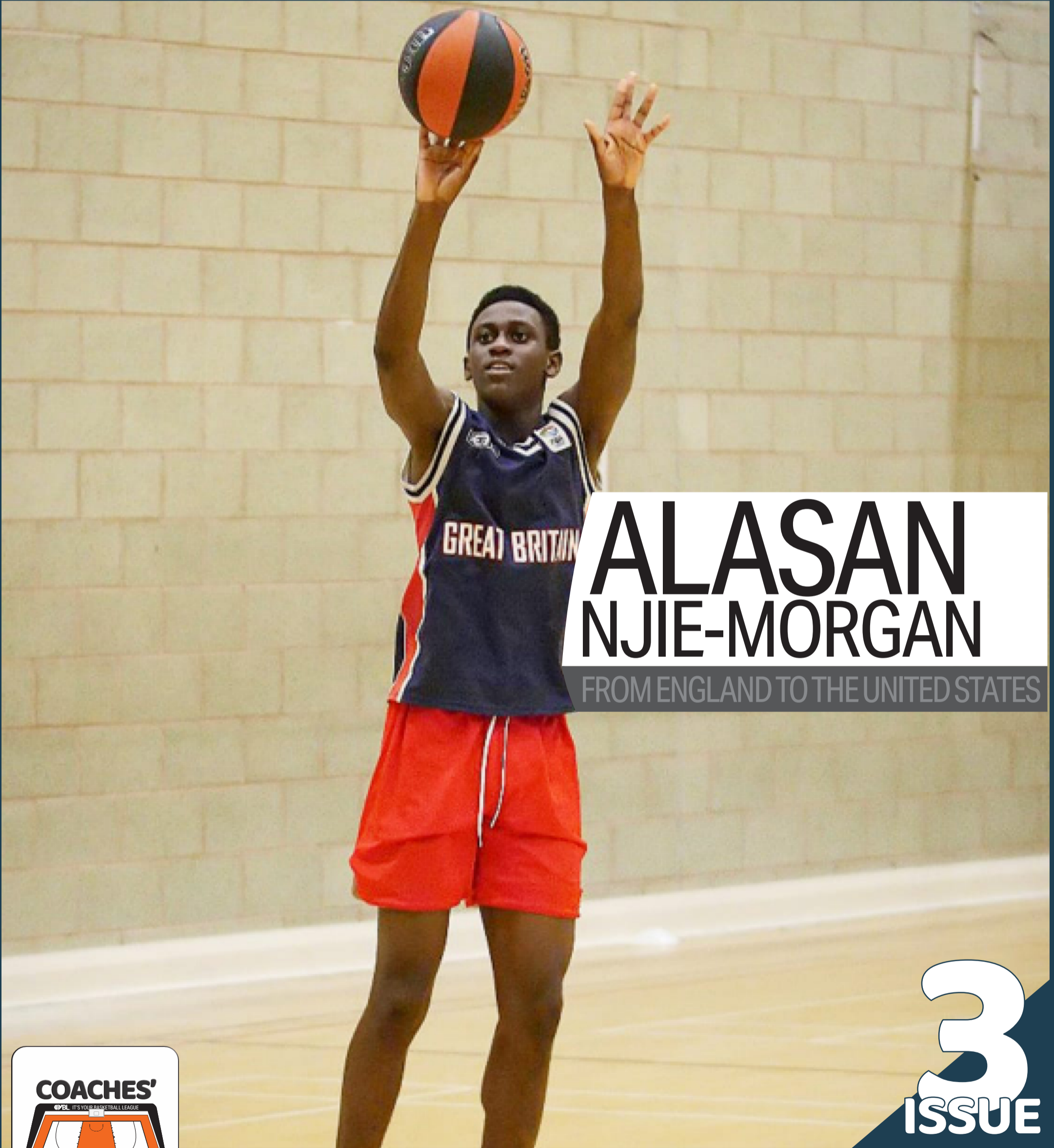


YBL Full Court

April 2021



ALASAN NJIE-MORGAN

FROM ENGLAND TO THE UNITED STATES

3 ISSUE

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YBL IT'S YOUR BASKETBALL LEAGUE
CORNER

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with Coach Douglas

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Sam Neter
Hoopsfix



Swansea Storm
with Steve Lomax

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OPINION REGULAR FEATURE
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Coach Mroso tackles the tough questions in **24 Seconds**

24 SECONDS

our main feature

MAIN FEATURE
ALASAN NJIE-MORGAN
 FROM ENGLAND TO THE UNITED STATES



also inside this issue



Sam Neter
of Hoopsfix



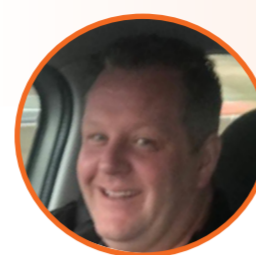
Steve Lomax
of Swansea Storm



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of West Brom Basketball



Douaine Anderson
of Team Wolverhampton Slam



JAMES DAVIES'
 Managing Director - The YBL C.I.C.

introduction

Welcome to the third issue of Full Court.

It's been a good news type of month, with the government outlining their plans to return to competition, my fingers are crossed that it will be sooner rather than later. The YBL have an exciting season ahead!

Full Court has some great interviews for you this month, starting with Alasan Njie-Morgan who is currently studying and playing in the United States.

We catch up with Sam Neter from Hoopsfix and we chat with Liam Sheridan, founder and head coach of West Brom Basketball and Douaine Anderson from Team Wolverhampton SLAM!

We welcome Barrie Viner and Steven Hansell as our guest columnists, whilst Coach Mroso takes the 24 Seconds challenge.

The YBL crosses the border into Wales as we catch up with Steve Lomax, coach and basketball enthusiast from Swansea Storm.

Another jam packed issue for you.

We asked for your feedback and have put a couple in this issue, thank you for allowing us to print your responses. Any more please get in touch.

Have you seen what Kevin's been doing this month?

Enjoy the issue and I'll see you on the court soon.

You got in touch... We heard from;

Hi James

Well done on the YouTube and the publication. Excellent quality and very relevant.

Let's hope we get going at some point and in some format soon.

Stay safe.

Steve C.
Via email [West Midlands]

I've really enjoyed your Full Court magazine. The first issue was really good and the second looks a lot more professional and they both cover a wide range of topics within basketball.

Keep up the good work.

Dawn P.
Via email [South East]

YBL Advertisement

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CATCH UP WITH 'IN THE ZONE'

Missed an issue?
 All previous editions are still available on our website.

In the Zone

Weekly news publication from the YBL



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COVER PICTURE SUPPLIED BY
 Alasan Njie-Morgan himself

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Issue 1 Readership

Day of Release: 424 (1 Dec 2020), New reads after Issue 2: 86, Total Readership to date: 1,350

Social Reaches

FACEBOOK: 6 ↑, 9 ↑, 550 ↓

INSTAGRAM: 22 ↓, 307 ↑

YOUTUBE: 79 ↑

TWITTER: 79 ↑

credits

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Home of YBL Clothing



State of Play

How have you been holding up during lockdown?

Overall, I have remained very busy running my business and continuing to advise my clients. That being said, I have now been working from home for over 12 months and this latest period of lockdown which effectively goes back to November (with us remaining in Tier 3 between the two official lockdowns) has been particularly tough. Not during working hours as there is plenty to do to fill the time but more around the dark evenings and poor weather almost meaning that you become a prisoner in your own home and unable to meet up with friends and family.

That was probably the hardest part, missing family and not being able to hug my grandchildren and spend time with them, time which will be very hard to make up for as they grow older.

I will admit that back in January, my mind was not where it usually was and it was easy to let daily routines slip. Thankfully we are now heading back into longer days and I see plenty of sunshine outside to encourage us forward.

What's your opinion on the state of basketball from when you started to now?

Disappointingly I feel the sport is far less wide reaching that it was when I first joined a club in June 1986 at the tender age of 18.

Back then the local area was the largest or second largest in England by number of clubs, teams and players with the West Midlands League running from Premier down to Division 6 with all of those leagues made up of at least 10 teams. That meant at least 70 teams in the West Midlands together with 3 divisions in the Worcester League and a thriving Warwickshire League system and a multi-division competitive league structure for Women.

The sport was also far more sociable. It was almost expected of all players to go to the pub after a training session or a game and talk and laugh about the incidents that had happened, catch up with each other and share stories and away teams would almost always accompany you to your local to join in.

For me, that helped me to form friendships and bonds with people that I never played alongside with those relationships still strong now.

There are many reasons for the decline of this including an ageing player group, other family needs for time etc but I think the fundamental approach that sport was something we did as a part of the wider social side has been lost and too many players now simply leave after training or games. This is also very apparent in how many players will help set up and take down equipment etc.

Not everything is for the worst. Back then, there was only Birmingham Bullets (or Team Fiat as they were) and West Bromwich Kestrels as local teams to play

at a higher level and for younger children to play depended wholly on whether your PE teacher at school liked or played the sport.

I would hope that I played a part in widening that gap by starting the Worcester City Chiefs (moved after 2 years to Solihull and re-named as Solihull Chiefs) alongside Paul Virgo as a specific vehicle for local players to be allowed to play in National League competitions. We were then soon followed by teams such as Adante in Wolverhampton as more and more National League spaces were made available.

Now we have any number of Clubs across the region with National Teams for juniors and seniors alike and below that hundreds if not thousands of junior players receiving coaching every week.

Our next ambition has to keep these juniors in the sport as they pass through the upper age groups so that our sport can once again prosper from the next generation coming through.

How excited are you to return to play?

The word isn't really excited. I am really keen and eager to get back into the sport that we all love but there is also an air of trepidation and caution that the sport may be afflicted by the last 12 months.

Many people may have found other ways to fill their time and I feel some of the older players, organisers, coaches and officials may well never come back.

I am also concerned about the potential restrictions placed on clubs and participants that will make some venues either unavailable or simply too expensive to be viable moving forward which combined with a potential renewed spike in Coronavirus infections later in 2021 and severe restrictions on the sport could once again halt our progress and potentially cause irreparable harm to the sport.

I hope that I am proved wrong and that the sport comes back invigorated and roaring away, but that may take some time and definitely will need us all pulling in the same direction.

What are you looking forward to when we do return?

Having played competitively at school, then again at college and then being involved with league basketball since 1986, the last 12 months has almost felt like someone pulled a big part of the previous 40+ years of my life and threw it away.

One thing I am looking forward to the most is to catching up with the old faces once again and since we have been locked out of the pubs for so long, maybe re-establishing that tradition of going for a cold drink after the exercise!

ALASAN NJIE-MORGAN

Started in Birmingham (England), Alasan Njie-Morgan talks about his journey to The Phelps School, Malvern, Pennsylvania in the great United States of America, where he is studying and playing his favourite sport.



What age were you when you first started playing competitive basketball?

I was practicing when I was 9, but competitively at the age 10 or 11.

Your first club was City of Birmingham Rockets...

Yeah, it was my first club, and still is. It's been my club until I moved to America.

Did you play local league (participation) or did you play Junior National League (competitively)?

I started off playing in the Under 11s league in the YBL first for the first two years, then moved to play Under 14 JNBL.

Was the experience a big difference going from Under 11s to Under 14s?

