrist was broken, and though the visitors edged the game 90-91, with Metzger contributing 33 points against Pete Jackson's 28, the game was to have a longer-lasting impact on Doncaster's title chances, as they would be without Dunn for much of the rest of the season!



Steve Latham executes a classic jump-shot.
(Photo: Trevor Pountain)

ATS Giants stayed well in contention, as they visited **Vauxhall Motors**. Building a 16-42 lead, the Giants never looked troubled, and despite 27 points from Pemberton, Vauxhall went down 69-100, with Dick Powell scoring four baskets in the last 80 seconds to bring up the "ton", and take his game tally to 22, level with John D. Miller.

Bowmer & Kirkland were expected to prove too strong at home to **Avenue**, especially after the addition of second American Kevin King, but their preparation was upset when he was held up at immigration.

The visitors, led by Adrian Acres, led 39-41 at the half, and pulled away to 53-71 in the second period before Loughborough finally realised they were in a game.

The home side steadily reeled in their opponents, and as the buzzer sounded the score stood at 73-75, with Carl Olsson facing two shots from the line to take the match into overtime.

In the event he hit one of two, and Avenue had picked up their second victory in as many games.

Strongarm, though, were heading in the other direction, as they continued to struggle. Down at **Magnet Wicksteed Metros** the Durham team went down 106-70, despite 21 points from the reliable Brian Ayre. Allen Bunting continued his high-scoring exploits, with 39, and young Colin Croft got in on the act, with 22.

Fiat played host to **ATS** in the big match in mid November, and it was the Giants who came out on top ... twice!

John D. Miller was in awesome form for the visitors, as they pulled out a 36-52 interval lead, but despite his 46 points the home side pulled right back, to lead 85-80 going into the last two minutes. Not to be denied, Miller poured in the last six points, and at the buzzer ATS had won 85-86 ... or had they?

As the teams left the court, Steve Latham picked up a Technical Foul, and since at that time the match was not over until the scoresheet had been signed, Phil Hield was sent to the line for Coventry, with a chance to snatch the game.

In the event, Hield hit one of two, and the match went into overtime. Once again Fiat took the lead, but yet again the Giants came from behind, this time to clinch victory by two points, 94-96 ... and this time they ensured that they kept their mouths firmly closed as they left the court!

Avenue were looking to make it three wins in a row, as they hosted **Vauxhall**, but the Motors put together a five minute spell of twenty unanswered points. In a low-scoring match, that was enough to take them to victory, 68-79.

Vic Collins had 14 for Avenue, while Pemberton's game-high was just 18 for the visitors.

Strongarm were continuing to struggle, without any foreign players, and it showed, painfully, as **Embassy** came to call. Consecutive defeats in their last two matches had clearly given the visitors an itch, and they scratched it with a 4-39 opening blitz! By comparison the 24-55 half-time score was considered a recovery, but the visitors (led by Hogue's 40 points) raced away in the second half to a resounding 69-126 victory. Ayre was again top scorer for Durham, with 27.

Division One @ 14 Nov. 1976		Pl.	W.	L.	Pts.
1	Wilson Panthers, Doncaster	8	7	1	15
2	Cinzano SCP	7	7	0	14
3	Embassy All-Stars	8	6	2	14
4	ATS Giants (Manchester)	8	6	2	14
5	Team Fiat, Coventry	7	4	3	11
6	Vauxhall Motors, Bedford	8	2	6	10
7	Strongarm, Durham	9	1	8	10
8	Magnet Wicksteed Metros	7	2	5	9
9	Avenue	7	2	5	9
10	Bowmer & Kirkland L.A.S.	7	1	6	8

Approaching the mid-point of the season, there were clearly still two leagues within the one division, with all of the bottom five looking capable of finishing at the foot of the table.

At the top, it looked as though Fiat had slipped off the title pace, while Giants and even Embassy could ill afford to lose any more ground.

Realistically the destination of the title now seemed to lie between the unbeaten Crystal Palace and the unexpected leaders, Doncaster.

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