

A busy summer

Club Head Coach Rick Wooldridge has just returned from the European Under 18 Men's Championships in Bulgaria and outlines the preparation and performance of the England team

One of the problems we encounter each year with this age group is that a significant number of players are playing in Europe or America. In addition, it had been decided that Devon Van Oostrum, the stand-out point guard, would only be available for the Great Britain Under 20 squad who were attempting to gain promotion to Division A. Currently all our the England age group teams (i.e. Under 16 and Under 18) play in Division B where they have to gain one of the top two positions in the annual championships to gain promotion.

I had been asked to be Assistant Coach to Steve Bucknall, who after an impressive playing career at North Carolina (under the legendary coach Dean Smith) and the Los Angeles Lakers with Magic Johnson and coach Pat Riley, was starting his first Head Coach appointment to the national teams.

The initial squad was selected in December after a morning session at Loughborough University. Following this a team was selected to play in the Xmas tournament held by the Manchester Magic club each year. The selection included players based in Europe and the USA who it would be impossible to see again until after their college course finished in June. Wins against Luxembourg, Cheshire Jets and Magic 2 gained a semi-final spot with the German regional side Breitengubach. This resulted in a 72 - 59 win and a place in the final against Magic 1, the hosts. A 23 - 11 first quarter and 40 - 22 half time score ended in a comfortable 73 - 49 win. The only disappointment was the discovery that 6' 7" US based Skyler White was ineligible to play for England as he had a Scottish father ! He is eligible for future GB teams !

A training camp for 2 days in Birmingham saw a team selected for the Cherbourg annual Easter tournament which the Under 18's have competed in for several years. A win against Belgrade (Serbia) 78 - 71 was followed the next day by a 52 - 76 loss to the Tunisian Under 19 team who were preparing for the World Championships and had just won the African Championships. Day 3 saw a comfortable win over the host club 67 - 38 and a semi-final spot against Switzerland to look forward to at 9.30 a.m. on the final day. The early morning start suited the Swiss who took an early lead and ran out winners 68 - 51 which saw us in a 3rd / 4th place game against our old foes - Manchester !! The majority of the latter had been together from the age of 12 and contained two prominent members of our squad who we had agreed beforehand to not select for the tournament. Their starting point guard, the experienced Josh McGinn, hit 5 out of 5 from 3-point range to underline their challenge and it took an outstanding performance from Raphael Thomas-Edwards to gain the 72 - 66 win for the us. Raphael gained a place in the All-Star 5 which was announced after the final in which Tunisia defeated the Swiss.

A training camp in London and the GB skills camp at Bristol marked the end of the public examinations period and the start of the final preparations for the squad.

A lengthy camp in Belgium incorporated games against Luxembourg (1 win / 1 loss), Belgium (a heavy defeat) and Portugal (a win) and a concentration on physical conditioning. Unfortunately Josh McGinn and captain John Stewart broke down with injuries which were diagnosed as long term by scans.

On our return to London we were immediately into the prestigious Future Stars tournament at Brunel University. Wins against a USA Select (78 -72) and a loss to Holland (65 – 85) gave us a semi-final spot against European Division A challengers Slovenia, who proved to be too strong in all departments as we went down 63 – 93. The 3rd / 4th place final game saw us against Holland with a virtual repeat score defeat again of 66 – 85. We had been using all these matches to try out combinations of players and tactics as a priority in giving all the squad the opportunity to display their talents.

A final camp at Cobham in Surrey saw the final selection announced with Tiger Jordan Culley on the plane to Bulgaria.

The draw for the Europeans were 4 pools of either 4 or 5 teams in each. We needed to gain a position in the top two in our pool to continue playing for one of the top 8 spots in the competition. Despite a first day win over Estonia, this was followed by losses to Belgium and Denmark (who were tournament runners-up and gained promotion) leaving us needing a win against the Portuguese who we had beaten at the previous training camp. A close game throughout finished with a disappointing loss and 3rd place in the pool. The highest place we could now finish would be 9th but we were carrying forward the losses to Portugal and Belgium into this classification which was an unlikely scenario.

We started superbly with an overtime win against Georgia (61 – 59) and a huge win against Luxembourg (100 – 58) on consecutive days and despite leading Switzerland by 10 points late in the 3rd quarter we went down by the same margin at the final buzzer (61 – 71).

Tournament winners were Bulgaria who defeated Denmark in the final – both teams gaining promotion to Division A next year.

Since my return the England Under 16 squad have gained selection to Division A in their tournament – the first national age group team to achieve this under the new system introduced 6 years ago – a terrific achievement for the players and Head Coach Simon Fisher. I would like to take a minute (i.e, very small !) part of their success as many of the squad were in my England Under 15 programme two years ago !!

After a few days recovering from stresses and strains of Bulgaria I can now look forward to the Tigers new season with Under 14 (regional), Under 16 (National League) and the two senior men's teams competing in the local league – bring it on !