

Chris Finch: Shark to Timberwolf, London Olympics and developing young talent



(Photo by Stephen Maturen/Getty Images)

By Jamie Mullock

From the steel city to the land of 10,000 lakes, Chris Finch did something very few have in forging a successful NBA career which all started in the UK.

Finch, 54, is the head coach of the Minnesota Timberwolves, who currently occupy the top spot in the NBA's Western Conference as the franchise continues to enjoy one of its best seasons ever.

However, this all started when a 23-year-old undrafted guard made the decision to cross the Atlantic and begin his playing career in the UK.

He joined the Sheffield Forgers (later becoming the Sheffield Sharks) where he spent four years as a player before swapping jump shots for clipboards to become head coach.

Finch spent six years in charge and forged a British basketball dynasty as he led the Sharks to seven titles during his tenure, branding them as the most successful team in BBL history.

The Ohio native built up a close relationship with the owners who gave him a platform to grow, and in turn wrote his name in British basketball folklore.

Finch said “I was very close to the people that ran it and still run it. They treated me like family and gave me the opportunity to launch my career, they supported me through all my mistakes.

“When you’re young you make a lot of mistakes, I look back at some of the things I did and the way I behaved and I was like, God, who would ever put up with that.

“We had success, we always had the resources to do it and that was a fun environment to work in and I just loved living in the UK.

“I was there from 23 to 32 age wise, it (Sheffield) was a young person’s town, a big student town and it was a lot of fun. It was my formative period of coaching.”

Unfortunately, this highly successful spell as head coach in Sheffield was followed by a miserable one, as he made a move to German side Giessen 46ers which ended with Finch being fired.

This seemed to only spur him on as he enjoyed success with several teams across Europe and in the NBA development league, eventually leading to him landing a job as an assistant at the Houston Rockets.

It was during this time that Finch was named coach of Team GB ahead of the 2012 London Olympics, an occasion that was said to make basketball ‘explode’ in Britain.

Team GB were not successful in the competition, but it seemed the groundwork for growth was in place. However, basketball in Britain has been all but abandoned at that level ever since.

Coach Finch said: “I thought coming out of the Olympics, we had a ton of momentum even though we would have liked to have done a little bit better there, these things take time.

“Spain came on the scene and had a 20-year run before they built it up to what it is now, and they (UK Sport) were never going to make a 20-year commitment to basketball.

“So unfortunately, from government level, it probably hasn’t seen the commitment levels it probably deserves given the numbers of participation.”

Finch suffered no hangover from this Olympic failure and unlike British basketball, he continued to grow and improve, landing associate coach jobs with Denver, New Orleans, and Toronto where he assisted close friend and fellow former BBL coach Nick Nurse until he arrived in Minnesota as their 14th head coach in franchise history.

For those in learning their trade in British basketball Chris Finch’s story is the perfect example that with time and commitment, opportunities in the promised land will arrive.

Basketball in the UK is growing, slowly but surely, we are seeing more young players taking their talents to the States.

Said talents will be hoping that in the next few years, basketball gets the required attention to flourish in the British market to give young players a platform.

The NBA coach of the year candidate is known for his trust in youth, and he believes there is a seat at the table for the young, upcoming, UK-based ballers, but they need opportunities.

Finch said: "There's a lot of raw talent in the UK, I've always believed that, particularly in and around London. If that talent is 15/16 by the time they are 19/20 you've got to be practicing every day, multiple times a day, you've got to be in a structure with great coaching.

"You've got to be playing in a league with a platform that is going to push your competitiveness and measure you against other great players."

In the eyes of Minnesota's star coach, young British talents must be careful with where they choose to play their basketball if they make the move to college.

"A lot of the really good, talented players would go to college in the United States, which is a very good path. But they would also pick the wrong colleges, they would pick colleges where they weren't able to really play, and you can't develop unless you play.

"I always thought that the federation should have official relationships with a handful of universities to create a pipeline... We were never able to establish that because the bylaws of the NCAA, or the federation didn't allow it, but we should have done it anyway.

"We should have worked hard at building relationships with the schools that wanted our players and were going to play them."

Finch knows, having spent nine years here, what Britain has to offer in terms of basketball, it just needs funding and the attention it deserves. And however tough and long the road to the NBA is, it is there and the more people that tread it, the smoother it will become.

He said: "I still believe it (British basketball) has great, great potential and it just needs to kind of reinvent itself one more time to capture it."