

A Preview to the 2009 British Baseball Season

Matt Smith ★ 18 April 2009

The 2009 British baseball season begins on Sunday 19 April and it promises to be a great year. The hope and excitement that every new season creates is with us once again, but this time those emotions are joined by a series of structural changes that should make for a more competitive and enjoyable competition, for players and fans alike.

What's new for 2009?

We shall need to get used to a new Northern League structure this year and a cleverly reconfigured postseason. A number of teams have changed leagues in the South and we will be welcoming several new teams that have joined the British Baseball Federation (BBF) league structure for the first time. Finally, there's a new name for the final championship deciders and they will be played under a new tournament format.

Northern League re-structured

The main change to the regular season schedule has come in the north. In recent years, most British divisions have contained northern and southern sections and representatives from each area met in the Final 4s tournament.

The Northern Senior League have decided to eliminate the divisions in their section this year, running instead a single 'super league' that will hopefully ensure all teams get to play a decent amount of games. The Northern Conference will consist of ten teams and it looks each will play twenty-six league games. The top six teams at the end of the season will qualify for the postseason, although none of the Northern teams will form part of the top-tier of British baseball (the NBL) this year.

Southern League team changes

The Herts Falcons followed their 2008 AAA victory by being promoted to the National Baseball League (South). The Herts Baseball Club will retain a presence at the second level of British competition, however, with the introduction of a fourth adult team to their organization: the Herts Eagles.

The Eagles will be joined in AAA by the Bournemouth Sharks and the Sidewinders (based in Enfield) who make the step up from AA, while the Windsor Bears move in the opposite direction. The Thames Valley Bisons and the Croydon Pirates III have been promoted from A to AA, with the latter taking the place of the Croydon Pilots (previously Pirates II) who will not be competing in 2009.

There are two new teams in the Midlands League. The Alconbury Braves and the Mildenhall Bulldogs both hail from towns including United States Airforce camps and they will continue the USAF's long-established involvement in British baseball. The London Marauders also debut in the A League.

New postseason format

Just as the regular season has undergone several changes, the postseason format has also been overhauled. Ten teams will qualify automatically for the National Baseball Championship (NBC), re-named from the Final 4s title of previous years. Those teams will be joined by a further six determined by an additional playoff round that has been reintroduced to the calendar.

The NBC will be held over two weekends at the end of August and the beginning of September. Each of the four NBC competitions will be played under a new 'double-elimination' format, as seen most recently in the World Baseball Classic.

The Southern and Midlands leagues

The Southern part of senior British baseball includes four tiered leagues and one Midlands League.

National Baseball League (South)

The top tier of British baseball includes five teams in 2009. Each team will play twenty-four, seven-inning games, scheduled as Sunday double-headers. The top four teams will all advance automatically to the NBC where they will compete for the NBL Championship.

Teams	2008 win-loss
Bracknell Blazers	5-19
Croydon Pirates	5-19
Herts Falcons	21-3 (AAA South) - AAA Champions
London Mets	23-1 - NBL Champions
Richmond Flames	15-9 - NBL Runner-up

Table 1. The NBL (South) line-up

AAA (South)

The second tier of British baseball in the south contains ten teams divided into two pools. Each team will play twenty-six, seven-inning games; four each against their pool rivals and two against each of the teams in the other pool. As in the NBL, the games are played as Sunday double-headers.

The two AAA (South) pool winners will automatically qualify for the NBC, where they will compete against the top two teams from the Northern Conference for the AAA crown.

AAA (South) Pool 1	
Teams	2008 win-loss
Bournemouth Sharks	13-2 (AA South)
Bristol Badgers	8-17
Burgess Hill	14-9
Oxford Kings	18-8 - AAA Runner-up
Southampton Mustangs	15-11

Table 2. The AAA (South) Pool 1 line-up

AAA (South) Pool 2	
Teams	2008 win-loss
Essex Arrows	16-10
Herts Eagles	(2009 debut year)
London Metros	18-8
Richmond Knights	9-17
Sidewinders	12-2 (AA South)

Table 3. The AAA (South) Pool 2 line-up

Midlands

The Midlands is a separate five-team league that has been allocated a space between AAA and AA by the British Baseball Federation in 2009. Each team will play twenty games. A team will play two, seven-inning double-headers and one nine-inning game against each of their four league rivals.

Teams	2008 win-loss
Alconbury Braves	(2009 debut year)
Birmingham Maple Leafs	18-4 - Midlands Champions
Leicester Blue Sox	4-18
Mildenhall Bulldogs	(2009 debut year)
MK Bucks*	12-10

Table 4. The Midlands line-up. *The MK Bucks played as the Northampton Baseball Club in 2008.

Four of the Midlands teams will qualify for the postseason. The division winner will automatically qualify for the AA League National Baseball Championship, while the second-place team will go through to the AA League playoff. The third and fourth-place teams will both move on to the A League playoff, where they will face the sixth and fifth-place teams from the Northern Conference.

AA (South)

This is a six-team league in which each team plays twenty games. A team will play two nine-inning games and one double-header (seven-innings per game) against each of the five other teams.

No team from this league will automatically qualify for the NBC. The top two teams will qualify for the playoffs. The league winner will face the fourth-place team from the Northern Conference; the runner-up will face the second-place team from the Midlands League.

The winners of those two games will go on to the AA Championship at the NBC where they will take on the top team from the Midlands and the third-place team from the Northern Conference.

