

The Boteler Basketball Club

The Early Years

In 1977 Boteler was a grammar school with an excellent record of success in football, swimming, athletics and cricket. Rugby league was getting stronger but there was no organised basketball. There were in fact only three basketballs in the PE stock room which were not either completely smooth or damaged, so I knew I had my work cut out! I received vital moral support in this first year from John Thomason in the PE Department and David "Sucker" Smith, feared in the classroom but dedicated to school sport.

Initially I asked a few of the boys in my Y11 and Y10 French sets if they would be interested in playing, they brought along some friends, and within a month we had our first squad built around the towering figure of Andy Armitage, whose three children have all attended the school and who still follows the team's progress. Mark Blackburn, Bill Reilly, Ron Hand, Kev Reid, Paul Hope, Neil Stevens, Steve Hesketh and John Boulton were Y11 regulars at training.

To mark the end of our first year in existence we played a 24 Hour Charity Basketball Marathon Match in the summer term to raise money for the England Wheelchair Basketball Team. A group of their players came for the final hour and gave a demonstration of their skills. In those days we played in the Gym, which is now better known as the Drama Studio. One backboard was flat against the back wall which made layups decidedly risky but the sprung wooden floor was ideal. There were no leagues in Warrington but the basketball was increasing in popularity and our school was no exception. We entered the Cheshire U16 Cup Competition in 1979 and were beaten by an excellent Ellesmere Port team which had far greater experience. One player, John Ansell, went to the annual Cheshire training camp but there were a number whose enthusiasm was vital to keep the new momentum in the sport going, such as Paul Bibby, Neil Astill, Fred Wheeler, Dave Fraley, Andy Bennett, Geoff Kirk, Ade Burns, Geoff Pimblett, Paul Clarke, Chris Upton and Keith Cudlip.

The subsequent success of Boteler basketball teams owes a lot to the enthusiasm of these players who in another era would have made a strong school team.

Champions

Towards the end of the 1970s plans were drawn up to build a new gym and upgrade the changing rooms. Longer, wider and with proper backboards at each end and a court marked out on the carpet flooring, this new space would give us a real incentive to produce a team so I began recruiting potential players among the top sportsmen in year 9. As the 80s began we had arguably our best team ever and Boteler would be firmly established as a basketball playing school.

Whilst they had never played a competitive basketball match before year 10, the 1980/81 team set the standard for all others which followed, right up to the present day. It was made up of selected successful athletes from a variety of other sports at school. With little coaching in PE lessons and no previous experience of competition we needed to achieve a very steep learning curve. Fitness was not a problem so techniques and tactics were the focus of training, which was twice a week with a three hour session from 6pm to 9pm on Friday evenings; quite prophetic in the light of the recently established Ball Hall leagues.

I regularly received support from Dave Clifford, a new colleague and former international student rugby league player. The enthusiasm of the players was tremendous and they were reluctant to go home even after 3 hours of work.

Through the latter stages of the year before we entered competition I received several offers of friendly matches against other schools but the plan was to prepare in secret rather than reveal our style of play. This strategy worked well and winning became a habit.

Our captain Chris Lynskey was a top schoolboy track and field athlete and the ideal build for a basketball player. Tall and fast, Chris was a superb defensive rebounder and in offense had a very solid layup technique and reliable mid range jump shot. He was hard to defend against with great acceleration from a standing start and could complete a move even under pressure. Chris averaged around 20 points a game for two years. He would be in my all time best starting five.

Our defensive triangle was completed by two more top players. Paul Grady, strong, mobile and determined, took no prisoners under the boards and in Y11 became a regular scorer in offence too. The centre of the zone was controlled by Derek Flannery. A powerful swimmer, Derek could play the full game at a high tempo and had a high percentage jump shot from the left of the court which never let him down. He rarely missed a defensive rebound and his upper body strength allowed him to score from offensive rebounds even under close marking. In the league-winning match away against Culcheth in 1981, Derek top-scored with 16 points making him a strong candidate for man of the match.

Many schools we played had a high quality guard to direct play. We had two of the best in Warrington, who blended perfectly. Paul Screawn was a top performer in all the traditional school sports and represented the county as an athlete. Paul's winning mentality came from his father Bernard, a former Boteler pupil with a reputation for robustness. Paul distributed well, had a solid layup and could shoot from 3 point range. He was also a key defender and would often play opponents' top scorers out of the game by man to man full court marking. This won a vital game for us against Stockton Heath in Y11. Opposition coaches held no fear for Paul; notably one disgruntled PE teacher from Culcheth, but that's another story...

Playing alongside Paul was Lee Turner, an excellent footballer and all round sportsman. For those currently at the school and in the squad, Lee played a lot like Temi Abimbola. He intercepted a great many passes in his two years, and in the small school gym, these were almost always converted into layups or assists. Lee rarely missed a layup on either side of the basket and could also shoot. He was also extremely modest in spite of his talent.

First off the bench was usually Brian Burke, a guard with a strong layup, good jump shot and permanently optimistic approach. Paul Atherton was a free-scoring centre forward in the football team whose fitness and awareness made him an excellent replacement. The third replacement guard Andrew Ditchfield exuded enthusiasm and was a skilful shooter and essential squad player. Wayne Schofield was also an occasional player. He trained regularly although not always selected. When we had a mid season injury crisis he kept our title

chase on track with two late jump shots against Richard Fairclough which allowed us to creep in as 43-41 winners.

