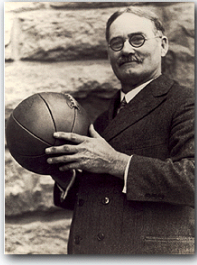


YMCA Spiritual Legacy Series

James Naismith – Inventor of Basketball



James Naismith. Born near Almonte, Ontario on November 6, 1861. Orphaned at age nine, when his parents contracted typhoid fever while working in the milling community. the Naismith children were left under the care of their uncle, Peter Young.

James learned early many lessons in honesty, initiative, independence, and ruggedness. Uncle Peter put great stock in reliability and self-reliance. When James was sent into the field or the woods with a team of horses, he was expected to do the assigned job without asking for help. If trouble arose, he was depended upon to take care of it himself.

Education and Influences: After graduation from McGill University (he was cited on the Prize and Honor List for having passed the Bachelor of Arts in Honors in philosophy and Hebrew) James enrolled in Presbyterian College theological school. To finance his education he accepted an appointment as instructor of physical education in the gymnasium at McGill. As a student in a theological program, he studied hard and became involved in extracurricular religious activities such as the Missionary Society.

Although James won theological scholarships, he dismayed colleagues and professors by continuing his involvement in athletics. He played lacrosse - a sport occasionally referred to at the time as "legalized murder", and rugby - a hard hitting sport, which some considered a tool of the devil. James was advised to leave the evils of the athletic life and devote himself to books and Christian duties. James' views of athletics differed from those of his instructors. He continued his involvement with sports.

During a rugby game in his senior year in seminary, a player on James's team uttered some profanity, then apologized to James explaining "I forgot you were there." These words changed the course of James' life. From this remark he began to play with the idea of helping men through athletics and the ministry.

Backstory: In the late 1880s D. L. Moody convened his annual Northfield conferences during the summer near his home in Massachusetts. Moody attracted hundreds of college YMCA leaders annually to his meetings, which combined Bible teaching and discussion with rigorous activity and athletic competition. All-American Amos Alonzo Stagg of Yale, later the most successful college football coach of the first half of the twentieth century, was in charge of the athletic activities, and Moody and fellow evangelicals instructed the YMCA leaders in how most effectively to return to their campuses and use their athletic prowess as a means to attract converts to Jesus.

Out of these conferences, not incidentally, arose the Student Volunteer Movement and its "watchword" of "Reaching the world for Christ in this generation."

Out of these conferences also arose Springfield College as a permanent successor to Moody's summer meetings, given to training YMCA leaders who would skillfully combine athleticism and evangelism.

In the late summer of 1890, after spending some time learning about the YMCAs in Canada and the U.S., James traveled to Springfield to enroll at the YMCA Training school. Here he would take courses that emphasized spiritual and physical development.

When James Naismith applied on May 27, 1889, to be a

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student at the YMCA Training School, he answered this question among others: "What is the work of a YMCA Physical Director?" He answered, "To win men for the Master through the gym."

While at the YMCA training school, James took and taught various courses, and played rugby for the YMCA. His job at Springfield was to train men for ministry in the growing Sunday school movement and the similarly expanding YMCA.

Basketball is Born: Under orders from Dr. Luther Gulick, head of Physical Education at the School for Christian Workers. Naismith had 14 days to create an indoor game that would provide an "athletic distraction" for a rowdy class through the brutal New England winter. Naismith's invention didn't come easily. Getting close to the deadline, he struggled to keep the class' faith. His first intention was to bring outdoor games indoors, i.e., soccer and lacrosse. These games proved too physical and cumbersome. At his wits' end, Naismith recalled a childhood game that required players to use finesse and accuracy to become successful. After brainstorming this new idea, Naismith developed basketball's original 13 rules and consequently, the game of basketball.

The game took off. In January 1892 Naismith published the rules, including prohibitions against "holding, pushing, shouldering, striking, tackling, or tripping," in the training school paper. By 1896 the game had reached England, France, and Brazil; Australia, China, and India soon followed. Ironically, by 1897 the game had grown so popular in North America that YMCA facilities started banning it—hotshot teams were monopolizing the gyms. At the 1936 Berlin games, basketball became the first team sport in Olympic competition.

Legacy: Naismith later applied to be director of physical education at the University of Kansas, a job he held until his retirement in 1937. In recommending Naismith for the position, A.A. Stagg described him as the "inventor of basketball, a medical doctor, a Presbyterian Minister, a teetotaler, an all-around athlete, a non-smoker and the owner of a vocabulary without cuss words." No wonder basketball refs penalize technical fouls.

*Rev. Tom Welch
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