

INQUIRY REPORT

Evidence from Brixton Topcats

Brixton Topcats

1. The History of Brixton Basketball Club

i) Introduction

Brixton Basketball Club [**"Brixton Topcats"**] was formed in 1984.

ii) Background

In May 1981, following the inner-city disturbances which had occurred in both Brixton and Toxteth, a meeting was called with more than 60 young people in attendance, together with two key adult figures and the New Educational and Recreation Association [**"New Era"**] was formed.

The key figures in the successful launch were:

- a) Courtney Griffiths - at the time a young barrister, commencing his successful career, and now a prominent QC; and
- b) Jimmy Rogers, a retired basketball player, who, prior to moving to London, had achieved some success working with young people in the Toxteth area of Liverpool.

Courtney produced a constitution, with the primary objectives as follows:

The Association aims, as set out in the constitution to, ... advance the education of young persons resident in Brixton (and surrounding areas) through providing programmes for physical recreation, so as to develop their physical, mental and spiritual capacity, that they may grow to full maturity as individuals, and as members of society, and that their lives may be improved.

The Association intends to motivate young people, initially through the sport of basketball. The Association further believes, that such participation, will have a casual effect on young people's self perception and self confidence, and that it will operate to alleviate some of the frustration of life in a somewhat depressed and deprived environment.

The Association further stated its intent to form an organ through which its members could participate at the highest possible level in England - The National League.

Brixton Basketball Club was officially formed in 1984 against the backdrop of race riots in England in the 1980's, although its roots are far older than this. The club's mission is to advance the education of young people resident in Brixton and surrounding areas by providing programmes for physical recreation in order to develop their physical, mental and spiritual capacity, that they may grow to full maturity as individuals, and as members of society, and that their lives may be improved both on the court and in the wider areas of life.

The club aims to motivate young people through the sport of basketball, believing, that such participation, will have a casual effect on young people's self perception and self confidence, and that it will operate to alleviate some of the frustration of life in a somewhat depressed and deprived environment. Its philosophy is, "*Winning is an attitude - it is not about winning a game of basketball, but winning the game of life - saying yes to the positives and no to the negatives*".

iii) Today

Today, the club is arguably the most famous basketball club in England, with a trophy cabinet and alumni to rival any club in the country.

The Brixton Topcats men's basketball team play in Division 2 of the England Basketball national league. They play at their home court at Brixton Recreation Centre in the heart of the multi-ethnic community south-west London, with a large percentage of its population being of African and Caribbean descent.

Brixton Topcats is a cornerstone of the local community and has touched the lives of thousands of inner city children in the last thirty years. The nickname 'Topcats' is inspired by the cartoon of the same name, relevant for its parody of the relationship between young people in the community and the police. The current development programme attracts around 100 juniors every week and has strong links with local schools and an official

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partnership with London South Bank University. In addition to developing talent the club has an elite strand that competes at the highest level with the Ladies Topcats, and Junior and Senior teams that have been league mainstays since 1985.

iv) Structure

The club is structured as follows:

- Voluntary Sports Club;
- Chair;
- Treasurer;
- Secretary;
- General Manager;
- Pool of qualified sports coaches; and
- Pool of volunteers.

Brixton has:

- 2 Junior Under-18 National League Boys' and Girls' Teams involving 30 players;
- 2 Senior National League Men's and Women's Teams involving 30 players;
- 70 additional junior members from as young as 4 years old who play in the Central Venue League; and
- Summer, Easter & half-term basketball camps with an average daily attendance of 25 participants.

v) Income and Expenditure

The club's typical annual expenditure totals £20,400 made up as follows:

- £10,000 on venue hire for London South Bank University, the Evelyn Grace Academy and basketball camps;
- £4,000 on National League registration for 4 teams;
- £400 on Central Venue League entry fees for 2 teams;
- £2,000 on travel; and
- £4,000 on referees and table officials.

The club's typical annual income of £19,825 is made up as follows, but the shortfall is eased greatly by donations of free-of-charge use of the Brixton Recreation Centre from Lambeth Local Authority and a minibus from London South Bank University:

- £6,400 from club memberships;
- £8,400 from club subscriptions; and
- £5,025 from Sportivate.

vi) Alumni

The club is particularly notable for its highly-rated development programme, which has produced the likes of Andrea Congreave, Ronnie Baker, Andrew Bailey, Paul Mundy-Castle, Luol Deng, Ajou Deng, Ugonna Onyekwe and Emiko Etete in recent years. Five of the current men's GB team are products of the Brixton programme:

- Luol Deng (Chicago Bulls);
- Ogo Adegboye (St Bonaventure University);
- Eric Boateng (Arizona State University);
- Matthew Bryan-Amaning (University of Washington); and
- Justin Robinson (Rider University).

