

Bibliography, Dr. James Naismith

The late Dr. James A. Naismith is best known for his invention of basketball, considered today the only major sport originating in America.

Strange as it seems the fact that he authored a sport which was to sweep the fancy of both competitors and fans, gave him less satisfaction than his 39 years of teaching at the University of Kansas.

Dr. Naismith regarded his invention of the game as an episode in a long career devoted to the improvement of the physical conditions of succeeding generations. Naturally, he observed the growth of basketball with satisfaction but he always remained a great deal more calm about the game than did thousands of players, spectators and coaches.

Dr. Naismith thought wrestling was better exercise than basketball. Personally, he would rather go into a corner of Robinson Gym at KU and instruct a couple of eager youngsters in the art of fencing than watch a 100 games of basketball. He drew as much pleasure from the sight of a clever tumbler as he did from watching such Kansas all-Americans as Paul Endacott and Al Peterson perform on the hardwoods.

While experts sat up late thinking of ways to amend the rules of basketball, Dr. Naismith, who died November 28, 1939, at the age of 78, worked away at tabulations of the comparative measurements of the various freshman classes which entered the University.

Those measurements, as well as various other figures for different phases of physical man, Dr. Naismith tabulated mostly to gratify his own curiosity. He seldom published any of his results, and a visitor at his office would see hundreds of dusty cards in and on top of filing cases.

There was a time when Naismith even thought it foolish for a grown man to actually propose to devote his life to the game he invented. About 1910, Dr. F. C. "Phog" Allen, now one of the country's most illustrious hoop mentors, told Naismith he was going to Baker University at Baldwin, Kansas, to coach basketball. The good doctor was incredulous.

"Why Forrest," he exclaimed, "basketball is just a game to play. You don't coach it."

Basketball was responsible for what Dr. Naismith regarded as the greatest experience of his life. In 1936, as a gesture of honor to the game's inventor, one week of the season was set aside and a penny from each admittance charge went into a fund to send Dr. and Mrs. Naismith to the Olympic Games in Berlin where basketball was to be played for the first time in the International Games.

Illness prevented Mrs. Naismith from making the trip, but her husband saw the United States win the first Olympic championship and was suitably honored and recognized for his tremendous contribution to the sports world.

Upon his return home he told a friend that seeing the game played by teams from many nations was the greatest compensation he could have received for his invention, from which he never profited a cent, except for royalties received from sales of a ball bearing his name.

Dr. Naismith was born in Almonte, Ontario, November 6, 1861. He was graduated from McGill University in Montreal in 1887, and was director of physical education there three years while he studied for the ministry at Presbyterian College.

He decided that he could be of more value in YMCA work than in the pupil so he went to the YMCA training school at Springfield, Mass. There he studied and then moved up to the faculty. The gymnasium at Springfield was the birthplace of basketball during the winter of 1891-1892.

Dr. Luther H. Gulick, head of the physical education department of the school, assigned Dr. Naismith the task of devising some game to occupy the students in the winter months when the weather kept them from playing games outdoors. The father of basketball often recalled how he tried to dodge the assignment, but Gulick was insistent.

As a rugby player, Dr. Naismith started with the idea of incorporating that game into some kind of an indoor contest. Tackling had to be eliminated since it

was too rough for indoor play. Hence, one of the first rules Naismith formulated was that the ball must be passed, not carried.

First he thought of putting boxes at each end of the floor for goals but decided they would be too easily defended. Then he placed the goals above the players' heads. The problem of what to use for goals was solved when someone suggested peach baskets. Since there were 18 players in the class, the first games were played with teams of nine. This was cut to seven and then to five.

Dr. Naismith opposed most of the rules changes since 1925 but always was friendly with his progressive colleague, Dr. Allen.

Naismith left Springfield in 1895 and went to Denver to become physical director of the Denver YMCA. He studied medicine at Gross Medical College in Denver and was graduated in 1898. That year he went to Kansas where he first was director of chapel, a position long since abolished.

Later he became a professor of physical education. He headed the department until 1925, retiring from active teaching in 1937.

As chaplain of the First Kansas Infantry, Dr. Naismith spent four months on the Mexican border in 1916. He engaged in YMCA work in France after the United States entered World War I.

Dr. Naismith was a rugged, sturdy man, and if the matter had been left to him, he might not have taken all of Rugby's roughness out of basketball as he liked rough and tumble physical contests. In his youth he played lacrosse and until the late years of his teaching fenced regularly with his physical education students.

While at Springfield, Naismith played on the same football team with Amos Alonzo Stagg, still the dean of American grid coaches. Dr. Naismith originated the forerunner of the headgear while playing at Springfield, but the first "helmet" didn't protect the head, merely the ears.

Dr. Naismith almost always went to Kansas City on the opening night of the Naismith league, an industrial wheel named in his honor. As long as he was

at KU he attended all of the Jayhawkers' home games.

Yet he never was a conspicuous figure, and a stranger sitting beside the rugged man with the black mustache would never have known that his neighbor was the inventor of the game which was sending ten young men darting furiously while thousands yelled unrestrained encouragement. Dr. Naismith never yelled at a game.
