

A HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL LEAGUES.

6. 1977-1978.

"Close Season" controversy

The lead up to the 1977-8 season was dominated by one topic - **Crystal Palace's** recruitment of overseas players with British passports.

Palace's initial problem, after a perfect domestic season, was how to replace Jimmy Guymon and Vic Tinsley, both of whom had announced their retirement. In the Summer, "Basketball" reported that Guymon would be back after all; he wasn't, but Tinsley was. Guymon did come back over in August, but returned Stateside in September, leaving the club still to find a replacement.

How do you replace a legend? Simple - you just find another, and Larry Dassie, described by "Basketball" as "a spring heeled wonder" arrived to begin what was to be a glittering career.

With coach Tom Wisman also withdrawing his declaration that he would not return, the club's focus shifted to strengthening the team further, to enhance their prospects in European competition. They still had Mark Saiers, Martin Hall, Willie Cameron, Paul Philp and Paul Stimpson, while Ken Walton returned from ATS. To this already strong line-up they added two players who would be the focus of the row - Alan Baillie who was born Glasgow, but raised in North America, and Mel Bishop, born in British Columbia of British parents.

The prevailing view outside of Crystal Palace was probably best summed up by the article which appeared in the Team Fiat programme early in the season:

"The whole of the National League has seethed (the article actually said "settled", but I think that was a misprint) for the past three weeks, after the announcement that the Cinzano team would contain four American players in all domestic as well as European Competitions.

"This is complete and utter exploitation of the rules, which limit the use of foreign players per game to two, so the Champions have gone one better, and picked-up two extra aliens, with British passports, thus, on paper, playing a legitimate side.

"But what about the ethics of the game? The EBBA have tried desperately to convince the Londoners that they are not assisting, by disencouraging opposing clubs with their behaviour, and have met with no success.

"Cinzano are adamant that they are going to field a full strength squad in all of their NBL matches, as they have a commitment to their own beliefs that in order to secure sponsorship, they must succeed in Europe.

"In order to achieve this, the WHOLE squad must play together, as often as possible, and gain the match practice they need, by trouncing all the opposition England can muster.

"These are the blunt facts of the situation which has arisen from a loophole in the League rules with regard to players of dual nationality, and through the permission granted to Cinzano by FIBA's president which in fact appears to be in breach of FIBA's own regulations, which state the players of dual nationality shall be regarded as having the nationality of that country in which they reside or for which they hold a valid passport on their 19th birthday.

"The EBBA have decided not to close the loophole in our League rules for the current season (to the disadvantage of the 9 First Division teams who prefer to uphold the spirit of the rules) but are to consider an amendment for 1978-79.

"One thing is certain - Cinzano, hailed by most as the best British team ever, will lose a lot of friends by their actions and it is generally known that many clubs are very bitter about what has happened."

Pretty strong stuff - especially for a match programme, which is supposed to be uncontentious.

So, how were the other teams, with just a couple of foreign imports, shaping up?

Embassy Milton Keynes, with Peter Sprogis as secretary, were determined to improve on the previous year's worst-ever third place finish, and when Miles Aiken failed to agree terms for the new season they recruited Graham Nichols - a Canadian coach ... with, ironically, a British passport.

The big news, though, was the return of the old war-horse Steve Schmitt, who had played such a huge part in their previous successes, and his pairing with Alan Bunting, the scoring sensation from Metros. These two would certainly form an intimidating front-line.

In the back-court they still had the tried and tested pairing of Sprogis (who had also, of course, been raised in the States!) and Dave Shelley, while Steve Langdon, Stu Turpie, and Nigel Acres provided further continuity.

The increased depth at Palace enabled Embassy to recruit Walter Ededua, from the Cinzano bench.

ATS Giants had pipped Milton Keynes for the runners-up spot in the previous season, and the big question was whether they could maintain that momentum.

Steve Latham's knee injury, picked up in April, ruled him out for the start of the season, and that would certainly hinder the Giants, and they lost Ken Walton to Palace, but they still had the core of the previous season's team, most notably Jeff Jones, Dick Powell, John Nono, and Al Malik Kaaba.

New American Daryl Johnson was brought in, and he would have to shoulder the bulk of the work on the boards in Latham's absence, while Bob Park returned (from Strongarm), and Mel Eadsforth (Rochdale) and Norman Eastwood (Morley) were recruited.

Wilson Panthers Doncaster, looking for an injury free season from Brian Dunn looked to have the greatest stability, with fellow-American Wayne Metzger also returning.

