The Man Who Invented Basketball

JAMES NAISMITH AND HIS AMAZING GAME

by Edwin Brit Wyckoff

Biography A biography is the story of a person’s life, written by another person. As you read, think about why someone would write about James Naismith.

Question of the Week
How do talents make someone unique?
**TOUGH LOVE AND A TOUGH LIFE**

Winter in Canada can be very hard. Icy wind sweeps down from the north. Rivers freeze solid. Crossing them can be scary and dangerous.

James Naismith turned eleven in 1872. He was old enough to know where the river near his home became safe, solid ice. But he took a shortcut he had never tried before. His team of horses pulled his wagon onto the frozen river. Their feet pounded the ice. Then one heavy hoof slammed through the sheet of ice. James jumped off the wagon and landed in the water. Grabbing the horses by their reins, he pulled hard. Slowly he forced them to the other side of the river.

James looked around. He saw his uncle Peter Young watching him from behind some trees. But his uncle had not helped him. Uncle Peter wanted James to learn to solve problems by himself and not to take foolish chances. It was a tough lesson.

James was born on November 6, 1861, near Almonte, Ontario, which is in Canada. When he was almost nine, his father, John Naismith, came down with deadly typhoid fever. So they would not catch the disease, James, his sister, Annie, and brother, Robbie, were taken to their grandmother’s home. A few days later, their father died. Two weeks later, their mother, Margaret, died of the same disease. A short time later, their grandmother Annie Young died of old age.

That left Uncle Peter to take care of the children in Bennie’s Corners, near Almonte. The village had a schoolhouse, a blacksmith shop, a store, and lots of other kids to play with.

The children had lots of fun with very little money. When James needed ice skates, he made them. Then he raced out onto the frozen swimming hole like a champion skater.
The best game in town was called duck on a rock. One player, the guard, would put a rock about the size of his fist on top of a great big rock near the blacksmith shop. The other boys threw stones at the “duck” to knock it off the big rock. If they missed, they had to pick up their stones before the guard could tag them. It sounds easy, but it is not. The pitch could be soft, but it had to be perfectly aimed. When a player missed the duck, there was a lot of running, shouting, and laughing. James would remember duck on a rock years later when it would be very important to him.

He cut down trees for almost five years. Then he decided to change his life.

James had a plan. He wanted to go back to high school and finish fast. His next step would be college. In 1883, James entered McGill University in Montreal, Canada.

When James was home for a visit, his brother, Robbie, had a terrible pain in his side. They all thought it was just a stomachache. It was actually a very bad infection. Robbie died a few hours later. A doctor could have helped him. Knowing Robbie might have been saved stayed in James’s mind every day of his life.

In 1887, James graduated from McGill University after studying Hebrew and philosophy. Hebrew is an ancient language that many ministers study. Philosophy teaches people to think about life. James had a lot to think about.

THE DROPOUT

James was great at sports. He also worked hard on the family farm. He did not work hard at school, though, and his grades were never very good. He wanted to grow up fast and be a man with a job. When he was fifteen, he left school and worked as a lumberjack.
**THE MINISTER PLAYS HARDBALL**

For James, the next step was studying to become a minister at McGill’s Presbyterian College. There was much to learn, and he studied day and night. His friends tried to get him to play sports. They told him it would sharpen his mind and toughen up his body. He said no and kept on studying.

One day his strong friends dragged him out to the football field. James had so much fun that from then on he found time to study hard and play hard too. He was smaller than the other players, but he was powerful and smart. He learned rugby, which is a very rough game. He loved lacrosse, which can be even rougher.

One Saturday James got two black eyes in a wild game of lacrosse. The next day was Sunday, and he had to give a sermon in the church. James, the student minister, looked out from behind those two black eyes. He may have looked kind of funny, but he finished the sermon he had written.

In 1890, James became a Presbyterian minister. But he did not want to give sermons in a church. He thought he could help teens live better lives if he talked to them while teaching them sports. His first sports job was at the International YMCA Training School, which is now Springfield College. So he moved from Canada to Springfield, Massachusetts, in the United States.

