

A HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL LEAGUES.

6c. NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP CUPS 1976-1977:

The Cup competition for men, under new sponsors Guinness, was restructured in 1976, to give more games, and, so it was hoped, more excitement. The new format mirrored that of European competition, with two knock-out rounds to determine the eight quarter finalists, who would then play in two round-robin Pools to ascertain who would play in the semi-finals.

Although this gave the First Division teams (well, eight of them, anyway) a few extra matches, and although it did provide additional excitement (especially in Pool B, where there was a three-way tie for the two semi-final places), it also detracted from the traditional "magic" of the Cup, with the extra chance of an upset that one-off matches provide.

With the continued expansion of the League, it was to be expected that few non-League entered the competition (Blackpool and Bromley were the only ones), but what was surprising was that two of the Division Two teams did not see fit to enter. Nor were they newcomers, who had not yet got their act together - it was Birmingham Bulldogs and St. Luke's Exeter, both of whom had entered the previous season's competition.

GUINNESS NATIONAL CUP, 1976-1977			
First Round		Second Round	1/4 Final Qualifiers
Blackpool	(x) 59	}	
Seensee Sonics	(2) 88	}	Seensee Sonics (2) 62
			Cinzano SCP (1) 117
			Nottingham (2) 94
			A.T.S.Giants (1) 137
Malory Lewisham	(2) 72	}	
Bromley	(x) 65	}	Malory Lewisham (2) 78
			B&K Motors Loughborough (1) 127
			Magnet Wicksteed Metros (1) 117
			Strongarm Durham (1) 68
Derby CFE	(2) ot 81	}	
Epab Sunderland	(2) 75	}	Derby CFE (2) 54
			Embassy Milton Keynes (1) 113
Miles Mustangs, Morley	(2) 56	}	
Stockport Belgrade	(2) 93	}	Stockport Belgrade (2) 69
			Wilson Panthers, Doncaster (1) 74
KCA Bury	(2) 91	}	
Larsen Lions, Leeds	(2) 86	}	KCA Bury (2) 72
			Team Fiat, Coventry (1) 106
			Vauxhall Motors (1) 81
			Avenue (1) 55
St.Luke's Exeter	(2) d.n.e.		
Birmingham Bulldogs	(2) d.n.e.		

This meant that there were just five First Round matches. **Oxford** duly disposed of **Blackpool**, but **Lewisham** twice had to come from behind at home to get past non-league neighbours Bromley.

Miles Morley may have felt that home advantage would tell against **Stockport**, but the visitors' defence proved too strong and they went away in the second half for a convincing victory.

At **Derby**, a late run put **Sunderland** nine points clear, but Honeyman and Rudge pulled the home side back to force overtime, and an eventual six point victory.

Meanwhile, at **Bury** the struggling **Leeds** side gave a good account of themselves, thanks largely to a huge 47 point haul from Yusef Hedar, but that became the highest individual score for a losing Cup team, as KCA edged home by five.

Most of the second round matches proved to be far more clear-cut, with just two all-First Division games and the others pairing First and Second Division teams.

Nottingham's Paul Meade came close to Hedar's record, as he hit 43 for the home side as they went down to a 137 point blitz from **ATS Giants**. Just along the road, **Derby** stayed close to **Embassy** until 21-31, but just one more field goal by the home team in the next seventeen minutes saw them trail 26-82, after which the visitors eased up for a 54-113 victory.

Similar fates befell **Malory**, at home to **Loughborough**, and **Seensee** who hosted **Cinzano**. At half time Lewisham trailed 37-77 to the Midlanders, and the 78-125 final scoreline could be considered a recovery; the Sonics played steadily against **Palace**, but could only muster 62 points, while Guymon alone hit 35 of the visitors' 117.

Another team to hit 117 were **Magnet Wicksteed**, at home to a struggling **Strongarm**, with Alan Bunting taking the opportunity to set a new individual cup scoring record, with 55! **Vauxhall**, meanwhile, showed that their First Division experience was paying dividends, as they disposed of **Avenue** by 26 points.

