

Frank Nunns O'Connell - Journalism project (pages 2-12)

Target publication - Overseas magazine

3730 words

Lost in transition: The story behind Britain's NBA drought

With the Mayor of London set to create a 'basketball taskforce' that could mark a new era for British basketball, is there finally hope on the horizon for the sport?

Words by

Frank Nunns O'Connell

Clear blue sky with the sun setting, shouts of 'and-one!', the distinctive sound of basketball to tarmac, hip-hop music blaring and waves roaring against the beachfront. No, you're not on the luscious Venice beach in LA, you're at the newly renovated Brighton beach court, on the salty English south coast. Having been reconditioned in October 2024, the court has become a welcome addition to the British seafront. It marks a rare period of reasonable hope for British basketball. For years the sport has been an afterthought in the UK, evident in the lack of British NBA (National Basketball Association) players. So, is British basketball finally getting the break it's been waiting for?

Since its inauguration in 1946, the NBA has contracted just nine British developed players. Similarly, the WNBA has seen only five British players since the league's first season, in 1997. During that time, the NBA has seen 52 French players, 21 German and 20 Spanish. In the WNBA, Australia has had 41 players, France 17, and Brazil 15. Basketball isn't necessarily the number one sport in these countries, but it's supported enough to produce meaningful talent. Many will point to basketball being a 'niche' sport in the UK, but this is a common misconception.

According to Sport England, basketball participation in England reached record levels in 2024. Nearly 1.2 million children (aged 5-16) play basketball weekly and almost 350,000 adults play twice a month. It means basketball is currently England's second most popular team sport, after football. In 2022 Sport England confirmed 27.1% of adults playing basketball were of the low socio-economic group, making it a readily available sport to many across Britain.

In the last year, there has been a 52% increase in viewership of all live and off-court content on the NBA app in the UK. British users spent an average of one hour a week on the platform, an increase of 24% year on year.



Luon Deng,
drafted to the
Bulls in 2005



OG Anunoby,
picked by the
Raptors in 2018



Steve
Bucknall,
drafted by
the Lakers
in 1989

The statistics point towards basketball not only being a sport of interest in the UK, but one that has a platform to develop talent. Mayor of London Sadiq Kahn and NBA deputy commissioner, Mark Tatum, seem to agree as in September 2024 they announced the creation of a 'basketball taskforce'. The aim of the initiative is to develop basketball in London using the sport's recent growth. This includes developing pathways for local talent and boosting access to basketball across the capital.

Despite what seems like a step in the right direction, seven months have passed, and as of April 2025 no further announcement has been made. It hasn't come as a surprise for many in the British basketball community.

"The sport has been plagued by poor leadership over the years," says Sam Neter, founder of hoopsfix.com, Britain's most popular basketball platform. "Basketball is objectively massively underfunded by every single measure, but I don't think money is the only answer."

The state of the British professional league

On 2 April 2025 sports minister, Stephanie Peacock, asked the governing body responsible for elite funding, UK Sport, to investigate allegations made against the British Basketball Federation (BBF). The accusations revolve around legalities of the BBF's tender process for operating a new British professional league, currently known as Super League Basketball (SLB). When the BBF confirmed the deal, a civil war ignited that could jeopardise the £4.75m basketball receives each year from UK Sport and Sport England.

In response to the deal, Super League Basketball released a statement claiming that the tender process was "illegal and unjust." The organisation also threatened to set up a breakaway league in reaction to the news.

"Plagued by poor leadership"



Jeremy Sochan, drafted to the
San Antonio Spurs in 2022
(All image credits: NBA)

"I think the instability of the professional league is and continues to be a hurdle in youth development," says Tope Alli-Balogun, women's basketball coach at the University of East London. "The current infrastructure doesn't allow the professional league to be a consistent alternative to American or European routes."

"Serious changes outside of the taskforce would have to be implemented to even stand a chance against the European or American alternatives," he added.

The legal issues are only where the chaos begins to unravel. In March 2025, a number of SLB referees went on strike. It came after Sheffield Sharks owner, Vaughn Millette, accused long-time official Eduard Udyanskky of racism after his side lost to the Surrey 89ers.

On X (formerly Twitter) Millette wrote: "There has been an ongoing issue of racism towards my coach from a certain referee for years now."

That same week a game between the Bristol Flyers and Caledonia Gladiators was postponed when referees refused to officiate in solidarity with Udyanskky. Officials from Canada were later flown in to ensure the SLB could continue. In a fitting finale Millette, who was the interim chair of SLB, was forced to stand down after apologising and deleting his posts.

Speaking to The Guardian former British NBA player, John Amaechi, said "I feel the same way about SLB clubs as I do about the water companies. The natural resources are plentiful – there are so many talented young players in this country – but we end up with sewage."

