

Introduction

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When my grandfather left his uncle's rural Canadian farm to go to college, he had no idea what the future held. He thought he wanted to become a minister, but what was uppermost in his mind was that, whatever he did, he wanted to find a way to help people.

He had no idea he was going to invent the game of basketball. He had no idea even that he was going to go into physical education. He certainly had no idea that the game—intended merely as an activity to fill the winter months between the sports of football and baseball for a rowdy class of 18 students at the YMCA Training School—would become one of the most widely played sports in the world.

And he had no idea that the sport of basketball would become his legacy—and fulfill his personal life goal.

More than 70 years ago, my grandfather recalled the day that his life changed. It wasn't the day he created the 13 rules for the first basketball game. It was the day when, as a student at McGill University in Montreal, he decided to go into the world of physical education instead of the ministry. During a 1932 speech at the Training School, which by then had become the International

YMCA College, he reflected on that moment, which became his epiphany:

I was lying on the bed on Sunday and thought, “What is this all about? What is life about? What are you going to do? What are you going to be? What motto will you hold up before you?” I put up on the wall, not in writing, but in my mind this thought:

“I want to leave the world a little bit better than I found it.”

This is the motto I had then and it is the motto I have today. That has been a mighty fine thing to me.

It was not an easy decision for my grandfather to pursue a career in physical education. In the late 1800s athletics were viewed by many as a tool of the devil. He had to resist objections of family members when he decided not to become a minister. His parents had died when he was a young boy, and he was left in the custody of a bachelor uncle and was raised in part by his older sister.

Years after his sport had become popular around the world, he wrote, “I asked my only sister if she had ever forgiven me for forsaking the ministry. She shook her head and said, ‘no, Jim.’ On the other hand I received a letter from a former classmate who was moderator of the general assembly in Canada who said, ‘You with your athletics have done more for the welfare of humanity than any member of our class.’”

It was largely through his efforts, and the sport of basketball, that the perception of athletics as the devil’s work was changed. He marveled at how popular basketball became in churches, and as more and more churches built new gymnasiums, he was amazed and pleased.

His legacy really should be much more than basketball. He was a man of immense integrity, a man who earned a theology degree and a medical degree even though he never held a pastorate or worked as a doctor. He became a military chaplain at the age of 55 because he thought it was his opportunity to use his talents

and give back to his adopted country, the United States. He served more than a year in France during World War I. Near the end of the war, in a letter to his wife, Maude, he offered his thoughts on what should be done for the soldiers returning from the war, basically describing a preliminary form of the GI Bill, a piece of legislation that would not be passed by Congress until 26 years later.

He was always interested in the moral and physical development of young men and women, and he opposed those who tried to make a profit out of athletics. It never mattered to him whether the team he was coaching won or lost a game. It was how the team played, and the character of the men involved, that he thought important. In his early years at the University of Kansas, while serving as the basketball coach, he also worked as the referee for many of his team's games. He placed a high value on sportsmanship, and treasured most the men and women who he thought possessed a high degree of character. He opposed segregation and worked hard to make sure African Americans were treated equally with white men and women.

Even though he invented basketball, he thought wrestling was a better form of exercise, and he considered other sports more entertaining to watch. He would rather have spent time instructing a small group of students in fencing than he would watching a basketball game.

What he valued most about basketball, however, was that it required teamwork, cooperation, and the development of a variety of skills. Having been raised in a very poor economic environment, he also appreciated the fact that the game required very little equipment to play. He once wrote:

Basketball is a team game demanding a high degree of accuracy, judgment, individual skill, initiative, self-control and the spirit of cooperation. It demands that each player be skilled in all phases of the game, thus developing all-round rather than highly specialized ability. Since the object of the game is to have the players of one team put

the ball into their own basket and to prevent the opponents from putting it in the other basket, it is frequently necessary for one player to pass the ball to another in order to keep possession of it until a favorable opportunity to make a goal occurs.

If one quotation sums up my grandfather's opinion about basketball, and athletics in general, it would be this: "Let us all be able to lose gracefully and to win courteously, to accept criticism as well as praise, and last of all, to appreciate the attitude of the other fellow at all times."