The closest to an upset came at **Stockport**, where the Division 2 pace-setters took on **Doncaster Panthers**. The home side were renowned for their defensive strength, having conceded just 65 points per game over a season and a half, and that, together with the scoring of American Louie Ross, kept them well in contention, to 45-37 at the half. Trailing by around five points throughout the second period, the home side edged ominously closer in the final minute, but veteran Keith Rae saw the panthers through with the final points of the game for a narrow five-point victory.

The eight surviving teams were, not surprisingly, all First Division outfits, and they were drawn into two Pools for the single-game round-robin stage:

Quarter Final Pool A				P.	W.	L.	
Cinzano SCP	100	Magnet Wick. Metros	85	Cinzano SCP	3	3	0
Cinzano SCP	111	B&K Motors Lough.	66	ATS Giants	3	2	1
A.T.S.Giants	109	Magnet Wick. Metros	79	B&K Motors Lough.	3	1	2
A.T.S.Giants	78	Cinzano SCP	106	Magnet Wick. Metros	3	0	3
B&K Motors Lough.	83	A.T.S.Giants	92				
B&K Motors Lough.	90	Magnet Wick. Metros	83				

Loughborough gave **ATS** a fright in the first Pool match, as they came back from 29-48 adrift to take the lead 64-40. Jeff Jones, however, was in top scoring form for the Giants, and his 35 helped them to recover to win 83-92.

An even bigger shock was **Metros'** 17-33 lead at **Crystal Palace**, twelve minutes into the game, as Bunting and Pete Turner led the charge. The lead was at the price of a mounting foul-count, however, and before the break Turner, John Miller, Dave Miller and Nick Startin were all on four fouls, with Bunting on three, while Cinzano had edged into a one-point lead.

Nonetheless the visitors stuck to Palace for a long spell in the second half, but the pressure finally told and Paul Philp hit a purple patch to see his side home by fifteen.

The second series was far more straightforward, as **ATS** edged 44-32 ahead of **Metros** by half time, and cruised to a 30 point victory. Meanwhile Cinzano had an even easier time at home to Loughborough, winning by 45 points, despite a brave 29 from Carl Ollson.

Metros visit to Loughborough was thus of academic interest only, but as so often happens, with the pressure off the teams responded with a highly entertaining game. Alan Bunting took the opportunity to hit a game-high 42 points (and smashed a backboard in the process!), but it was the home side who triumphed, by seven, to take third place in the Pool.

The result of **Cinzano's** visit to **Manchester** could not alter the qualifiers, but it would decide who topped the Pool and gained home advantage in the semi finals. It was standing room only at Sale, and hundred were turned away at the door, and the fans had plenty to cheer as Jeff Jones' shooting kept his side 22-21 ahead.

Jim Guymon, though, had other ideas, helping Palace to a 42-52 interval lead, and though Giants held the margin steady well into the second half, when Steve Latham fouled out midway the visitors hit ten without reply and the game was effectively over.

Quarter Final Pool B				P.	W.	L.	
Embassy Milton Keynes	82	Wilson Panthers, Donc.	79	Embassy Milton Keynes	3	2	1
Wilson Panthers, Donc.	83	Team Fiat, Coventry	81	Wilson Panthers Donc.	3	2	1
Team Fiat, Coventry	98	Vauxhall Motors	70	Team Fiat Coventry	3	2	1
Team Fiat, Coventry	76	Embassy Milton Keynes	75	Vauxhall Motors	3	0	3
Vauxhall Motors	79	Embassy Milton Keynes	115				
Vauxhall Motors	60	Wilson Panthers, Donc.	107				

The other Pool proved to be far more evenly contested, and three teams finished with equal records, and could only be separated on results between them.

Team Fiat began well, with a 22 point home victory over **Vauxhall**, but the big interest in the first series was at **Milton Keynes**, where Bryan Dunn was making his return from injury for **Doncaster**.