Two tall players, Andrew Hibbert and Rudi Forbes, who at 6"4" provided a different option when he started playing in Y11, gave us cover at the back. There was just one player from a lower year, Neil Skelland. Neil was simultaneously the Cheshire javelin and 100m champion. He was physically one of the strongest boys in the school, quick and well balanced. "Skell" often came on if we were in a tough spot or when the defence was taller than our offence. He made the Cheshire elite squad in the summer of his Y10 year and developed superb dribbling and shooting abilities. In the final of the 1981 U16 tournament I brought him on to close out an opposition guard who threatened to take the game away from us. That year he won winners medals in both the Y10 and Y11 tournaments.

In addition to having an outstanding group of players to work with at this time, I was fortunate to have a regular table official in the form of Graham Screawn, who is rightfully pictured with the team in the photo gallery. Graham was an important member of the setup and a player in his own right but in the early years of the league, match details were recorded on official basketball score sheets which were quite complicated and took a lot of understanding. The score sheet which records our league title clinching victory at Culcheth in 1981 is in the photo gallery and shows the detail involved. Graham went on to gain a first class degree in Maths at Southampton University before embarking on a career in accountancy. Needless to say his score sheets were always totally accurate! Graham and his mother Edna were basketball guests of honour at the opening of the Ball Hall and featured in the Boteler Bulletin shortly after.

I recall the first Schools' Basketball Coordinators' meeting I went to. The top schools in the sport at that time were Culcheth and Bridgewater. Boteler had never entered a team to any basketball competition and the group of PE teachers rather condescendingly wished my team good luck and hoped my team would "do OK".

We lost one game at the start of year 10 and then went on a two year winning run which brought back to Boteler the 1981 League Title and end-of-season

Tournament Trophy. There were 14 schools playing in those competitions so I think we did more than “OK”!

To underline how much players had improved individually let me use this example; in 1980 we ran another Charity Basketball Marathon Match. It was a similar format to the 1978 event but this time only for 12 hours. The two teams actually scored a combined total number of points which was higher than the first match played two years previously but in half the time.

When Chris Lynskey’s team reached the end of their school career, they were always going to be a hard act to follow. However, there had been cause for optimism because Neil Skelland’s Y10 team had finished the season with a tournament win as well, meaning we took 3 out of 4 trophies in 1981. The following year we were runners up in the league and would have won it but for a crucial injury to Neil, just before the deciding fixture with Bridgewater.

Neil’s team of Anthony Higham, Stephen Wood, Ricky Kay, Mike Curley, Keith Robertson, Marcus O’Neill and Chris Tighe overpowered other teams in the zone with tremendous rebounding resources and in the case of Neil Skelland a player who could dribble with both hands whilst running through a brick wall and had a superb jump shot! In his absence Anthony Higham emerged as a great leader whose will to win made him an example to others.

The combination of Skelland, Wood and Higham as a defensive triangle was as good a rebounding unit as we have ever had and allowed any combination of guards to leave the zone and pressure the opposition’s point guard. We often played this variation of the classic “box and one” defence, calling it a “triangle and two”. Teams did not know how to cope and were often caught on the break, especially in the small Boteler gym, as we would often have two players close to halfway when opposition attacks broke down.

The only team in the league to really trouble us when everyone was fit to play was Sir John Deane’s of Northwich. After losing to them in our first game by only 2 points it was clear there would be many victories to come. In offence we used size and strength to dominate the low post area. Rick Kay would use a bounce pass in to Anthony Higham or Stephen Wood who were able to turn and score heavily from 4/5 feet. As the defence collapsed in on them, Chris Tighe, Keith Robertson and Neil Skelland were given space for short/medium

range jump shots. From mid season on in year 11, Mike Curley developed an abrasiveness in offence which saw him increase his scoring average significantly and emerge from the shadow of the other tall players.

Limited Resources

In the early 80s, numbers of pupils were falling and although in 1982 we had a reasonable team, it was clear that with our new mixed gender status and only 500 pupils on roll, competing with the bigger schools would become increasingly difficult. The team of Pat Egan, Paul O'Hanlon, John Fox, Andy Clare, Steve Murphy, Mark Brown, Graham Screawn, Colin Maxwell, Rob Muttock and John Rosbottom had an average season but could not trouble the bigger schools. This team however enjoyed excellent parental support and the same group of boys were ever-present in other school sports such as football and cricket. I also recall several of them giving a footballing lesson to a group of older pupils at our German Exchange partner school in Hilden when a "friendly" match was abandoned at half time with our school leading 7-1. The Germans' only goal was from a dubious diplomatic penalty given by me!

The following year there were just 39 boys in Y10 and the club could easily have folded. Fortunately two of those 39 just happened to be two of the best players ever to represent the school in my 32 years of coaching. Paul Manuel and Nick Caddick carried the team. Both were top performers in other sports but with only five on court at once they could carry a basketball team. Nick Caddick was the first player at Boteler to master the reverse spin dribble with his right hand and could move from this to a layup or jump shot. He was hard to defend against.

Paul Manuel was simply one of the best five players I have ever coached. As a county 800m champion he had great stamina and always played the full game. His standing jump was good enough to block any static shooter and his transitional passes out of defence made the fast break one of the team's best moves. Modest and determined he was an ideal leader. I recall the game against Bridgewater, champions –in –waiting in 1984. Having already secured the title they came to play us expecting a walk over and ended up in panic and disarray shouting "stop him" every time Paul had the ball. We eventually lost by a mere 2 points but with our reputation solidly intact.

The rest of that year's team deserve enormous credit for supporting Paul and Nick. They included Paul Brown, Barry Jones, Simon Thornbury and David Coleman (Not the BBC commentator). The spirit and sportsmanship they all showed in adversity was admirable.