John Belk was back after a year with Embassy, and the familiar roster included Ian Day, John Redford, Keith Hawkswell, Keith Rae, Mike Davis, Ian Clark, and Chris Bycroft, with Yusef Hedar joining from Leeds..

Team Fiat, Coventry had quickly established themselves among the leading teams in the League, and they were determined to continue to enhance that reputation.

Darnell Harrell was back, but this time with a new American partner, Fred "The Fly" Towns Jr.

Maintaining the continuity would be their strong English contingent of Steve Assinder, Robin Hall, John Dabrowski, Phil Hield, Jim Stinton and Neville Hopkins.

Another strong showing seemed likely.

Bowmer & Kirkland LAS had continued to confound the doubters by remaining competitive, but had now lost Richard Pearce, who had retired from playing, to concentrate on refereeing.

Having played at the top level Richard was uniquely placed to bring a player's perspective to officiating, and the career move proved to be a good one as he rapidly enhanced his reputation as one of the country's top referees.

Steve O'Shea stepped up from the Juniors, to attempt to fill the gap in Loughborough's playing ranks, and other young graduates included Winston Gordon and Paul Gervais.

Carl Olsson, Pete Siddall and Chris Worcester, however, seemed as though they would go on forever, and B&K were another team to go for stability, as American Kevin King returned, this time bringing with him compatriot Billy de Marle.

London YMCA Metros -had finally been able to move into the Central London YMCA facility, which was unique in being housed in the basement of the building.

Unfortunately the rest of their forward planning appears to have been somewhat lacking, and they had only two players signed by a fortnight before the start of the season! They did very nearly manage to complete their roster in time, but had to postpone their first match (against Crystal Palace) - as a result of which they began with the disadvantage of having had a point deducted before they'd even gained any.

Replacing Alan Bunting was obviously going to be quite a task, but the Metros seemed to have access to their own Stateside production line, as they brought in another prolific player in the same mould, Rick Mack.

Always prepared to try something different, Metros also brought in Israeli Junior International Sary ben Zvi, at point guard. They recruited Andy Sutherland from Embassy, Colin Gregg returned after injury, and his brother Geoff Gregg joined him from relegated Avenue.

Pete Turner, Mal Chamberlain and Nick Startin were back, with Jack Singer coming in as coach.

Vauxhall Motors had surprised many by succeeding in staying up after their first season in the top flight, but could they do it again?

The loss of Sherman Austin, who had moved on, would make it more difficult, and much would be asked of his replacement, John Walker, especially as fellow-American Ken Pemberton would now be combining coaching duties with his playing.

With the teams that had finished above them all being well established in the top flight, Vauxhall's hopes of continued survival would clearly hinge on the quality of the two promoted teams.

Stockport Belgrade looked to have the calibre to at least be competitive after the step up, with the return of key English players Phil Brazil, John Allerston and Geoff Linnell, with the wily Bill Beswick still as coach.

Stockport's two new Americans were Craig Lynch and Mark Newlen, with the former being another who was destined to make a prolonged and significant contribution to the game in this country.

St. Luke's TSB Exeter were embarking on their second stint in the top division, and so they, and experienced coach Vic Ambler, had a good idea of what was required of them.

Top scorer Neil Whittam was still there, but would inevitably find the step up would make points harder to come by, but two new Americans had been recruited, in Robin Farris and Dale Tjarks, who would undoubtedly add to the team's competitiveness.

Their biggest asset, however, was their remote geographical location, which would mean that many opponents may arrive feeling travel weary ... but it was also their biggest liability, as they would find their own travel to away matches could take its toll as the season progressed!

In short, it looked as though it would be another highly competitive season ... at least for all except the invincible-looking Cinzano SCP.

The first few months

Those who had feared that **Crystal Palace** would run away with the title were given cause for renewed optimism in the first week, when newly promoted **Stockport Belgrade** led the defending champions 62-60 after 32 minutes at Peel Moat Leisure Centre.

In the last eight minutes Cinzano's strength in depth finally told, as they outscored their hosts 4-22 for a seemingly comfortable victory, but Bill Beswick's team had shown that they could be held in check, at least for a while. Americans Craig Lynch and Mark Newlen led the scorers, with 25 and 20 points respectively on their debut for the home side, while Mark Saiers led the Palace with 17, followed by two of their own debutants, Larry Dassie (16) and Alan Baillie (15).