As a student teacher, James was very good at the job of teaching baseball, field hockey, football, and rugby, which are great games during spring, summer, and fall. Winter was a problem. The men had to come indoors and exercise, which was not much fun. They were so bored that some of them wanted to quit the YMCA training school. James was told to invent an exciting indoor game. It had to be ready in two weeks. That was the deadline.
Inventing Fun

James struggled with the problem for twelve days. The game had to be fast and fun. It could not be risky, like football or rugby, with teams of men banging into the gym walls.

That good old game from his childhood, duck on a rock, flashed into his head. He remembered how using a soft pitch was the best way to aim for the “duck.” James’s eyes lit up. He shouted out loud, “I’ve got it!”

There was no time to invent new gear. Two peach baskets were used as goals. James explained the strange rules. Two teams of men dragged themselves onto the gym floor, grumbling. They took a soccer ball and started playing. The grumbling soon stopped. Cheers and shouts filled the gym. The date was December 21, 1891. Basketball was born. Soon teams formed in gyms all around town.

In schools across the United States, students began to play basketball. Women began playing, too.

A young woman named Maude Sherman was on one of the first women’s teams. James and Maude soon became friends, and then fell in love. They married on June 20, 1894. James and Maude would have five children together.

In a few years, basketball started being played more like it is played today. The peach baskets had changed to rope baskets. Backboards were added. Dribbling became popular because players were not allowed to hold the ball very long without throwing it. When the ball bounced off the floor as a player raced down the court, it sounded like a fast drumbeat. James thought dribbling was a great idea.
In 1895, James and Maude moved to Denver, Colorado. There James became director of physical education at the largest YMCA in the country.

He was always working on his plan for the future. He remembered his brother dying horribly without help from a doctor. He had seen athletes have terrible accidents. He wanted to be a doctor and help people.

There was no stopping James when he had a plan. He became a student at Gross Medical College in Denver. He would work all day at the YMCA and then study to be a doctor after work and on weekends. James graduated as a medical doctor in 1898. That year he got the job of assistant physical director at the University of Kansas. By 1909 James was working there as a minister, a professor, and a medical doctor.

James Naismith could have made lots of money by selling sports equipment. He could have used his fame to pose for ads selling products. He refused the offers. He just wanted to do his job as a teacher, minister, and sports doctor.

George L. Pierce invented the basketball used today. Here is his sketch for the patent.
**Naismith’s Original Thirteen Rules of Basketball, 1891**

1. The ball may be thrown in any direction.
2. It can be batted with hands, but not with the fist.
3. No running with the ball.
4. Hold the ball only with the hands.
5. No holding, pushing, hitting, or tripping the other team’s players.
6. Follow the rules or a foul will be declared.
7. Make three fouls and the other team is given a goal.
8. A goal is made when the ball goes into the basket.
9. When the ball goes out of bounds, the first person to touch it, or the umpire, will throw it onto the court.
10. The umpire is the judge of the players. He can call fouls.
11. The referee is the judge of the ball. He decides on goals.
12. Game time is two fifteen-minute halves.
13. The team with the most goals in that time is the winner.

**Time Line**

- **1861** Born on November 6, Almonte, Ontario, Canada.
- **1870** Parents die; moves to Bennie’s Corners, Ontario.
- **1887** Graduates from McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, Canada.
- **1890** Becomes a Presbyterian minister.
- **1891** Invents basketball; first game is played December 21.
- **1894** Marries Maude Sherman on June 20.
- **1895** Becomes director of physical education at YMCA in Denver, Colorado.
- **1898** Graduates as a medical doctor.
- **1909** Is professor, minister, and doctor at the University of Kansas.
- **1917** Helps American soldiers in World War I as a military chaplain.
- **1925** Becomes United States citizen.
- **1936** Is honored at Olympic Games in Berlin, Germany.
- **1939** Dies on November 28 in Lawrence, Kansas.