

## **Northern Conference Baseball**

### **Summary –**

It is our belief that the potential of the Northern Conference has not yet been fully realised and will not be in its current format. The Conference is one of the few sports leagues, either amateur or professional, in Britain that features clubs from both north and south of the border and few have as diverse a geographical spread.

For the Conference to truly maximise its potential, the following needs to occur:

- A restructured two division format needs to be established which would allow a) elite teams to compete against each other more regularly in a National League North and b) newer ballclubs the chance to develop and establish themselves in a level competitive environment.
- Operate the top division of the Conference on more of a 'franchise' basis with eligibility and promotion being dependant upon a number of criteria to ensure as professional an approach as possible to league operations.
- Greater support and assistance from BSUK for the Conference as a whole including direct qualification for the top two National League North teams in to the BBF Final Four. Better nurturing of newer clubs and support during the establishment of a National League North needs to occur as Federation resources seem to be constantly channelled southward.
- Establishment of a unified marketing approach by all Northern Conference clubs, in particular those within the National League North, to identify and secure a major sponsor(s).

### **Restructuring the Conference –**

The 2003 standings and results illustrate the need for a two-tier approach to the Conference's structure. There has been an obvious disparity between the top 6 and bottom 6 teams but this is not to deride the lower half of the table. The creation of two divisions would be of benefit to all clubs. The stronger teams would play against each other more often allowing for better competition,

creating a better product to market and aiding in the development of better players, adding to the future strength of national teams.

For the newer or less advanced clubs, the second division would allow them to grow both on and off the field, establishing their home fields and nurturing a playing staff until they reach a stage where access to the National League becomes a viable option. It is far easier to recruit and retain players on a team that has a shot at winning each week. Costs should also be lower as travel commitments should be lessened by having fewer teams to visit.

### **The 'Franchise' approach –**

If a National League North is to be established, it would be wise to operate it on a 'franchise' basis. The success of the Super League in rugby league has been due to the franchise approach where clubs are only permitted to play if they meet certain criteria and this should be considered for the National League North and, to a certain extent, for the second division. This way the integrity of both leagues can be protected and the opportunities for growth maximised.

The following criteria should be considered for the National League North clubs:

- *A suitable home field with pitching mound*, changing facilities, home run fence, backstop of a suitable size and style (for example 3 metres high by 10 metres wide with net or mesh), dugouts and/or bench area and perimeter bullpen areas with or without mounds. Mounds can be real or artificial as agreed by member clubs. Quality facilities are essential to the growth of the league and must be of a parallel standard across the league
- *Clubs to be able to illustrate a certain financial resource* to ensure their ability to complete their commitments. This could be established in a number of ways. A certain monetary value in the club's accounts by a certain date would be an easy way to monitor this criteria. An obvious financial commitment from the club's players (such as a direct debit-based membership structure) could also be construed as suitable. A larger affiliation fee to be paid to BSUK with a percentage returned at season's end after playing all fixtures might also be an option or a signed sponsorship/support agreement with a backer could be

enough evidence. There needs to be protection in place for other National League clubs to ensure that a team is not going to run in to difficulties during the season. The unfortunate collapse of Preston's entry in to the National League South in 2002 illustrates the need to protect the league's integrity and ensure the commitment of the member clubs. This will be crucial in securing sponsorship, both at club and league level. Whichever method is used, the criteria should be monitored by the league commissioner and the relevant information should be confidential.

- *Clubs to have an affiliated youth programme* to ensure continuity of the franchise. Grass-roots development must be a key component of any club. Affiliated groups could be Playball! Leagues, Pony Leagues, Little Leagues or some other youth scheme registered with BSUK.
- *Clubs to have a web site* to help in promotion of their activities. A centralised league site could be used to drive traffic to the various member club sites and help add value to any sponsorship packages.
- *Clubs to have two registered and qualified umpires*, as greater emphasis should be placed on developing quality officials in the North. Regional courses should be scheduled in conjunction with ABUA-GB.
- *Wooden Bats* should be used if National League status is conferred on the Conference's top division. Composite wood bats like Baum bats ([www.baumbat.com](http://www.baumbat.com)) could be a viable alternative to proper wood if sponsorship cannot be found along similar lines to the National League South where clubs are given wooden bats at the start of the season.

In addition to prospective National League clubs having to meet the admission criteria, a play-off should be held at season's end between the team that finished in last place in the National League North and the winners of the second division. This play-off should be a three-game contest. This will ensure that the competing teams are tested on their squad depth, which will be a key component in any successful National League franchise.

### **The BSUK's role –**

The development of baseball in the north needs to be more structured and tiered to give assistance whenever possible to the right clubs at the right time. Newer clubs need more support than older, more established organisations but this does not mean that

the National League clubs would not want assistance. Coaching would be of greater benefit to newer clubs as well as field development advice whilst the emphasis for National League teams should be on the 'business' side of the sport – in particular the recruitment of sponsors and volunteers to boost the organisation's development. This will help grow the league to the stage where it becomes a viable product that will attract paying spectators. This should be a long-term aim of all the league clubs.

The challenge to BSUK will be to how best utilise it's resources to achieve the aims of the Conference with the establishment of regional development officers being a possible route to help raise the support structure in the north.

### **A Marketable commodity –**

The Northern Conference has a number of unique selling points and every effort should be made to capitalise on these for the collective good of all stakeholders:

- Geographical spread – teams in or near almost every major population centre in the north of Britain including Liverpool, Manchester, Hull, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Birmingham and Sheffield.
- Rich history – many of the clubs in the league have been in existence for a large number of years and have established themselves in their local community and with the local media.
- Lack of competition – there is little in the way of competition in the summertime from other national league sports (speedway and cricket are an example) and baseball is the only US sport predominantly played in the summer in Britain. This opens up a large market to target to attract sponsors and spectators.
- Business potential – There are a number of big companies based in the north of Britain that may be amenable to exploitation opportunities in their market area.
- The increased exposure of the sport in general through MLB's efforts and coverage on Channel 5 and NASN has substantially boosted the profile of baseball across Britain, paving the way for the indigenous leagues.

The recruitment of a sponsor for the league would be of tremendous benefit to all teams and BSUK as it would add

credibility to the Conference as well a small piece of revenue. A suggestion would be that 50% of all sponsorship revenues go to BSUK whilst the other 50% is shared equally amongst the teams. Even £50.00 per team would pay for the annual Public Liability insurance fee.

### **Conclusion –**

“This document aims to outline a proposed format and structure for the 2004 Northern Conference season. It is an amalgam of my thoughts on this matter and meetings with members of our club’s Executive Committee. It is merely a working document aimed at outlining some points for consideration ahead of further discussions on this matter.”

Nick Clark,  
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