Nor did **Embassy Milton Keynes** have things all their own way at **Loughborough**. With three minutes remaining the scores were level at 86-all, and though Allen Bunting's 31 points helped the visitors to a 90-96 victory, the East Midlands team, led by 31 from Carl Olsson, had shown that they were fallible.

There were no such scares for **Doncaster Panthers** as they took on **Vauxhall Motors** at Adwick. After ten minutes the game was already over as a contest, with the Panthers leading 36-7, and coach Morris Wordsworth was afforded the luxury of giving his bench extended early-season match experience as his team romped to a 48 point victory, 126-78.

Indeed, the only scare for the home crowd came two minutes from time, when the Leisure Centre lights failed! Although some fans reckoned you couldn't tell the difference (Adwick's lights appearing, at the best of times, to be powered by a lethargic hamster on a tread-wheel), the fuse was mended, and the game did not have to be abandoned.

Panthers' England International, Ian Day, showed that you did not have to be American to post big numbers, with 38 points by the time he was rested 15 minutes from time. Urgent messages from the fans, however, reached coach Wordsworth, and Day was re-introduced into the game long enough to hit another basket, to take his all-time tally in the League to 1,000 points, and his game-score to 40.

ATS Giants ran **Team Fiat** close throughout the first half at Coventry, with the Midlanders just 59-56 ahead early in the second half, but when Jeff Jones and John Nono both fouled out within a short space of time, the home side raced away to a 93-73 victory.

Darnell Harrell had 28 points for Fiat, followed by Phil Hield on 19, while the best that Giants could muster was 19 from new American Daryl Johnson.

For this season the Association had realised that to award two points for a win and one for a defeat gave the wrong message ... that teams needed to be rewarded for having the decency to turn up. So, the rules had been changed, to award two points for a win, and none for a defeat.

Unfortunately, as we all know, "sod's law" (that whatever can go wrong will go wrong) is better known as "the first law of basketball", and, sure enough, the first week's fixtures witnessed the first "no show" since the League's formation!

The offenders were **London 'Y' Metros**, who found themselves unable to raise a team for their Thursday night match at **Crystal Palace**. Traditionally their American players tended to arrive after the start of the season, and I suspect that several of their domestic players found that work commitments prevented them from being available on a midweek evening.

The result was that Palace were awarded the game by default (2-0, as it was in those days), and Metros were deducted a point for their transgression ... leaving them with a points total of -1 in the League Table.



DARNELL HARRELL of Team Fiat (Photo: Mike Street)

Fortunately the Londoners were able to piece together a team within the next three days, and their home match against **Stockport Belgrade** went ahead as scheduled on the Sunday. For a team that had only just come together, Metros performed strongly, led by 25 points from young Israeli point guard Ari ben Zvi and 24 from American Rick Mack, and in the dying seconds they led 87-86. Then a foul on Mark Newlen sent Stockport's American to the line, and he duly sank both shots to take his tally to a huge 45 points, and his team to their first victory in Division 1.

Cinzano were back in Manchester for the second weekend running, visiting **ATS Giants**, and once again they found themselves in a close-fought game ... at least to begin with. The visitors held a slender 28-30 lead part-way through the first half, but then hit 16 unanswered points.

33 from Johnson and 26 from Jones kept the Giants ticking over, but their team-mates could only muster 20 between them, while Saiers and Dassie shared 36 points with the other Palace players adding 66 as they cruised to a 79-102 victory.

Allen Bunting showed that a change of team had done nothing to dampen his enthusiasm for scoring, hitting 40 points for **Embassy**, with Sprogis adding 31, as they outclassed **Vauxhall** 110-71 (who had player/coach Kenny Pemberton to thank for 20 of their total).

Having held **Embassy** close the week before, **Loughborough** hoped to continue that form at **Doncaster**, but the Panthers continued their impressive start to the season, pulling out a 40-16 lead before the visitors realised they were in a game. Brian Dunn led the home side's scorers, in the 105-86 victory, while B&K had the slight consolation of the game's leading scorer, Kevin King, with 29.

By the end of week three there were just three unbeaten teams, with three victories apiece, at the top of the table.

Embassy continued to flatter to deceive as they picked up their third win, on the long trip down to Exeter for **St Luke's** first game in the top flight. The All-Stars took the points, but the 83-99 victory was closer than expected, and Steve Schmitt's 25 points were overshadowed by Robin Farris' game-high 35 in what "Basketball" Magazine described as a "fine solo effort".

Doncaster, too, struggled to impose themselves at **Metros**, where the hosts were still finding their feet at their new Central YMCA venue, to such an extent that the table officials found they had no sounding device ... and had to borrow one from the travelling Panthers' fans!

