Basketball a Triumph of Dr. Naismith's Logic.

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By Theodore M. O'Leary.

WERE Dr. James A. Naismith alive today he would probably approve of the fact that the United States postoffice department in marking the centennial of his birth with a commemorative stamp, to be issued Monday, chose to place on that stamp a design showing a hand, a basketball and a goal rather than a likeness of Dr. Naismith. For during his lifetime he was happy to acknowledge that the game he had invented had become more important than its inventor.

Dr. Naismith was of course proud to have invented basketball. But he regarded it as simply another episode in a life devoted primarily to promoting physical fitness. Long before the government and many of our leading citizens got stirred up over the physical softness of Americans, Dr. Naismith was preaching the virtues of systematic and vigorous exercise. Before Theodore Roosevelt extolled "the strenuous life" Dr. Naismith was living it.

When he set out to invent a game of movement that could be played indoors, Dr. Naismith recognized the fact that because the game would be played on a wood floor much of the roughness of games such as football would have to be eliminated. But somewhat reluctantly he devised a game that lacked even the roughness of rugby, which he had played for many years beginning as a youth in his native Canada.

He Enjoyed Fencing.

Dr. Naismith said frankly in later years that he thought wrestling was better exercise, from the physical development standpoint, than basketball. He also fancied fencing. Almost anyone who ventured into old Robinson gymnasium on the campus of the University of Kansas during Dr. Naismith's lifetime was likely to see him off in one corner of the lower floor of the gym instructing a small group of fencers.

Upstairs in the main gymnasium Dr. F. C. Allen would be drilling the Kansas basketball team. Dr. Naismith never dropped in on those practice sessions. He was too busy with his fencers, his parallel bar performers and the file of cards on which he recorded the physical characteristics of generations of K. U. students.

His attitude toward basketball had been indicated in the remark he made to Dr. Allen in 1908, when Allen said he was going to Baker university to coach the basketball team. Dr. Naismith was incredulous. "Why, basketball is just a game you play," he said. "It doesn't need a coach."

Dr. Naismith invented basketball because he was told to do so. He was in 1891 assistant to Dr. Luther Gulick, head of the physical education department at the Y. M. C. A. training college in Springfield, Mass., where the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame is to be dedicated Monday.

The training school students, active youngsters all, rebelled in the winter of 1891 at the diet of physical activity being served up to them. They were bored with twirling Indian clubs and playing tag and three deep, tame fare for those fresh from the football field.

Invented Football Helmet.

Football was a rugged game at Springfield as Dr. Naismith knew. He and A. A. Stagg had played together on one of the Springfield teams which consisted of 11 players and no substitutes. And Dr. Naismith had invented a forerunner of the modern football headgear. It offered but rudimentary protection; its chief purpose being to prevent a player from having his ears torn off.

Led by a truculent young Irishman named Frank Mahan, the students appealed to Dr. Gulick to devise a winter sport which would appeal to vigorous young men. Dr. Gulick, like many a boss before and since, turned the problem over to his assistant, who had remarked, not very originally, a few days before that there was nothing new under the sun; that new things in the world are simply a combination of old elements. Here, Dr. Gulick told Dr. Naismith, is your chance to prove that remark. Give us something new out of the old.

Dr. Naismith recalled later that he first tried to modify some of the then existing games but without success.

"I then left out the idea of any individual game," he related, "and began to think of the fundamental principles of all games. I discovered that in all team games some kind of a ball was used. The next step was to appreciate the fact that football was rough because you had to allow the defense to tackle because the offense ran with the ball. If the offense didn't have an opportunity to run with the ball, there would be no necessity for tackling and we would thus eliminate roughness. This is the fundamental principle of basketball."

Why Baskets Are Round.

The next step was to figure out what the offense should do with the ball. First Dr. Naismith thought of putting goals on the floor at each end of the court through which the ball would be thrown. But that would put a premium on throwing the ball with great force, not desirable in an indoor game, and would lead to congestion around the goals. It occurred to Dr. Naismith that if the goals were so placed that the ball had to be thrown in an arc, the premium would be taken off sheer hard throwing. Also if the goals were above the players they couldn't interfere with the ball once it was launched. To get the ball in position for a shot at the goal it could be passed from player to player.