Amalgamation

In 1983, following the tragic death during a fell running race in the Lake District of Headmaster Bob English, a great sportsman and supporter of basketball in the school, we amalgamated with Richard Fairclough High School to become Victoria Park County High School, a title the school kept for five years before reverting to the Boteler name. Everyone had been concerned about impending problems between pupils from the two rival schools but these never emerged and there was a real spirit of common purpose around the buildings. At a stroke we had twice as many players to choose from.

There was room in the basketball team for players from both teams although Boteler had previously had the upper hand. Wayne Pickering and Steven Wooldridge fed off Paul Manuel's passes and our defence was strengthened too with the inclusion of John Cochrane making our 1983/84 "Unification" season a good one to build on. The best victory and one which underlined our new found strength as a new school was a 50 point winning margin against Lymm High School, so sure of themselves before the tip-off. Reports of success in sports fixtures went a long way to establishing a positive new identity for the pupils of Victoria Park.

In 1985 there was industrial action by teachers and a year's sports fixtures were lost. We fell to mid-table obscurity in the basketball leagues and were unable to recruit all the best players due to pressure from rival sports, notably rugby league. However, some stood out in this period; Paul Allen, Chris Payton, Neil Payton, Stuart O'Hanlon, Billy Davies, Mark Taylor, Mike Timson, Darren Bull, Darren Wilcock and Alex Sinclair. Mike Timson joined the Cheshire Regiment after leaving school and played basketball for their representative team. He continued to return to train on Fridays and helped establish the trend of former players returning to assist with training and pass on their expertise.

Alex had the unique distinction of being the only pupil ever to represent Boteler in a school match of any kind before actually being a pupil here. Having come to watch his brother Andrew in a cricket match whilst still at Junior School, he was drafted in to the Under 13 team at the last minute when a player failed to turn up.

A new PE teacher, Mark Owen, gave me a lot of support and ran a year 10 team one year in spite of his other sporting commitments. However, the local basketball leagues faltered, some of the previous organisers moved on and we entered a period where matches against other schools no longer took place.

Although we never seemed to have successive years of squads good enough to justify looking for fixtures there were groups of players who really took to the game and whilst strength in depth was an issue, we continued to produce players who would certainly have been in school teams anywhere in Warrington. Scott Byrne, Wayne Muckley, Mark Warburton and Paul Starkey played week in and week out for two years. Scott had an eye for a telling pass and was very mobile whilst at 6ft 4" Mark dominated in the zone. Another tall player from the year below, Paul Taylor, was the only member of his year to play basketball.

In the early 1990s numbers coming to training firmed up considerably and we suddenly had a succession of viable squads, but school basketball was still not a priority within PE departments and fixtures difficult to find. The combination of Tim Callaghan, Rob Tam, Mobeen Raza, Matthew Kane, Gary Marshall and Glen Cartwright, combined with Paul Cook and Brian Hall from the year below, was the closest we came to having a proper team. All were intelligent and skilled players, maintaining their link with the school for several years and establishing the impact of the sport. Mobeen, famous for his swashbuckling runs and flamboyant layup attempts recently reminded me how much everyone at that time loved dunking the ball with the aid of a judiciously placed trampoline and ample crash mats. Mobeen, Rob, Tim and Matthew entered a Street Ball competition in 1993. In the mid 90s Tim went on to play representative basketball at Priestley College and in a local open age team. Rob Tam was a perfectly balanced guard with excellent passing and shooting skills and would have been capable of playing for a University team. Paul, an expert scorer of extravagant layups and off-balance shots and Brian, a left

handler whose cultured passes could dissect any zone defence coached younger players including Paul's brother Mark, who became the first Y7 pupil to score a basket in training with the Upper School squad. For the first time we had long serving members of the club who started in Y9 and eventually used to drive to training in their parents' cars in later years.

On a French Trip to Pourville near Dieppe in 1994, two pupils, John Ellis and Dave Hewitt bought basketballs on Dieppe market and were playing on a car park near the hotel when I saw their potential. The following September they joined the squad in Y9. By Y11 and with several predecessors at training to show them new skills, they went on to become part of the largest squads we had in the 1990s with the combination of school players, 6th Form guests and staff regularly reaching 20. A new head of ICT, Graham Cooper, joined training every Friday and for the first time we had senior and junior sections with 5-10 minute games alternating on court for the regular 3pm-6pm training session. This in turn alerted pupils lower down the school to the fact that basketball was on every week of the year and many wanted to join in.

This was a very keen squad, with outstanding players in John Ellis, fast with the ball in his hand, powerful on the rebound and with a good jump shot and Dave Hewitt, an excellent well balanced point guard who could pick holes in a zone defence with his dribbling and passing. These two, along with Gareth Rustage, entered a 3-a-side "Street Ball" competition in Manchester and were undefeated, missing out on a finals place only on points difference. From that era, Matthew Sargeant, Sam Hankey, an excellent outside shooter and Paul Marsden all showed promise and there were a number of other regulars like Chris Webster, Mark Hoey, Neil Horton, Peter Conroy, Phil Craven, James Linton, Stephen Ratcliffe, John Cook, Phil Moran and Nathan Ashurst who through effort and determination became useful players. One regular player of this period, Graham Sayer, went on to be a world champion kick boxer of some repute locally.

On one memorable occasion Chris, a basketball player with a rugby league player's body, whose perception of the playing surface's boundaries was approximate to say the least, set off on a spirited dribble only to run straight into the benches and crash mats which many of you will recall used to be stood up along the sides of the gym, bringing several down in a heap on top of him.

