

Meet James Naismith... He Invented Basketball

His Group of Lively Students Needed a Game to Play in the Winter Time, So the Young Instructor Set Out to Fill the Bill

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BECAUSE a lazy janitor didn't take the trouble to throw a couple of old peach baskets into the alley, America's most popular indoor sport was given the name of basketball.

This is what Dr. James Naismith told the writer in Lawrence, Kan., a few weeks ago. And Dr. Naismith should know what he is talking about. He invented the game. He has been teaching boys to play it ever since December, 1891.

Dr. Naismith was sitting on his screened-in front porch reading the Kansas City Star the evening the writer drove up. In Kansas it is wise to screen in the porch in order to keep out flies, mosquitoes and black widow spiders. It is annoying, when trying to read or knit, to keep brushing flies off one's nose or to chase a spider with a swatter.

"Well, you have come some distance," said the doctor as he put aside his newspaper to look at the visitor's card. "By the way, you folks have had some fine teams out in Oregon, both at your university and at your state college."

Here the writer forgot himself for a moment, forgot that he was in the presence of basketball royalty.

"Yes, but the California teams have more money and better jobs to offer our good football players," was explained.

Game's Start Explained

"I wasn't thinking of football, sir," said Dr. Naismith, "I was thinking of your basketball teams."

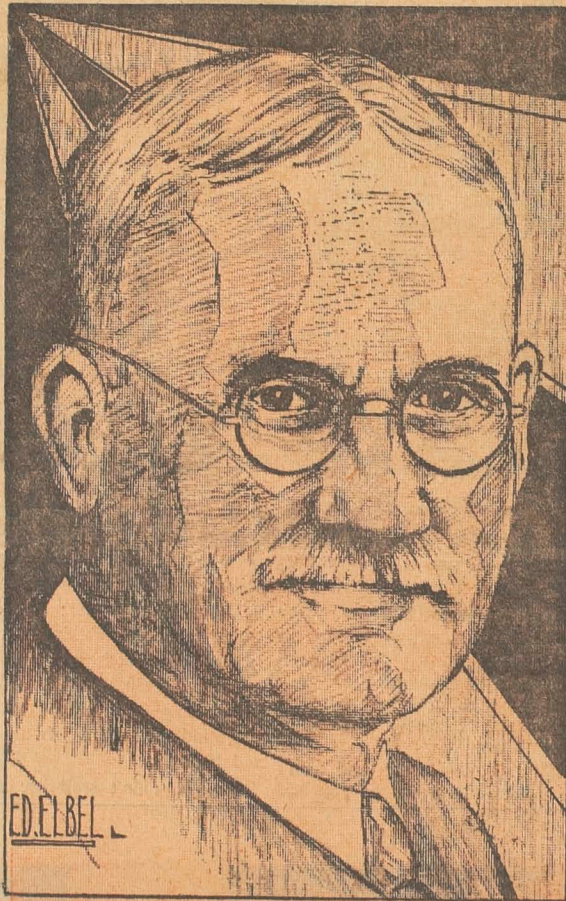
This brought the conversation back to normalcy.

"How did you happen to figure out this great game of basketball, doctor?" was asked quickly, before any more breaks could be made.

"It's rather a long story—have you time to wait?" my host replied.

"All right, I'll begin at the beginning. But first, let me ask you this: Twenty-eight years ago out in your city of Portland there was a very great basketball player. He was known all over the country, but his name has slipped me. I would like to know his name, if any of your friends recall it!

"Now, getting back to your question. In December, 1891, I was teaching in the 'Y' college at Springfield, Mass. We had football teams and baseball teams, as other colleges had in those days. The point was, we knew we needed a game for the winter time. We were all looking for something to fill in that space. Dr. Luther H. Gulick, the president of the school, had



Dr. James Naismith, inventor of basketball.

a new game that they would like if it took me all winter. I began to study all games as a whole. My first thought was we would have to get one in which a ball was used.

Large Ball Preferred

"I realized that with a small ball, more skill is needed. A game in which a small ball is used is more difficult to learn, so fewer boys would play it. And also, the ball is in sight only part of the time.

"But a large ball, that is also light, is easily handled. It can be seen most of the time. American Rugby was then the most interesting game that was being played in the United States, to my way of thinking. So I asked myself, why couldn't you make an indoor sport out of a modified American Rugby game, a new game in which there is both running and kicking?

dering what the professor would try on them next.

"The first man to come to class that morning was Frank Mahan from North Carolina. He was a

football tackle, and a very good player. He had been very difficult to handle in school, and had been the worst fault-finder in my classes. I was anxious to win him to my new-fangled game because I knew if I won him I would have the class. But I didn't have a very promising start. He said, seeing me there:

"'Huh! Another new game!'

Reduced Team Size

"I didn't let on as though I heard him, and when the other boys arrived I picked out two teams, saying to them, 'If this game doesn't work, I'll never try another new one!' At first I had nine men on a team, but reduced this to seven before the first season was over; the next year I reduced the teams to five men each."

Dr. Naismith had been so interested in the narrative that he didn't allow any time for needless questioning. But at this point the writer asked:

"How did the 'peaches' go over?"

"The game was a success from the time the first ball was thrown," proudly declared the inventor. "In a little while, we began talking about a name for it. A game without a name wouldn't be any game at all. Mahan enthusiastically announced that it should be called 'Naismith ball.' I was too shy and modest to allow that name to be given, so I suggested:

"'Why not call it basketball?'

The Name Stuck

"This name took right away. And it has stuck. When I made the suggestion, Mahan said:

"'Well, we have a basket and a ball, and that would be a good name for it.'

"As soon as possible, I had the rules copyrighted, but I've never made a cent out of it. I have a ball that is used by many teams,



A Japanese basketball team touring the United States made a special stop at the University of Kansas to visit Dr. Naismith.

the Naismith ball, and I make something out of that. But the greatest thing I have made is the realization that my game has brought enjoyment and healthful exercise to tens of thousands of our young people!"

In 1895 James Naismith left

Springfield for Denver. In the Colorado city he completed his medical course, and aided in making his new game popular in the columbia commonwealth. In the fall of 1898 he went to the University of

Kansas as physical education instructor.

Needless, of course, to say that Dr. Naismith at once started building up the great basketball teams that so long made the sunflower university famous. These teams held the same position in basketball that "Hurry-Up" Yost's elevens held so long in the football world.

Teaches Two Subjects

"I have been here ever since '98," the host stated. "I am professor of physical education in the university, and have a class in advanced gymnastics and one in fencing. Oh, sure, I coached basketball a while, and still take a look at the boys when they are practicing."

Dr. Naismith proudly announced that his game is now played in 56 different countries, and the book of rules has been translated into all the common European languages, as well as into Greek, Arabic, Turkish, Japanese and Chinese.

"Like most people, I have a hobby," explained the inventor, "and I don't think you could guess what it is. I may be the only fellow you have met in your travels who had such a hobby—I make furniture for fun. I use antique patterns, and I think it takes an expert to tell my stuff from the things that came over in the Mayflower. Come in the house and take a look at some of my 'antiques.' But don't try to put any of them in your pockets for souvenirs."

Dr. Naismith's tables and sideboards and highboys are beautiful; no question about that. But while we were looking at them, he also showed me the manuscript of his autobiography he had just completed. And the epic of the old peach baskets recalls a line in holy writ:

"The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner."