

An Early Day Basket Ball Player

Mr. Shiras Recalls His Experiences as a Member of a Seven-Man Team When Football Regalia Was the Style. He Knew Game's Inventor Well.

By Tom Shiras.

Turn back 42 years of basket ball history and look at the picture. It is not at all like the one seen today. Then there were seven men on a team: two forwards, two backs (now called guards), a center center and a right and left center. The court had three sections, the middle one for the centers, the other two for the opposing backs and forwards. There was a large circle in the middle section from which the center centers leaped for the ball at the toss-up; a foul was called on any player stepping over any section line.

Step into the dressing room 42 years ago. Opposing teams are donning regalia for the fray. A strong odor of dry, stiff clothes, drenched many times with perspiration is noticeable. Heavy football pants, wool jerseys, wool stockings and heavy rubber-soled gym shoes are scattered about. They comprised the regulation uniform, and it was needed in the Missouri Valley in those days, for the game then was a rough, slam-bang affair.

A few years later, when the teams were reduced to five men, court lines were eliminated and the men played all over the court, speed became more essential. Football pants were replaced by shorts, stockings were tossed aside; this has been the universal uniform ever since.

Basket ball was brought out by Dr. James Naismith, in the East in 1891. It was the hard fighting Middle Western teams that developed the game. In the beginning, the Eastern teams played a slow, defensive game, which lacked glamour. The Western teams started the game with rougher, slam-bang, aggressive play, which made it more spectacular and exciting for the fans.

Dr. Naismith went to the Kansas University as physical director in 1898, from the Y. M. C. A. College at Springfield, Mass., and it is probable that his presence in the Middle West helped popularize the game, especially in the Missouri Valley.

Kansas City, Mo., was one of the first large cities in the United States to develop a basket ball complex. In 1895, four years after Dr. Naismith brought out the game in the East, it was becoming a popular sport in that city.

The writer started to play basket ball with the Star-Pathfinder Bicycle Club in Kansas City, in 1895, and was active in the sport for 10 years. The bicycle craze was at its peak then, and everyone rode a wheel. The Star-Pathfinders had their track, road racing teams and century riders, and went in strong for that sport during the summer. The winter months were devoted to basket ball and indoor track meets.

If my recollection is right, the first team organized in the Missouri Valley was the Y. M. C. A. Tigers in Kansas City. It wasn't long before they had someone to play with. Teams were organized by the turn-vereins, K. C. Athletic Club, high school, several companies in the Third Regiment, Missouri National Guards, and the amateur sporting element of the town began to sit up and take notice.

Adjacent small towns and schools in the Missouri Valley fell in line. The strong teams in those days were the M. W. A. team, K. U., Independence, Mo., Y. M. C. A. Tigers, Haskell Institute, Wentworth Military Academy, William Jewell and Missouri University.

Popularity was shot into the game late in the nineties, when the teams were reduced to five men each. If there had been any doubt in the minds of members of the sports fraternity that the game would not gain national recognition, it was dispelled then. It became a faster, more spectacular game and the fan lines grew.

The bicycle craze began to die late in the nineties and I threw in my lot with the Y. M. C. A. Tigers. Dr. Clarke, physical director, had developed a splendid team and I made the grade with that organization. We won most of the games we played in the city and in the Missouri Valley. We had one rival for supremacy and that was the M. W. A. team at Independence, Mo. This small Missouri city probably developed more good basket ball players in the early history of the game than any other town in the Middle West. At one time



DR. JAMES NAISMITH.

Dr. Naismith invented the game of basket ball and officiated at games in which Mr. Shiras played at Kansas City.

"Dutch" Krass and Lambert Dick, forwards on the M. W. A. team, were classed as among the best forwards in the United States. "Fog" Allen, the first college basket ball coach in the United States, started to play the game there and rose to national prominence.

A game between the Y. M. C. A. Tigers and the Independence team would bring out every basket ball fan in the two towns. They came out to see something rough and they generally saw it. Shortly after the Independence team returned from an Eastern tour in which they won every game they played, the Tigers took them on in gym crowded to the doors with enthusiastic fans. Two men were carried off the court that night. An excerpt from an account of this game taken from a clipping from the old Kansas City Journal, gives an idea of how rough games could get in the infancy of the sport:

"The play on the part of both teams was of the rough, slam-bang order, as one umpire seemed disinclined to call fouls. It became worse as the game progressed, and at the finish the fiercest football tactics were employed."

Henry Ashley was captain of the Y. M. C. A. Tigers, and during the early days of the game was one of the most successful in the Missouri Valley. He was playfully called "the dirty little captain," by his teammates, because he would never let a close decision go unchallenged, and he had a menacing manner of shaking his fists in an official's face in an argument.