In a very physical game ("Pawprint" referred to Jerry Walker "running down the court and slapping Dunn round the face") Embassy were clearly the better team in the first half, helped to a 44-36 half time lead by the outside shooting of Dave Shelley, and the Panthers looked to be struggling, with Dunn clearly not yet match fit.

Panthers edged back to 60-56, but when Paul Beasley fouled out midway through the half Embassy put on a spurt to pull away to 70-58. Brian Dunn came back into the game, and five unanswered points gave the visitors hope, and in the final minute they got back to within a single point.

Embassy finally took the spoils by three - but the full import of the Panthers' fightback was yet to be realised.

In the second series, **Embassy** cruised through by 36 points at **Vauxhall**, and **Fiat** visited Adwick knowing that they could dump **Doncaster** out of the competition.

A thrilling see-saw game saw the home side open 8-0, and then fall behind 10-14, and the two rivals were virtually locked together throughout the first half. A disputed buzzer-beater by the visitors gave them the interval lead, 31-33.

Fiat seemed to take the upper hand as they led 50-58 in the second period, but their defensive efforts had taken their toll; Neville Hopkins had fouled out and the team were in the ten-foul penalty.

Coventry's defence became necessarily more cautious, and by the time Jim Stinton fouled out, Doncaster were back in touch, 64-66. With a minute on the clock, however, Fiat still led, 67-71, and the Yorkshire side looked as though they were on their way out of the competition.

A fast break by Paul Beasley proved the turning point. Recalling Beasley's 0 of 3 from the line thus far, Steve Assinder committed a foul which was generously described as "clumsy" ... only for Paul to calmly sink both free throws.

With twenty seconds remaining it was Fiat's turn to draw the foul, but coach Bob Hope opted for caution, and sideline possession - only for his team to commit an immediate back-court violation, giving Ian Day the opportunity to take the game into overtime, at 71-all!

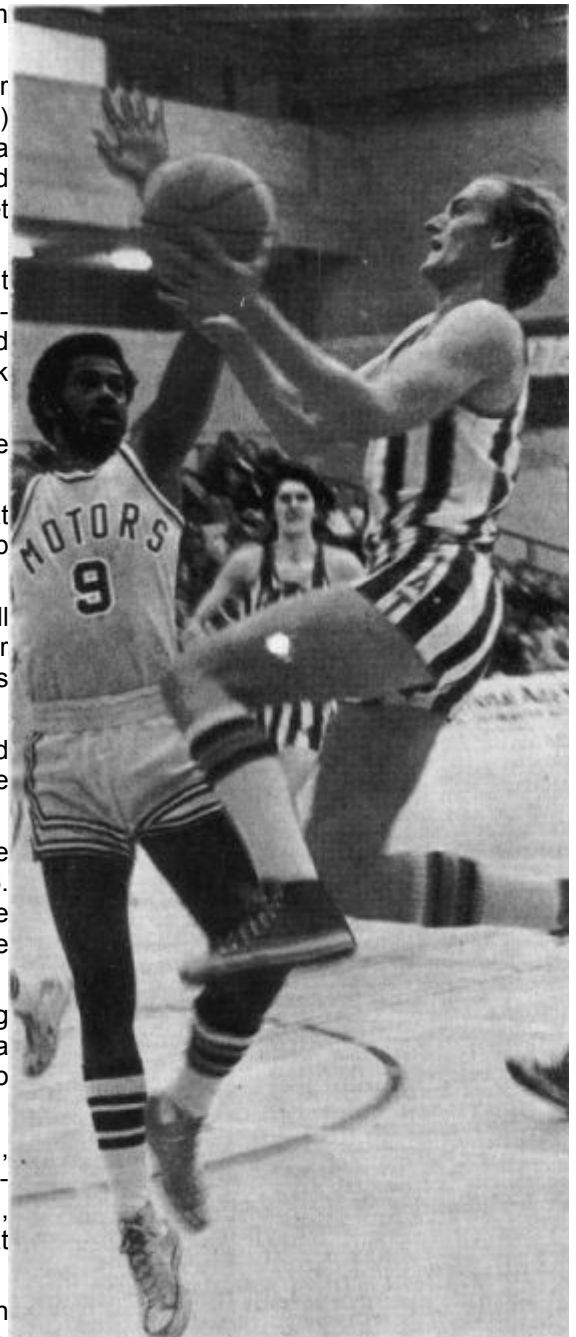
Stung once more into action, Fiat took the first six points in overtime, and held on to lead 75-79 with just two minutes to play. Then the Panthers hit eight unanswered, to take a four point lead, and though the visitors scored the final basket, Doncaster had scraped home by two.