It was a big step, as I played for two years at Under 11s and then went to 14s, I played for four years at U14s. But as a player, I grew every year.

You also played for the West Midlands regional team?

Yeah, I have, I played for the West Mids team twice at U11s and U14s and then for the U15s team. I enjoyed it more and more. I enjoyed the more competitive side of the tournaments, as these games are a lot more competitive.

Did these games help your mind-set in the way the game is played in the States?

Definitely, as at the regional tournaments there are players from the different regions, and they play different styles to us. So, you have to adapt. It's the same thing when I came to America.

You went over the States at 15, you left the English school system for the United States. I know there are differences. How did you find the educational system?

I found it relatively easy. The things I am learning now, I touched upon when I was younger. It was an easy transition.

How have you found being in the States on your own, without your parents? Being independent at such a young age?

I was quite nervous at first. But when I thought about why I was coming I was more excited than nervous. It was always a dream of mine to come over and play 'ball.

You said it was always a dream of yours. When did that become a dream? When did you decide this is what I want?

It was when I was about ten years old. When the game turned a bit more competitively, it turned from a hobby to a passion. I found the love of the game, and from that point forward, I knew this is what I wanted to do.

I had a look at The Phelps School website, and it looks very impressive. It looks like it's set in a really nice area. What is it like there?

Pennsylvania itself is a really nice area to be. The people are nice. But as the school is a boarding school you have people from all over the States and you have international students.

How long have you been in the States for now?

I've been here since August but came home for Christmas for a few weeks.

What are you enjoying the most about being there at the moment?

I like the fact that I have bonded well with people in my school quite quickly. I'm with them all the time, before, during and after school. You bond with them because you're living with them. You become a family.

Those people you're bonding with, your friends. Are they the same people that you are playing with at The Phelps?

Yes, most of them, I'm one of the younger guys on the team. It's more of the older guys that play on the team though. There are two teams here, the Prep and the Varsity teams.

What's the difference between the Prep and Varsity teams? Not many of our readers will understand the difference.

The Varsity team is more of the school team. Most schools in America will have a Varsity team. Some schools will have a Prep team, where they recruit players. It's a higher level of play style. They'll have some older players come in, post-graduates, that'll play on the Prep team, and they'll play other schools' Prep teams. The Prep teams are very similar to college teams, in the way they are run. That way, it prepares you for college.

Is that where you want to get to eventually, play on a college team?

Yes! That's my goal to play college.

NBA too?

Yes, definitely.

If I had to do a comparison to the team where you are playing now to a team in the U.K?

The team I'm in now has a lot of older guys in, 18 or 19 years old. It'll be similar to an Under 18s Premier league team (JNBL).

There isn't much focus on the school side of things when you watch American basketball over here. There is a lot of about college. It's nice to understand the difference between them. I gather you are enjoying your time playing there because of the competition and the standard.

Yes, especially, as there are people who are not playing in England right now. It's a privilege that I am able to come here and be able play. We do play a lot of games. I am really enjoying it.

What would you say a typical training day and game is for you? Do you have to still do the 6, 7 hours-a-day schoolwork and then train? How is your day structured?

It was different when I first started, when I got here, as we were in pre-season. Which meant we had to wake up at 6

Questions by Kevin Henry and James Davies
Pictures supplied by Alasan

Special thanks to The Phelps School for the use of their logo and locational pictures.

a.m. every day to train, either we'd run or lift [weights] in the morning. Then we'd have the school day and then another two hours of training after school.

That's a lot of basketball.

Yes, it was a hard eight weeks.

Now, in-season, we don't have to get up that early in the morning for training. I still do, as I like to get in some extra training with some of my teammates. Then after school, we have team practices.

If a game is on the weekend, we'd have a shooting practice before the game. If the game is on a school day, we'd finish the full day then go to the game.

I'm excited about playing for an AAU team in New York in the summer; called New York Jayhawks, I was scouted for it.

Congratulations on being scouted and good luck.

A typical week would be, training and school Monday to Friday, and your game on a Saturday?

Most of the Prep team's games are during school on weekdays and a few on a Saturday.

How big is the league that you play in – so we can compare?

There are no play-offs this season, because of Covid. Schools have been able to play each other, so the students can still be exposed to the scouts for the colleges.

I can't explain it at the minute, as I don't believe the leagues will be like this normally. We play a junior college, and other Varsity teams and some younger teams. The schools which are able to play are playing.

It's a bit of a mix and match at the moment, because of Covid.

How would you describe the venue that you are playing in? I'm presuming that your home court would be of a decent size and standard?

Compared to the courts in England, the courts here are much nicer, especially here in Pennsylvania. The schools around here, are very similar to our school.

We have two courts here, one for training, available at any time and one for games.

What has surprised you the most, now looking back over the last few months?

Nothing really, I was surprised at how un-surprised I was! How I fitted in and adapted to life here. A lot better than I thought I would. I thought there would be many differences, maybe because I am not near any big cities. I'm more in the countryside, so I've not seen it all. I think it helps that you've not gone to another country and they speak the same language.

Do your grades in England have to be of a high standard before you can transfer to any school in the States?

For the school I'm at you have to have good grades, the school were asking my old school for references and to see what grades I have. If my grades weren't up to scratch as they are, I think it would have been a lot harder for me to get here. Even players here in the States, to get into a school like this without good grades would be hard too. Grades are equally important as a talented you are at basketball when it comes to getting scholarships for schools.

If you are in the squad now, and your grades fall a bit, like you see in the American movies, does that have an impact on if you can or can't play?

I'm pretty sure that if that were the case, that they'd help you get your grades up first. When I have my practices, there are also sessions that school puts on for help with classes you're not doing so well in. So, you can get your grades up. Some of the players can be told to go there before they come to practice. In some cases, if your grades are not up to standard, you might not be able to play the next set of games until they are back up. They care just as much about your education.

I think it's great that schools put the emphasis on your education and that your grades come first. It's nice to see that, even though basketball is at times recreational, and in some cases a profession, the educational side comes first. It sets you up for being a better adult.

What would the average class be like? When I was at school a lesson was 35 minutes long, a double would be like an hour and ten minutes.

My school here, isn't like most American high schools. The difference between my old school and this are the class sizes are a lot smaller. We have six lessons a day at about 55 minutes per-lesson. It's nice having the smaller class size, around 7 students in my case, it helps the teacher support you more when you need it. When there's 30 kids in a class, it's harder.

If a player in England was reading this now, what advice would you give them to make their dreams come true and play and study over in the States?

Try and get as much exposure as possible to the game. Record your games, the whole game, not just the highlights. Coaches like to see the full game, to see how you play in a full game not just your highlights. Anyone can look good in their highlights. Just because you are good at basketball doesn't mean your grades don't have to be good as well. When you want to get to far places, they will look at your grades as well as you as a basketball player. They'll look at





MAIN FEATURE



you as a student and person too. You have to have the whole package to get to the places you want to go.

Now you have gone down this path, if we were to speak to you as a 9-year-old Alasan, what would you tell yourself?
 I'd say, to work harder at an earlier time. Even though I think I could have worked harder, I think I could off worked harder. If I started at 10 instead of 12 years old, I'd be even further than I am right now. Even though I was passionate about the game, I didn't put the extra work to outwork as many as possible at the earlier age. Go the extra mile, that's the way you separate yourself from others.

Is the game different to the game in the U.K.? Or are they exactly the same?
 The rules are the same, the only difference is some games you don't have a shot clock, but if you did, it would be a 30 second clock as opposed to a 24 second shot clock in England.

How would you say the coaching style is different in the States to England?
 I think regardless of what team you go to in any place in one country or any other country will be different. Here, I'd say it's more conditional. If you're not conditioned, it's a lot harder for you to play. Also, they focus a lot more on defense. If you can play good defense you'll play more. With a lot of emphasis on team basketball. In England, sometimes, if the team has one decent player, they might let them have a bit more free rain. Here, it's fitting into the system. They look at the whole team to be successful. You have to be more of the team player than an individual player.

If I went to watch one of your games, or someone from England were to, what do you think I'd be surprised about?
 I think, more the Prep games, the pace of the game, it's a lot faster than what I was used to in England. Maybe because I was younger with younger players, but the pace of the game was something I had to adapt to quite quickly. It's a lot faster up and game.

Alasan, thank you for your time and everyone here at Full Court and the YBL wish you all the best in your future endeavours and that your basketball journey continues to flourish.



Hoopsfix's Sam Neter

Catches up with Full Court

'Full Court' were delighted when Sam Neter the driving force behind Hoopsfix agreed to speak with Kevin and James about UK Basketball. If you listen to his podcasts, you will already know he is massively passionate about the game in the UK and is an advocate for British Basketball. Like everyone he wants the game to grow and reach its full potential - you know the one everyone talks about!

Sam does anything he can to help to achieve this, interviews, articles, videos, feature events and projects. He is working on a 'Basketball White Paper' to provide independent analysis of the British Basketball market. Something our team here at Full Court and the YBL would thoroughly support to have some independent research that benefits the whole of the UK basketball scene.

Hoopsfix has been around since 2010 but it was in 2012 when there was the buzz around the London Olympics, that Sam left his 'full time job' at a Tech start-up in Shoreditch to concentrate all of his time and energy on Hoopsfix and grab a piece of the Olympic action that summer. "It was an incredible and great experience, but when the games finished all the companies and brands that had been involved with the big hype of the Olympics. They all left too!"

Hoopsfix was generating interest with regular advertisements on the website and had some brand partnerships. Looking at what he is currently doing people probably think that Hoopsfix is completely self-sufficient, but in fact it's his freelance work that brings in the majority of his income and helps to pay for the things he needs to run it like the cameras and recording equipment.

Sam will admit those first two or three years were a struggle, just when he thought that he might have to get another 'full time job' he would sell another website banner or generate some additional income which meant he didn't have to. Longstanding clients provide him with a regular stable income. When he looks back, he knew in 2010 he wanted to make his passion for basketball his career. He was 23 and thought it was all going to happen really quickly and that by now he would be a millionaire and Hoopsfix would be known all over the world.

Maturity brings with it not just knowledge but an understanding of reality. Sam's got projects in the pipeline and believes that these projects are going to come to fruition he dedicates a lot of his time and energy to what he does but can now adapt what he is doing to best meet the needs of Hoopsfix. He explains "I can adapt and make changes to projects, when I recognise an opportunity which might take me down a different route, I can choose to follow it, if something is not productive, I can stop it". "I'm forever the optimist and I have the belief that it could change very quickly for me and 1 or 2 of my projects could take off to put me on stable financial footing." Being self-employed comes without employment benefits like a pension so hopefully one of these projects will bring him the financial security of a few hundred grand in the bank.

Speaking with Sam you realise that his drive, determination and faith in what he is doing will work out. Thankfully for Sam there are only a small number of people working in the UK who have

his level of experience when it comes to his freelance work. So, when big clients like Footlocker or Nike come and ask for something he can put a price on the job which is for a job that no-one else can deliver like he can. His experience and knowledge over the years has given him the confidence and understanding of his own worth in that market.