Amaechi has long been opposed to the SLB, citing it as a "cartel" that fails young players. In a study of his last month, he referenced inconsistent leadership, chronic financial stability and neglect of grassroots pathways as reasons why the league fails.

Meanwhile, countries across Europe are supporting and developing players ready for the next level. The NBA is now fronted by players who aren't American, boasting multi-time MVP winners like Giannis Antetokounmpo and Nikola Jokic. In last year's NBA draft, Frenchman Zach Risacher was selected first overall, the year before his fellow countrymen Victor Wembanyama, had the same fortune.

"They (France) have a strong professional league which makes a massive difference," says Sam. "It's a pathway for the French players as every team has an Under-21's so they are putting an energy and focus into developing talent, which is something we don't have. In the UK the clubs don't see it as their responsibility to develop talent, so it's left to grassroots clubs which are reliant on volunteers."

France is a blueprint for the UK. For decades it has been a breeding ground for successful NBA players, giving aspiring players access to elite-level facilities, coaching and competition.



“There were times I had to replace dribbling cones with chairs, how can that be?”

British basketball funding

It makes for a stark contrast to the infrastructure in the UK. Basketball England relies on a volunteer's program to make up a portion of their work force. The facilities grassroots clubs use is for the most part, multi-purpose courts which aren't owned by the club themselves. Nationwide, free-to-play courts aren't fit for purpose, stunting players' development.

The feeling amongst the British basketball community is that the quintessential English sports take priority. UK Sport has dedicated a combined £10.7m into basketball since the start of the 2012 Olympics. Compare that with canoeing and rowing which have both surpassed over £50m of support in the same amount of time.

The impact of the financial neglect to basketball is felt first-hand. For Gavin Reid, a former youth basketball coach in south London, coaching was an “uphill battle.” Citing a lack of organisation and inadequate facilities, he says “the courts aren't even made for basketball, so players aren't getting the support they need.”

As time went by, running sessions became increasingly harder for Gavin. From double bookings to broken rims, basketball wasn't being prioritised on any level. He said: “These things (the court conditions) have become normalised because the sport isn't highly financed. There were times I had to replace dribbling cones with chairs so the drills could actually be carried out, how can that be? At times we really felt the effects of little investment.”

In early 2023 the pot hit its boiling point, as Gavin stepped away from coaching due financial issues of his own. After the company he worked for stopped supporting basketball to pursue other sports, he was left at a crossroads that led away from the sport he loved.

“It wasn't easy,” he says, “but I think I made the right decision. Basketball could not keep me going financially, so unfortunately it came down to being a business decision. In an ideal world things would've been different and I would still be coaching to this day.” Coaches stepping back has become a sore reality for many in the game, but it underscores a bigger issue with British basketball itself.

UK Sport base a large portion of funding on success at an Olympic level. In theory the better a team performs, the more money the sport gets come the next Olympics. So, despite the British men losing by just one point to silver medallists Spain at London 2012, basketball saw its funding slashed from £7.1m to £1.9m. Even though they didn't win a medal, there was serious potential in the team which was destroyed because of the cuts.

Fencing, which hasn't won a medal since Tokyo 1964, had its funding increased at both Rio 2016 and Paris 2024. UK Sport has come under heavy criticism from many in basketball as they feel the sport has been misspent and mistreated over the years.

Sam said: “If god forbid that GB basketball won a medal, making millions of kids want to play basketball, we didn't have the infrastructure to support it. If millions of kids decide tomorrow that they want to take basketball seriously, where are they going to play? Most clubs are already at capacity so they can't take anymore.”

Even if by half-court buzzer beater type luck, a player is to break past the obstacles, there's still a mountain to be climbed. According to Eurobasket, just 41 of the 118 players in the SLB are British. Over half of those players are between the ages of 25 and 38, making them too old to develop into NBA talents. Line this up with the Betclic Elite (France's highest level of basketball) where 127 of the 239 players are French and 83 of those are between the ages of 18 and 24, peak age for turning into NBA level talent.

The leaders in assists and points per game in the SLB this season are both American. In fact, there isn't one British player in the top ten for points per game this season. And just two of the top ten leaders for assists are Brits. For Sam the British league consistently overlooks homegrown talent, “the professional league needs to prioritise British talent, which I don't think they have,” he said. “One of the things we've seen repeatedly over the years is that they search for players with British passports who have never stepped foot in England.

“The league allows six imports per team. You work it out, most teams have an eight-player rotation which means you've got two spots for British players, some of which are filled by Americans with British passports. As a British player, with the opportunities and minutes

available, why would you bother?” he added. In a statement from the BBF, they confirmed that the new deal to operate the men's professional league will “provide a radical boost in the development of talented British players.” The hope is that GBBL, the league's new owners, will follow up on this promise and bring a new identity to the British game.

