

Basketball and Faith

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Walking by Faith

Fred Roggen

Schrijver: Fred Roggen

Coverontwerp: Jack Clanton

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How a Christian invented basketball and made it an evangelization tool



Thanks to James Naismith many young people were brought to Christ through the game of basketball.

Faced with a group of restless young men snowed in at the International Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) Training School in Springfield, Massachusetts, physical education instructor James Naismith had to think of a new game to distract them from the cabin fever they were feeling.

With some added encouragement from his director, Naismith tested his ideas out for two weeks but nothing was working. Then on December 21, 1891 Naismith had a breakthrough.

“Something had to be done. One day I had an idea,” Naismith explained to a New York radio station. “I called the boys to the gym and divided them into two teams of nine and gave them an old soccer ball. I showed them two peach baskets I had nailed at each end of the gym, and I told them the idea was to throw the ball into the other team’s peach basket.” The game was called, “Basket Ball,” and the boys couldn’t get enough of it. They kept asking Naismith to let them play, but with the lack of any rules, brawls would break out on the floor.

Naismith then devised 13 original rules for the game of “Basket Ball” and wrote an article that was distributed to all YMCAs across the country. The game spread like wildfire and by 1898 Naismith was hired as the first men’s basketball coach at the University of Kansas.

Ever since, the game of basketball has been a staple of American culture and has increased in popularity every year, especially at the collegiate level. For example, in 2015 “March Madness” attracted 80.7 million people worldwide who watched the tournament online through NCAA March Madness Live.

What’s interesting is that Naismith, while he created the game to entertain restless boys during the cold months of winter, also invented basketball “To win men for the Master through the gym.” This was in keeping with his general mission in life, one that he developed as he studied for a master’s degree from Montreal’s Presbyterian Theological College.

Naismith was convinced that, “he could better exemplify the Christian life through sports than in the pulpit” and sought to “develop the whole person—mind, body and spirit” in the gym. As a result, he held basketball players to a high standard and wanted them to be virtuous.

Naismith's director, Luther Gulick, explained the Christian values that surrounded basketball in an article in 1897 where he wrote, "The game must be kept clean. It is a perfect outrage for an institution that stands for Christian work in the community to tolerate not merely ungentlemanly treatment of guests, but slugging and that which violates the elementary principles of morals... Excuse for the rest of the year any player who is not clean in his play."

Michael Zogry, associate professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Kansas, further explained Naismith's approach to sports and faith in an interview last year.

"His approach was to put Christianity out there in front of people and try to influence them through positive character development, but he reserved his formal preaching for when he was a guest minister at area churches."

Basketball for Naismith was not simply a game, but an evangelization tool. In fact, during this time

period the YMCAs had integrated the game into their mission trips and it is recorded that many young people were brought to Christ through these missionaries and the game of basketball. This is how basketball was brought to China (through YMCA missionaries), and it has since become one of the country's most popular sports.

In the end, Naismith firmly believed in the connection of sports and faith and wrote, "Whenever I witness games in a church league, I feel that my vision, almost half a century ago, of the time when the Christian people would recognize the true value of athletics, has become a reality."

Keith Spencer II, " I walk by faith "

I had a chance recently to talk with DeFriesland Aris forward Keith Spencer about his experiences playing ball in Holland and his devout faith as a Christian as well. It was truly a pleasure speaking with him and having the chance to know some of his thoughts.



Where did basketball begin for you?

I began to play basketball at the age of 4. My parents placed me in many different activities, but basketball is the one that stuck with me.

Glancing back at college for a second. Do you have any favourite moments, shots, games, anything in particular that you like to look back on?

When I think about my college career, the first thing that pops in my head is the intense training we were given. I'm thankful for it, as it has greatly prepared my way for more competitive professional basketball. During that time, I would dread waking up for 5:00 in the morning runs, and intense military type training given to us by coaches. Looking back it now, I see the team building that took place, the unity it provided for us, and overall preparing me for where I am today.

What factors influenced your decision to stay another year in Leeuwarden?

It was dropped in my spirit during the 2008-2009 season that I would return to Leeuwarden for my second professional year of basketball. During the negotiation process I lost sight for a moment of what God was telling me to do, and gave the team a hard time about coming back. In prayer I regained

my obedience, and decided to come back to De Friesland Aris.

How is your year going so far in terms of basketball?

The year is going well in terms of basketball. We are winning more games, and are a playoffs prospect. This is much needed for this program and I am happy to be a part of it.

This team has shown it can come back from any deficit and win a close game that can go either way. What's your mentality when the game is on the line in a pressure situation?

It's just like you said. We have the ability to come back no matter what our standing is in the game. I keep this in mind throughout those close games, and focus on doing whatever I can to help the team.

In which areas do you feel the team needs to improve?

As a team we need improve in sustaining our defense throughout the entire game. Once we have that down, we will really run teams out the gym!

Talk about your role on the team - what do you try to bring to the team?

I really try not to get wrapped up in stats because I feel that throws my focus off on our collaborative efforts as a team. I really focus on the little things such as being the defensive stopper on the team. That is one thing I take personal and feel that is one of the elements I bring to the team.

What do you most enjoy about playing for DeFriesland Aris?

I really enjoy the community involvement that De Friesland Aris has offered. I commend the general manager and his staff for being such warm, approachable, and genuine people. They really make this experience that much more of a blessing.

Describe your relationship with Coach Pete Miller?

Coach Pete Miller and I have a healthy relationship. I respect him as a coach, and I feel he respects me not only as player, but as a man. I understand his philosophy and I do my best in helping him achieve his goals.

Keith, confidence-wise, do you feel that differently than a year ago at this time?

I've always had confidence in my team. It feels better knowing that we have what it takes to win any game.

Talk about why you do what you do and to whom your emotions are directed

I feel that God has blessed me with this ability to play basketball. In return, I owe it to Him to step out on the court, play my hardest, and give Him all the glory.

And what is your Christian story and background?

My parents have always raised me in the Christian church. As a youth I didn't always fully know what it meant to walk in Christian values, and I had my times when I wasn't living the life God wanted me to live. I am happy to stand before you today and say that I walk by faith and continue to do so.

My story is not a simple one, and is actually quite long. I have a blog in which I have written a story about my coming back to Christ; please feel free to