

# ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF BASKETBALL



Basketball is celebrating the hundredth anniversary of its invention. Just one century ago, the very first game of basketball was played. For this sport, which has been Olympic since 1936, this seemed like a cause for celebration not to be missed. And then came the sad news that Robert Busnel and his wife had died in a car accident. Basketball is in mourning, and all the Olympic family with it.

**T**he origins of basketball go back to the Mayans and Aztecs : "pok-ta pok" or "Tlatchli". The ball they used was made of rubber and the game, which was part of

religious ritual, took place on a pitch surrounded by walls with two rings at the two ends at least three metres from the ground. The ball's trajectory expressed the

pendular movements of the heavenly bodies as the Mayas imagined them. The ball could bounce while in play and the players (three or four) could only strike it with the elbow, the hip or the knee. As a result, the game was often dangerous, and doubtless curious to watch.

Centuries later, at a college in the North East of the United States, the young students used to get bored in their gym lessons during the winter. After much searching for a remedy, they were invited to put a ball through a ring. In this way, modern basketball was born, one hundred years ago.

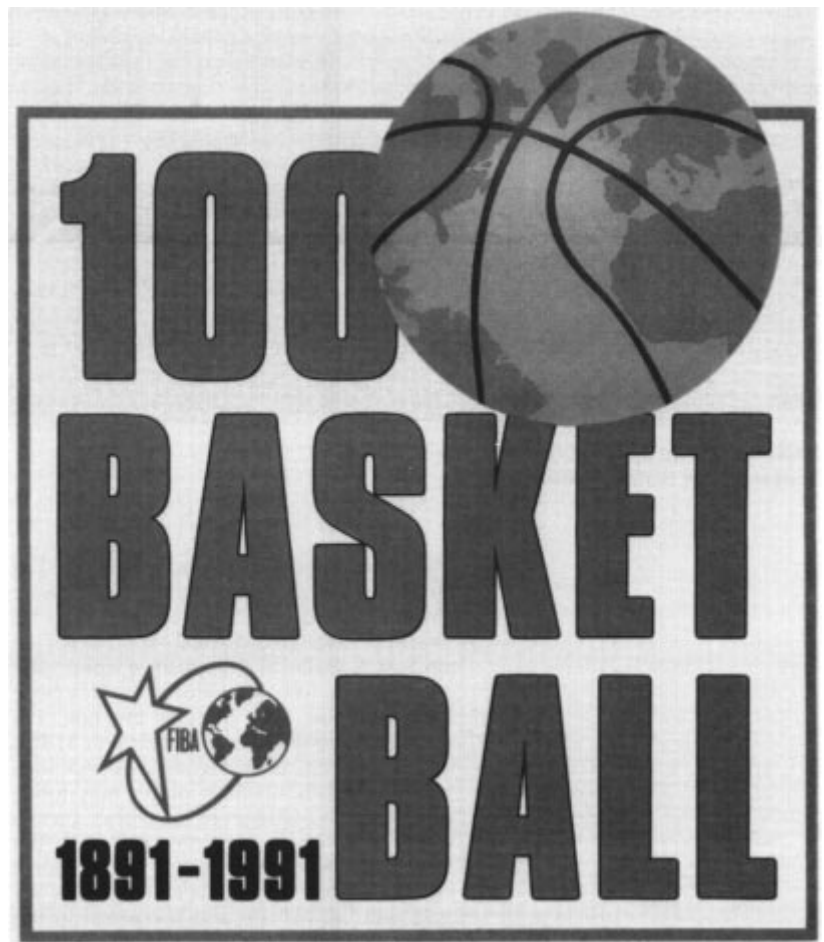
It was at the YMCA international training college in Springfield, Massachusetts that basketball school prepared its students to teach physical education by means of all-round sports training including track, cycling, team sports like rugby and, of course, gymnastics, which, by virtue of the suppleness it induces, constitutes the ABC of all sport... and like the ABC, it is not very exciting, especially when the New England winters keep you inside for months on end.

After all the techniques of the Old World had been tried in turn and neither the Swedish method nor the French programme had succeeded in putting these spirited young men on their mettle, the need for a new game became apparent : a team game which could be practised indoors.

