

Basketball's Birthday

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE - BASKETBALL'S BIRTHDAY
DECEMBER 22, 2016

Invented in the United States by a Canadian in the late 19th century, basketball may be the most American of all sports. Within less than a half century it became the most popular participatory sport in North America. Yesterday was the 125th Birthday of what is often called, "The City Game."

In 1890 James A. Naismith, a young Canadian minister arrived in Springfield, Massachusetts, to study under Dr. Luther Gulick at the Springfield YMCA Training School. Gulick as director of the YMCA physical development programs had led the movement to replace gymnastics with competitive sports. Football and baseball had become very popular at the school, but the winter indoor season continued to feature German and Swedish gymnastics.

In 1891 Gulick challenged his young instructors, including Naismith, to invent a game that could be played indoors in the confined space of a gymnasium, would incorporate the natural movements of the human body, and would appeal to the students of the college.

Naismith took up the challenge and the result was basketball. He started with the notion that it should be a game involving a ball manipulated by the hands, rather than a stick or racket. There would be no running or physical contact, and the ball would be put into play with a center jump, a feature of water polo and rugby. Finally the object of the game would be to get the ball through a goal which, after experimentation, Naismith decided should be elevated and horizontal.

Naismith then posted his thirteen rules of the game in the gym and asked the school custodian, Mr. Stebbins, to provide two boxes for goals. Stebbins had no boxes of proper size and produced instead peach baskets which were fastened to the track balcony in the gym at a height of approximately ten feet. Those who want to raise the basket could point to the fact that the original height was purely accidental rather than an essential element for Naismith.

The first game was played on December 21, 1891, with nine players on each side. Frank Mahan, one of the students, suggested that the new game be called "Naismith Ball," but when the inventor declined the honor, Mahan suggested "basket ball."

Basketball immediately caught the imagination of young men and women. By the end of the century it was being played in YMCA's, colleges, and high schools across the nation. One key to its spread was the YMCA network. Another was the decision by the leading college athletic power, Yale, to take up the game. Rules and equipment rapidly evolved with the addition of dribbling, backboards, five man teams, and the iron rim with cord basket.

Within a year of its invention basketball was the most popular sport of college women, and was being played by class teams, in physical education classes, and in intercollegiate competition. Basketball may have been even more popular at the high school level, with half the states in the nation holding state high school championship competitions for women by the 1920s. Women were attracted by the freedom of movement and the vigorous competition offered in the game.

Senda Berenson of Smith College first introduced basketball to women on campus in the early '90s. Within a few years she had begun to modify the women's game to minimize roughness as well as physical and emotional exertion, and in 1899 under Berenson's urging the Spalding Company published the "official rules" of women's basketball. However for at least another generation acceptance of Berenson's game was resisted, as elements of the men's game were preferred by many of those who played and coached the women's teams. The AAU and many interscholastic leagues were instrumental in retaining the more competitive and physical styles of play.

Despite many changes over the past 125 years basketball remains in its basic concept and structure the same wonderful game invented in Springfield in the late 19th century even as it has become an international game. And so we should pay tribute and say thanks to James A. Naismith for his invention of the Winter Game.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau wishing you all Happy Holidays and reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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