

Jim Naismith: The Nineteenth Century Man Who Created the Twentieth Century Game

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Basketball has had a significant impact on recreation and athletics in the twentieth century. And any review of its history has included an acknowledgment of the role of Jim Naismith in its genesis. Yet most of the writing about Naismith is developed from the perspective of the last half of his life. Limited research has focused on the nineteenth century, especially on the peculiar environment of Muscular Christianity out of which basketball emerged and the personal dynamics affecting Naismith's creativity. It was the purpose of this paper to examine these two variables.

From a casual perspective Naismith seems to have captured the essence of the American experience. He appeared to be a real life Horatio Alger, who through luck and pluck raised himself by his bootstraps, overcame adversity and emerged as an all-American hero-inventor of basketball, father of five, devoted husband, wonderful counselor and servant of his fellow men. Although there is much that is true in that portrait of Naismith, it is an incomplete one. As a Muscular Christian Naismith was a complex individual who reflected and reacted to the culture in which he lived. One cannot understand Naismith's invention of basketball in 1891 without framing its origin and development within the Muscular Christian environment of the 1880s.

American Muscular Christianity represented a broad spectrum of social and religious groups including educational theorists such as Thomas Higginson, evangelicals such as Dwight L. Moody, pragmatic preachers such as Henry Ward Beecher and physical culturists such as Robert McBurney. Although these early activists laid the foundation for the movement, it was the second generation of Muscular Christians who chose to emphasize cooperation rather than ideology who worked out Muscular Christian principles in the marketplace of the late nineteenth century.

By 1890, men such as Luther Gulick and Jim Naismith led the YMCA Training School at Springfield to a program using games and sport as central elements of its educational ministry. Even though some disapproved of ballgames as unbecoming those engaged in religious work, the Muscular Christian movement swung rapidly toward commitment to recreational activity in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

Basketball, which Jim Naismith created in 1891, was a natural outgrowth of the Muscular Christian movement. Working as Christian social activists Naismith and Gulick attempted to create a new game and a new system for the benefit of society and to bring forth the Kingdom of God on earth. Although some of Naismith's ideas were shaped by the early phase of the social gospel movement, it is likely that the game itself was developed out of personal dynamics reflecting his education in a British games system, his rural heritage and life without parents.

The game was a unique blending of an open structure with limited differentiation of leadership positions, a framework that especially fit his free, non-parental environment as a youth. With that perspective Naismith created the game which Gulick endorsed and the Y used to further its Muscular Christian philosophy. The coalescence of the Muscular Christian movement in the 1880s provided a channel through which Naismith's creation was delivered to a world audience.