At that point basketball almost didn't get born because the janitor at the gym, a man named Stebbins, apparently had a box fetish. He saved boxes but he didn't like to part with any of them and when Naismith asked him for a couple to put on poles to serve as goals, Stebbins said nothing doing. If he had parted with a couple of his boxes we would probably have square goals instead of round ones.

Finally Stebbins agreed to trot home and get a couple of peach baskets, which apparently didn't affect him the way old boxes did. He and Naismith nailed the baskets to the balcony at each end of the court. Naismith called in the physical education class, threw them a soccer ball and told them to go to it; they did and men, women and children have been going to it ever since.

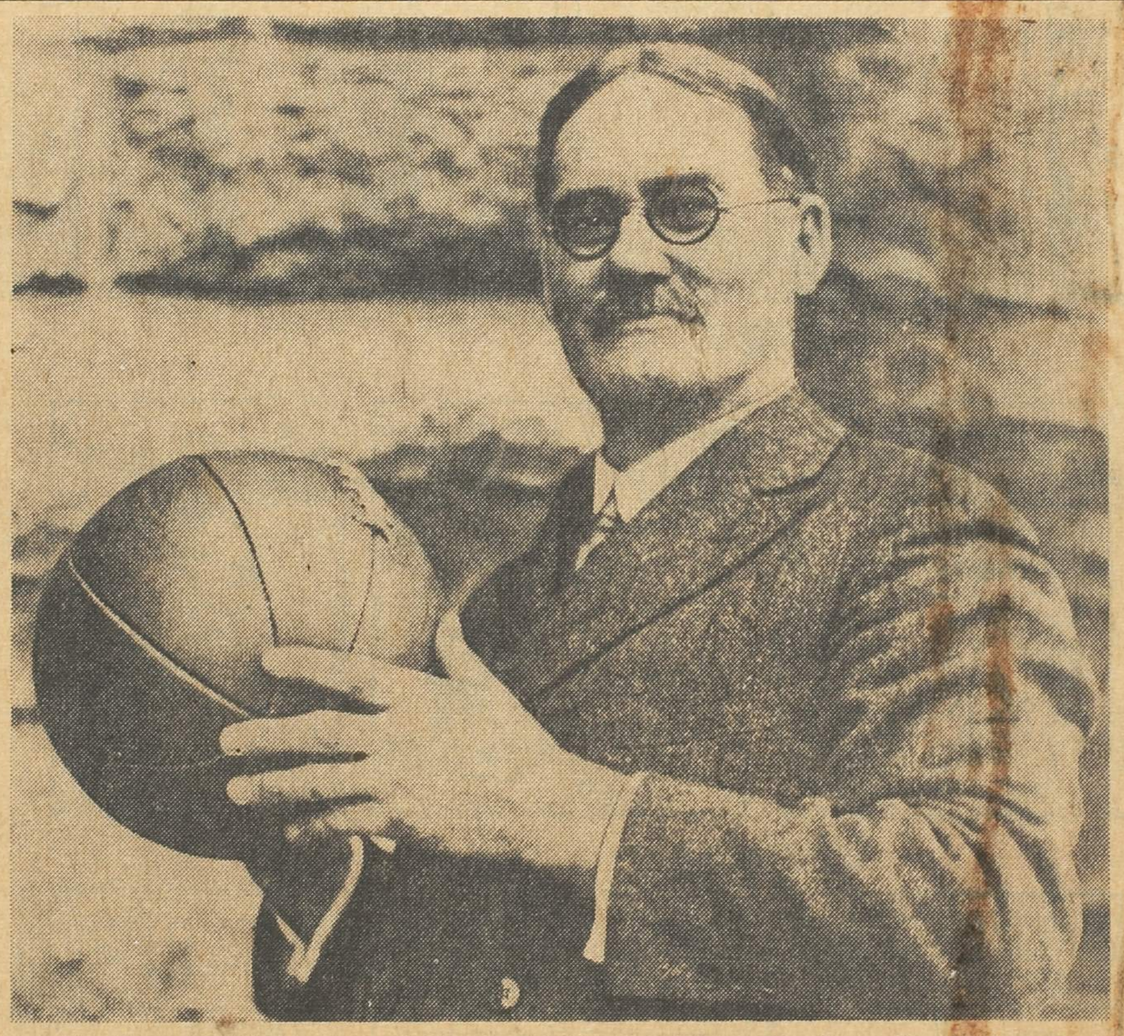
The Center Jump.