We moved onto our UK Basketball Leagues and Sam explained that they need to be visible, their websites need to be accurate, clear and easy to navigate. One of his bugbears as a journalist is hitting one of these sites to find information for an article and it's not immediately there. He loves basketball so he is happy to 'grind it' out and 'dig around' for the information but other journalists wouldn't be as keen because unlike him they are not invested in basketball. They would probably give up and say to their boss that it wasn't worth the hassle and move on what a missed opportunity for that league.

He advises that the leagues need to turn the tables and actually reach out to the media partners out there to see if their content is of interest to them. Your league is your media platform and used our YBL leagues as an example. We run the leagues, but we need to look at what content is available on the website, can anyone going on the site find what they are looking for easily be that a kid looking for his stats, a club looking for results, journalists researching for interviews or a club administrator needing some contact details. He further advises about having good quality imagery which he knows some of the smaller organisations out there may have a challenge to source but having pictures and videos on the site works. Not only are you visually promoting what everyone is doing, but it brings in new opportunities like brands and advertising.

Having friends who are in the basketball community has enabled his network to grow. A lot of the people who he interviews are his friends in real life too. With Covid he is looking forward to when they can all meet up in person again safely. His connections not only benefit his work by helping him to get information or allowing him to speak to the right person to get that information, but it also means when people come to him for information or who they should speak to he can signpost them and provide the introductions to get things moving. These relationships make Hoopsfix stronger.

When you listen to his Hoopsfix podcasts you can hear Sam is passionate about basketball, but you can also sense that he really cares about where basketball should be heading. He is surprised how UK Basketball sits on the global stage. "We have a good economy a strong democracy yet it's shocking how the game is managed at every level" and he is adamant that we should be doing much better than we are currently.

Basketball is the second largest participation sport in the UK but compare the funding to sports like Rugby and Cricket, "basketball lacks professionalism and commercialism" which is why there is no money in basketball. He also says there needs to be better management across every level of the game.

He hears about things going on that seem insane or mind-blowing and he gets just as frustrated as we do about how slow things progress. That's one of the great things about his podcasts



there's an opportunity to bring these conversations out into the open and pass on information and opportunities to everyone. He quite rightly states that "if you ask most people in the basketball community about the current state of the game in the UK they would probably say 'it's not great' or 'it needs a lot of work' but if you actually manage to hit reality and get through the weeds it is actually in a bad way".

To change basketball there needs to be an investment of money, that's a massive obstacle getting major sponsors to drive it forward to enable those involved to make the changes and also make a good living out of it.

The podcasts are unique featuring not just player interviews but conversations with clubs, leagues and event organisers to get the whole picture and providing a platform for real discussion and sharing of information. A recent interview with James Merchant (owner of Richmond Knights) sparked interest from people wanting to connect with him about starting a club. Hoopsfix is starting to make changes to the politics in the game, encouraging people to work together and by pointing them to people who can help them grow or even start up. Vital work getting the right people connected.

The guys asked Sam to get in his DeLorean like Marty McFly (for those younger readers watch Back to the Future) and head to 2025 and what did he think basketball would be like in the UK and more importantly what would he be doing?

"Hoopfix will be employing a small team of staff, so everything is not reliant upon me and Brad and we would have a whole programme of rostered events". Being a techie, he has been learning code and by then he hoped that he would have coded some software projects and products - maybe built an App or two that would add a lot of value to the sport as well as producing a good revenue. Basketball will have reached its true potential, with a greater grassroots base participation level across the UK making it a real powerhouse and attracting massive interest, which is something the team at the YBL are making ground on. He would also like to see more clubs playing out of their own facilities or arenas, more clubs achieving what Newcastle and Leicester have done with their own 2000+ seated arena which is sold out every single week the game would be massive. The revenue it would generate would trickle down through programmes funding community projects and junior academies.

"Historically we've only had 7 players who have made it to the NBA that's ridiculous when you think about it, there is no reason why we shouldn't be producing NBA talent". Sam explains that by empowering individuals and organisations to make the changes within the sport we could have a competitive team at every age group on the global stage with players from the UK making it to the NBA. We can influence and drive the future.

"People need to stop being too quick to complain about things without trying themselves, it doesn't have to be a big thing, it can be a cool little local thing. I have a great deal of respect for people like you guys at the YBL, those on the ground doing the work, dealing with the same frustrations that we all are dealing with within British Basketball. You're still turning up every day trying to provide opportunities for people".

The drive and influence needs to also come from the top. "The federation [Basketball England] need to work on where they are taking us and need to drive change. People stay involved because of their love of the game but without change we are never going to grow".

Summing up basketball is a huge part of his life and work and without that he wouldn't be who he is today. 🙌



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Words by Kim Accalia
Interview by Kevin Henry &
James Davies
Pictures supplied by
Sam Neter

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Quality over Quantity

West Brom Basketball Club started in 2014, the same year the YBL was founded, you were the first club to enroll teams in the YBL. Take us back, what inspired you to create West Brom Basketball Club?

I was working at George Salter Academy at the time and the school had a high demand for basketball. The school wanted community projects, that was a big part of my role at the school, PE and community development. The club was a spin off from my role within the school. As expected, it had a short shelf-life within the school. It was a real good time for me and the club, as we were only just getting started.

From 2014 to now, West Brom has grown considerably, are you pleased with the direction the club is going?

Yes, very pleased, we've grown dramatically, starting from me and group of ten to fifteen under 15-year-olds, to now where we have players from Under 9 to seniors. It's not so much me now, we have a team of volunteers, staff and coaches, as well as a committee taking the club forward. Along with more members, we have a lot of good people on board.

From the outset, West Brom have been one of the clubs that I enjoy coming to. I can see the development of your players, officials, coaches and the club. We've grown side-by-side through our journeys. You are fundamentally a grassroots and development club. Have you ever thought about going down the National League route? Or are you solely focused on the development of your players, coaches and official's personal journeys?

Several people in the basketball community have spoken to us about moving to play at that level. We've had a few conversations within our club about this, but essentially, in my opinion there are more than enough National League clubs around the area and the wider region that offer the National League outlet for all the ages we cover. I think National League should be the high, pushing to elite standard of basketball. To me having too many clubs at that level dilutes the players' pool. For me personally, I don't want to add to the diluted pool further. We have a lot of pride in starting someone's basketball career. If their journey stays within our club, that is great, but if that means they want to go and play at National League, that's also fine. Same, if they want to try out for the Aspire programme or go somewhere where they can get noticed to play for a basketball academy, then that's great. I'm all about the development of those individuals. We have some players play at other clubs at other levels, but what I find is they come back.

Liam Sheridan, founder and head coach of West Brom Basketball Club joins Full Court to talk about all things Basketball. We waste no time getting stuck in...



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Words by Kevin Henry & James Davies
Pictures supplied by Liam Sheridan





With the players development, we also give the opportunity for those people within our club to start officiating. Again, if they start their journey with us and go elsewhere to develop it's an honour for us to be a part of their journey.

If you look back over the years, how the club has developed, what has surprised you the most (in running a club)?

When you are running a club, you find that you do less and less coaching and more and more admin. Because of all of the day-to-day running of the club, the administration side is a huge part of that. It's a hard balance to find. It took me a while for me to find that balance; that balance between having the club on a more professional standing and at the level it needed to be, while not neglecting my coaching.

When I first started it was a part of my job, I just got on with the coaching. Now, it's all the other stuff that comes with it.

The other thing that really surprised me, and it's very positive, the people who believe in the club and are willing to put their time and effort into it. That's a really humbling thing for me. I think I'm just doing something that I love which is basketball, but the fact that people support you in doing it is really fantastic.

You have a great leader, people follow!

Thank you!

Following that, what would have you found to be the biggest challenge (to run a club)?

Once I took on the club independently and lost the financial support of the school, it was to make the club financially stable and successful in whatever form that success came and to make it work for me, personally, being financially stable in the middle of leaving a steady job and purchasing a house. It was a difficult time. It's going alright, it's prevailed.

The other challenge was exploring the world of public funding, sponsorships that make the club stable. Without these things there is no club.

Looking at your website, you have several programmes and companies that you are involved with. Recently, you've had a big sponsor come on board. Would you like to tell the readers how that came about?

We secured our first ever sponsorship from Utilita Energy, that came about organically, they came to us. They opened an energy hub [shop] on the high street. Dennis and I went to meet with them and seemed to click really well. Having similar goals in what we are doing in the community, our values and vision. It's great to have that come into the club. It helps us tremendously.

We receive other support too; Street Games has been a huge part of the success of the club from the outset,



Black Country Active Sports Partnership, Sport England and Basketball England. Recently, we've been in touch with the West Midlands Police Violence Reduction Unit. It goes back to the challenge of public funding which helps West Brom.

You've got a lot of experience coaching at various age groups. What age group do you prefer coaching. Not necessarily a team per se, but the age group?

I don't know if I have a preference. Most recently, if I had to give an answer, would be our U15s, as that would have been the team, I would have been coaching this season. It was going really well. They're a good bunch, they had good chemistry and bought into the club's and my ethos. As well, I like that age group because, these are the youngsters, that are still on their basketball journey. At that age, you see them come into their own and find their identity as a basketball player. More importantly as a person as well. Yes, they are teenagers, I feel at that age, you can start to give them some responsibility.

When I set up the club, it was this age group team I had. It was a positive experience. We had a lot of success on and off the court, I tried to replicate that.

Under 9s and 11s is a challenge for me. Patience is everything at these age groups. I don't believe I am the best person for those groups. There are better coaches in the club that are so much better at that than me.

Brave man to admit that, not many coaches will. You've recognised your own and other coaches' strengths within your club.

Talking about your U15s for that first year, they went on to win league titles, then the following year, the same team, won league titles and the U17 YBL Cup and Championship Finals. How have you enjoyed your coaching journey with that team and West Brom's journey through the YBL?

We touched upon it earlier, that U15s team was special and unique and was a perfect storm for me, to coach within school and for the club. The majority of the players were at the school as well. So, we excelled in school basketball as well. The school supported that. I had daily contact with the players which helped. Now that we are run as a traditional club, I see how valuable that time was. I almost took it for granted. We can't have as much contact with them as we'd like.

The amount of contact that they had with me and Ziggy helped. But the success was down to them. They had a great bond together, that and the effort they put made them the team that they were and that transformed into the achievements that followed. For me as a coach, it's great to be a part of that, at the same time, it's not the winning it's the journey that you are witnessing, I'm there to facilitate the basketball.

As a club, its journey and the growth that the enjoyment. The success of the earlier teams, but we've all had some of that as part of the club as coaches. Ziggy has, with the Under 13s over the years and Dennis with the U15 and U17s as well as our seniors. The winning and the titles we've won over the years has been fantastic. It's not primary goal of West Brom, our primary goal it's giving the



young people something positive and some inspiration which allows them to inspire each other.

You have a lengthy playing career. What's the difference between when you started playing to... if someone came to you club now and started playing?

Nowadays, its basketball but with a wider context, the use of social media has made the game and life more accessible. In terms of there are so many clubs out there to play for now compared to when I was younger, unless I wasn't aware, but that could be down to the creation of social media. There was definitely not enough local basketball when I was younger. Coaching is developing. Not to say it's better. There are more younger coaches going into the sport. There is more of a local community now.

What does the YBL do well for clubs like West Brom, and what would you say that the YBL needs to be better at?