Vauxhall had twice held **Panthers** close in the League, but in their Cup meeting Kenny Pemberton was absent with ligament problems, and the visitors took full advantage to record a crushing 47-point victory. That left Doncaster with two wins from three games, with Embassy on two from two, and Fiat one from two, and the Sunday's visit of Milton Keynes to Coventry would decide the outcome of the Pool. Fiat needed to win by two or more to qualify for the semi-finals; if the margin was two, three or four, it would be at the expense of Doncaster, while a five point victory or more would be enough to put Embassy out!

Fiat began confidently, and led by nine for much of the first half, but gradually Embassy edged back into the game, to trail 35-34 at the break. Stuart Turpie was in fine form for the All-Stars, hitting seventeen second-half points as the visitors took the lead, but three minutes from time the teams were locked together at 71.

Phil Hield hit the next four points, to put Fiat in the frame, Earl Hogue pulled the margin back to two, and one of two from the line by Harrell made it three. In the closing thirty seconds, Fiat had possession and had only to hold on to clinch their third semi-final place in as many years.

Once more, though, caution cost Coventry dear. Giving up on an easy lay-up, for fear of missing and handing Embassy a chance to score, the home side lost possession in the process - and handed Embassy a chance to score. Jerry Walker threw up a "prayer", and it was answered as the ball swished home on the buzzer. Embassy had lost - but by only one, and both they and Doncaster were through to the semis!



John Dabrowski drives to the hoop during Fiat's Cup game against Vauxhall.
(Photo: F.G. Thompson)

Semi-Final		FINAL (@ Wembley)	
Cinzano SCP	112}		
Wilson Panthers, Doncaster	88}	Cinzano SCP	91
Embassy Milton Keynes	96}	Embassy Milton Keynes	90
A.T.S.Giants	81}		

After the thrills of the quarter finals, those semi-finals were something of an anticlimax.

Cinzano had failed to book their Crystal Palace venue in time for their home game with **Doncaster**, and the match thus took place at the much "cosier" Crawley Sports Centre, near Gatwick Airport.

The visitors held on, to 18-all, and stayed within four points for most of the first half, and only in the final three minutes before the break did they fall behind, 58-48.

Brian Dunn and Jim Guymon were matching each other basket for basket in the second half, and Panthers still trailed by just twelve, 84-72 seven minutes from time. Then the home side drew on their European experience to produce a 13-6 spurt to take the game beyond their opponents, and cruised to a 24 point victory.

It was equally convincing for **Embassy at ATS**, where the home side never really got into their stride. Walker and Sprogis led the charge, on their way to 29 and 26 points respectively, as the visitors led 33-48 at the interval, and it was only as the visitors eased up that Giants were able to keep the final margin respectable, at 81-96.

And so, for the fifth year in succession, the Cup Final came down to a contest between Embassy and Crystal Palace!

And what a thriller it proved to be, as the game swung from one side to the other, with only a single point separating them at the final buzzer.

Embassy had the better of the early exchanges, leading 16-27 after eight minutes, and stayed apparently in control to 28-37. Then, with Stu Turpie rested on three fouls, Mark Saiers began to find room under the basket, and with Willie Cameron helping out on the defensive boards, Cinzano's fast-break clicked into gear. A 13-2 spurt gave the League champions their first lead of the game, at 41-39.