After a period of about 10 seconds lying motionless on his back, Chris jumped up with an expression on his face which was half Rocky Balboa and half injured bulldog, slapping his cheeks and declaring himself ready for action. We were all unable to play for at least 5 minutes whilst the rib-splitting laughter subsided. It was the single funniest moment of my 32 years of coaching.

The understudies to that group of players were Nik Askins, Ian Mahoney and Lee Willott closely followed by a group of keen all round sportsmen including Nigel and Adam Walsh, both agile and powerful in any area of the court, Nigel the accurate jump shooter and effective passer and Adam the “Enforcer” on the defensive boards and excellent offensive rebounder. They were supported by a group of good sportsmen which included Andy Brown who always made little of his small stature and was a tenacious player, Chris Bow, guaranteed to lighten the darkest mood and a fast dribbler, James Nalton, Ian Darlington, Carl Leicester, Jack Birrell, Jonny Stewart and Mike O’Dea. Mike was a very skilful player but often lacked energy at the end of the week. I recall once raiding the staff biscuit store for some “Hobnobs” to keep Mike’s energy level up so he could play. Mike has recently served in Iraq and Afghanistan and is now altogether a lot fitter than ten years ago. There were also around this time the only two girls ever to regularly play basketball; Steph Llewellyn, who I sent for trials with a Manchester ladies team and Kate Wilcock a top netball and ladies football player.

Nigel and Adam continued to train for several years and were highly supportive of school sport. Both would have graced any of our teams over the years and with nine consecutive years of attendance from Y9 to leaving university, Nigel is categorically the longest serving player the club has had. His potential to become a PE teacher was always evident from his sensitive approach to younger players at training and the respect he commanded for his obvious basketball ability linked with his competitive yet modest approach to the sport. Known to successive groups of younger players as “Nige” for years, he began to feel his age one week in his final year when a Y9 pupil came over to me and asked, “Sir, who’s that man that sometimes plays?”

Strong New Foundations

At the turn of the Millennium, with more and more basketball available on TV and our pupils' consequent growing awareness of the NBA, it was becoming easier to recruit players to the club. There was also an embryonic inter-school competition in Warrington although as usual some of our best players were also involved in rugby and football teams outside school which would have made it hard for them to play regularly. One such player was Danny Inman, who eventually became a student rugby league international. Danny was tall, agile and fearless with a will to win. In his year we also had Matty Lee and James Shaw, both outstanding local sportsmen and competent players like Mike Sherratt and Stephen Talbot who never missed a training session. James trained with us for several years and had the potential to become a successful college and university player. He still holds the record for scoring the most points in one Friday training session with 76, a total unlikely to be beaten now we have moved out of the Boteler gym. One other highly significant player of this period is Ben Bennett. Ben worked at his game year after year and developed into a very competent forward. He was one of only two pupils in his year to play basketball and is still on our training register now. He is currently a student at Edge Hill and intends to go into sports medicine as a career. No account of the early part of this decade could be complete without a mention of Mike Eaves. Mike was always brimming with enthusiasm for basketball and has maintained a seven year relationship with the club. Unmistakeable in his trade mark all-white outfits he was surprisingly agile for a "large unit" and had a superb layup technique. He rebounded well and in his final year played a couple of representative matches for the school when the Ball Hall opened. Few defenders were ever brave enough to stand in front of the basket and take a charging foul once Mike got up a head of steam and his eye on the ring. I hope he can continue to maintain his fitness and participation in sport in spite of a seemingly regular sequence of motorcycle accidents.

These players formed the basis of the squad for three years and inspired a group of slightly younger players to take up the sport. I still regret that we did not have the facilities to enter the Schools' competition with the 2003 squad because it was the best we had put together since 1983. Alan Sau with his superb balance and handling skills was a focal point of this squad along with

two other “overseas” players; the mercurial Andy Tam, who joined late in year 11, with his excellent range of passes and short range shots and Neal Theunissen from Holland, by year 11 one of the most complete players we have ever produced. Alan continued to train with us for three more years and was highly respected to the point of being renamed “Mister Sau”. He was the inaugural winner of the “Priestley College Player Of The Year” award which was introduced in 2005 in recognition of the contribution made to training sessions by former players. I’m pleased to say Alan has recently reappeared on the basketball scene and has lost none of his touch. Neal is back living in Holland now but recently called in to training whilst on a family visit and has been coaching youngsters in the Netherlands. Adding speed and resilience to the squad and excellent in defence were Dave Heathwood who as a student played amateur rugby league for Ireland and John Marsh, a naturally gifted basketball player and athlete as well as a mean lead guitarist. Another player, the powerful Adam Hughes, continued the musical connection and was a bass guitarist in the same band. James Pendlebury, better known as a footballer now he is employed at the school, had the innate ability of all good sportsmen to find space on court and complete passes effectively. He could also shoot well from outside the zone. Nick Yarnold at his best was an excellent offensive guard and Lewis Jaundrell developed a reliable outside shot in time. There was no player faster on the break than Dale Overton whose ability to spin the ball in off the backboard from impossible positions would have won him a place in any Indian cricket team! Anthony Morris was a powerful forward and who could ever forget Paul Penketh’s work rate and enthusiasm. Wes Markie, Phil Coyne, Jonny Parkinson and Garry Fogg all made appearances too. With their balance and depth I firmly believe this squad could have competed with teams from any other Warrington school at the time. As it was they played just one match, beating a selection of players from Lymm High School.

There were just a small number of players from the year below when this group left; Mike Eaves and Ben Bennett, mentioned above, Lee Bailey, a natural basketball player in spite of his small stature, Shaun Wooldridge, excellent in defence and counter attack and Zead Elgaddari.