I've always been a big advocate of the YBL, one of those reasons is, when it first started, I'd describe it as a bridge in the gap between school basketball and National League basketball. In my experience of basketball in my lifetime, that never seemed to be there for people. When I was young and naïve, you seemed to play National League, and I was fortunate to do that, but if you weren't good enough, you were sort of forgotten. Now, the YBL has bridged that gap. Also, I don't ever believe I have ever seen so many basketball clubs at this level. The league is massive now, that can only be a good thing, giving people access to more clubs and playing opportunities. Everyone wins in that instance.

The YBL does a great job in facilitating basketball for players that perhaps, don't have the ability or don't want to play at National League. Similar to our club, we want to stick to what we are good at.

Do better? I don't know where to start! **(JD jumps in shocked faced!)** You guys communicate really well, the website is great. It's not necessarily the YBL, my biggest gripe is fixture rearrangements. Feel free to print that **(We will)**. No honestly, the other thing is, development of the sport, not just allowing players, but we've had table officials and referees supported by the YBL. That have become good officials. That comes down to you and the platform that you provide for them. **Thanks for your kind words.**

Finally, where do you see West Brom going in the next five years?

With Covid and some other challenges, if I'm honest... Initially, I'd like to be back to where we were before the pandemic started. It's been hard, we had to change venues and our practices to fit into guidelines.

To continue to grow in the direction we are, to keep to our identity. We are a grassroots and development basketball club. That is what we are good at. I wouldn't want the club to be going in different directions that we lose our core values that we are all about. More of the same. Develop more coaches to enable more players access to basketball, maybe to have multiple teams at the same age group.

To grow organically. ●





Returning to Play

With the recent news from the government regarding the easing of restrictions, we now have a roadmap for a return to play. That is what we have been waiting for and now is a good time to start planning what your sessions will look like when we get back on the court.

This in turn will pose problems for many of you in regard to what areas to address and of course we will be worried about the fitness of the players, so I am offering a suggestion. Why not try adding skill circuits to your sessions. It takes a bit of planning beforehand, but I have found them to be hugely popular with players across all ages and rewarding for coaches, as you can record their progress over a period of time. Skill circuits give you the opportunity to choose the essential skills that you want your players to be good at without spending too much time on a particular area, especially when you will be attempting to recapture the time lost through lockdown.

So, how do you go about setting up a circuit? Well first thing to do is look at the layout of your court and draw a plan of it. Then based around your floor plan you can start creating your skill circuit.

Let's look at a basic one for a group of 15 players. You have a couple of options here. Do you go with 6 pairs and one group of 3 or five groups of 3? Let's choose five groups of 3. Now start looking at the skills you want them to work on. Here are mine:

Ball Handling
Shooting
Passing
Individual defence

Now break each one down into a drill that will challenge the players and work on specific points that you would like to see them improve on.

- 1- Ball Handling – Fig 8 weave
- 2- Shooting – Continuous lay ups
- 3- Passing – Wall passes
- 4- Individual defence – Lateral slides
- 5- Shooting – Free throw line continuous shooting

From here I will start allocating areas on the court for each skill and also start deciding how long each activity will last for. I have chosen 60 seconds for each and with there being five groups of 3 players, with approximately 10 seconds changeover time between players, we are looking at 3 minutes 30 seconds for each station but if we add another 30 seconds to move to the next skill station, we can say that the whole skill circuit will last for 20 minutes if they all do just one round each.

You can choose to either collect their scores as a group of 3 or individually. If you want to amp up the workout you can make the players do some sort of activity while they are waiting for their turn. This could be core work, jumping jacks or jogging on the spot. Why not try playing music during the workout for something different as well.

If you are lucky enough to have a hall with lots of baskets you can make it a shooting circuit or if you want to hone in on another skill it can be all dribbling drills. They are so many options and combinations that you can create which is why I think a skill circuit option would be a good choice for you try.



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With Coach Mroso

24
SECONDSGeneral Manager | Team Birmingham Elite
Vice-Chair | West Midlands Region
BSc/MA/PGCEQuestions by Kevin Henry and James Davies
Pictures supplied by Coach Mroso

WE ASK THE QUESTIONS, THEY ANSWER WITHIN 24 SECONDS!



COACH MROSO'S BIO

Team Birmingham Elite

Coach all age groups at the club at either Head or Assistant position. I mainly head coach the younger age groups like U14s and U16s.

I have been a head coach at U18s and seniors, but my priority is juniors as I believe development is key and try to prepare the players for their basketball journey from a junior to a senior.

Alongside this I am the general manager of the club which deals with the day-to-day activities, from regular communication with parents/guardians, players, Basketball England, YBL, administration and organising international camps/projects and relationships.

I am also a lecturer and assessor at Birmingham Metropolitan College: James Watt College, where I run the academy for EABL for Men & WEABL for Women at U19s - players study full time alongside an intense Basketball Programme.

WM Midlands Region

I am currently the Vice Chair of the region where I work closely with the passionate and intelligent Luke Freer whom I know his heart is in the right place to take the region forward. I also work closely with the Regional Talent Manager, Danny Williams who is also an intelligent and passionate man about the game and is promoting good relationships in the region.

I am a big fan of the WM local league and national league for seniors and juniors. I used to, actually still do, when the season comes back around to promote the Basketball which is taking place in the region by promoting fixtures, game of the week and a West Midlands all-star event.

Aspire

In the past I have been Head Coach for the Boy's and Girl's Aspire programmes in the West Midlands which has been an honour working with top coaches across the region such as Clive Allen and many more. Just because I am Head Coach does not mean I do not learn from other coaches. For me it's just a title but as long as we are working together to make the players work together then I am sure that is the outcome everyone wants. To me, I was responsible for the organisation of the programme. After two years of the being the Aspire Boy's Head Coach, I was asked to resign for matters that I didn't agree with the national governing body. People might have a different version, but I know the truth but for me and as long as the parents, players and coaching staff were happy with the programme whilst I was Head Coach, that's all that matters.

A few seasons later I was asked by Danny Williams, our Regional Talent Manager to become Head Coach of the Girls Aspire Programme which I had no problem with as there was a gap at the time for Girls Basketball at participation and performance. As we are the second biggest populated region in the country, if I can remember there were two seasons in a row where we did not take a girls' team at U13s and U15s to the regional development tournament which I consider embarrassing, so like I said before I am here to make the region better. Some coaches think they are too good to coach girls. Coaching is coaching to me, simple as that. Due to time restraints of club duties, I have had to step back from being the Head Coach to assistant coach of the girl's programme.

University

At university level I have been involved for many years, starting at just officiating games at University College Birmingham and Aston University. I was contacted by University College Birmingham to become the Head Coach for the Men's programme and I was there for 8 seasons which involved promotions and relegations. As I was only appointed as Head Coach - As competitive as I am, I had to respect that this was just an appointed role and had to respect the universities ethos to sport. Every season I would ask a rhetorical question, because students would start and leave the university, so it was practically a new team every season.

I can babysit you if want and then let your talents and efforts do the talking or you let me coach and let's do the best, we can which means no excuses - for those who know me; tell the new guys what that means in your time.

I want to thank you for letting me take part in this interview. Thank you to Nigel Hanson, Steven Hansell and Louise Young for letting me be part of my current club.

#NoExcuses

**How long have you been involved in basketball?**

As a player and coach over 20 years now.

How did you get involved in basketball?

I've been involved in basketball from 13 years old. For those who knew me before Basketball I used to play football and was selected for Birmingham City Football club from 10 years old and played against some top clubs such as Liverpool. However, after some waterlogged muddy pitches, playing in the horrible rain and once my dad refusing for me to get in the car after a match because of how dirty I was. I decided "I don't like this game no more".

During this time in school in Year 7, I got an interest in Basketball from PE lessons and was happy as this sport was played indoors and it was nice and warm, mostly!. My PE teacher saw I had some talent and put me and some other players through to the Birmingham Bullets junior programme, where I recognised some of the kids from my school who were already there.

What is your role with Team Birmingham?

My main role is general Manager but I am a head coach at junior age groups and assistant coach at senior age groups.

What would be your one highlight over the span of your career in playing and coaching?

As a player it would be winning the national college title (equivalent to the EABL today) with Solihull 6th Form College playing with legends such as Wayne Robinson, Daniel Kerr, Richard Wellings, Daniel Jackson and Renaldo Edmundson.

The Birmingham and West Midlands Schools competitions were very good back then. Just before the schools final, in the West Midlands Squad at U15s, I was one of the players who never got selected to make the England Squad and to be honest I thought I was better than most - yes a coach now, I understand, height is important but I was furious, I didn't respect my coaches for not saying anything and I was happy for my team mates because I saw many Birmingham players make the team. However, I never went to Birmingham Bullets practice for a while and people thought I had quit, but I was training hard with Mr. Brown and I said to him I am going to beat everybody especially the players who made the England Squad. He advised me I should still be going practice, but no one could convince me.

In the semi-final of the Birmingham school's competition, Baverstock beat Great Barr school at their place they thought they were going to win but I made sure of that as I had something to prove. The final was between Baverstock and Cockshut Hill School at the BAI with Mike Shaft commenting. I remember seeing my close friend Renaldo Edmundson who went to Cockshut Hill saying "you ready to lose" - I said "you, your coach (who was my coach at national league) and everyone is going to get it".

That day I scored 55 points and received MVP award from Mike Shaft - legendary commentator! Oh and what do you know - I made the England squad!

As a coach, I cannot say as there are so many great performances to mention where players have worked so hard themselves and for me over the years.

What has been the best game you've seen so far and why?

U18s Final Fours 2015 - Team Birmingham Elite v Peckham Pride.

Lost by 1 due to free throws but that was a great game - showed how coaching can overcome talent. Coaches are needed and players deep down know that! Very sad day but you know the saying you learn better from a loss.

Tell us something interesting about yourself that you think no one will know?

I wouldn't say I was a naughty kid because I had no reason to be. I came from a good home where my parents worked hard to make sure I was okay but after 3 suspensions I was finally kicked out of school in second term of Year 8. My mom wouldn't let me go to basketball because if I didn't go school, she was not letting me go to training.

I never got back into school until the end of Year 9 so I missed 18 months of school (No SATs). Baverstock taught me about "Strive to Succeed". Now I have a degree, masters and a teaching qualification. Hopefully in the future I will get my PHD.

Also in November 2009 after playing against Telford College I suddenly lost the sight in the my left eye. I was diagnosed with Keratoconus where the cornea in my eye is severely damaged. I am not defined as blind but I can sense light but everything is just a black vision. In the early stages I had to stop driving and bright lights would make me suffer with severe headaches so I had to wear an eye patch whilst working or coaching.

No glasses or laser can be used as treatment to correct this and after seeing a corneal transplant I refused that as I have full sight in my right eye and that is good enough for me.

You have to look at the positives I guess.

Do you prefer coaching or playing?