Peter Sprogis responded, for Milton Keynes, taking his tally for the half to 21, and at the break the teams could not be separated, at 49-all.



Unlucky for some. Jerry Walker's frustration is clear as he leaves the court on five fouls, consoled by Sprogis. Earl Hogue can't bear to watch
(Photo: Photosport)

As the second half started it was all Cinzano, as Paul Philp hit a rich vein of scoring and as they pulled out a ten point lead it looked as though they were justifying their tag as favourites.

Then, however, an attack of cramp forced Jim Guymon to leave the court, and, deprived of their playmaker, Palace began to struggle. Freed from the defensive shackles, Peter Sprogis found his range at last, and two massive dunks from Earl Hogue boosted the All-Stars' morale still further.

The impetus was now clearly with Embassy, and though Guymon rejoined the fray it was Milton Keynes who led, 81-88, four minutes from time.

That was when fate stepped in again. Jerry Walker picked up his fourth foul, and within seconds his fifth followed, and with three minutes on the clock he trooped angrily from the court, with his team leading 84-90.

That seemed to knock the stuffing out of his team-mates, and they failed to find the hoop in those final minutes, while Paul Philp took his tally for the game to 20, with two field goals and two free-throws.

It was left to Mark Saiers, as cool as ever, to sink his eighth free-throw of the game (out of ten attempts), to give Cinzano the narrowest of leads, and when they regained control of the ball they ensured that they retained possession - and with it the Cup.

It was a devastating blow to Milton Keynes, who had come so near, but for Cinzano it marked a new high-point of their already illustrious history, as they became the first team to record back-to-back League and Cup doubles.

WOMEN'S NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP CUP 1976-1977:

With the Women's National League still only having fifteen members, there was still plenty of opportunity for ambitious non-league clubs to participate, especially as three of the First Division teams (being Scots) were ineligible.

WOMEN'S NATIONAL CUP, 1976-1977			
First Round 20 th /21 st November		Second Round 11 th /12 th December	Third Round 8 th /9 th January
Radcliffe Wildcats	(2) 66 }	Radcliffe Wildcats	(2) 59 }
Ullathorne (Coventry)	(x) 60 }	Birmingham Aztecs	(x) 44 }
Highbury Hellcats	(x) 36 }	Highbury Hellcats	(x) 34 }
Birmingham Falcons	(x) 28 }	Norwich Coe Stars	(2) 31 }
		Liverpool Ajax	(2) 73 }
		Oldham	(x) 66 }
		Sheffield Hatters	(x) 60 }
		Brinnington	(x) 42 }
Chelmsford Comanches	(x) 62 }	Waltham Abbey Griffins	(2) 59 }
Waltham Abbey Griffins	(2) 65 }	Solent Shrimps	(x) 54 }
Chantry Bobcats, Ipswich	(2) 64 }	Chantry Bobcats, Ipswich	(2) 71 }
Dartford Dodgers	(x) 60 }	Langley College	(x) 62 }
		Radcliffe Wildcats	(2) 62 }
		Highbury Hellcats	(x) 57 }
		Liverpool Ajax	(2) 50 }
		Sheffield Hatters	(x) 55 }
		Waltham Abbey Griffins	(2) 82 }
		Chantry Bobcats	(2) 51 }

The closeness of the gap between league and non-league was clearly shown in the first round, where, although the three Division 2 teams did progress against their non-league opponents, the biggest victory margin was six points.

The five second division teams who appeared in the second round were all paired with non-league opponents – and only four successfully negotiated the hurdle.

The odd team out were **Norwich Coe-Stars**, who went down by three at **Highbury Hawks**, while, from the only meeting between two non-league teams, **Sheffield Hatters** also progressed.