Back Into Competition In The Ball Hall Era

During my many years of coaching basketball at Boteler I have come to realise that the most successful and dedicated groups of players have always had at least one natural leader whose enthusiasm and ability at training or in matches has inspired confidence and self-belief in the others. When the Ball Hall opened in 2004 and participation in competition after almost 20 years became a real possibility for the school, we were fortunate to have such a player in Earl Francis. Earl had trained with older pupils from Y8 and showed natural ability with, in particular, an excellent shooting percentage and a strong layup technique, even under pressure. In the last season before we moved into the Ball Hall Earl scored more than 1000 points in training over the 35 weeks of practice. He brought with him three friends from junior school; Danny Conroy, still training with the squad although now at university and last year's Priestley College trophy winner, Sam Sinclair-Smith and Sean Morris. Along with James Allen and Calum McAlinden, these players formed the nucleus of our new league team. Sam and James were excellent rebounders at both ends of the court and Sean's pace and touch on the layup and short range jump shot made him a potent attacker, especially in the wide open spaces of the Ball Hall courts. Completing the Y11 contingent of the team was Calum, extremely fit and with a strong personality. By marking Woolston's top scorer out of the game in a box and one defence, Calum effectively won us the away match (25-24) without hardly touching the ball. I had not seen that job done so well since Paul Screawn against Stockton Heath in 1981.

To mark its opening, we played an exhibition match in the Ball Hall at an event visited by Tessa Jowell and various local dignitaries along with officials from EBBA one of whom I discovered I had played against in the North East as a student at Durham University. Our first competitive match was in an end-of-season tournament at which the best we could manage was a draw against Birchwood's reserve team. However, by the beginning of the Y11 league season we had become far more used to the larger courts and began with a close defeat to Birchwood by 5 points. Had I not tried to give everyone a game we may well have won. A fast and physical Beamont team were beaten by a small margin and thanks to 20 points from Sean Morris on the fast break we narrowly beat Great Sankey. Chris Yarwood, currently playing for Priestley College, made short but regular appearances and for experience Mark Brown, Darryl Cox, Sam Wernham and James Griffiths, all year 9, were given court

time. In Sean Morris' absence against Padgate HS, James made the starting five and obliged by scoring the first two baskets in a relatively easy victory, earning himself the nickname "Lebron" in the process.

We suffered a heavy defeat against an older and taller Penketh team, who won the league, but Woolston were eventually defeated in a scrappy match and St. Greg's completely outclassed. The starting five's strong performance on that day allowed me to use a "five on five off" substitution system which gave the enigmatic Luke Rowe his debut. Our players struck up a number of good friendships with the Woolston players and the following year a number of them joined our training sessions as guests from Priestley College, notably Jordan Bibby, whose skills and enthusiasm provided a good example for our players to follow.

In the absence of an official league table at the end of the year we calculated we had come third in the league. The team was really well supported and had several spectators at matches. In January of 2005 we were invited to play against a touring side from Melbourne in Australia. The match was watched by about a hundred spectators and covered by the Warrington Guardian. Our team included the year 11 players plus Ben Bennett, Alan Sau and Anthony (Beef) O'Keeffe from Priestley College. Although we lost, it was an unforgettable event and many email addresses were exchanged. I recall the wording of my team sheet, displayed on tutor group walls that week;

"The following players have been selected to represent the school against Australia..." how often do you get your name on a team sheet like that!

The final event of the basketball calendar in our comeback year was the Y10/11 tournament, held in the Ball Hall. We lost to Lymm, but managed to come third overall beating Birchwood twice in the process, the final game a nail-biting affair which we won by 2 points right at the end, thanks to Earl and Sean. In the end I think our supporters and parents just made the difference, so the competitive season ended on a high. We were back!

Consistency Established

Whilst occasionally featuring in the school team that year, a small group of year 9 players had become the first to set up their own Ball Hall league team under the name of "Boteler Bulls". This gave them invaluable experience and with one or two additions would give us the basis of a strong league team for the next two years. By the time this team played its first match of the 2006 07 season, they had already played over 20 times together and had a good tactical plan in place, each player with his own role, all versatile enough to cover a team mate's position.

Sam Wernham was an ideal point guard and his ball-handling skills and vision put him among the best who have played this role in my teams over the years. Sam worked consistently on his skills every day and could often be seen walking the streets of Latchford dribbling the ball as though it were attached to his hand by elastic. Blessed with an innate understanding of the dynamics of a basketball match Sam made other players around him play well. He was forceful in directing tactics and spent a lot of time studying basketball training websites. He is now a qualified coach and referee and in my view one of the former players most likely to run his own team in the future. He was a worthy inaugural winner of the trophy for overall contribution to basketball in 2006.

In Mark Brown we had a very strong rebounder who could shoot accurately from outside the zone but who was also highly effective close to the basket under pressure. Mark could always score points by picking up secondary phase possession after missed shots and with his size and agility was hard to defend against. Mark played the high post position as well as anyone I've coached and his touch around the basket, developed through hours of training, combined with his natural stability made him a nightmare for defenders. He contributed to every score line, often making baskets from nothing. In the Y11 vY10 match in 2008 he exceeded 50 points, mostly from 3-4 feet.

James Griffiths joined the school in year 9 and emerged as the top all round sportsman in the year. James was a match-winner of the highest quality for his age. He rebounded strongly, was fast and dribbled well under pressure and could lay up or shoot with a high percentage of success in competition. What gave him the edge was his strong will to win. In 2006 against Beamont we were 12 points down at the start. There was a point in the match where two Beamont players made a fast break with the ball and looked certain to score.