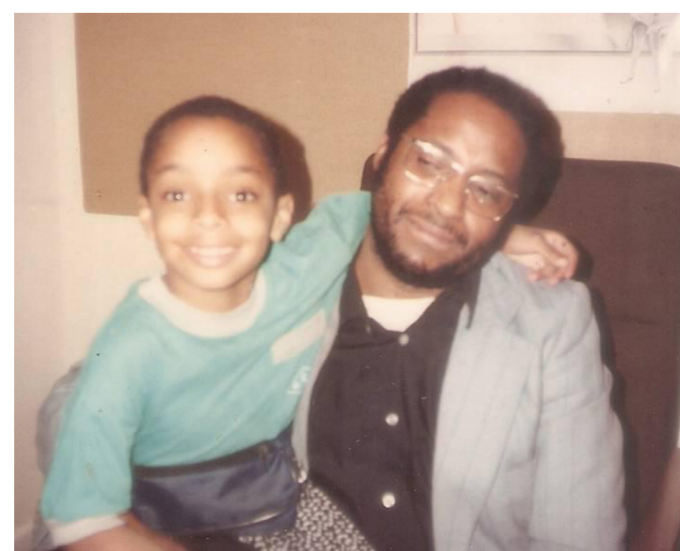
Coaching - love helping the kids' basketball journey. Seeing players play for the national team or even players starting to take the sport seriously from school to national league.

What do you see yourself doing in 5 year's time?

Staying in education and Basketball - raising my education portfolio - hopefully do a PhD and continue to be part of a successful Basketball Club. I have thought of coaching overseas to get a different look to the sport but who knows?

What will be your mic-drop moment?

If I was involved or responsible for bringing back the standard of Birmingham basketball by creating a similar model to the Birmingham Bullets franchise.



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STEVE LOMAX

CHATS BALL

Here comes our controversial question Steve. Why play for Bristol Flyers in England and not for a National League team in Wales?

The South Wales Basketball Association is a great voluntary organisation, and the clubs have some fantastic coaches and players. You can get some really close competitive games of basketball. However, in general, the overall level of basketball competitively, isn't as high as it is in England, especially when you get to the Prem, which is the highest level of basketball you can play in the U.K., at that junior age group. Currently (as far as I know), there is no Prem level team below U18 playing out of Wales.

What would you say the difference is watching a game in England to one in Wales?

It wouldn't be the knowledge of the coaches, as there are some fantastic coaches. It's the smaller size of the pool of players and the lower number of games played, compared to England, so less basketball to watch or take part in. The comparable size of the towns and cities is one reason. Basketball is more popular in the bigger cities, for example in England you have London, and the powerhouses in the North West, such as Manchester, plus you have the Midlands pushing out some really top-level players and athletes too, all the while operating inner city local league, regional and national league games.

Rugby is a huge sport in Wales and is played in most schools as it is in my son's school. Football and a host of other sports also dominate, leaving Basketball somewhere over the immediate horizon, this is something we all would like to change.

I think the Junior NBA scheme operated in England has helped hugely with participation levels and there are lots of other organisations that are playing a lot more basketball than here in Wales. Such as the illustrious YBL for example!

Do you think that Basketball Wales needs to take note that the standard needs to be brought up? Maybe having a better level of competition?

I think Basketball Wales, being a voluntary organisation, do an incredible job, especially considering that they are doing it all in their own time. It would be nice however, to have a greater level of support for those kids who do get up before school and practice for an hour, then again at lunchtime and also in the evening, those that do work extra hard to realise their goals of progression. I would like to see a better pathway for those type of players to access support and be exposed regularly to a higher standard of competition, outside of the National team set up. For example a U12, U14 & U16 team playing in National league at U12 and Prem U14 & U16 et cetera. The experience gained would be fantastic! The implementation of such an ambition would be difficult, however this is something I would encourage BW to look into.

The younger age groups tend to focus on basketball for all and development, which is most definitely required

Steve Lomax, thank you for taking the time to sit with us to discuss basketball in your corner across the border. Let's start off with an easy one for you Steve. Why Swansea?

I met a girl! I took her back to Blackpool, where I'm from. We've lived in the Midlands Leamington and Southampton. Finally settling back into Swansea. I've always liked it here. It's a lovely place.

At what point in your life, that pinnacle moment, when you thought, basketball is for me?

My school maths teacher was a basketball coach. I was having trouble in school, a little rebellious, you might say. He involved me in all things school basketball and it gave me something to focus on. However, I've not played to any real consistent standard, played in school, then local league in the North West which was just for fun. I also managed a very short stint with Fylde when Roy Blake started coaching the team, but when things got serious, I wasn't confident or good enough to handle it.

I know your son plays for Swansea Storm, what made you choose Storm?

Really, it was locality, the ease to take him there. A few years ago, when the club didn't have many coaches they'd be standing in-line playing 'horse' for an hour, I slowly got involved and did a bit of helping out. Swansea then became the place where I coached. Our journey started with me learning to become a coach of a small group of players, including my son, whom have all since developed to be quite a skillful bunch. My son has grown into a good basketball player, I can't get near him anymore! The original players, along with a group of other boys who took to basketball a little later, continue to practice really hard. They've all become good players too.

My son and another player from Storm, also play for Bristol Flyers in the Prem, they train twice a week and have games on the weekend. We share the travel burden as best as possible, but it's a huge commitment nevertheless.



One side of the boarder to the other - Welcome to Steve Lomax
Un ochr i'r ffin i'r llall - Croeso i Steve Lomax

on a large scale to keep the door open and welcoming, basketball should not be exclusive, however this should be seen as a separate matter. The coaches do a great job with the resources and time they have, so anything extra requires additional support, ideally from a centralised organisation.

Whatever the circumstances past or present, it has to be said that the U16 Welsh National Team have achieved great results in recent FIBA tournaments, which is a credit to the hard working players and the voluntary staff!

From the clubs in South Wales, what's the difference between the grassroots cohort and the players that are good enough and play further afield?

Sometimes there is no difference in the beginning, it's about how much they train and play, also where they are in their journey. We do need basketball for all, the more kids playing the better. If we can get more playing, there will be an element of those kids that love the sport and will want to commit their time to practice. That is when you need to have the parent on board as well, to make those sacrifices and commit the time and resource to enable their player to travel more, train more and compete at higher and higher levels.

To help the players development, I'd really like to see more camps and tournaments in Wales, ideally hosted in a centre of basketball, essentially owned and run by Basketball Wales. This would be advantageous to all clubs offering access to a court for regularly competition instead of relying solely on third party sports facilities and schools.

BW are doing a fantastic job especially as a time limited voluntary organisation. There have also been some additions to the board of Basketball Wales. New people with good skill sets, so its looking better all the time for basketball in Wales.

Would you say that basketball has evolved over the last few years?

When I was playing in the school's competition both locally and (I think) once in the North West [of England], I felt the standard was quite high at the time, however it was a long time ago and the actual truth maybe somewhat different. Nevertheless, generally being around Manchester, you had some tough games, especially if you made it to the next level of competition. Even Local league & school games in Blackpool felt competitive and tough at times (maybe a little rough).

The games in my junior experience were rougher in the 80s, modern values and inclusiveness were second place to winning. The style of basketball was different, flashy handles were less important than the fundamentals and we rarely took 3-point shots, it was all about getting to the basket. I can't remember enough detail, but that's my general feeling from that time.

Nowadays, basketball is growing fast in the city centres, there is massive brand recognition, high NBA awareness, and the huge output of information via basketball video games such as NBA 2K is helping the status of the game in the U.K. Players also have unrestricted access to enormous volumes of basketball information and media via smartphones and other connected devices, so learning can be advanced if the information is used wisely. The overall result is a massive focus especially in the junior ranks, on crazy handles, breakin' ankles and making high difficulty baskets. Players want to shoot like Steph or dribble like Kyrie which is a great motivation, but sometimes the fundamentals get overlooked in the process.

Sadly, despite all the all the attention and the fact that basketball was one of the fastest growing sports in the UK prior to lockdown, the game remains grossly under recognised and deeply underfunded by the various authorities of the UK.

Totally agree Steve!

Back to Wales, and to Swansea Storm. How have you seen your club grow?

When I first started coaching, there was a relatively small number of junior players that would turn up for practice and games. I did some coaching qualifications and started to widen the range of teaching on offer. Within a year or two, myself and another coach called Mark, had an explosion of numbers, sometimes with 40 or 50 kids in a session!

It was a nice period for the club as we grew and grew in both the number of players and coaches. Some of those players have now been with the club for many years and in turn have become tremendous basketball players and great young adults. In fact, some of the players as mentioned were selected for the U14/15 Welsh National Team.

It's rewarding to watch those players whom you taught to bounce a ball for the first time, improve bit by bit over time and eventually go on to play for the National Team.

Currently I am in the middle of my level 3 qualification, so I would say that I'm far from the best of coaches and still very much in the learning and experience gaining phase. A great way to learn is to listen to other coaches, whom have lots of experience, and then try to incorporate some of the knowledge where relevant into your own learning.

Like me Steve, I'm not the best of coaches, a few junior teams and a senior team, I knew it wasn't for me, so I kept to what I know the best, administration and officiating.

What would you say is the best game experience you have had? Your proudest moment as a coach?

The best recent game experience would be against a capable Cardiff Met team who came to Swansea as visitors and by half time were 26 points up, despite a very decent performance from Swansea. We gave away a lot of height to one Cardiff player who dominated the boards in the first two quarters. We came up with a game plan and slowly the points



difference started to reduce, as the game continued, I watched all 12 players of the team support and encourage each other, becoming totally engrossed in the game that would require all their efforts to possibly win. The atmosphere in the hall was great. Lots of noise and support for both teams, then with just a second or two left Swansea was one point down and had two free throws to take. The young player had to go up there and nail both of them to win by one point. The highlights for me, was seeing the players totally immersed in the experience as a team, also as the parents of both teams were equally involved which in turn created a great atmosphere. Despite the tense nature of the game the free throws were taken in silence, so good sportsmanship from the visitors with a fantastic atmosphere lots of noise, tense and fun all the elements to make a great game.

Did he make the free-throws?

Yes, he did! Nailed both free-throws and we won by one. The win was nothing to do with my coaching during the game, it was all down to the efforts of the players!

What I like to see is players making observations, suggestions and in-game decisions that work well. Collaborating with the coach, not in fearful hierarchy but encouraged and empowered to make the right decisions on court for themselves. I can't see everything that goes on and the players often know if they can exploit the match-up they've got, so we talk about it. Some decisions of course have to be made by the coach; however I also understand that some of the players in addition to being skillful are also starting to demonstrate good basketball IQ which needs to be encouraged.

From your clubs' point of view, can you see how thing are growing?

Pre-Covid the numbers were consistently high, and we had a good number of capable players, whom I would have expected to trial for the National squad. Now of course it's hard to see how things will look following the eventual return to proper basketball. We will see if the players have managed to keep practicing during the lockdown and just how many will return to the club as before.

I am in regular contact with parents and players whom I have coached for several years, so I'm able to keep updated on their progress. Some of these players are now really growing, in fact one or two are even dunking! I am sure we would have had a handful of players from Swansea doing very well in the local league and National team trials this season.

A good number of players stayed with me through the various groups since I started coaching, however this year most of them went up an age group into the U16s, which I won't be coaching until next season. So far, five of the players gone up, are looking like very good ball



players indeed (if they keep up the commitment and practice) These players would undoubtedly benefit from having regular and more intensive games experience in the JNBL. However, would require a considerable commitment from parents. Conversely to the higher level of exposure required by more able players, we also need to provide new players who come and starts learning the game from scratch, the opportunity to experience game play too. So I feel it's very important to keep moving forward with grassroots basketball, or we won't have the next Prem level or National Team players coming through.