"Playing Basketball in Brixton provided me with a way of belonging, it opened doors to help further my education and career" says Luol Deng of the Chicago Bulls.



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The club has a high profile nationally and has received visits from HRH Prince Charles, Princess Diana, Michael Jordan, Allan Iverson, Robert Horry, Lennox Lewis, Ian Wright and Kate Hoey MP. The clubs' founder, owner and Head Coach, Jimmy Rogers, is recognised as a community leader and is respected globally in Basketball circles. The club has been placing players into educational institutions for over 20 years both in the USA and England, and is proud of its alumni who have been successful both on and off the court.

Today, Brixton Topcats has an Alumini to be extremely proud of, and it includes:

- Three Barristers; one Doctor and another nearing completion of his medical studies; two Head Teachers; a very successful international Journalist, who was Russian Correspondent for 'Time' magazine for eight years; England's first ever Wheelchair National Basketball Association ["WNBA"] player, who, whilst attending college in the USA, became the highest ever points scorer in US College history;
- Britain's highest profile NBA player;
- Numerous successful business personnel, in the UK and globally;
- 3 Ivy League graduates; and
- A significant number of professional basketball players, including Ronnie Baker, who was told, for the first 14 years of his life that he was too small to play high level basketball, and who is currently England's most capped player.

Finally, there are more former Brixton Topcats players than any other club in the UK, who are actively coaching or participating in various clubs throughout England.

2. Endorsements

Brixton Topcats could have collected over 200 endorsements of the club, but it has carefully selected just three:

- a) A youngster from an estate in Brixton;
- b) His single mother; and
- c) A Senior Social Worker, now 60 years of age, who was the first young person who Jimmy Rogers coached.

i) The Jimmy Rogers Story

As told by Paul Ambrosius, one of the four friends he has left on the planet. The rest are recent acquaintances.

I first met Jimmy or more accurately, saw him at various parties and functions in Toxteth, Liverpool in 1967 when I was 14. From a distance, he appeared cool, calm and together, a role model to aspire to. Initially I had no idea that he was one of the top three basketball players in the country. But he carried himself with an air of confidence that set him apart from his companions with whom I was more familiar.

Being young, black and shaped by the Toxteth environment into which I was born, I just wanted to 'dress sharp' and be seen by my peers as being 'cool'. Vacuous, perhaps, but I was 14 and had taken part in race riots and (not so petty) crime since the age of 7. My aspirations had not taken any positive shape or form and 1960s Liverpool made it helpfully clear that black people were almost welcome: to stay in the 2 square miles that formed the Toxteth area. Anywhere outside of that enclosure and black people took their wellbeing in their own hands. There were roads that marked the line between a kicking and a dirty look. The latter if you stayed on 'your side' of the road.

I saw little of Jimmy locally but he gave the impression that he was a local guy. What I didn't know was that he was in the Army. He joined as a boy soldier at 15 having been in foster care for most of his life in Newcastle. The first time he was to see another black person was when he was leaving for training camp at 15 at a railway station. His mother was a professional dancer and his father an African American serviceman, who had met and parted in 1940. He was fostered long term by a couple in the North East of England who had their work cut out. By his own account he proved to be rebellious and mischievous in his early years. No change there then!

Jimmy flourished in the Army and the regime at the time enabled him to follow what he felt to be intuitive interests (i.e. music and sport). The fact that a black person was encouraged by western society in little else, except in exceptional circumstances, was the driving factor in Jimmy's early aspirations. Whilst not completely erasing the aforementioned 'qualities' he had developed, the Army did provide the environment for a young Jimmy to learn self discipline and dedication when applying himself to his chosen interests. By his late teens Jimmy had discovered Liverpool whilst on leave and felt a natural affinity with its predominantly indigenous black community. He was made welcome and by now regularly playing the best basketball both the Army and the English Central

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League had to offer in those dark days when seeing an American made pair of sneakers would be almost as rare as seeing an American playing basketball in this country.

Flash forward to Jimmy having left the Army at the age of 27 or 28 and settled permanently in Liverpool working for the Ford Motor Co. in Halewood. He began playing with a number of teams in the North West of England five or more years before the advent of the English National League. He was offered and accepted the job of player coach with the Liverpool Police who he was to go on to lead them to a National Championship at Crystal Palace in 1970/1.

