

JIM NAISMITH, THE MAN

By Raymond P. Kaighn

(A fellow student)

AN ORPHAN LAD stood on the frozen bank of a Canadian river watching the other boys skate. He was too poor to buy a pair of skates and too proud to ask his uncle to buy them for him. But he was out there skating the next day with a home-fashioned pair he had constructed out of a couple of old files firmly set in strips of hickory wood. That resourceful mind which dealt effectively with necessity as it arose was the same that gave the world of sport and recreation the game of basketball.

Much has been written regarding the birth of basketball, which was conceived to meet a need for a game that could be played in a limited space, that would have the vigor and thrill of football or lacrosse but without quite so much bodily risk, and that would be highly interesting to spectators. But what of the man Jim Naismith, granting that he had an inventive mind and that he was the father of the most popular game in the world, now enjoying its Golden Jubilee?

The writer was a student at the Y.M.C.A. Training School in Springfield, Massachusetts, at the time Jim sprang his brain child on an expectant group of fellow students who had little enthusiasm for mass calisthenics after a wonderful season of football under the leadership of Lonnie Stagg. That same Stagg created out of a total student body of less than forty (not more than a half dozen of whom had ever had a football in their hands) a team that scored on Harvard and Yale—an unprecedented feat for a small college in those days. It also rolled up creditable scores, ties, and victories over Amherst, Williams, Trinity, and other schools with ten, twenty, and more times the enrollment of the Springfield Training School. Next to Stagg himself, the mainstay of the team was Jim Naismith at center. At the beginning of the nineties lots of "beef" at center was considered orthodox and essential. The players that Jim faced through two strenuous seasons—and he played the whole time in every game—outweighed him from twenty to fifty pounds. Any sense of superiority any one of them entertained quickly evaporated after the first ball was snapped. (The ball was "snapped" in those years, not passed or thrown back from between the legs of the center.) A hundred and sixty-odd pounds of concentrated T.N.T. was Jim Nai-

smith, with a broad strip of adhesive tape about his head to hold back his ears from being brushed off, the gleam of battle in his eyes, his bristling mustache and determined jaw aggressively set—he was a combination of mad bull and a bunch of wild-cats! He never played dirty ball, always kept within the rules of the game and woe betide any center opposite him who tried to do otherwise.

As a member of that football squad I came to know Jim intimately, not only on the playing field but also in contacts three times a day at the training table which, at the close of the football season, was converted into an eating club with no change in personnel. The hour about the table was often tumultuous with arguing. Jim loved to start an argument. His eyes would snap and he would chuckle as he got us stirred up. Usually it was something that touched our patriotism. As a Canadian with Scotch-Irish background he was ardently pro-British, and his comments about our national heroes of Revolutionary days would always start a near riot. Once excitement rose to the stage where taking Jim out and rolling him in the snow was proposed, but the idea was abandoned when Jim readily acquiesced to our trying it.

He had had theological training in Canada, but gave up the idea of going into the regular ministry when he saw in physical education an opportunity for serving his fellow men from the physical and recreational approach. He did preach occasionally. Once, when the day before in a football game he had gotten a couple of beautiful black eyes, his appearance in the pulpit was a bit startling to his congregation! His sermons were thoughtful and practical and delivered without much oratorical effect. Jim was a naturally good teacher and did a good job with his subjects in the Training School. He enjoyed his classroom work and his classes enjoyed him. He never minded being disagreed with, and the more that were drawn into an argument the better he liked it. He might have made a fair lawyer, but it would have spoiled an outstanding leader and exponent of physical education, a professorship and head of a department, which position he held for many years at the University of Kansas.

In spite of Jim's thorough "he-mannishness" there was a tender and sentimental side to his nature that broke through in many unaffected and simple