If you would of have asked me this question a year ago, I could have been more specific. But for now, I'm filling in the blanks to a degree as basketball has flatlined this season.

The pandemic has hit us all very hard. We have lost a little bit of that basketball community. Things have been stagnant for too long now, practice court time and games have been taken away, so parents are not meeting and talking. However, thanks to social media there has been some respite from the basketball isolation the players and clubs are facing.

It's hit people quite hard, it's crashed everyone. Thanks to social media, if that wasn't around, I think that would have hit people even harder with their mental wellbeing

Yes, I think, if this basketball isolation goes on much longer, organisations have to wake up to the fact that they need to put some online engagement out, in the form of virtual training camps and interesting inclusive media keep players involved in basketball. When we do return, we need those players to come back.

What I'd really like to see this year, is for as many of the players as possible attend one of the many UK summer basketball camps if Covid permits, such as the Hakeem Olajuwon Camp in Birmingham for example.

We were quite fortunate that we could send some kids to Spain to participate in an international competition called Globasket in 2019 with BTM basketball tours, which was a great experience. This is something we tried to repeat in 2020 and 2021, however Covid put a stop to that! I would like to try again in 2022.

I am pleased to say that one of boys in the team is heading off to the USA with BTM Basketball in February 2022 for a tour of basketball in the San Francisco area, what an experience this will be!

Not everyone can afford to send their children on basketball tours, so we need a basketball camp in wales this summer – Covid permitting! Maybe the YBL could organise one?

Funding is a major part of what is lacking in basketball. I presume it's the same for Basketball Wales and Basketball England. There's not the infrastructure for clubs who want to push those players.

Without doubt basketball needs more money. More investment now would make a huge difference if manage correctly for the benefit of both elite pathway and grassroots players. A subsidy available to individual elite players to attend approved training camps and tournaments etc. could be an idea. Also to ensure low-cost mass basketball events for the grassroots level.

Funding is a major part of what is lacking in basketball. I presume it's the same for Basketball Wales and Basketball England. There's not the infrastructure for clubs who want to push those players. I don't know the answer to that, like many sports, if there is a talent that is a benefit to someone, it doesn't get supported.

As a relatively new organisation we are looking at how we can improve our development pathways, how can we get funding for grassroots level, it's difficult.



Even before the pandemic it was difficult. People don't want to step up and give financial support. 'Here's five grand"! That would make a huge difference for instance to us as a league.

Enormous difference. It'll be nice to have someone with a voice in basketball.

You have seen a lot of success stories of inner-city players who could have been in the wrong place at the wrong time, but fortunately was on a basketball court at the time improving themselves and being better human beings. Being at the grassroots level, you attract people from all sorts of life, that is how the government should decide what to spend their money on?

Changing the topic, what would you say the difference is at a junior National level in Wales compared to the other three nations?

Its mixed, there an influx of players for the national teams. Some there are really very skilled whilst some are being developed. You have a look at the difference in size, as you have a greater number of players trialing out, they possibility will not get in. There are more people bouncing balls over the boarder than here in Wales.

There have been some age groups that have gone on to play very well over the years. There have been some tremendously good coaches and they have won or come second in some championships.

We're like the under-dog. We sometimes don't have the 6'8" players who can dunk at 16 years old! It's because we are a small country. Also, we haven't got that premier level league. Some of the bigger cities have the bigger clubs, that have academies within them as well.

Wales still has a way to go to be up there. We are in a good position that we can put out some good talent, considering that basketball isn't the first sport in Wales.

Finally, what would your three basketball wishes be?

Primary wish. Have a facility that was low cost for basketball players to go to. That would be a steppingstone for both grassroots and elite level to be able to access court time and not having it cost that much money. A purpose-built facility. More than one would be fantastic.

More international travel, a funded, camp and an international experience that was there. That would be open to every kid, from the bottom to the top. It's a good experience for players to have that at least once. A magic wand that everyone gets to do it.

My final wish, all the players I coach go on to play in the NBA!

Final thoughts...

I'd like to think that Swansea Storm coaches are all about the basketball, open and friendly and a welcoming club. We'd like to see interaction and collaboration with clubs, especially now, to get basketball back on track. ●

<https://swanseastorm.leaguerepublic.com/index.html>

Words by Kevin Henry & James Davies
Pictures supplied by Steve Lomax



There's No Place Like Home!

Douaine Anderson, head coach and founder of Team Wolverhampton SLAM!
Talks to Full Court about his journey to date

How long has Team Wolverhampton SLAM! been going? Where did the idea behind SLAM! come from?

SLAM! stands for Serious Learning Achievement Mentoring. The idea was to use basketball as a mentoring tool to help young people by building their athletic, educational and social abilities. Team SLAM! was founded in the summer of 2009, just as I was finishing my professional career with the Worcester Wolves (BBL) and considering a career in coaching and education. An opportunity came up with a local community development organisation - All Saint & Blakenhall Community Development (ABCD) to deliver basketball sessions for young people throughout the summer holidays. For the rest of the summer, I rotated around a number of outdoor courts in the local parks. My aim was to teach as many young people as possible, basketball skills and how to play the game in an organised manner. This idea would go on to develop into an annual community outreach program called 'SLAM! 2 The Streetz'. Even though the program was youth focused, SLAM! 2 The Streetz was all about 'engaging the community' in the community. Over the summer of 2009 more and more individuals got involved who wanted to pursue basketball at a higher level. At the end of the summer, I hired out a small gym at the Royal School, Wolverhampton and the rest is history.

The Royal School gym was the cheapest sports hall I could find, bearing in mind court hire for basketball is one of the biggest barriers in the sport. I started off with one session on a Sunday morning, but more and more people kept coming every and every week. Before long I needed to differentiate the group, as the age gap between the youngest and oldest was too large for everyone to get the best out of the training session, so after a couple of weeks I booked another time slot to separate the groups. By October the numbers had increased significantly so much so that I then needed to think about developing teams. I initially looked to develop two main groups: an under 11's primary aged group and a 16- to 19-year-old group. The plan was to develop the younger group through our own Mini



Words by Kevin Henry & James Davies
Pictures supplied by Douaine Anderson

Serious Learning Achievement Mentoring.

Basketball League at The Grove Primary School and quite quickly form the older group into a Basketball Academy at Our Lady & St Chad School. At the time, the younger group were our most promising age group, with the likes of Jrae & Chris Lue, Kofi Ruddock, Akeem Givens, Ethan Milosorov, Kadeem Frazier, Elliot Smith, Amish Granger and others. The following season we entered a team straight into the National Basketball League's (NBL) under 12's with most of the players aged 9 and 10 years old. At the same time, I was being commissioned by Our Lady St. Chads School Sports Partnership to coach basketball in a number of primary and secondary schools to increase basketball participation. Then an opportunity came about to start up the basketball academy with the older group 16-19-year-olds.

The majority of the growth of the club would then come about through our working partnerships with other community organisations within Wolverhampton, especially Youth Organisation Wolverhampton (YOW). Unfortunately, they don't exist anymore, but their aim was to connect community organisations through networking and community projects to give greater value to the users and residents of Wolverhampton city.

You started SLAM! from a junior point of view, but I do know you have and have had senior men's teams in the West Midlands and YBL Development league.

The men's team was entered to support the development of the academy players. I didn't believe at the time they were ready to play at the NBL as seniors. It was different with the younger ones as I had more time to develop them over a longer period. But, the older guys, I needed them to be able to play with better competition than they were getting in the local school's league. Sadly they were hammering teams by 50 points, not intentionally either, the difference in technical and tactical ability was ridiculous. Hence why we entered the West Midlands Men's league. This gave the academy guys the opportunity to help develop along with some older more experienced local veterans. This was exactly the same way how my basketball career started and how I rapidly developed.

When I was younger, I played for the Wolverhampton Warriors, led and coached by Dave Weetman. Coach Weetman and coach Sunny Lawrence ran a Saturday development session at Molineux Youth & Sports Centre. Through these sessions I was fortunate enough to be funnelled into the Warriors Men's team at the age of 14 years old. The following year I made a lot of progress and I went on to make the under 17s team for the Birmingham Bullets in the NBL. Playing against guys that were older and a bit more experienced prepared me to be more ready for that level. So this is why I have always made sure SLAM! has had a men's team but with always the premise to help the development of the junior players coming through.

You then found out about the YBL. Does the YBL sit well with your club's ethos, is it the avenue that sits well with your players? It's not quite the National League, but it's the step in the middle.

Absolutely, especially for last season. The last few years I stepped away from coaching to focus on my career as a Mathematics teacher. Coming back to basketball, there was no rush to enter teams at the NBL level straight away. From previous experience, knowing how much investment I personally put into the basketball club, it wasn't realistic for me and my family situation to be travelling up and down the country playing games and developing players to a high standard. National league consumes quite a bit of your time and personal resources. So, when the conception of the YBL came along it was perfect. It is centralised, it cuts down on

travel and other expenses massively. I'm not saying it is easy, but it is much more convenient and suited us at that stage the club is in at the time. *"As the club has grown, so has the YBL. We have paralleled with the growth of the YBL, which has helped us tremendously".*

It is good to hear that clubs are growing and some of the topics you've mentioned, other clubs have touched on as well in that they progress and grow alongside us.

Douaine, please take us back to the very beginning, what made you pick up a basketball in the first place and inspired your lifelong career in basketball?

I have to credit my dad, first and foremost, he was the one that inspired me to get into sports. He was a Decathlete and watching him training while I was young gave me a thrust for sport. As a child he gave me a book called Jonathan Livingston Seagull by Richard Bach. It's a fable about a seagull called Jonathan and all he wants to do is follow his passion in flying fast, high and do acrobatics. The other seagulls keep mocking Jonathan about him wasting all his time flying around, when they believe that he should be flying to eat food like the rest of them. Jonathan is determined and carries on his path to perfect great speed, height and acrobatics. He ends up in an incident with the elder gulls and gets cast out of the seagull flock. Jonathan continues on his journey to improve himself and eventually meets other seagulls who think like him. Long story short, Johnathan learns even more skills from the other seagulls and goes on to fly even faster and higher, becoming great in terms of his ability and what others thought gulls were capable of doing. Johnathan then meets a great gull, who teaches him things he never thought were possible. The great gull also teaches Jonathan about love for others, paying it forward and why it's important to give back to others what you've learnt. This book really resonates with me and my journey with the beautiful game of basketball.

I spent the majority of my teenage years finding what my talents were. I was always good at football but was reasonably good at every sport I tried. It took one Champion Coaching session at the Molineux Youth & Sports Centre that Coach Weetman was running for me to truly fall in love with basketball. I saw Coach Weetman doing all sorts of dribble move combinations, manipulating the ball with his eyes closed and I said to myself this is it; this is what I want to do to as high a level as I possibly can. This is what I want to do with my life. So, I dedicated myself to improving my chances of making it in basketball. Back in those days people used to go to the library for information, I went and read about Michael Jordan and North Carolina University. I realised that North Carolina was a college in the United States of America. Therefore, this is what I needed to do; this is where I needed to be to make my dreams come true. I challenged myself to do something every single day to reach my goal in getting a college scholarship or being able to play overseas.