James chased after them, rebounded two shots and went straight back down the court to score for us. His last minute jump shot against Beamont in 2007, which brought us victory by 47-46, remains one of the highlights of that season. In many ways James reminded me of Chris Lynskey from the early 1980s. James still trains regularly with us and always impresses with his positional sense, sophisticated passes and incisive breaks through the opposition's defence.

In Rob Morris we had a team captain of great enthusiasm for the sport. Rob's speed and eventual high consistency in converting fast breaks into points were complemented by a reliable close range jump shot. By the 2007/8 season, Rob had the upper body strength and balance to score regularly with this difficult shot, often flat to the baseline with no backboard to work off. Rob's movement off the ball was exemplary and other teams found him hard to defend against. The coach of Culcheth High School, whose team reached the last 16 of the English Schools' competition in 2008, told me after our narrow loss to them that they would have got further in the competition with a player like Rob in his side.

Ben Connelly was something of an unsung hero. He played every game for two years and made the starting five against Beamont in 2007. Ben's tenacity and ability to steal the ball off over confident opponents often led to scoring opportunities for others in the team. Like Danny Conroy from the previous team, Ben rarely wasted the ball and was at the heart of many moves which other players completed. Always unselfish, he linked well with the rest of the team and had a high percentage success rate with his shooting. He is now a qualified referee.

In the 2006/7 season, the only player with any significant experience of school matches was Chris Yarwood. I recruited Chris to the team after watching his athletic performances as a goalkeeper in Y9. In this season he was the oldest player and offered much needed height and strength in defence. Against the taller players from big schools his rebounding kept us in the game, notably against really tall Woolston and Culcheth sides in 2007. I am delighted that Chris has gone on to further his basketball career and is currently in his second season with the Priestley College team.

With Chris due to leave at the end of the year we desperately needed a replacement. There were a number of tall boys in the year but with a strong involvement in Rugby League, none was able to make the commitment to another sport. Then one day I spotted Josh Campher playing netball in a PE lesson on the tennis courts. Josh was a perfect build for a basketball player; tall slim and with long arms and big hands and feet. He had a superb standing jump and great upper body strength to make long passes. Josh joined the squad and began a journey of self-improvement which saw him develop from a complete novice to one of the best rebounders in the whole of Warrington for his age in the space of 18 months. He was the missing piece of the jigsaw which would allow us to compete with any team. In 2007/8 Josh put in some awesome performances and began to contribute points in every game. In the match against Culcheth he man-marked a 6'6" player so well, we were ahead by 5-4 after 10 minutes and the opposition had no answers. Considering that team had beaten us 71-17 the previous year that was some achievement. Josh continues to train with us and will surely make the Priestley team next year.

In 2006 Darryl Cox emerged as a good all-round basketball player with a particular ability to shoot from 3 point range. In a Y9 tournament he won us the game against Great Sankey with such a shot and in the following season was a real threat from outside the zone, drawing defenders to him and creating gaps in defences. By half time against Woolston in 2007 Daz had scored 17 of our 21 first half points and this match, which we narrowly won away from home, remains the best example of how individual skills, teamwork and determination can be effective against physically taller stronger and faster opponents. Through a combination of illness and injury, Daz missed the whole of the 2007/8 season, which was not only personally disappointing for him, but will always leave us wondering how far towards winning the league we could have got with him fit and playing since we never lost by more points than he could have scored. Happily, Daz is back at school and approaching a level of fitness that will see him return to the team.

During the year, Lee Beswick trained regularly but did not feature in many games due to injury. He remained a staunch supporter of the side though and has now returned to playing rugby league. Nathan Johnson played a few times

for us providing important back up from the bench and Lewis Barker also attended practice sessions but was sidelined by injury before being selected.

At the end of the 2006/7 season, playing mostly against older teams, we were a creditable fourth out of nine in the league. There were regularly 15 school players plus guests at training and with almost the whole team still available in year 11, things were looking good.

A Team To Be Proud Of

Even with Darryl Cox missing, the build up to the 2007/08 season was characterised by a strong sense of belief in our ability to do well. Crushing defeats by Culcheth and Penketh were well behind us and every player was improving, helped by the new outdoor practice facilities. However, the first game against Birchwood did not go our way and we lost by a small margin. Things could however have been a lot worse as three days before the first match James Griffiths was in plaster with a suspected broken ankle. Amazingly after a couple of sleepless nights at the weekend wondering how we would cope without him, I saw James at the window of room 5 on Monday morning giving me the thumbs up sign. His X-ray had been wrongly interpreted and the ankle was just twisted. The plaster was off, but he was definitely restricted. Maybe that cost us the match, even though he did play.

The Beamont game turned out to be a classic, with yet another one point victory to ourselves at the end. I couldn't believe it when the Beamont coach asked me to referee without him. Beamont had one player who scored 30 of their points and was hard to defend, but kept travelling on his layups. The atmosphere got very heated but in the end we kept our heads and retained possession for 20 seconds after James put us in front with a jump shot. We waited for Beamont to leave the Ball Hall before celebrating, to avoid another confrontation.

Mark Brown missed the Great Sankey Match and we couldn't make up the points he would have scored, eventually losing by 10 points, but soon returned to top form by beating Penketh by 4 points. Considering they had beaten us by

50 points the year before this was a very satisfying result but didn't go down well with either their players or staff.

