

'THE BASKETBALL MAN'

By Susan Schott

One of the foremost authorities on the history and development of basketball stands a mere 5'1" tall and has played the game only in a high school gym class.

KU alumna Bernice Larson Webb would be a natural to stump the panel on "To Tell the Truth." The soft-spoken, reserved woman might be taken for an English professor, an author, or a mother—all of which she is—but who would guess that she is a wealth of information about the invention and growth of an international sport?

During her years as a KU student Bernice heard a great deal about basketball and its creator, James Naismith. She thought it strange that no one had written a full-length biography of Naismith, and, as a writer, vowed to do it herself. Beginning in 1962, she spent more than nine years researching every aspect of Naismith's long and eventful life. The result is her book *The Basketball Man: James Naismith*, recently released by the University Press of Kansas.

Why did Bernice choose Naismith as her subject? "Because he *deserved* a book written about him," she says. "As the 'father of basketball' he knew international fame, but remained humble. He devoted his life to helping others, and never tried to become wealthy from any of his achievements."

As Bernice tells it, the creation of basketball was no more to Naismith than the fulfillment of an assignment



Dr. James Naismith (left) with Dr. Forrest C. "Phog" Allen, '09.

in a Y.M.C.A. class. As an instructor at the International Y.M.C.A. Training School in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1891, Naismith was temporarily given a recalcitrant gym class and was told by the physical education director, Dr. Luther Gulick, to "do something with it." Naismith promised to give the "incurables" a game to play that they wouldn't forget—something involving maximum physical activity, yet harmless enough to be played indoors. He gathered together an odd assortment of equipment—a soccer ball, two old peach baskets, and a borrowed step ladder—and made almost instant sports history.

Bernice found it fascinating to trace basketball over the years through modifications of the original rules, playing techniques, and equipment. Basketball as first envisioned by Naismith, she says, was a far cry from the type of precision game that is played today. Goals were few and far between, and when one was scored it was necessary to stop the game while an official climbed the stepladder to retrieve the ball from the basket. It didn't dawn on basketball players and officials for a number of years that if they cut a hole in the basket, the ball would fall through!

Basketball has grown much more complicated in many ways. The original 13 rules have been expanded to over 200. A simple penalty box once preceded today's elaborate foul regulations, and originally the scoring of a goal meant one point instead of two.

In other aspects, however, modern

basketball has been simplified from Naismith's version. He at first thought "the more players, the more fun," and considered allowing as many as forty players on the court at the same time. The first games were played with nine players on a team, the positions patterned after those of lacrosse (which, oddly enough, was always Naismith's favorite game).

According to Bernice, one of the greatest thrills of Naismith's life was the introduction of basketball into the 1936 Berlin Olympics. She hastens to add, however, that he would probably *not* be happy with basketball today. "The development of the individual player was always more important to him than winning the game," she says. "He would be appalled that his invention has grown into a multimillion-dollar international giant, because he believed that 'commercialism' destroyed the real purpose of sports."

Bernice's book will astound people who don't realize how versatile Naismith was. He had not one, but several careers. He possessed three earned and two honorary degrees in three very different fields: religion, medicine, and physical education. He was an administrator, professor, respected counselor, and good friend to students and faculty alike during his 41 years on Mt. Oread. In addition, he was an inventor, a rugged athlete, a physician, and a Presbyterian minister. He was a chaplain on the Mexican front during the border war of 1916, and he served with the Y.M.C.A. in France in World War I.



"In everything Naismith did," Bernice says, "his versatility was matched only by his dedication."

In her search for biographical data, Bernice carried on extensive correspondence with Naismith's relatives and colleagues, and also traveled throughout the United States and Canada to interview many of them. Naismith counted among his friends some of the most notable sports figures of his day, such as the "dean of American football," Amos Alonzo Stagg; famed KU basketball coach Forrest C. "Phog" Allen; and runner Glenn Cunningham.

Bernice says that some of her most interesting and helpful interviews were those with A. P. "Duke" D'Ambra, well-known KU photographer. "As one of Naismith's dearest personal friends, Duke D'Ambra was able to give me many small, intimate details about Naismith that no one else could provide," she says. Her book contains several D'Ambra photographs.

Bernice took special pains to in-

clude in *The Basketball Man* accurate descriptions of life in Lawrence and on the KU campus in the first third of this century. Her details on early KU history—the old buildings, basketball teams, pranks, and colorful personalities—could be the most enjoyable part of the book for KU alumni and students.

The Basketball Man has received praise from national athletic organizations as well as reviewers, who have described it as "a classic," and "a beautiful biography," and as an important contribution to the history of physical education.

James Naismith, like Bernice Larson Webb, wasn't much of a basketball player. In fact, he played the game only twice, and humbly regarded his invention as merely a part of the service he owed humanity. Despite the recent reviews, Bernice is modest, too; she considers her book simply a tribute to a great man, and to the great game he created.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Bernice Larson Webb, c'56, g'57, PhD'61, has won more than 70 awards for creative writing. Although *The Basketball Man: James Naismith* is her first book, her short stories, poems, plays, and essays have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies.

Bernice is a native of Kansas, born near Ludell and reared near Oberlin. She received her grade school education in a one-room country school in Decatur County, and then attended Decatur Community High School in Oberlin.

In 1956 she became the seventh student in KU history to complete undergraduate studies with a perfect all-A record. During her career at KU Bernice was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and Pi Delta Phi and was the recipient of ten scholarships and fellowships, including a foreign exchange scholarship to the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1959-60. As a graduate student she taught in the English department at KU in 1958-59 and 1960-61.

Now associate professor of English at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, Bernice specializes in American literature and creative and professional writing. In 1972 she and her husband, Robert M. Webb, USL professor of geography, served as instructors for Chapman College's "World Campus Afloat," traveling around the world in four months on the S.S. *Universe Campus*.