Once the requirements had been established, the implementation proved more difficult than you would think. The students grew impatient and rebellious and inspiration failed a number of teachers faced with the problem. Finally, the class fell into the hands of Dr Naismith, a muscular young trainer in charge of boxing, wrestling and rowing, all sports requiring good leg work and spring in the arms. This man knew what his pupils needed and, what is more, shared their distaste for gymnastics. His first measure was the abolition of all apparatus and floor exercises. This was a little high-handed of him, no doubt, but had the

immediate advantage of winning over his audience.

The problem still remained to be solved, however, as the games they played instead had to give the same results in terms of suppleness and physical fitness. Naismith quickly realized that outdoor team games would be difficult to adapt to indoor conditions. His colleagues' attempts had come to nothing. The space available conditioned the game, its rules and the players. Moreover, a given sport gives rise to a series of habits which are difficult to



# INTERNATIONAL FEDERATIONS



*Basketball made its first Olympic appearance in Berlin in 1936.*

change. Something new was needed. The doctor therefore boldly set out to innovate on the basis of principles which reflect his practical and pedagogical approach : an enclosed space and a positive spirit : the player as a free individual, all of whose contacts must pass through the ball. His five initial premises were as follows : 1) This sport shall be played with a round ball, with the hands; 2) Each player may move wherever and whenever he wishes on the court, but (3) he may not walk with the ball, and (4) there shall be no personal contact between the players. Finally (5), the goal will be high up and horizontal to the ground. Thus, Naismith left the players

free to move around as far as possible, but, in an enclosed space, it was obviously impossible to play with the foot, and spontaneous movements obviously had to be tightly controlled. He then added thirteen fundamental, descriptive rules to these five essential points.

After a long period of experimentation, the transition was made from an instinctive idea of the sport to a very well-thought-out game based on quasi-scientific principles. As for the philosophy behind it, we may quote, bearing in mind the very Christian orientation of the Springfield school, the words of Naismith himself: "a

game created for the love of human relations into which the athletes can put all their physical, moral and spiritual strength without the excesses which could make it an instrument of the devil”.

## BALL GAME

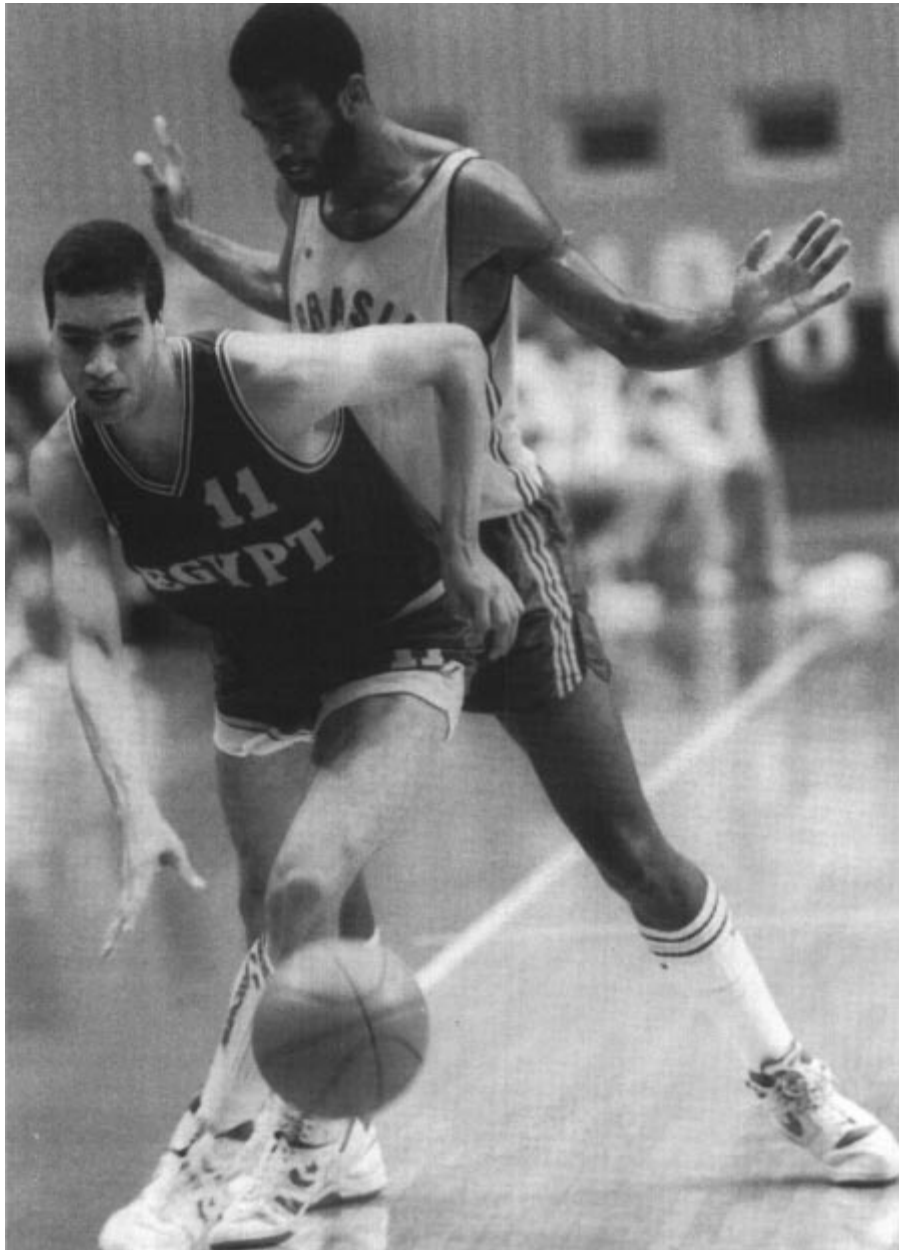
The students were happy. They had their ball - any self-respecting game had to have its ball - and the school syllabus offered them a new activity for the winter which gave them sufficient physical training and, and at the same time, demanded of the pupil in his handling of the ball, his movements around the court and his attempts to score by shooting the ball through a high, narrow basket, sufficient efforts, both physical and mental, in terms of suppleness, tactics and concentration. There were eighteen pupils in the class, so Naismith divided them into two teams of nine : three forwards, three centres and three backs. A game had been born.