St Greg's and Padgate didn't bring teams to play us. Both schools had suffered big defeats in the past and that left us with just three fixtures. Newman played well but were no match and we won with a fifty point margin. A similar result was achieved against Woolston. We have traditionally got on really well with their players and the match was a friendly affair but for the second game in a row we scored over 70 points and were easy winners. This left one match to play against Culcheth. They were doing well and in the last 16 of the English Schools' competition. We knew it would be tough and raised our game. Everyone played at their best level and the margin of defeat was around 14 points. They had really panicked after a tough opening half which ended with the scores level. I was pleased that in our last league game we had such strong opponents to measure ourselves against.

Throughout the season I had introduced players from Y10 to competition on a rotation system so that six of them had been on the bench at some time and would qualify for a certificate at the end of the year. There were also four from Y9. By the end of the season, Morrison Kirk and Louis Haughton were regularly selected and scoring points in each match. They would be at the centre of the team for the 2008/9 season, with Mo as captain.

Back To The Top

As the 2008/09 season began I honestly had no idea how well we would perform. All summer on the outside court the Y11 players had been practising their shots and playing 2 on 2, 3 on 3 etc. and were looking really skilful. With three or four good Y10 players to add to the competitive squad we had more strength in depth than I can ever recall since the 70s. In addition to this the players were all very fit and athletic and I had no worries about any of them lasting right through a match. They were all playing in the Ball Hall leagues on a weekly basis and had experience to go with their ability. My only worry was how they would play together since unlike Sam Wernham's team, they did not all play for the same team outside school.

At the start of the school year I discussed this with Josh Woodward, our club captain and we agreed that a message encouraging cooperation should go at the front of the training and performance log issued to all squad members at the start of the Autumn term. Regular Friday training began again in September and we had some extra sessions to work on tactics prior to the league starting. Attendance was at an all time high with 25-30 players at training every week and competition for places high. I interviewed four players for the role but decided on making Morrison Kirk captain. Not only was Mo a reliable points scorer and strong defender but he also played and led with passion for the Vipers and hated being beaten. He was the natural choice, reminiscent in many ways of Chris Lynskey.

Our first game turned out to be away against Padgate High School yet we played all our other matches at home. The team contained seven year 11 players and three from year 10. Padgate were weak and we were able to play rotations of two equal teams of five players throughout the match. Everyone scored and we dominated so much that the scoreboard ran out of space to put up our points. The eventual score was officially given as 117-11 but it may well have been more. Every credit goes to the Padgate team for persevering. The following year however they were to cry off and refuse to play us!

The combination of playing two alternating teams of five and a half court man to man defence worked well for us and we stuck with it against Woolston who were easily beaten by 30 points in our next match. The Woolston players had no answer to Morrison Kirk who scored at will from all areas of the offensive half. Our first real test came against a well organised Newman side who were only beaten by 12 points. Once again, the last 10 minutes of the game, when the opposition were running out of energy and unable to cope with our fast breaks was the key period of the game.

The first real challenge of the season was against Great Sankey. We had lost to them for the previous two years and needed a victory to set the record straight. A very close match was won 20-17. After an early Boteler lead, the teams were neck and neck all the way through with both defences dominating. Sankey had one very dangerous player but he was neutralised by Danny Craven whose tenacity and athleticism were too much for him to cope with. In defence Tom Taylor, Tom Bate and Temi Abimbola all rebounded powerfully.

Deep in the second half, Adam Hayes and Stephen Harding both ran in superb layups to leave us clear at the end. All those hours of practice sometimes give you the edge and that was certainly the case in this match. We reached Christmas joint top of the league with four wins from four.

The first game after the break was against fellow title contenders Penketh. In previous years we had struggled against them and a close match resulted in a narrow defeat by 10 points. In the second half we had been within two baskets most of the time but they had two really strong rebounders and were just a little too strong.

The next game was against Birchwood and was probably the best match of the season. Emotions were running very high for this game and we began well before slipping slightly behind until the last minute. Two free shots by Adam Hayes and a powerful layup by Tom Bate put us a point ahead with 30 seconds to go but we lost possession in our own half and they edged the match by a point.

It has become a worrying feature of the basketball league that some schools pick and chose who to play so that they do not suffer heavy defeats. I have never believed this is right and reveals a real lack of character. I recall going to Culcheth with a team of seven in 1982, missing my best three players. On the morning of the match I asked the team if they wanted to cancel the match and the decision was to “fight on” with what we had. That has always been the Boteler approach. If you aren’t good enough don’t enter the league, but once you do see all the fixtures through.

This problem still exists in 2009 but last year St Greg’s and Beamont both failed to complete their fixtures with us and Culcheth did not rearrange a match that was postponed earlier in the year. Although we took the points we would have preferred the matches. As it was we ended up third in the league.

The end of year cup competition was held in the Bal Hall. We started strongly with a win against Woolston but then let Great Sankey get a lead and in spite of a strong comeback lost by 2 points. However an excellent fighting victory against a previously unbeaten Culcheth team took us into the 3/4th playoff match against Penketh who had amazingly lost to Birchwood in their pool.

We shared in a match which should have been the final, narrowly losing 16-13 to Penketh. The final was won 5-2 by Great Sankey in a really poor 15 minute match. Thus ended our competitive season for 2008/09.

However, training continued and the players played for their Ball Hall teams, improving and forcing up standards week by week. Our thoughts turned to the 2009/10 season for which we would have yet another strong and experienced team.