Highbury, however, could not quite stage a repeat when they visited **Radcliffe Wildcats**, in Nottingham, in the third round, and they went out by five points. Hatters, though, showed that they could beat more than non-league opposition, as they put out **Ajax** in **Liverpool**, and the Sheffield team were the only team from outside the league to reach the quarter finals.

That was as far as they, and the two Division 2 qualifiers, could go, as the Division 1 teams proved their superiority with resounding victories.

1/4 Final 29 th /30 th January		Semi-Final 26/27 Feb. & 5/6 Mar.	FINAL(@ Wembley)
Radcliffe Wildcats	(2) 34 }	Tigers (Dacorum)	74+73 }
Tigers (Dacorum)	(1) 91 }	Magnet Wicksteed Bob.	52+46 }
Corvus Cornix	(1) 54 }	Cleveland Eagles	69+65 }
Magnet Wicksteed Bobcats	(1) 67 }	Cleveland Eagles	62 }
Sheffield Hatters	(x) 47 }	Waltham Abbey Griffins	(2) 50 }
Cleveland Eagles	(1) 99 }	Southgate Wisps	(1) 94 }
Waltham Abbey Griffins	(2) 50 }	Southgate Wisps	53+66 }
Southgate Wisps	(1) 94 }		

The semi-finals were played over two legs, and the Tigers and Eagles secured their fifth meeting in as many years.

The Tigers had no problems with Magnet Wicksteed Bobcats, who were struggling in the League, and the holders were never in danger as they took a 49 point aggregate victory.

Cleveland, however, were made to work hard for their Final place, losing by one at Southgate, and having to rely on a strong home performance to see them through.

That took the two rivals to the first ever Women's Final to be held at Wembley, where it was played as the precursor to the Men's Final, and it produced a finish fitting for its illustrious surroundings.

While the game had inevitably been well hyped in advance, to counter the fears of some that it was a mistake for it to replace the usually high-energy Junior Final at Wembley, there was no doubt that the two most famous Women's teams rose to the occasion.

The final result was a two point victory for the Tigers, with the winning basket scored just five seconds from time, which gave them their fourth success in a row, and their second League and Cup "double".

The report in "Basketball" gave an even clearer indication of how far basketball had progressed. There's no "byeline" on the two page spread in the magazine, so I don't know who wrote it, but it remains one of the clearest, and most knowledgeable reports I've seen in over 30 years.

I'll not even attempt to match it in these pages, so I've simply taken the liberty of reproducing it in its entirety. You can find it, from the History Index, titled "1977 Women's Cup Final"

JUNIOR NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP CUP 1976-1977:

The Junior (Under-19) Cup competition continued to grow, and the 33 entries were a new record, making it necessary to hold a Preliminary Round (albeit of only one game) to reduce the numbers in the first round to 32.

JUNIOR NATIONAL CUP 1976 - 1977			
Prelim. Round	First Round 18th/19th December	Second Round 29th/30th January	
	Sussex Comets	77 }	
	Columbans (St. Albans)	67 }	Sussex Comets 93 }
	Watford Royals	80 }	Watford Royals 69 }
	SCP Eagles (Chiswick)	77 }	
	London Braves	87 }	
	Quaife & Lilley (B'ham)	64 }	London Braves 73 }
	Cinzano SCP Falcons	2 }	Cinzano SCP Falcons 75 }
	Plymouth Kanaries	0 }	
	Stockport Belgrade	92 }	
	EPAB (Sunderland)	54 }	Stockport Belgrade 71 }
	Kings Norton G.S.	0 }	Hereford Phoenix (Grimsby) 62 }
	Hereford Phoenix (Grimsby)	2 }	
	Rolls Royce, Derby	77 }	
	St. Saviours (Ellesmere Port)	59 }	Rolls Royce, Derby 59 }
	Sheffield Scorpions	87 }	Sheffield Scorpions 107 }
	Trent Jayhawks	46 }	
	St.Luke's, Exeter	63 }	
	SCP Hawks (Leatherhead)	73 }	SCP Hawks (Leatherhead) 58 }
	Howletts A-S Loughborough	59 }	Howletts A-S Loughborough 73 }
	Hackney Downs	44 }	
Folkestone Saints	85 }		
Camden Amber	90 }	Camden Amber 42 }	
	Avenue, Edmonton	94 }	Avenue 89 }
	Highbury Chicks	49 }	Granwood, Coventry 48 }
	Granwood, Coventry	76 }	
	Strongarm (Aycliffe)	72 }	
	Sheffield Polytechnic	35 }	Strongarm (Aycliffe) 72 }
	President Kennedy, Coventry	59 }	President Kennedy 54 }
	Blackpool Telefusion	52 }	
	Nottingham	131 }	
	Willenhall Dons	49 }	Nottingham 88 }
	Larsen Lions, Leeds	56 }	Barrow Thorns 62 }
	Barrow Thorns	61 }	