Newcomer Rick Mack (37 points) was proving a dominant inside player, while the Londoners' defence prevented the Panthers from making an early spurt, and at the interval the visitors held a slender 43-45 advantage. The brief surge came at the start of the second half, as Doncaster pulled out a ten point advantage, but they then had to hold on to secure an 89-97 victory, with Dunn and Day sharing 50 points.

The meeting of the other two unbeaten teams attracted a crowd of 1,400 (packed into the Coventry Sports' Centre), and they saw **Team Fiat** race into a 40-26 lead against **Cinzano**, before the slow-starting Palace team fought their way back to trail 46-43 at the break, led by Martin Hall and Mark Saiers.

It was Larry Dassie (21) who really turned the game, though, hitting 15 points in a seven minute second-half spell to give the visitors a ten point cushion. Darnell Harrell led all scorers with 35, but as fouls and tiredness took their toll the Fiat resistance crumbled, and the defending champions secured a 93-103 victory.

In the first Manchester derby, **ATS** raced into a 20-43 lead at **Stockport**, but Belgrade, led by Newlen (29) and Lynch (27) fought back to 71-74 before the visitors edged away again, to take their first victory of the season, 90-101, thanks largely to 35 from Johnson and 32 by Jones. Giants' delight was tempered somewhat by the fact that Steve Latham, attempting a comeback from injury, broke down again and seemed unlikely to figure prominently in their season.

Another team picking up its first points of the season was **Bowmer & Kirkland Loughborough**. They made the short(ish) trip down the M1 to Bedford where the hapless Vauxhall Motors were on the wrong end of another mauling, as they capitulated 67-104.

The fourth weekend saw the League take on an ominously familiar look, as the wheels (tyres?) came off **Wilson Panthers'** title challenge, leaving just **Cinzano** and **Embassy** with unbeaten records. **ATS's** duo of Jones and Johnson were beginning to gel as the spearhead of their attack, and the Giants jumped out to an early lead at home to the Panthers, and despite furious efforts by the visitors to get back on terms their press failed to hold the hosts and Doncaster suffered their first reverse of the season, 99-90.

Wayne Metzger (29) led all scorers, with Dunn and Day also on target with 22 apiece, but no-one else could manage double figures for the Yorkshire team; the Giants were guided to their second victory in a row by 24 points from Johnson and 21 by Jones.

Things nearly got worse for the Panthers the following day, when they trailed 42-43 at home to **St. Luke's** at the interval. There was still nothing to choose between the teams at 70-68 in the second half, but then Robin Farris fouled out for Exeter, and with 50% of their offence gone they wilted under the pressure, eventually going down 105-84. Brian Dunn led the scorers, with 36, while Farris and Dale Tjarks both had 30 for the visitors.

That defeat left Luke's still looking for their first victory, as they'd also lost the previous day, at **Loughborough**. Five home players hit 18 or more in the 104-79 rout, led by Billy de Marle with 22, while Tjarks (29) and Farris (24) were again the main scorers for the Devonians.

At least Exeter, after three losses, did not find themselves at the foot of the table, as **Vauxhall** had fallen to their fourth defeat, 82-104 at home to **Fiat**. Not that the visitors had had an easy ride, as they trailed 46-45 at the break, with Barrett (23) and Pemberton (20) finding the hoop, but Harrell (25) and Townes (20) continued to inspire Coventry, who took the second half 36-59 for an 82-104 victory.

Even Vauxhall weren't propping up the table, though, as **Metros** still occupied that position (with -1 point), having lost 107-83 at **Embassy**. Although Mack had another 38 point haul for the "Y", Metros' next highest scorer was Nick Startin (14), while Milton Keynes had far more firepower, with Sprogis (30), and Schmitt and Bunting (29 apiece) leading the spree.

The fifth weekend was set aside for Cup matches, which was strange, considering the fact that none of the First Division teams were involved at this stage.

The only top-flight game saw the **Panthers** returning to Manchester, this time to take on **Stockport**. Belgrade were developing a reputation as slow starters, and the visitors were back to their form of the early weeks, as they stormed into a 31-12 lead, maintaining their superiority to 51-34 at the break. Doncaster, though, had forgotten the other part to Stockport's reputation ... their ability to fight back, and as the second half wore on the margin was reduced to just eight points. With Ian Day experiencing a lean spell, Keith Hawkswell was granted extended court-time by coach Wordsworth, and repaid him with 14 valuable points, as Panthers held on for an 88-95 victory. Mark Newlen's 31 for Stockport were matched by Wayne Metzger for Panthers.

