

# Walter Camp and James Naismith: The Shapers of a Culture

Robert Carl Johnson

Miami University, Oxford

Two men dominated the development of two major team sports: Walter Camp and James Naismith. But the two men also developed and defined the culture which surrounded and embraced these sports. American football is in many ways the brainchild of Walter Camp, who invented the scrimmage in 1880, and in 1882 devised the rule of requiring the team with the ball to gain five yards in three downs, thus defining the scrimmage as an offensive tactic, not a defensive strategy. Camp was also a writer, both of essays and books on how to play the game and of juvenile sports novels. His goals in both fiction and nonfiction were the same: to introduce the reader to the subtleties of the new game of football, making the reader aware not only of the physical skills necessary to play the game, but also of the intelligence necessary to succeed. To Camp football was a game of brains, not simply brawn, and although the reality of the game might appear very different in its first decades, Camp's idealization of the game emphasized the triumph of intellect over mere physical force and helped to create a public following for and adoration of the sport and its heroes.

James Naismith invented the game of basketball as a form of exercise for the winter months. He consciously attempted to eliminate the violence he recognized in football during this period. But the game Naismith envisioned and for which he attempted to develop acceptance was not the game that quickly developed. Naismith's original rules emphasized the opportunity for all-around exercise, the attractiveness of the game for its own sake (even its "laughable side"), the ease of learning the game, and the absence of the rough play associated with football. But in the 1896 edition of *Spalding's Athletic Library*, the editors included a section on the "Ethics of Basket Ball," lamenting that the participants had a "false conception in regards to the objects of the game," and suggesting that their emphasis on victory violated the rules and spirit of the game. It is obvious that the intent of the game was already being subverted, so much so that in 1897 Luther Gulick called for mandatory registration of players with their respective YMCA's in an attempt to curb the "numerous abuses" plaguing the game. The dominant culture of football prevailed in the early days of basketball, and Naismith's own concept of his game found a more ready acceptance on the courts of the women's gymnasiums, a different culture from that of the early football teams.