Throughout my pursuit to gain a scholarship, opportunities came about through coaches and other people involved in basketball. Coach Richard Parker and Coach Mike Finger provided a springboard for my first stint in America and fellow Wolverhampton basketball player Spencer Dunkley helped give me opportunities to get to America and let the right people see me. But I do believe it was the attitude developed and teachings from my Dad that helped me the most. My dad taught me to be ready to take advantage of opportunities in life when they present themselves (I did and still do). I went out to America and tried out for some coaches and colleges. I was fortunate enough to secure scholarships at a number of colleges (Indian Hills Community College, Wilmington University and Franklin Pierce University).

You played a lot of junior basketball at a high level, then you got to college in the USA. What would you say the difference is between playing in the U.K. to college in the States?

I don't want to sound like a complaining disgruntled developer of basketball, but it's quite simple, access to facilities and access to resources to be able to reach the highest levels. When you go over to America, be it high school or college, you have access to a dedicated court or arena where you can go whenever you want to improve your skills. You have coaches, trainers and all the facilities to help you to become a better athlete. I know in England, we have started to develop basketball specific facilities at the elite levels which is brilliant for the long term development of the game. But it seems the investment at grassroots level in America is on a whole different level totally. They realise that investing at the younger ages to create a crop of ball players (like at under 11s and lower) will reap much greater benefits later on when they develop into teenagers and young adults. It's not only about the playing, it's the other opportunities around the business around the game, around the events that they promote as well. It's a totally different level.

I have to thank all of the coaches for when I was based in England, that they did, they tried to create a programme which gave me daily basketball development, opportunities to play and to increase my basketball IQ. In America its part of the fabric and culture. We can't compete against football, rugby and cricket in this country, I don't think we ever will be able to. I'm in a bit of a dilemma myself. I want the best for the members in my basketball club and actually, does that mean them staying at my club? Is that really the best option for them? Is another club better suited for their development? Is it going overseas is that going to be the best option for them? We have to look at ourselves as developers of the game to look beyond winning the games and league titles, but we really have to look at the player first





in terms of helping that individual in getting to where they want or need to be in life.

You've talked about the support from coaches that you've had from both coaches in the U.K and in the United States, focusing on your club, would you say you are a role model, in terms of putting your players first? Your philosophy?

My philosophy of the way basketball should be developed sometimes comes at the detriment of my own bank account. From the community aspect of basketball, I know and feel the power of the game and what impact it has on these young people. I was young and had the mindset that no one couldn't tell me any different and that I wasn't going to play in the NBA. I listened to anyone who appealed to that desire within me, having that kind of mindset allowed bad spirited people in basketball to use me instead of me using basketball as a tool to better my life overall. I had some hiccups in my career, but they allowed me to see that I needed to use my talent and my situation to get me to the next levels of my life, not just chase an NBA dream. It's this way of thinking that led me to a path of community work and teaching to genuinely help others through basketball not just for my own gain. I want as many young people as possible to participate in the game but have their own experience. So, me having the approach of winning games, by keeping the five best guys on the court, because they are the most talented players doesn't resonate with my philosophy. I understand that there are a lot of programmes that are focused on outcomes such as to where they finish in the league tables. But for me the whole individual as part of a team, which is part of a club, which in turn is part of a community aspect of it all comes first and foremost.

You've said it twice there Douaine, where you said it's a detriment to yourself, I don't believe it's the right word to use. You're talking about the development of your grassroot players, the development as you as a person and the development of them to become a better adult on their journey through basketball. It's the investment that you are putting into these players. You are right, they are with you for that development. Yes, they might go on to a National League club, or to play at a regional level, or even the States. That's a testament to you, because you are putting them on the right path.

I hope so!

I first started SLAM! to change lives through basketball, It would then turn out that these individuals would become my extended family and you're right as I have strived to develop others. The process has also allowed me to develop significantly, I look back and think about how I have helped young boys become men, I have developed and grown in my abilities also. It's not just us coaching basketball, in terms of making sure you have a competitive team each week of a season. In dealing with the multiplicity of personal, school and family related situations of my members you might as well call me a part time social worker. It's part of the role when you are serving the community, it's your responsibility. Even when recognition for the things that you've done isn't even shown. We continue to do what we do because we know that our roles have meaning and it is morally right.

Not many people have taken the journey you have taken and come back to where you started. What drew you to come back and start what you did? You could have gone anywhere, like Birmingham for example. Why Wolverhampton?

The great majority of my opportunities in life stem from my Dad. He used to be the Chief Executive Officer of Wolverhampton City Council during my most formative years. He showed me through his style of leadership that you need to be visible to the people that you're trying to serve. But not only are you visible, but you also pay homage to those who helped you get to where you are in life. It was a no-brainer when I started to think about developing my own basketball club that I was going to go back to Wolverhampton. I knew how much basketball meant to me as a Wolverhampton schoolboy. And since there wasn't much basketball going on in Wolverhampton at the time, I could fill a gap. Subconsciously I had my own Jonathan Seagull moment. The fact that I was able to take basketball to a pretty decent level, the next step would be to help someone else achieve even more.

The original idea to start SLAM! Basketball Club was at my old secondary. I wanted to give back to my old school, where the caretakers let me train in the sports hall from 6.30am everyday in the morning so I could work out before school. Having that kind of opportunity (and access to facilities) and the drive to pursue my dream meant the world to me.

Wolverhampton is seeped with basketball history, it's had very good clubs come through the WMBL level and some of those players have been successful and gone onto to an elite level. Were any of those players or clubs an inspiration to you when you were growing up.

I think my biggest influences as a young basketball player was Wolverhampton Community College when they used to play and train at the old Bilston College. This is where I met Black Country legends Mike Landell, Colin Rhooms, Cecil Gordon, Junior Hemans and company. Mike used to play for the senior Birmingham Bullets senior team. Mike used to come down and shoot the lights out. He would refer to us younger players as scrubs. Me being one of those younger guys I would fit into the category of a 'young scrub'. I remember thinking, I'm going to make this guy eat his words one day! I understand where he was coming from as he was an amazing ball player in his prime. But I had a lot of pride and wasn't going to be known for very long as a 'scrub'. His words pushed and motivated me to get to a point that I wouldn't be referred to as a scrub again. I do have to give much thanks to all the Wolverhampton Community College guys for giving me the opportunity to play, train and ultimately develop through their club activities. It felt great to be a part of Wolverhampton Community College and Bilston College in the mid-90s. They are some of my first mentors in basketball and I still am in contact with a number of them to this day.

In September 2020, SLAM! moved back to Wolverhampton College as part of our partnership with the college to produce a Basketball Academy. Many of the Wolverhampton Community College players still train there on a Monday evening straight after we have our under 17's training. It was great that juniors got to rub shoulders with those more experienced guys and got to develop a relationship with some of the veteran players who have paved the way for them. These same former Wolverhampton Community College guys are doing some amazing things in the world of business and life outside of basketball; they are great role models to aspire to.

From a club perspective, that is a different skill altogether. Was there an individual that pointed you into the direction of creating the club? It's a huge commitment and a lot of hard work.

I was kind of backed into a wall when the Birmingham Bullets franchise folded as my first year as a professional. I had some opportunities overseas to continue playing, but none were stable enough for my liking. An opportunity with the Worcester Wolves came about which involved me studying towards my Master's degree as a paid player and student. I also did some other jobs working for British Gas and RAC within data management. I also worked in a local secondary school as a learning mentor. I had a self-belief I could do more than I was currently doing. By being able to set up the club, it gave me skills that I could see later on that would make me more employable in the future. I thought to myself, I can do this and what's the worst that could really happen?

At this point I'd like to thank you Kevin, for all the support throughout the whole journey, from the very beginning up until now. You have been a pillar of advice and assistance. I have always been able to call on you at any time, no matter how big or small the issue.

I've seen your club grow from the start, you now have a team of coaches, you've had players leave and come back. What would you say your biggest achievement is so far?

Being able to maintain the large network of individuals through basketball and harnessing basketball as a tool to help others to believe more of themselves. I don't preach too much about how SLAM! came about it wasn't about filling the void of junior basketball development in the city. It was more about using my experience with basketball, getting a scholarship, getting a degree and showing others how they can make the most of themselves through the game. Having that type of mentality to the club's environment and setting a different tone, that's what creates our club's culture. I said it before SLAM! is a family that celebrate the good times together but more importantly supports each other when times aren't so good. For me, the biggest achievement is for me to maintain this network of individuals and for that network to continue to grow!

Douaine, you've talked about the relationship of your players and their parents, the support. Where would you like to see SLAM! in the next five or so years?

I would like to develop a complete player pathway that is fully self-sustainable. For us to be able to provide a service that they can continue basketball through the whole of their life, be it a young person or even a toddler that wants to get involved in basketball. I've tried to move away from basketball and focus on my teaching career, but I've always been drawn back to the game. My partner knows it's always been in the middle of our relationship and is ingrained in our lives. Basketball isn't ever going anyway.

I also dream to have our own purpose-built basketball arena. To have unrestricted court access and to be able to provide all of our provision under our own roof. To create more provision and give more basketball opportunities to the local community. 🍷





Trans-Atlantic Play

What was it like to leave the UK to go to America on a scholarship?

I was 14 or 15 when I knew I wanted to go to the States and play basketball. So, when it happened it was very exciting, a dream come true. It all started after watching a game in my living room, North Carolina (NC) vs North Carolina State on TV, it was roughly the same time when I used to watch basketball on Channel 4. I remember watching Crystal Palace versus Birmingham Bullets, I was hooked and watched the games every week. I was actually a Palace fan at first, they were a good team. I believe I had no fear at that stage, I just wanted to go.

When you got to the States, was it what you were expecting?

Yes and no! There were a few challenges, and culture shocks when I got to the States. There was lots of basketball going on for me as we had full access to the gym. I also had to adjust the surroundings and culture as everything was very different, the school system was completely different, it took time to get used to it. They had a few different holidays that we in England aren't aware of, it was going into the unknown. I loved the basketball culture, but off the court I had to make some adjustments. Like I said, getting used to how different Americans are, it was a culture shock.

Is it a different culture? What was the biggest surprise?

They have a sub-culture you could say, your teammates could be your 'worst enemies' at times, the banter was brutal. The American culture is more direct and challenging, more in your face. You'd get someone make a comment about what they did to you on the court or how you wear your pants [shorts] or the way you talk, it was an unforgiving atmosphere, it was quite unnerving at times. There were contentious times where emotions would spill over, you had

to learn to stand up for yourself but if you played well nobody said anything, you'd get respect. You are constantly challenged, almost all of the time, on and off the court. The coaching staff were different also, the level and the intensity of the coaching was very different, they were stricter, enforced a lot more rules and demanded a high level of play and concentration. If the coaches were upset about anything, you'd know about it as practice would reflect the mood.