My grandfather never profited from inventing the game; in fact, he never really worried about money. He turned down endorsement offers, and he never sought a patent on the game, which would have earned him millions of dollars in royalties. His satisfaction came from creating the game and from other, more personal sources. "It would be impossible for me to explain my feelings to the great mass of people as they wouldn't understand," he once wrote.

When I left the farm I had a goal in life—the helping of my fellow beings. This goal has never been changed and as I travel over the country I am constantly reminded of the fact that I have at least given something to the people that will be remembered after I leave.

I am sure that no man can derive more satisfaction from money or power than I do from seeing a pair of basketball goals in some out of the way place. Deep in the Wisconsin woods, an old barrel hoop nailed to a tree. High in the Colorado mountains, a pair of crude backstops; halfway across the desert, a crude iron ring fastened to a weather-beaten barn—all are constant reminders that I have at least partially accomplished the objective that I set up.

On Thanksgiving Day 1918, only a couple of weeks after the end of World War I, my grandfather was still working in France.

He wrote a long letter to my grandmother in which he listed all of the things he was most thankful for in his life. He listed his loving wife, Maude, his five children, and the many opportunities he had been given. He wrote that he was “thankful that I have tried to help the people of the world to make it a little better, and that I have tried to love my neighbor as myself.” He prayed “for a clear hope in the future that as in the past the good persists and the evil dies out, that all that is good in my life will go on and the evil will radically be deleted.”

At the end of the letter he wrote, “I have tried to fill in some of the details of my cause for gratitude. You know what you do when you have filled in the details of a picture, you move back and see the details in harmony. That is what I do now and see my life as one great cause for rejoicing.”

When I was a young girl, my mother became ill, and I spent several weeks living with my grandfather shortly after the death of his wife, Maude. My aunt Maude was also living at his house in Lawrence, caring for both of us. I was homesick and would not stop crying. He asked me if I would go to sleep in his trundle bed, and I said yes. He lay down in the big bed, and he held my hand until I went to sleep. The next thing I remember is waking up in the morning with the sun streaming through the windows.

My grandfather was a man who truly was ahead of his time, someone who understood what really mattered in life. His unwritten motto, which he conveyed to his family members and to those around him, was to “do the best you can with what you have” and “to be thankful for what you have.”

When he died in 1939, he left five children and his second wife. My mother, Hellen, was the executor of his estate and thus was responsible for all of his personal affairs. Many of his personal papers and memorabilia were stored in five large boxes that she kept in her basement. My mother moved in with my husband Will and me in 1964 and brought the boxes with her.

Even after my mother died in 1980, the boxes remained largely undisturbed in our basement until the spring of 2006, when, at

the request of another family member, I began to look through the boxes searching for a particular picture. What I found was an absolute treasure of items that help to capture the life of this remarkable Renaissance man: not only his documentation of the events surrounding his invention of basketball, but many, many other items showing the man I remembered and loved.

Seventy years after his death, the details of my grandfather's life are still vivid. Many of the young men and women who will make millions of dollars playing basketball may not know the name James Naismith or may not be able to correctly answer the question "Who invented basketball?" As long as they are playing the game, and playing it the way he thought it should be played, however, my grandfather would be happy.

He was a humble, simple, hard-working, dedicated, moral, and honest man who loved his family, loved God and his chosen country, and was proud of his accomplishments. He was a man of high character who was not afraid to take a stance on an issue in which he believed strongly, and he never wavered in his convictions.

He was happy and proud that the sport of basketball brought enjoyment to so many, but he was more pleased that the creation of the game kept him from having to report to his boss at the Training School that he had been given an assignment he could not complete.

It was not until he stood on a reviewing stand at the opening of the basketball competition at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, the first time the sport had been added to the roster of competitions, that he recognized the magnitude of his invention. He wept as the players for 21 countries walked in front of him, lowering their countries' flags in recognition as they passed.

Through his invention of the sport of basketball, and through the other accomplishments in his personal and professional life, James Naismith, my grandfather, more than fulfilled his personal motto and did indeed "leave the world a little better than he found it."