Teams	2008 win-loss
Brentwood Stags	5-10
Croydon Pirates III	10-2 (A South)
Herts Hawks	7-7
Kent Mariners	8-7
Thames Valley Bisons	7-5 (A South)
Windsor Bears	5-21 (AAA South)

Table 5. The AA (South) line-up

A (South)

The A League contains nine teams in all, split into three even pools. Each team will play twelve nine-inning games, made up of three games against each of their two pool rivals and one game against each of the other six A teams. The A League structure is shown below in Table 6.

As with the AA League, no A League team will automatically qualify for the NBC. Instead, four teams will qualify for the playoff round. The three pool winners will all advance and they will be joined by the second-place team with the best winning percentage, who will go through as the wild card.

A (South) Pool 1		A (South) Pool 2		A (South) Pool 3	
Teams	2008 win-loss	Teams	2008 win-loss	Teams	2008 win-loss
Bracknell Blazers II	6-6	Braintree Rays	6-7	Herts Raptors	3-9
Guildford Mavericks	4-6	Essex Archers	3-10	London Marauders	(2009 debut year)
Southampton Mustangs II	6-6	Old Timers	9-3	Richmond Dragons	6-9 - (AA South)

Table 6. The A (South) line-up

Northern Conference

The Northern Conference consists of one ten-team league. Full details about the league structure are not available at the time of writing, but it appears as though each team will play twenty-six, seven-inning games, scheduled as thirteen double-headers.

Teams	2008 win-loss
Bolton Robots of Doom	9-13 (AA North)
Halton Jaguars	13-11 (AAA North)
Harrogate Tigers	(Details not published)
Humber Pilots	13-9 (AAA North)
Liverpool Trojans	2-20 (NBL North)
Manchester A's	14-8 (AA North)
Manchester Torrent	(Independent team - part of Manchester Baseball Club)
Menwith Hill Patriots	12-8 (NBL North)
Oldham North Stars	1-21 (AA North)
Sheffield Bladerunners	12-12 (AAA North)

Table 7. The Northern Conference line-up

The different levels of play that will perhaps be found in the Conference this year are taken into account in the postseason qualification structure. The top two teams will go through to the AAA Championship, the third and fourth-place teams will be part of the AA postseason and the fifth and sixth-place teams part of the A postseason.

A 'Knockout Cup' will also add an extra feature to Northern baseball in 2009, providing a mini mid-season competition in July.

The Postseason

Twenty-two of the forty-five teams will make the postseason. Ten will automatically qualify for the National Baseball Championship (NBC) as a direct result of their regular season performances, while the other twelve will play in an additional playoff round for the final six places.

Playoff stage - Sunday 23 August

The playoff stage relates to the AA and A championships and they should provide a great day of baseball. Six nine-inning games will be held across the country, played with an intensity only produced by 'sudden death' contests.

Two games will decide which teams take the final two AA League Championship spots. The second-place team from the Midlands will face the second-place team from the AA (South) and the top team from the AA (South) will take on the fourth-place team from the Northern Conference.

For the A championship, all four spots in the NBC will be decided by the playoff stage results. The Northern Conference and the Midlands League will compete for two of the places. The fifth-place team from the North take on the fourth-place team from the Midlands and the third-place team from the Midlands face the sixth-place team from the North.

The A (South) representatives will battle for the other two championship positions. The pool winner with the best record will face the wildcard winner, while the other two pool winners meet for the final position.

The National Baseball Championship

The British baseball season comes to a head at the NBC. Four championships will be decided over two weekends: the NBL, the AAA League, the AA League and the A League.

The first weekend takes place on 29-30 August and will see the NBL and the A champions crowned. The AAA and AA champions will bring the domestic baseball season to a close over the following weekend (5-6 September). The winner of each league will be determined by a four-team, six-game tournament using the 'double elimination' format.

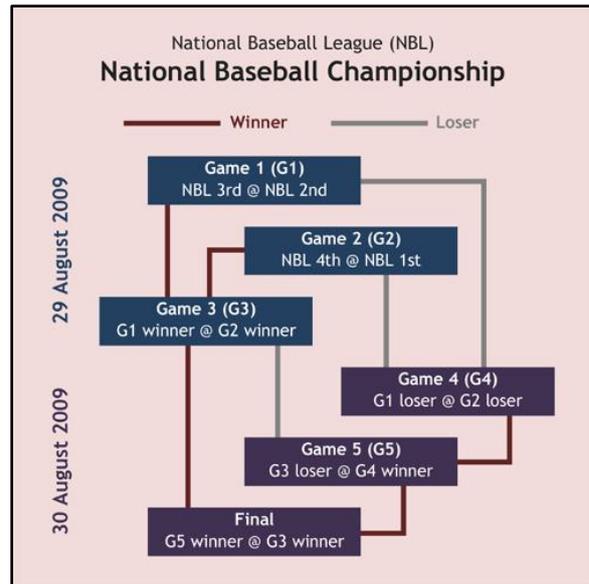


Figure 1. How the 'double elimination' format will work in the NBL Championship final tournament.

Figure 1 shows how this will work for the NBL. The winners of the first two games meet in Game Three, with the winner of that game qualifying for the final. The losers of the first two games meet in Game Four with the loser going home. The winner will take on the Game Three loser with the winner of this game making the final.

In the top three leagues, the first five games will all be played over seven-inning games and the final played over nine innings. All games in the A League championship will be seven-inning affairs.

Further details and acknowledgements

Fixtures, league tables and the full NBC structure can all be found on the British Baseball Federation website (<http://www.britishbaseball.org/>). Statistics for the Southern section are compiled and published by the Great Britain Baseball Scorers Association (<http://www.gbbsa.org.uk/index.html>). Thanks go to Joe Gray of the GBBSA (and BaseballGB) for producing the Figure 1 diagram.



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