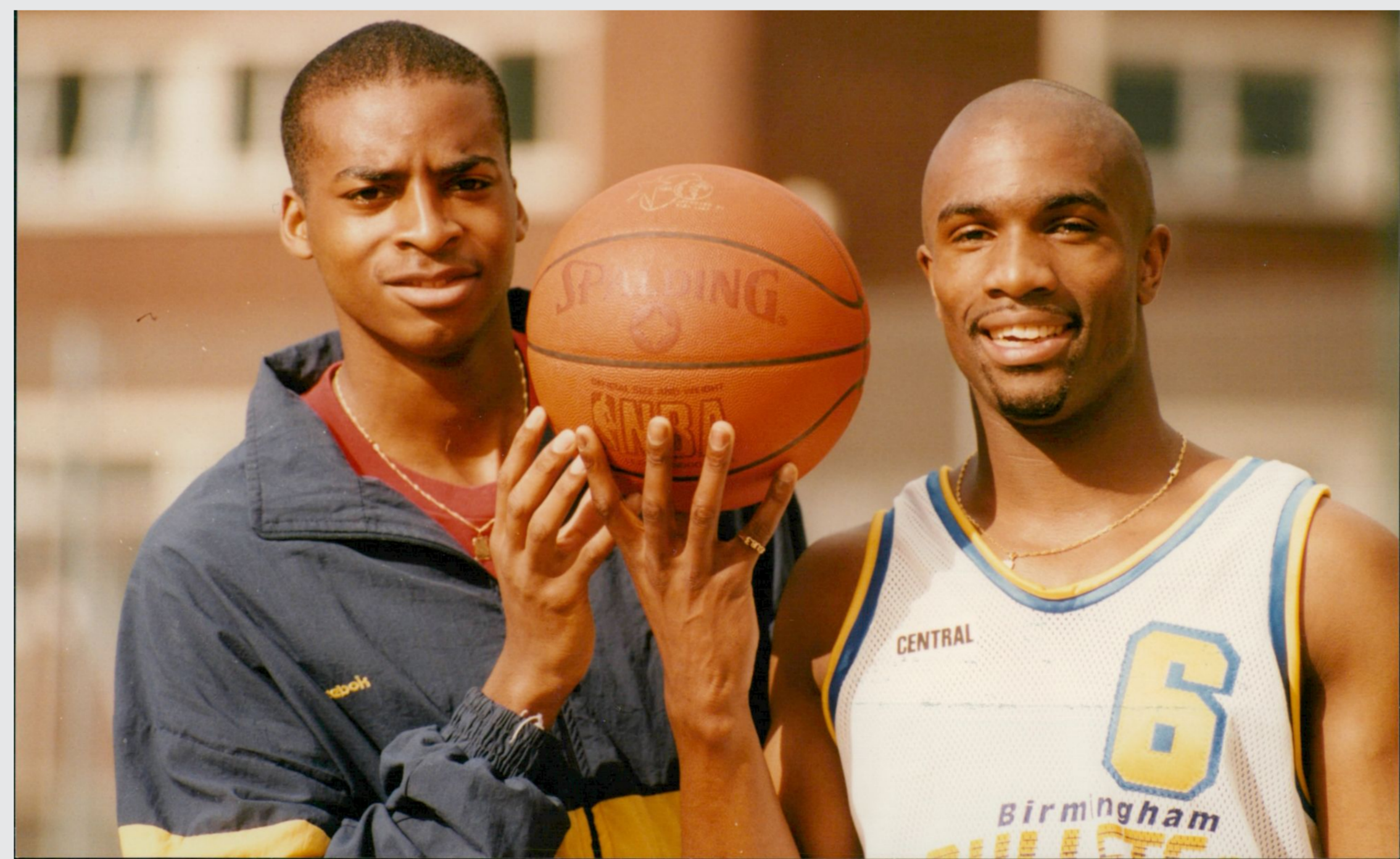
What was it like playing in the U.K to the U.S.A?

I started playing for the Birmingham Bullets Men's BBL team at the age of 16. One of my teammates at the time, King Rice, was one of the first people I saw on TV in the NC versus NC State game years prior. I was playing with and against some good players in the BBL back then. Players like Cat Williams, Alton Bird and Alan Cunningham. King Rice taught me a lot, especially the speed of the game. I was a young lad playing against men, but I was determined to play on the same level. As I was 16 to 18 it was a big step and a challenge to be playing with and against men. I had to adjust to the men's game quickly, the speed of thought and strength was the main difference to playing with juniors. Playing in the United States was a whole different experience. It was a different skill set and the athleticism was extremely high. The raw energy of players was different from the players and teams in England. You also had to earn the respect of the players as the new guy. I was the guy from England with the funny accent and wore my shorts slightly high for the time. It was like you needed to prove you could play to earn their respect as I came from a different country where they play football/soccer, that's a fight within itself. I suppose that is the same anywhere really when going to a new team, you have to prove yourself, you have to show where you fit into the group. It's a very important part of the journey. I was living the dream even though there were some very tough days. I would tell myself, 'I am not going home' when practices got tough just

to push through and not be the weakest link. The pre-season practices at 6 am was my introduction to American practices, we had to run a mile in 5 minutes 45 seconds, and if you didn't make the time you had to do it again. That was my first practice session and I missed it by a second, so I had to do it again. Even though it was a tough experience, looking back now, it was enjoyable in the sense that I came through it but at the time it was extremely difficult. You get challenged, when you achieve your goal and pass the challenge you do feel stronger and more confident. You put your body and mind through tests that only the strong survive, it's rewarding. Playing with guys of a similar age who can play, was extremely satisfying also, no disrespect to some of those in England of a similar age, but the Americans were slightly better players and played at a higher tempo. Everything is new. I mentioned their culture, once you got used to it, it was enlightening. The food, the travel, I was absorbing all these new experiences. I really got stuck in out there.

Are the training sessions the same?

After earning my stripes and the respect of the players, I then had to continue to prove myself to the coaches. The training sessions were more intense, but I endured. The coaches were a shock to the system, there was a lot of shouting, screaming and sprinting. There was one session where we'd lost a game, and the coach put 30 minutes on the clock and said get running! We had to run up and down for 30 minutes straight, it was intense indeed. You have to put in 100% in training as you would in games, that was expected of you all the time. At Illinois State pre-season was even tougher still. The coach gave us a task where we had to run around the 400m track for



12 minutes straight. They recorded the average laps, I think I did 5 or 6, some of my teammates did 6 or 7. We would do a lot of conditioning work through the six-week pre-season, then at the end of the pre-season, the coach would give you a 'tough time' meaning a target greater than laps you did at the beginning of pre-season. He'd set a target of 6 and a half laps, if you didn't make that target and complete that 'tough-time' you didn't make the team. You'd have to do it over and over until you made your tough time. There were a few who made it the first time, I did it on the second go round, some guys did 3 or 4 times before they could practice. These sorts of challenges made us tough competitors. Welcome to America!

What are your American highlights?

I had a few memorable highlights when I was playing in the States, the teams I played on always finished in the top two positions – that was a nice experience, making the play-offs after each season. In my junior year we got knocked out at the quarter final stage, one game away from playing at Maddison Square Garden in the NIT. The second year at Illinois State I won the 'Sixth-Man of The Year' award for the conference/league (MVC). I was quite proud of that; I wasn't expecting it at all. When coach called me and told me we have to go to St. Louis for the presentation, it was a nice surprise. It was nice to be recognised by that the coaches and press of the conference, they respected my game. At the presentation, they told me one of my stats, I shot 46% from 3 that year. Thinking back now, I should have shot way more, but I was so proud at the time.

The tip of the iceberg was in my senior year, we got to the NCAA tournament beating Tennessee in a last second shot in the first round. It was a great game, the team played really well, all the teams' hard work over the last 3 or 4 years came together for that game. I think this would be my best memory of being in the States, playing in the NCAA tournament and winning was fantastic. My school haven't been back to the tournament since I left, it was a great achievement. Then we lost against Arizona in the next round and the ride was over! It was emotional in the locker room, we were a tight bunch, having won two championships together, league and conference championships in back-to-back years which I believe is still a Missouri Valley Conference record that still stands today.

Where did you go after finishing in the States? Back home?

My next chapter came very fast, I didn't have time to transition into being a regular student for the remainder of the year, I was flying over to Italy within two weeks to play in Europe. Then the journey started again on another level. ●

FINALLY

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Kev's been looking at our development

I've had a busy few months reviewing the YBL's Development Pathway and the season has not even started!

The pandemic has made us all rethink and change our approach to basketball, and I have utilised the time to assess the current number of officials that we have within the YBL region.

The clubs and teams participating in the YBL continue to grow each year, so I am mindful that there continues to be more demand than the actual number of officials we have.

The Government and Basketball England have made announcements that we can start looking to returning to play and the levels are revamped in the latest BE Return to Play Roadmap.

I've been speaking with clubs and key stakeholders around the YBL region to discuss their individual needs and to identify potential gaps where officials are desperately needed.

I am working on a strategic plan which has in fact already started. We already have a number of candidates for the Level 1 refereeing, table officiating and statistician courses that we are running through the YBL for our members.

Over the next few months there will be an all new dedicated 'Development' section on the YBL website which will be filled with useful information from us, as well as from external sources.

Included in the section will be the 'overview' and the 'living' Development Pathway documents. The 'overview' explains

our principles, objects and aims within an achievable timeframe whilst the 'living' document will be regularly added to, amended and updated so we meet the identified emerging needs.

Something that the YBL Development Pathway will be offering that is unique is a mentoring system so some of my ongoing conversations will be having discussions with the existing official's workforce around some of them agreeing to be the mentors in the programme.

The mentoring provides feedback on all the YBL officials identifying talented and competent Level 1 and Level 2 officials to be 'fast-tracked' to the next level.

Candidates selected to be part of the "YBL Fast Track Programme" will be mentored, reviewed and assessed over a four-year period to get them officiating at higher levels.

Our programmes don't stop there as I am exploring more exciting projects for clubs and their behind-the-scenes workforce as well.

If you are interested in being part of our YBL Development Pathway or would like some more information you can contact me or contact the YBL office. The courses that we run are all on the YBL website so if you fill in that form one of us will be in touch.

Thank you to everyone who has helped me so far with the YBL Development Pathway.

Kevin Henry
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DEVELOPMENT

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What we are looking for; In the Zone and Full Court Reporters

Enthusiastic people who love the sport, who like to get into, or continue their passion on reporting on the sport they love. We are looking for articles and news stories that have the edge; game reporting. Player, coach or official pre or post game interviews. Or a subject that matters to you involving basketball. For the YBL or beyond. It could be small nuggets of news or a full page article or opinion piece. Is this you?

What we are looking for; Game Reports for our Social; including for our YouTube Channel

In front of the camera reports that would report on games across the YBL. These reports would be included within our YouTube videos and posted across our social media platform. Could you see yourself as a budding YBL Reporter?

For the budding professionals;

Potential writers for blogs, online sources and magazines can get vital practice and experience. Write up articles and submit to Full Court for editing for our next issue.

The YBL are looking for dedicated basketball lovers to report on their club activities and games. Writing about what their club does best. Who has achieved something special within their club. Received an award, or just gone above and beyond.

Do you have the skill for writing engaging articles or little nuggets of news?

Are you a potential writer that would like to get experience writing for Full Court? Are you a photographer that would like to share your basketball creativity or would getting your article published - would this help those already in education?

Please share your talents with the basketball world? We want to hear from you. Drop us a DM, email or give us a call.

