

Birth of a Basketball League

The Key: Take Time to Get Organized First, Or Regret It

By Dick Hunt

Forming and operating a play-by-mail Strat-O-Matic league is a very tough undertaking. Anyone who has tried it will tell you that. If you'd like to start your own league, but don't know where to begin, this article may help. It will also help if you simply wish to join a league as a coach, because the outline below lists many of the questions you might ask about a league you're thinking of joining.

Since my league was a basketball league, I'll use it as a reference, but some of the points I will make here can apply to any PBM league.

The key word in starting any Strat league is Organization. Your league will run much more smoothly if you take some time to get organized. Leagues that try to totally revamp after their first season due to poor organizing rarely survive. So start right the first time!

The commissioner needs to form most league policies before even *thinking* about recruiting coaches. Do this with great care — this is the only chance to make the league yours. Before you get any coaches, you are a dictator with absolute powers. There's no one to complain about your decisions. Enjoy this feeling — it'll be the last time you have it!

Most important is your league rule book. Write, type or print it neatly. It makes recruiting coaches a snap. If someone shows interest in your league, just send 'em the rule book. Conversely, whenever I considered joining a league, the first ones I eliminated were the ones that weren't even organized enough to have taken this basic step.

It doesn't have to look like a doctoral thesis or an encyclopedia, but your rule book has to be readable. It's crucial that it contains all the pertinent rules and rule variations you're going to use. If your league won't be playing "straight" Strat-O-Matic rules — I've yet to

see one that doesn't have some deviation — you need to be absolutely certain that everyone knows what the variables are.

One way to develop a rule book is to do what I did for my American Tabletop Basketball League. I joined an existing league, The World's Best Basketball League. After one season in it, I saw what I would have done differently if I were in charge. I took the WBBL's rule book, changed the parts I didn't like, and started the ATBL. It worked like a dream! Eight of my original 10 league members were with me for the entire run of the league. That's probably the best yardstick for a commissioner's success — the long-term loyalty of his coaches.

Here is a basic outline of the questions a basketball league constitution should answer — otherwise, you'll spend a lot of time on the phone answering them.

If you're a coach looking for a league, this doubles as a handy list of questions to ask the commissioner.

I. LEAGUE STRUCTURE

A. Describe your league's size and format: Conference, divisions, etc.

B. How is league policy handled? How will the league make changes in rules and procedures? Do coaches get to vote on rule changes, expansion, etc.?

C. Commissioner's powers: Does he/she have the right to fire coaches or make rule changes, or would that require a vote?

D. Mention the annual league fee; most people hate surprises of a financial nature.

II. TEAM STRUCTURE AND ROSTERS

A. Roster limits: How many guys can a team have at one time, including his active roster, reserves, disabled list, etc?

B. Can players be retained from one season to another? How?

C. Can a team retain a player who has a

card one season but not the next? This would have been a crucial point to Larry Bird's coach in '88-89. How would this be done?

III. PLAY-BY-MAIL METHOD

A. How will instruction sheets be used? Does the coach send out one game or series at a time, or will they get sent out in bunches? This area, more than any other, will determine how long your season takes.

B. How will you handle tardiness? With fines, suspensions, etc.? Let them know what to expect if they goof off!

C. Will the league use a standardized game plan, or can coaches create their own?

D. How should a coach handle situations not covered in his opponent's game plan? With a phone call, or his "best judgment"?

E. How will the league operate "coachless" teams? Occasionally, you might lose a coach and have no immediate replacement. Have a contingency plan ready, because the league must go on!

IV. SCHEDULE

A. How long is your season? What's the schedule "formula?" How many intradivisional, interdivisional, and interconference games will there be? A symmetrical schedule is smart.

V. GAME RULES

A. This section is the heart and soul of your rule book, because it's what makes your league different from all others. Here's where you list all the differences between SOM's rules and the ones your league will use. Do you limit player use? How does a team get its team defense cards? Will you use injuries? Do you restrict the fast break or press in any way?

VI. TRANSACTIONS

A. What are the league's trading deadlines during the season? Are off-season trades legal?

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First Step: Develop Good Rule Book

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B. How are trades made? Who notifies the commissioner?

C. Does the league have "free agents?" How are they obtained?

D. Are there any restrictions to trades? For instance, can you make trades with an owner who not be in the league next year? Are draft picks or team defense cards tradeable?

VII. STATISTICS

A. What stats are to be kept? Are any reports or game descriptions required?

B. Will the league supply stat sheets?

C. Are there deadlines for sending stats to the league?

VIII. POST-SEASON PLAY

A. What teams will make your playoffs at

season's end?

B. How will the playoffs progress? How do playoff teams match up? How long are the series?

C. How is the home advantage decided? Most importantly, how are ties for the home advantage broken?

D. Are playoff rosters any different from regular season rosters?

E. How about player use limits? If a guy has to miss 25 games in the regular season, you should probably restrict his playoff appearances, too.

F. Who plays the games in a playoff series? Does the home coach play his home games, or are they played at a neutral site?

IX. DRAFTING

A. When is the annual draft? How is it conducted?

B. How is the draft order determined? How are ties for drafting positions broken?

C. Can players be protected from the draft? What happens to players you don't protect from the draft?

D. Where do the league's rookies come from every year?

E. Can players without cards be drafted? How about college players as a future investment?

X. POSTSEASON AWARDS

A. Will you give out an MVP award? How about an all-star team? And, will you have a coach-of-the-year or general-manager-of-the-year award?