After a few days the players and Naismith noted a couple of flaws in the game. Because it didn't seem safe for the referee to venture among the milling players (there were nine on a side simply because there were 18 in the class), he stood on the sidelines and started play by throwing the ball onto the court. But from that distance his aim wasn't too good and usually one team got an unfair advantage. So it was decided to let him go onto the court and toss the ball up between two players as he does now.

The other problem was getting the ball out of the basket after a goal. At first a spectator was induced to stay in the balcony and dart from end to end, removing the ball from the goals. He finally got bored and headed for home. Then stepladders were used and later a wand to dislodge the ball. Next somebody had the brilliant idea of knocking the bottoms out of the baskets. Not until 1898 were iron rims with nets attached put into use.

Dr. Naismith's basic concept was so sound that of the 13 basic rules he worked out, 12 of them were essentially still in effect 50 years later. He himself was never inflexible about rules changes. To him there was nothing sacred about his concept of the game. He personally would have liked to limit the dribbler to only one bounce to promote ball handling but he exerted no great pressure to bring that about.

In the 1930s when stalling tactics threatened the popularity of the game, Dr. Naismith argued that it was the responsibility of the defensive team to stop stalling by going after the ball. For that reason, he opposed the 10-second rule, one of the basic changes made in the game, which provided that the team with the ball must pass from its backcourt into its forecourt within 10 seconds or give up the ball.



Dr. James R. Naismith and "Protege," the Ball Which His Game Has Made a Part of the Growing-up of Almost Every American, and a Livelihood for Some. He Was a Vigorous Man in His Sixties When This Picture Was Made.

A Trustful Man.

Mostly Dr. Naismith dismissed the matter of the rules as of no great consequence. He once told a K. U. colleague, Dr. Edwin Elbel, that he had played rugby for 20 years and had never set eyes on a rule book. A sportsman himself, he had faith in the sporting instincts of others and was prone to believe that most fouls in basketball were either accidental or the result of misunderstandings.

That trust in others carried over into Dr. Naismith's academic life. He was a member of the K. U. faculty from 1898 until 1937 when he retired, two years before he died. For many of those years he taught a class in hygiene required of all freshmen men. It wasn't, in all honesty, a very stimulating class; about all you had to do to pass was show up and answer the roll call. On far too many occasions 90 men answered "here" when fewer than 50 were actually on hand. If Dr. Naismith noted the discrepancy he never so indicated.

Basketball has now become an international game. It is an Olympic event and is played in virtually every country. In the library of his Lawrence home Dr. Naismith happily displayed rule books from some 50 countries. In one year 10,000 copies of a basketball guide were sold in China. Twenty years ago a government bureau estimated that 18 million persons were playing basketball, 15 million of them in this country, with 80 million spectators annually.

The numbers have doubtless increased vastly. To get an idea of the hold basketball has on American youth, just note the number of garages with iron hoops attached, at which assorted sized youngsters fire scuffed basketballs.

Kansas City a Focus.

The impact of Dr. Naismith's invention has been particularly strong in Kansas City. For many years the National A. A. U. tournament was played in old Convention hall. The N. A. I. A. tournament now is played here every year and the N. C. A. A. finals have been held here more often than in any other city. The annual Big Eight Christmas tournament is a bright spot on the local sporting scene. Now Kansas City has a professional team, the Steers, in the new American Basketball league, introducing still another aspect of play here.

Except for some royalties from a basketball bearing his name, Dr. Naismith never profited by as much as a cent from his invention. It is staggering to think what he might have collected on a royalty of say a nickel for each game at which an admittance fee was charged.

In 1936 during a designated week a penny from each admittance charge at games throughout the nation went into a fund to send Dr. Naismith to the Berlin Olympics, where basketball became for the first time a part of the international games. When he went back to Lawrence he said he could have received no greater compensation than seeing his game played by young men of so many nations.

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