The results surpassed all expectations. The students took to the game immediately and it was not long before matches began to be organized. This was in December 1891. Basketball - the name was not hard to find - was embraced enthusiastically by the universities and other training colleges, given the great demand there. Women's colleges, too, were not slow in joining the craze. The YMCA and YWCA network played a major role in the propagation of the game. The story may sound almost too good to be true, but it is a fact that few sports have been as successful. Less than three years later, it arrived in Europe, where the first match was played in Paris. In 1919, again in Paris, the first international tournament was held among American, Italian and French teams.

For all its initial success, basketball expanded slowly thereafter. First of all, it had to break out of the narrow confines of the sports colleges. It was not until the 1920s that it came to be considered as a real sport. In France, the first membership card was issued to a basketball player in 1927. Nevertheless, the game still came under the tutelage of another federation. At

international level, it was governed by the Handball Federation until, one day in 1932, the basketball officials went before the IHF congress meeting in Stockholm to ask for

*A sport that respects its players,  
played throughout the world.*





their independence, which was granted at the request of Avery Brundage, then President of the American NOC and the United States Athletics Federation.

The new federation, created in Geneva the same year around eight federations (ARC, GRE, ITA, POR, ROM, SUI, TCH and Lithuania), with Leon Bouffard of Geneva at its head, was quickly recognized by the IOC and succeeded in getting its sport on the programme of the Games of the XI Olympiad. That is how basketball came to be played at the Games for the first time in Berlin in 1936.

Unlike football, basketball since its creation has kept changing its own rules; the game has constantly evolved and the rules have followed its developments, always with the aim of finding the best solutions, as the federation  
eral, Mr Boris Stankovic, IOC member

in Yugoslavia, observed on the occasion of the federation

“The rules of the game must also ensure equal chances for all the players, and size should not remain determining. It is skill, tactics and strategy that should give one player an advantage over another.” Furthermore, the need to make basketball still more spectacular and attractive to the public has created new requirements, as sports broadcasting has become an indispensable source of revenue.

FIBA recognizes 178 national federations and estimates that two hundred and fifty million people regularly play basketball. The figure speaks volumes and is a splendid illustration of just how well, as Mr Stankovic puts it, “this sport, with its speed, uncertainty and tension up to the last second, with rapid and unexpected changes in the outcome, corresponds to our modern way of life”.