Prior to this significant achievement, the police team for reasons that are now lost in the ether, were stuck for a place to train regularly. Mr. Vaux the headmaster of Paddington Comprehensive School, that had recently opened, happened to be the father of one of the Police teams' players. Mr. Vaux made a deal with the team. If the team provided coaching to the kids who frequented the unstructured evening gym sessions they could train in the newly built facility. Paddington Comp was the school I had recently been asked politely to leave for my spectacular levels of indifference to all that it had to offer.

We (about 12 kids aged between 15 & 16) were messing about in the gym kicking, throwing, bursting or eating balls and other assorted equipment when we were collectively called to order by a very deep voice. We had taken little notice of the tall white cops who 'strutted' into the gym and took 'residence' at the far end of the gym. When the familiar looking black man (with the ultra hip low cut converse) approached us asking if we would be interested in learning how to shoot a basketball (It appeared he was unable to miss), he had our attention. I remember bragging and claiming all sorts of skills that I didn't possess which he, to my recollection, dealt with in a relatively thoughtful and sensitive way. That is to say that he didn't laugh or ridicule us when we proceeded to show him how hopeless we all were. I cannot speak for the rest of the guys that stayed but I recall my jaw dropping when he showed us an American basketball magazine with a colour picture of the legendary Wilt Chamberlain in his Los Angeles Lakers prime. The fact that his showing us this was backed by what was a throwaway aside, "He looks a bit like you", nailed me to this sport from that point on and I knew straight away I would never stop playing this game.

So in a sense it was my innate vanity that got me hooked. Jimmy was well schooled in the art of team and individual psychology and in the ensuing months he reeled us in to the point of us all being quite willing to jump off a cliff for a loose ball. We moaned at him to get us a game and he reluctantly relented. However he brought in the Liverpool schools champs to 'wipe the floor with us' by 40 + points and after that strategic humiliation he didn't let us play for 9 months. When he let us off the leash for the second time, same team, same score-reversed! They couldn't believe what hit them. Jimmy (The former Army P.I.) had been running us like greyhounds for 9 months in training. One of the sessions took place on Sunday mornings at 9.30 and there would literally be fog in the gym. Track suits were a rare commodity in them days and the words cold and freezing would be promptly followed by the phrase, "Get on the line". It's amazing just how warm you can get in an unheated sports hall in January wearing what would generally pass for underwear.

A year and a half with Jimmy saw us meet the eventual National Junior Champions, Doncaster Panthers in the quarter-finals of the Junior National Championships. We lost quite badly and a year later, although losing, we acquitted ourselves admirably against the same team, 6 of whom played for the Junior England team that year.

Throughout the first 3 years of learning under Jimmy's tutelage I recalled losing less than 4 times as we soon established supremacy in Liverpool and the North West of England. My final year as a junior saw that supremacy acknowledged when I was picked to play for the North of England. Jimmy displayed a fine aptitude on that occasion for hiding his pride (Jimmy would rather die than overfeed a young ego) in my creditable representation of our club, ATAC. The club by now was a local sensation and individually and collectively our standing in the community rose exponentially.

The institution that Jimmy created and nurtured in his unorthodox fashion allowed us to develop in the most positive and unforeseeable way imaginable. From a starting point of 'headed for oblivion', I became proud, secure and aspired to bigger and better things as did most of the ATAC team.

After the first two and a half years of ATAC's existence, the success that the team achieved, reflected deservedly on Jimmy's reputation as someone who could achieve greater things with the traditionally disenfranchised black youth of Toxteth. It was also an acknowledged fact that Jimmy was a bona fide well-respected role model 'from' the Toxteth community. He had led the Liverpool Police Basketball team as player/coach to the English National

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Championships and won, whilst also positively nurturing and guiding, what could be considered as some of the wildest kids in Liverpool, to be disciplined sporting achievers. Some have been honoured for less.

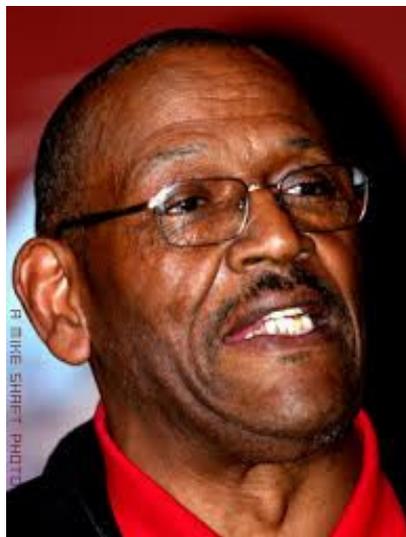
The historical context in which Jimmy achieved his success is crystallised when one remembers that the sport of basketball in this country in the late 60s and 70s was a predominantly white middle class pursuit. This being due to the fact that outdoor courts for the masses didn't exist and only teachers and professionals who had the 'keys to the gym' could practise the necessary hours to master the game. The 'liberation' of a basketball backboard and rim from a local grammar school near Toxteth has faded fondly into the ATAC legend.