Dr. Naismith was usually asked to act as an official in every important game played in the Missouri Valley, and the writer has played in numerous games in which he acted in this capacity. I remember the Doctor as a young man of medium build in his late twenties, very spry on his feet, with an unrelenting eye for fouls. Games in which he officiated generally went off smoothly, for he knew the game, and the

players took his word as final. His regulation uniform when acting as an official in a game was a dark, tight woolen jersey and a cap. I wrote "Fog" Allen about him the other day. He replied: "He is 74 now and a little heavier than he was when you knew him, but still very spry on his feet." While I never discussed what he thought about the future of the game, with him, I am sure that even in his wildest conception of what it would develop into, he never dreamed of it becoming a world-wide sport.

In some instances in the infancy of the game in Kansas City, the players purchased their uniforms, but for the most part the team was financed throughout by the organization which they represented. After the game got under real headway, there were plenty of fans who were glad to pay 25 cents to see the boys perform, and gate receipts took care of all expenses.

While strategy was not overlooked in the early days of the game, wind was considered one of the chief essentials of a winning team. Our squad was always long on wind, and could sustain whirlwind play for a full 20-minute half if we had to. We'd generally play our opponents off their feet in the first part of the first half, then proceed to win the game. We developed our wind on a 32-lap indoor track, starting early in the fall. By January 1 the man who couldn't trot and run five miles around that track without stopping didn't look good to the captain.

Most of the college teams were made up of players from the football squads, and it would seem that they would have plenty of wind after football training and a season of football, but we could always make their tongues hang out.

The Kansas City Athletic Club was one of the budding athletic associations in the Missouri Valley in those days, and had a wonderful group of athletics in its membership. They had a crack baseball team, football team, track team, fencing team,

etc., but the Y. M. C. A. Tigers always took them in basket ball. We would rush them off their feet, then run the score as high as we could, knowing it embarrassed them to read the account of the game in the paper next morning. They finally made the Tigers a proposition to take in the whole squad without initiation fees, and it was accepted, the whole bunch going into the club. We played under the name of the Blue Diamonds, and the team made basket ball history in the Middle West. In March, 1905, we defeated the Buffalo German Y. M. C. A., then world champions, in a series of games at the convention hall. My recollection is that 7,000 fans paid admission to see the final game.

There were no organized basket ball leagues in the infancy of the game. Late in the fall, the city teams and the college teams in adjacent territory would make up a schedule for the season, and stick pretty well to it. We used to play an average of one game each week. These were usually played on Saturday nights, which gave us a chance to lick our wounds on Sunday, before going back to work on Monday morning. Later, leagues were organized in the city. Early in the 1900's colleges organized the sport.

I made my first trip to Mountain Home, in the Arkansas Ozarks, in 1901, and kept coming and going for five years. Basket ball would pull me back to Kansas City when the season opened in January, and black bass would pull me back to Arkansas in the spring. The bass and Arkansas finally won in 1905.

Jesse James Jr., son of the famous Missouri bandit, was a basket ball player, playing as back on the Y. M. C. T. Tigers. When I played with Star-Pathfinders, I played against him. When I went over to the Tigers, he was a teammate. At that time he was studying law in Kansas City. He was a fine young chap, but had a temper like dry powder. I played forward with Bill Middleton, on the Star-Pathfinder five. Bill stood six feet six, weighed 250 pounds and was all bone and muscle. He had hands as large as hams. One night in a game at the "Y," a spark flew into Jesse's powder pan and he exploded on Bill. The latter caught him by the neck with one hand and by the crotch with the other and tossed him head first into the dumbbell rack. Yes—the game went on with two substitutes.

"Fog" Allen, now director of athletics at Kansas University, was an old teammate of mine. He played center on the K. C. A. C. Blue Diamonds. I played forward. His brother, H. B. (Pete) Allen, played back. The Allen family are natives of Independence, Mo. "Fog" has four brothers. I can't recall all their names now, but they were all basket ball players when they were young. The five brothers organized a basket ball team and called it the Allen Bros. basket ball team. After the team disbanded "Fog" came to Kansas City, and with his brother, Pete, threw in with the K. C. A. C. Blue Diamonds. After the Blue Diamonds won the series from the world's champions, "Fog" was credited by many basket ball authorities as being the best center in the United States. Whether he was may be open to argument, but take it from an old teammate, he was a great center. Graceful, quick, with a rapid-fire brain, and eyes and a steady pair of arms that seldom failed him when he tossed a free throw.

In 1907, Baker University at Baldwin, Kan., began to speculate on what a coach could do with a basket ball team, and engaged "Fog" in that capacity. He also coached Haskell Institute, at Lawrence, then went to Kansas University, where he has been since.

I wasn't the only boy Arkansas coaxed from the old Blue Diamond squad. Charley Wilson of Heber Springs, is an old Blue Diamond man, and saw the game when it was wearing its short pants. The only reason Charley is at Heber Springs is that he thinks black bass in Red river hit harder and fight longer than they do in the White river.

That, too, is a question open to argument.