As the year neared its end the whole school community was rocked by the loss of Temi Abimbola and there were efforts by numerous sections of the school to raise money towards his family's funeral expenses. Our tribute to Temi appears elsewhere on the website. This would be the reason for our last match of the year. All the players from years 10 and 11 turned out to play a memorial match which was watched by a number of students and staff from the school. The match was not competitive but the level of effort and enthusiasm was high and the event was a great showcase for the achievements of the basketball club during the year. It also underlined the fact that we had now firmly re-established basketball as the school's most successful team sport.

Those who left the school in 2009 and were at the heart of the club's success were the following;

Morrison Kirk, captain and leading scorer. Morrison played for the school for two years and set up the Vipers with a group of friends. By the time he left he was a prolific scorer inside the zone with tremendous touch close to the basket. He also had a high success percentage in shooting, including three pointers. Morrison enters the Hall of Fame and would have made the team in any of the last 32 years since I began coaching here.

Louis Haughton was a natural left-handed shooting guard. Since starting to play for the school in 2008 Louis refined and controlled his mid range jump shot to make it a reliable source of points for any team he played for. He was an unselfish player with good passing skills and a good layup. He was also a cornerstone of the successful Vipers team.

Adam Hayes always had natural speed and jumping ability which made him an ideal basketball player. In year 11, through regular practice and experience

with the Vipers, he became far more consistent with his layups and was a perfect player to have on the fast break. By the end of the year he had enough control in his jump shots to become a threat from outside the zone and was a good exponent of man to man marking.

Temi Abimbola was recognised as the fittest and most athletic player in the team. He made unbelievable interceptions with his lateral speed and could rebound against players a foot taller. In broken play Temi was always a danger to the opposition and had the vision to make passes which would bring applause from his own team and opponents alike. He played for the Swish and later the Vipers before his untimely death.

Stephen Harding had great enthusiasm for the game which led him to set up a Ball Hall team called Swish, supported by his father, which continues to enter Ball Hall league competitions. Stephen moved gracefully about the court and had an ideal build for a basketball player. He rebounded and dribbled well and on his day he could produce layups of superb quality and could shoot from anywhere around the zone.

Tom Taylor played for Swish and through his own perseverance and training turned himself into a strong defender and offensive rebounder. He played all the league matches in 2008/09 and his defence against Great Sankey was crucial in taking the team to victory.

Daryl Cox missed most of his original year 11 through illness so it was a huge bonus for us to have him back in 2009. Gaining in strength week by week he played half the season and contributed a lot through his experience and all round unselfish play. By the end of the year he was back to full strength and hitting his outside shots again. Daryl is a great example of what can be achieved through having a positive mental attitude. During summer training in 2009 he looked really fit and ready to take on the next phase of his basketball career at Priestley College.

Danny Craven was unstoppable in one on one situations and in Ball Hall league teams the Flyers and Swish he regularly scored some amazing off-balance shots. Danny was supremely fit through his elite boxing training regime and had a resilience in his mental attitude to opposition players that they found difficult to deal with. His man to man defence against Great Sankey was simply

awesome and an inspiration to others. In training Danny often gets fouled yet never complains or questions a referee's decision. This is a great example of how to succeed in sport.

Sean Conroy played for the Invaders and the Flyers as well as being a reliable member of the squad. In any other school Sean would have been a regular team member and if we had not lost so many fixtures he would have featured in some of the later games in the season. Sean became a good shooter and scored regularly through layups. He was perhaps our most underrated player.

Adam Poulton did not look like a basketball player which is why so many people who had not seen him play were amazed by the standard of his play in training or matches with the Swish. Adam was an unselfish player who often won but rarely gave away the ball. He was a good dribbler and agile in defence. He rarely made a bad decision in his shot selection and in most other schools would have been a regular team member. His hours of training and dedication to the sport brought him this success.

Kyle Sutton Had a real passion for basketball although he looked more like a prop forward. Kyle never missed training and was always out on the outdoor court practising. He could shoot and drive really well from both sides of the basket and stood out in Temi's memorial match. Kyle had an excellent attitude to basketball and in another school would certainly have made the team.

2008/2009 team players still studying at Boteler in 2009/10

Tom Bate was one of the top scorers for the team and would have regularly been in the starting five if we had not had a policy of rotation. He has been a key player for several Ball Hall teams, notably the Wizards. Tom defends really well and is unstoppable close to the basket. He also has a good set shot. We expect big things of Tom in the coming year.

Ashley Haughton has ball-handling skills to rival anyone who has ever played for Boteler over the years. He is athletic and tenacious in man to man defence and reads the game superbly. He also scores regularly from inside the zone. Ashley has made his mark for the Vipers against players older than himself and should really shine in 2009/10.

Josh Turner has played for the school since Y9 and is a very experienced basketball player and referee. He understands the game well and regularly works on his technique to become a better player. His shooting is good and he can lay up under pressure with either hand. Josh gives full commitment to every sport he plays and in basketball his defence is very tough. If he can stay injury free he will be a vital player for us in 2009/10

Declan Clarke broke into the team in early 2009. He is an excellent all round sportsman possessing both strength and speed and has worked on his passing and dribbling to make himself a tough opponent for any other team. Declan's rebounding ability and close control near the basket ensure he will always score points and as his shooting continues to improve it is hard to find any weaknesses in his technique.

Ashley Latham was in contention for a place based on his rapidly improving rebounding , shooting and defence. Ashley has strong basketball intelligence and reads the game well. He is a courageous rebounder and scores regularly. He also has the important ability to learn from every situation and puts coaching advice into practice. He will be a key player in 2009/10.

Other players likely to feature in 2009/10

Josh Woodward

George Jones-Dobbs

Mike Lyon

Jake Tarburton

Ryan Armitage

Kyle Phillips

Connor Atkinson

Dale Hill