Jimmy was invited to apply for the post of Community Relations Officer (With special responsibility for Youth). He was successful in his application and his work with the youth of Liverpool 8 expanded. He enabled and encouraged me to work voluntarily on behalf of the community, which led to my eventually becoming a Generic Social Worker in the Liverpool 8 area. 40 years later I look back on a career that has seen me working as a social worker and Youth Justice Manager (ISSP) in Toxteth, Brixton and presently St. Paul's, Bristol (Nothing personal Handsworth!).

Jimmy left Liverpool in the late 70s to take up a new challenge in Community Housing for black and minority young people in Brixton. Initially undertaking a role as Assistant Coach to the then high flying Crystal Palace National League basketball team in his spare time, it didn't take Jimmy long to recognise the similarities in the dearth of aspiration amongst the youth of South London and Toxteth. Jimmy soon set to work in establishing a local youth team based in Brixton. He began to specialise in working with players who for some reason couldn't 'get going with any other teams in London'. It was with this team based initially at the Dick Sheppard School in Brixton that Jimmy started the team that evolved into the present day Brixton Top Cats. The alumni of these teams that stretch back to 1981 have almost without exception gone one to become successes in their chosen professions. The jewel that holds pride of place in this crown of Jimmy's achievements might be Luol Deng, who with his brothers and sisters walked into Jimmy's gym having recently arrived as asylum seekers from war torn Sudan. He now plays for the Chicago Bulls. However Jimmy would point to the grammy nominated singer, lawyers, doctors, teachers, millionaires, accountants, bankers, and a myriad of professionals who have all played for him and testified to the skills of self discipline that were instilled at the club enabling them to reach their respective positive potential.

Jimmy can still be found in Brixton barking in his inimitable timbre at kids as young as five, who seem to know instinctively that the bark is worse than the bite. Maybe it's the mischievous smile that strategically accompanies his roared delivery that encourages them to come back week in week out without ever thinking about 'classroom rebellion'. Whatever it is, if teacher training colleges could teach it, we'd have less of a problem in our education system.

Jimmy Rogers is responsible for more inner city success than any Urban Regeneration Scheme or army of social and youth workers could possibly match or imagine. His beneficiaries are spread worldwide and without exception acknowledge their good fortune as stemming from having been part of one of Jimmy's teams. I'm not sure how one would approach quantifying the contribution he has made to the wider community but I for one would not wish to replay my life without having met and played for Jimmy Rogers.



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ii) A letter from Rebecca S. Smith

My son - Rohan Ayinde Smith - is now 22 years old and in his final year of a liberal arts degree at the University of North Carolina USA, an opportunity he achieved through an academic scholarship. Rohan and I make up our small family household and he has grown up on a large estate close to Brixton attending local schools. Rohan started playing basketball with Brixton Topcats at the age of 10 and it has been an integral part of his life ever since. As his parent, I have observed that being a member of the Topcats team significantly contributed to Rohan's physical, mental and social/emotional development.

I have no doubt that the regularity and discipline of the basketball training and skills that Topcats offered kept Rohan healthy, alert and self disciplined which, in turn, contributed to his cognitive/educational abilities. Basketball is a swift game that demands clear focus and concentration along with team coherence and I have watched my son benefit in so many ways from exercising these skills with determination and dedication to both the game and the team. Though I am perhaps stating the obvious, I have always maintained that the blood flow and oxygen exchange that arises from ongoing physical exercise can only enhance the brain/mind's capacity to be alert and absorb new information and I believe that Rohan's rigorous and continuous basketball training has contributed to his ongoing success at school/college/university.

In addition, the social significance of being part of the Topcats team is undeniable and is something that has been invaluable for Rohan. In an area where there is great disadvantage and youth disaffection and conflict, I have been repeatedly reassured that my son and his team mates have received a discipline (through rigorous and regular basketball training/games as well as constant encouragement to recognise the importance of education/cognitive development) and sense of belonging that has enabled them all to value connection, community, positive attitude and avoid being sucked into the negativity of hopelessness that can so easily deflect our children/young people from fulfilling their potential. The team spirit, both within Topcats and amongst the larger basketball community, was a pleasure to watch and be part of (I too benefitted from the positive and inclusive environment) and I wonder if the very nature of the game is inclined to foster a more collective spirit as a whole.

