

# US basketball ace who calls Derby home



Basketball brought Clarence Wiggins to Derby and keeps him here. He coaches the Derby Trailblazers, right.  
Pictures: Ian Hodgkinson

While the debate about the overuse of foreign players in football rumbles on, few would deny that players from abroad can enrich sport. One shining example is American basketball player Clarence Wiggins. Not only has he helped to take the game to new levels in Derby, he has inspired sporting excellence thanks to his job as a teacher at a city school. Martin Burley reports.

Whatever the nation may think about the vast number of foreign players in football, sport today demands an influx of skills from abroad.

Whether it's football, cricket, or even rugby, spectators like an overseas element to add glamour. But this is nothing new. American Clarence Wiggins is a Trailblazer, both in name and in spirit. The current head coach of the Derby Trailblazers, who play in Division 1 of the national basketball league, was one of the first overseas sporting stars to play professionally in the city in 1984.

Many foreign players have built a special relationship with Derbyshire sports fans over the years. Footballers like Igor Stimac and Stefano Eranio, or cricketing internationals Mohammed Azhuraddin and Dean Jones, spring to mind. However, despite this mutual affection, how many have chosen to remain here and serve their adopted city?

Some 23 years after first stepping foot on English soil, Clarence is happily married and combines his coaching role with his full time profession – as a PE teacher at Noel-Baker Community School in Alvaston. It is a role he has held for 18 years. "My American home is

Richmond, Virginia," said Clarence. "I grew up surrounded by competitive sports. I was encouraged to play baseball from an early age and I also enjoyed playing American Football.

"However, I soon found that my abilities lay in basketball. I enjoy the fact that everyone can take part in the sport and I won't deny that playing inside was a factor. I was a starter for two years during my senior years in high school and had no thoughts of playing professionally. Then my coach asked whether I'd considered taking up a scholarship playing basketball at university."

Clarence's desire to teach had already shown itself, and, like most people, there was one particular teacher at school who inspired him. "There was a PE teacher called Fred Taylor," recalled Clarence. "I always used to wonder what he had that made him the most popular and well respected teacher in the school. He had an in-built enthusiasm and always encouraged people to do their best.

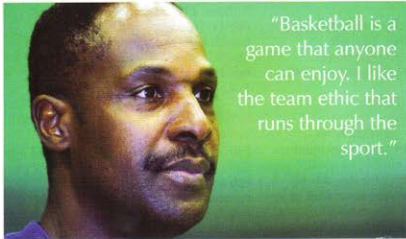
"So that was always my primary focus alongside playing basketball for four years at the Methodist University in North Carolina. It was an extremely competitive league and a high standard."

A quick internet search shows that Clarence was a top rebounder for

the university between 1975-79. His favoured position was that of "small forward", which should not fool anyone into thinking that he stands anything less than 6ft, and then some, in his stockinged feet. "Size isn't everything in basketball," said Clarence. "If you're close to the basket then there's no doubt it's a big asset but there are many smaller guys who play in different areas of the court. "That's why basketball is a game that anyone can enjoy. I like the team ethic that runs through the sport."

Even though Clarence was a regular for his university team, he never thought of turning professional. "I did have a few NBA scouts talk to me," he said. "But it was pie in the sky. I wasn't good enough. I was focused on teaching and my life was heading in that direction when a friend of mine, David Smith, rang to say he had been contacted by a basketball team in England who were looking for a couple of foreign players. They had asked him to play and he wanted to know if I would go over as well."

The team in question was Derby, an ambitious, forward-thinking



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basketball franchise whose main aim was to be one of the top teams in the country. Clarence admits to knowing absolutely nothing about Derby. He was given some basic information by David. "It was an absolutely massive, life-changing decision," he said. "We sat down as a family and spoke about the implications. My mom, who had always drilled into me that my education must come first, told me she felt it was something I needed to do. "After that, the decision was made straight away. It was the first time I had ever been outside of the States and I arrived in England with a map of Derby and some information about the climate. Everything was completely different. I encountered roundabouts and all the traffic was on the wrong side of the road. October turned out to be the warmest month of that year – I did find it difficult to adjust."

However, Clarence soon found that the warmth of his welcome made him feel at home. He got on particularly well with the coach, Chris Squires, and soon felt an important member of the team. "It was important to feel settled personally," said Clarence. "But when you start playing, basketball is just basketball – the court is the same wherever you go. One guy who was particularly important in my staying in England was one of the owners of the team, Tim Rudge. He had a huge impact on me and treated me like family. "I wasn't sure what kind of standard Derby played at but I soon discovered it wasn't as high as my university days. It did make you stand out as a foreign player. I've always believed in the team ethic so I'd keep passing the ball to my team mates and try to encourage them. I remember being criticised for being too generous sometimes. I was told to keep the ball a little longer."

Clarence's plan was to play basketball for the then Derby Bucks for three years before returning to the States and pursuing his teaching career. However he received a call from another team in England. He moved up to Middlesbrough and played for a season but often found himself heading back to Derby in his free time. "I used to travel backwards and forwards a lot," said Clarence. "And then Derby told me they wanted me back. I jumped at the chance. It was during my second stint at Derby that I started teaching. It was 1989 and Noel-Baker accepted my qualifications. A lot of the kids recognised me as a player and it gave me the chance to reach out to some of them. There was one kid who a lot of the teachers didn't have time for who took to the sport and now plays for a team in Belgium. I also helped Steve Astle, who is now a professional golf coach, when he was at school."

Again Clarence encountered many differences between England and his home country. He found the tendency of children to talk in form hard to get used to. "In America we would be silent when the teacher entered the room," he smiled. "I suppose it was a lot stricter and more respectful in the States but I soon grew accustomed to the challenge. "The PE department was doing well and the playing side was as well. I'd started to do some coaching when Mike Horton bought the team. He interviewed me for the position of head coach but I wasn't particularly keen. He wanted a more professional set-up and aimed to move to a purpose-built basketball arena. He was terrific for the side but I wasn't the man he was looking for. "It was a great era. The team became Derby Storm. We had great coaches like Jeff Jones and Bob Donewald, who was a real showman. The standard of the game improved as more foreign players came in, but it was to the detriment of English basketball in my opinion. With so many foreign players how could the game grow?"

Clarence's words have a certain irony considering the state of English football, where some teams now put out sides without an Englishman in the squad. He passionately believes that a limited number of foreign players is good for any sport, as long as there is home-grown talent alongside them. "When Storm folded in 2002 Clarence was spending time coaching the juniors. The fans took control of the second team and rebranded them the Derby Trailblazers with Clarence at the helm as head coach. "It's run like a basketball team should be," said Clarence. "We have a really solid club, right from the grassroots. We have a lot of kids in our mini side and are well represented at under-12s."

Clarence is as enthusiastic as ever about sport, just like that teacher who inspired him as a lad. But does he ever miss home? "Where do I call home now? If people ask me where I'm from, then it's Richmond, Virginia. But I think home is where you are – and I've been in Derby for more than 20 years now."