The reasons for the growth in popularity appear to be twofold – one was the growth of competitive Junior basketball generally (stimulated by the publicity of the National League), and the other was the increasing number of National League clubs involved in the Junior game.

Some of these clubs were ones who had started out as Junior teams, and put their development to practical use by entering the League. There were others, though, which had begun as Senior clubs, entered the NBL, and were now determined to develop their own players.

¼ Final	Semi-Final	FINAL	
Sussex Comets	73 }		
Cinzano SCP Falcons	143 }	Cinzano SCP Falcons	99 }
			} Cinzano SCP Falcons 78
Stockport Belgrade	68 }	Stockport Belgrade	58 }
Sheffield Scorpions	65 }		
Howletts All-Stars	36 }		
Avenue	92 }	Avenue	90 }
			} Avenue 76
Strongarm (Aycliffe)	58 }	Nottingham	66 }
Nottingham	83 }		

Holders **Cinzano SCP Falcons** had to survive a scare at the Second Round stage, when they scraped through by two at **London Braves**, but by the semi-final stage it was the traditionally strong clubs, **Palace**, **Avenue** and 1976 Finalists **Nottingham**, which had survived, alongside the emerging **Stockport** team.

The Final, held at Hemel Hempstead's Dacorum Centre, pitted the holders, SCP, appearing in only their second Final, against Avenue, in their record-equalling eighth appearance, with four titles already behind them.

The game was played alongside the "Basildon Bond Tournament", the qualifying round of the 1977 European Championships, which probably more than made up for the youngsters' disappointment at not featuring at Wembley this season.

Many of the players on show would become household names (at least in households which had heard of basketball) in the years to come. Suiting up for Cinzano were Paul Stimpson, Ken Nottage, Richard Rudd and Martin Clark, but Avenue had their own stars of the future in Pete Lawrence and Fred Munday.

Palace had a marked height advantage over their opponents, and a deeper bench, but Avenue had an excellent coach in Len Hoy, who had them running the fast break to good effect. There was little to separate the teams, at 34-32 to Cinzano, at the break.

Early in the second half, as Stimpson and Nottage shared sixteen points between them, the Falcons put on a spurt which took them twelve points ahead, but Munday and Stavros Elias both raised their game for Avenue, and with five minutes remaining it was the North London side who were ahead, 64-63.

With Paul Stimpson uncharacteristically missing four attempts from the foul line, Avenue were able to edge 72-70 ahead going into the final minute. Stimpson showed his character in those closing stages, as his next four attempts from the stripe were successful, and added a basket to keep Palace ahead, before fouling out, with ten seconds remaining.

That left Lawrence with two shots to tie the game. He duly obliged, and overtime looked an odds-on probability. Palace, though still had other ideas, and when Nottage received the ball twenty feet from the basket he coolly slotted his shot home as the buzzer sounded!

Palace had retained the title in a match which had been every bit as good as any of the Senior International encounters on the same bill.

Acknowledgements:

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

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Doncaster Panthers' match programmes

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