I do not hesitate in adding my support to a call for properly recognised and well-funded basketball as a game/activity that is positive and intrinsically connected to enhancing the lives of young people. I have seen it first hand as the mother of a young man whose life has significantly benefitted from being part of Topcats and as an observer of many of the other young people (Rohan's friends and team mates) who have attended and flourished. I am dismayed that young people are denied the opportunity to attend basketball in well-equipped spaces at a low cost and can only say that Rohan was incredibly fortunate to come across a club that existed against the odds - a club whose founder, Jimmy Rogers, has contributed to supporting, encouraging and inspiring hundreds of young people to achieve their potential for more than 30 years, despite continual budgetary restraints, poor facilities and resistant attitudes to the value of the game.

Rebecca S Smith
14 Greenleaf Close
Tulse Hill Estate
London SW2 2HB
020 8674 4367
07977 473720
rebeccaonline@talktalk.net

iii) Letter from Rohan Ayinde Smith - Basketball's effect on my life.

It is hard to put a true measure on what basketball has done for me.

I remember playing at Brixton - going to practice four nights a week, playing games on the weekends, going to summer camp, Easter camp, Luol Deng camp - and one of the things that will always ring through my mind is the emphasis that was placed on all the things that people had done after leaving the club.

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We had role models. They weren't all Luol's or Ronnie and Stedroy Bakers (players who had left Brixton to carve out successful basketball careers), but they were lawyers and youth workers, community leaders and social workers; they were a network of people who had been through the system at Brixton, and who were thus part of the family there. They would come back and talk about what basketball had done for them, and how if it had not been for basketball, and more specifically Brixton, they do not know what they would have been doing.

It's a fascinating thing to think back to those messages and reflect on them now that I am an alumnus of the club, because they are exactly the same messages that I would offer to players at the club now. Basketball shaped my very existence. Without it I truly cannot imagine what my life would look like.

I grew up on a council estate with a single mother and the friends I kept, as much as I love them, did not have the same focus or drive that I did. Do I attribute that to some superior intellect/drive? No, not at all. I attribute it to Brixton basketball club. I attribute it to the discipline and rigour that I learned every time I set foot on the basketball court. I learnt what it meant to be a young black man and I learnt what it meant to be part of a community that would look out for you no matter what. If I hadn't had that I would easily have looked for that community elsewhere and, given where I lived, that would most probably have been a gang. However, instead of living up to my stereotype, I found my sense of worth on the basketball court.

Something that always struck me as intriguing was that because of my drive and desire to play basketball everyone on my estate respected me. I was never picked on as the kid that didn't fit in, but rather I was treated as an equal who did not have to take part in all the stuff that the others were involved in.

It was also basketball that kept me away from drugs and alcohol. As a result of my rigorous training schedule, and the fact that my closest friends were all basketball players, I did not have time to smoke weed or go out on the weekends to drink and party. That's not to say that I was some perfect teenager - of course we went out and enjoyed ourselves, but everything was done in moderation because we had games to play and practice to get to, and believe me when I say you did not want to be hung over for a Brixton training session. I started playing basketball at eleven years old, and every step of the way I have loved it, cherished it, and lived it. It gave me a schedule and a way to understand myself. I did well in school because I had something to keep pushing me, to keep me balanced.

Now I am 22 years old and about to graduate from UNC-Chapel Hill, one of the best public universities in America, and also home to one of the best college basketball programmes in America. My first two years here I played Junior Varsity basketball and was living the dream that I had been preparing for ever since setting foot on the court in Brixton. I would not have been here if it were not for basketball. I would not have been here if it were not for Brixton. I would not have been here if it were not for Jimmy Rogers and all the other coaches that kept pushing me year after year. Without basketball I do not know where I would be. But I know for a fact that I would not have been here.

Rohan Ayinde Smith
UNC 2014
Cultural Studies and African Studies

Rohan can also be contacted at ras-11@live.co.uk should his views be required.

3. Conclusion

Approximately 14 years ago, Jimmy Rogers was interviewed by a Senior Civil Servant, who enquired as to whether he could say whether the young people he had worked with, would have 'ended up' in trouble, without the intervention of the Topcats. Unable, or perhaps unwilling to answer such a question, Jimmy paused for a brief moment and then replied "*We've never had a youngster in trouble once they've participated in our programme*". That just may be Brixton Topcats' crowning achievement!