With a 5&1 record, the **Panthers'** title hopes were revived as they prepared to host **Cinzano**, at the end of October, with "Pawprint" carrying a headline welcoming the "Chequebook Champions" and carrying a scathing editorial about the negative effects on the league that the discovery of "dual national" players would have.

Undaunted (in fact probably even motivated) by such comments, Palace hit the first sixteen points, with Larry Dassie seeming to find his team mates at will with telling passes. With Bryan Dunn well marshalled by the Palace defence, and hitting only 24% from the field, Doncaster were never in the hunt, and though Dunn still hit 21 points, Dassie's 22 were achieved from 78% shooting, as Cinzano virtually ended the home side's title chances, 90-105. Ironically it was Englishman Paul Philp who was Palace's second high-scorer, with 18.



Fred "The Fly" Towns leaps to shoot over the Stockport defence in Team Fiat's 103-84 victory. (Photo: Fred Thompson)

Embassy also retained their 100% record, as Sprogis (40), Bunting (36) and Schmitt (33) went on a scoring spree at home to **ATS Giants**. At half time the home side had an incredible 73-44 lead (and this was before the introduction of the 3-point line!), and even 28 points from Jones and 26 by Johnson could not prevent a shell-shocked Manchester team from going down 131-95.

Fiat kept themselves in contention, with a resounding 103-84 victory at home to **Stockport**, who suffered from the absence of injured Mark Newlen. Craig Lynch hit 27 for the visitors, with Frank O'Flynn contributing 12, but Harrell led the game with 35 for Coventry, well supported by John Dabrowski with 16.

There was high tension at Bedford, where **Vauxhall** and **St Luke's** met, as both sought their first victory of the season. Pemberton (25) and Dick Barrett (24) were on target for the home side, who were well in touch to 65-67, but Farris (24) and Tjarks (20) had the last word as Exeter pulled away in the closing minutes for an 89-95 victory.

Metros, meanwhile, remained in the red, after a see-saw game at CentYMCA. At the half, **Loughborough** led 36-44, but a blistering start to the second half saw the "Y" pull ahead, 52-46, and with three minutes of the game remaining they were still 83-79 to the good. Then Mack fouled out of the game, with 22 points, and Metros' offence dried up while their defence collapsed. King (27) and Olssen (21) took full

advantage, as the visitors closed with a 2-18 spurt to take the points, 85-97.

The seventh weekend saw just two games, one of which turned out to be the closest match in the NBL up to that time.

Down in **Exeter**, Ian Day (35) led the way for the Panthers as they recorded the "double" over St Luke's with a straightforward 85-104 victory, despite 21 points apiece by Farris and Tjarks.

At **Loughborough**, however, the absence of Darnell Harrell, with 'flu, left **Fiat** short of firepower against B&K, and the result was a thriller.

The home side looked to have taken the points, as they led 74-72 approaching the buzzer, but Neville Hopkins popped up with the equaliser, to take the game into overtime ... and did the same again five minutes later, to tie at 84-all and set up a second extra period.

In that second period of overtime, the visitors grabbed the first six points, to seemingly take control, but their hosts hit the next six, and at 90-all the game went into its third extra spell. This time it was Loughborough who moved ahead, but both defences were tiring; B&K had the edge, at 97-96, but Fred Townes hit the final score, and Coventry had kept their title hopes alive, 97-98!

06/11/1977	Pl.	W.	L.	Pts.
1 Wilson Panthers, Doncaster	8	6	2	12
2 Embassy All-Stars	5	5	0	10
3 Cinzano SCP	4	4	0	8
4 Team Fiat, Coventry	5	4	1	8
5 Bowmer & Kirkland L.A.S.	6	3	3	6
6 ATS Giants (Manchester)	6	3	3	6
7 Stockport Belgrade	5	1	4	2
8 St. Luke's TSB Exeter	6	1	5	2
9 Vauxhall Motors, Bedford	5	0	5	0
10 London "Y" Metros	4	0	4	-1

With roughly a third of the season gone, the table had already clearly separated into three distinct groups, each with its own characteristics.

The top four were clear of the field, although the Panthers would clearly not stay top for long, once the other three began to catch up on their games in hand.

In mid-table were the two established teams, Loughborough and Manchester, both with even 3&3 records, and then came the group of strugglers, including the three relative newcomers ... and Metros, still looking to climb up to the zero-point mark.

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