It would be some feat to do so, as for decades basketball has been treated as a secondary sport in the UK. Sam said, “culturally England is very different to every other country. You speak to anyone that's not involved in basketball and they say it's an American sport when actually it's a global sport, it's the second most popular sport in the world. England is an outlier in the sense that basketball is not relevant.”

It takes a short Google search to realise that British basketball isn't exactly top of people's watchlists at the moment. In doing so you will find that DAZN currently hold the broadcasting rights to Super League Basketball. Their dedicated league page is punctuated with, well, very little. It features a list of games coming up that you can watch on DAZN, highlights of previous games and nothing else.

BBC Sport's basketball-dedicated page has little to no trace of British basketball. The homepage is headlined with NBA stories and highlights of what's going on in American basketball. After cutting through a jungle of NBA content, there is a small section dedicated to the British league. Featuring a league table that only shows eight of the ten team's logos, it underscores a barren land in British basketball.

The state of outdoor courts

Although millions play up and down Britain, basketball isn't engrained into culture like it is in other European countries. Free-to-play grassroots spaces are the breeding ground for young players to develop their skills. In the UK, conditions of these spaces aren't in shape to do so.

Abdul Ly Lamba is a regular player at courts around London, and feels the effects of the poor facilities. "There's always cracked floors or lines that aren't painted on properly," he said as he drained a corner three, the ball ironically not touching the net that was hanging onto the rim by a thread.

"I mean look at that," he says pointing to the net, "we can't even tell if our shots go in half the time. It doesn't feel like the sport is prioritised by local authorities and it leaves (outdoor) courts to grow old and less usable. For the amount of people that use these courts, it's unfair on them that they have to play in these conditions."

If you're on TikTok you may be familiar with SBB (Simply British Ballers), who go up and down the UK rating some of the most bizarre basketball courts. Trust them when they say bizarre, because they really are. From playing in knee high grass to shooting on decaying backboards, the videos highlight the realities of British basketball in a tongue in cheek manner.

Over the years, the social media stars have collaborated with ProjectSwish, a campaign in partnership with Basketball England that has supported dozens of court upgrades, distributed over 10,000 new nets and identified thousands of places to play. The initiative aims to improve outdoor courts across England whilst simultaneously extending Basketball England's knowledge of outdoor courts. With a greater database of outdoor venues, they can identify potential areas for redevelopment going forward.

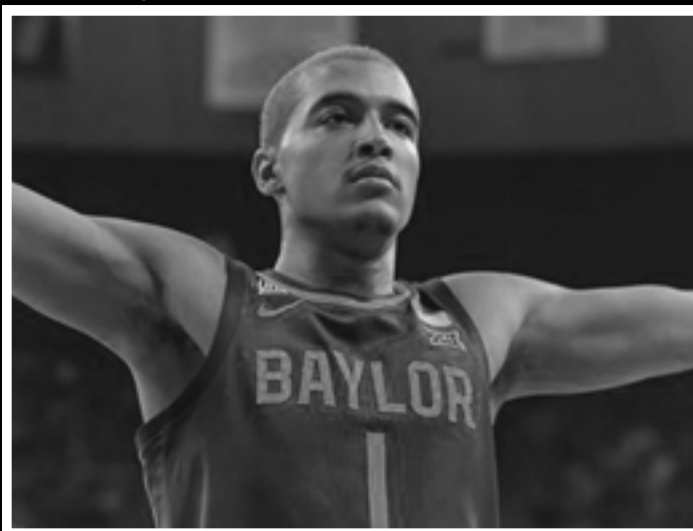
Similarly, in December 2024 the Hoopsfix foundation launched BasketballCourtsNear.Me (BCNM) with the objective of spotlighting the unique qualities of courts and identify areas for improvement. The database focuses on enhancing court sizes, updating line markings, improving surfaces or upgrading baskets and backboards. BCNM aims to be a data resource that can help put

pressure on councils to invest in basketball facilities, influence government policy on outdoor facilities and crowdsource courts that need renovation.

Sam, the chief executive of the foundation, said "we've got research, and we know anecdotally that if you invest in high quality outdoor spaces people will travel to them. In 2021 we renovated the Clapham Common courts and (we've) just finished renovating the Brighton beach court. We know that every time we do these high-quality spaces, players come to them. They want high-quality outdoor spaces; we've got surveys that show players will be more active if they have high-quality dedicated basketball spaces.

"A lot of work we're doing at the foundation is focused on that as a starting point and then later on we will try and deal with the indoor issue. But it starts with having decent outdoor spaces," he added. These initiatives are an honourable start, but it's just one of many challenges the sport faces when trying to develop NBA-level talent. Fortunately, overcoming obstacles is practically part of British basketball's DNA. Historically the sport has produced talent beyond its backing, in 1989 Steve Bucknall made history as the first ever British NBA player. In 2012, Luol Deng became the first British developed NBA All-Star while the likes of Joel Freeland and Pops Mensah-Bonsu had solid careers in the US.

Abdul Ly Lamba
taking a shot.
Credit: Frank
Nunns O'Connell



Brit's overseas

After moving to America to pursue a collegiate career at Baylor, Southampton raised Jeremy Sochan was selected ninth overall in the 2022 NBA draft. The American born forward moved to the UK when he was two and played for the Solent Kestrels before returning home at the age of 17.

Sochan's route is a common one taken by British players. Although they develop in the UK from a young age, there are no development opportunities over here. When the players turn 18, they opt to take their talents to where they can be properly developed.

"We're so far behind," says Sam, "in the USA these basketball programs are worth millions of pounds. They (US programs) are commercialised, so they earn a lot of revenue through tickets and merchandise sales. Whereas in BUCS (British Universities and Colleges Sport) basketball you get 20 people coming to games, an 80-year-old ref that can't get up the court and a live stream with 20 viewers."

With the lack of infrastructure at BUCS, top talent often leaves to pursue careers in the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association). There are currently 40 British players enrolled at NCAA Division 1 colleges across America. Combine this with the 28 female players enrolled at the same level and it sounds like a reasonable number, right? Wrong. The total of 68 makes up 0.0064% of male and female basketball student-athletes. The abnormally low percentage will come as no surprise to those familiar with the British basketball scene.

Young players' mentality

"I think the silo of British basketball has a part to play," Tope says, "players have a false sense of level and ability. Even when they don't have this, there aren't even close to enough facilities for players to develop in the right ways to maximise their potential." There's a belief in the sport that young British players lack the level of competition needed to fully develop. Tope added that "it's not necessarily the players at fault but the environment that allows for such opinions to form."



Credit: NCAA



Credit: Frank Nunns O'Connell

Poor court conditions, lack of quality coaching and underfunding has left young players with a false sense of hope. They aren't receiving the help needed to develop, leaving them with a misunderstanding of what a high-level basketball player is.

"What a lot of people don't take into account is the level of basketball over here," says Abdul. "In general, it is not very high at all and even the best players would struggle against global competition. It essentially leaves players thinking they're better than they are, and at the end of the day we have no one to tell us otherwise because there is no set standard in the UK."

"Football and rugby have those set standards which is what helps their young players so much," he added.

Up and down the UK there are weekend leagues available for sports like football and rugby, giving youth an opportunity to test their skills in a competitive environment. Basketball has very little in the way of this, limiting how far players can develop.

"Part of the issue is that every kid thinks that they are way better than they are, kids have no idea about the levels," says Sam. "Very few people in England are exposed to international basketball, let alone NBA basketball. If you were to bring the 50th ranked player in the states (USA) to England, people would fast realise how far off we are."

The difference between the UK and America, a country with an enormous NBA talent pool, is one of mentality. In Britain there is less competition for spots, meaning players become more comfortable instead of being pushed to their limits.

Whereas America has, in Sam's words, a "dog-eat-dog" mindset. "In the US if you don't do your job, you will get benched immediately, everyone's fighting for the same spot. In England there aren't 100 players trying to take another one's spot, and the coach will never bench their best player because they need them to win." The mentality is not only shared in the players, but with all involved in shaping basketball in Britain. The UK is missing something that other countries have - a thriving basketball culture. Blame for this can't be singled out to anyone or anything, but instead can be pinned to a shared 'pass-the-buck' attitude.

“There’s an apathetic culture in British basketball,” says Sam. “Everyone else thinks it’s on someone else to save them. When actually if there was a collective responsibility, the game would be in a much better place.”



Photo credit: Hoopsfix

The factors holding back the development of British players are interconnected. Quality coaching relies on adequate facilities and better funding. With improved coaching comes more talented players, which can be developed and nurtured by a strong professional league. With a stable UK league comes the platform to showcase British talent, which can in turn make its way to the NBA.

It doesn’t add up that a sport can be supported in so many ways yet disregarded in so many more. The conundrum isn’t a sporting one, but one of politics. How is it so that sporting bodies can pour money into elite past times like fencing, but ignore the potential of one that’s staring them right in the face?

In a region that prides itself on a deep sporting culture, British basketball is continuously left to be ignored. A sport that represents millions around the UK, promoting expression and representation, is proven to be an afterthought by those with authority.

It leaves basketball with a mountainous task on its hands, but not an impossible one. To get a player from Brighton beach court to Madison Square Garden will take cohesion from all corners of British basketball. One thing that’s clear is that it will be basketball’s responsibility, not the government or anyone with authority. The sport will have to do what it has historically done so well - be the author of its own story.

As Sam says, “nobody’s coming to save us, it’s on us now.”