

# Mystery centers around 1891 contest

## HERKIMER

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from Lambert Will, a 19-year-old who was an athletic director there, after Will wrote to Naismith about the new winter sport, asking him to form a team for him to play.

"We are not trying to claim that Lambert Will invented the game," said Brion Carroll, chief operating officer of the Herkimer 9 Foundation, an organization that is investigating the history as part of a village's revitalization plan that could include a basketball arena. "But with all due respect to those who believe otherwise, Will was a year ahead."

Basloe, who created the Herkimer Globe Trotters, among other teams, said the first game of nine players pitted the YMCA against the Herkimer Businessmen Nine. The score was 9-3 with the Will's YMCA team winning. Herkimer also played Albany that season, Carroll said.

"Herkimer got its ass kicked," he said.

Certainly, back then, the game looked different, Carroll said.

Bushel baskets were placed at the ends of the court. When someone scored, a teammate would grab a chair, pull out the ball — then a medicine ball that was at first kicked, but later passed — out of the basket. Then, the action would start again.

To avoid stopping the game every time someone scored, Will got the idea to take the bottom out. But that didn't work. Carroll said the baskets



Herkimer 9 Foundation

The Herkimer 9 Foundation, which is researching the possibility that basketball was played in the Mohawk River community before the date of its recognized December 1891 creation in Springfield, Mass., hopes to build a basketball arena off North Main Street in the village.

fell apart after about a quarter of play.

That's when Will went to the Herkimer Iron Works and had a solid metal rim made. His mother, whom Carroll said is known locally as the Betsy Ross of basketball, knitted the first nets. The first referee was a town judge, Tom Murray.

"We want to give Lambert Will the credit for the influence he had in rules development that Naismith came up with," Carroll said. "He wrote Naismith, saying, 'this is what I think will work.' Naismith never responded."

Neither did the Basketball Hall of Fame, which the Times Union reached out to this

week.

Adding to the mystery, Carroll said, was the Basketball Hall of Fame had an exhibition on Lambert Will in the 1994 with items donated from the Will family. ESPN wrote about it.

"A spotlight shone down on the Herkimer team photograph on a pedestal in a glass case in the center of the third floor 'Basketball History' room. Photos of Will were displayed," the article noted. "Less than a decade later, a family member visited the Hall and found nothing tied to Herkimer or Lambert Will. The family was confused. They'd received no warning. To this day, they still

have received neither an explanation, nor has their memorabilia been returned."

Carroll said that was upsetting.

"No one could answer what happened," Carroll said. "No one has been able to retrieve the stuff. It caused a lot of animosity."

Carroll cautioned that the Herkimer 9 Foundation is still in investigative mode. He said he is searching for a tear sheet from a February 1898 article in the New York Daily Press that offers the same chronology that Basloe has in his book. He also points to the team photo, that includes Will, that shows the teammates holding a basketball

dated 91-92, which he said indicates the Herkimer YMCA had a season that stretched from the fall of 1891 through the winter of 1892.

That photograph caught the eye of sports historian George Posty, who along with his brother Darril Posty, is putting together a documentary on the subject. George Posty's blog on the Society for North American Sports Historians and Researchers, wrote about the photo.

"For years the allegations of Basloe and the claim's of Will have been dismissed on the grounds that a simple 19-year-old, small-town athlete, could not devise a sport considered by many to border on science," Posty wrote. "The problem with this claim, as evidenced with the photo first published in Basloe's book, is that the evidence on the side of Lambert Will and the community of Herkimer continues to grow leaving many to wonder aloud if the true originator of basketball has yet to be officially recognized. After all, if the game of basketball was invented by Naismith in December of 1891, with the first 'official' game not played until early 1892, why then do the Herkimer players in this photo have a '91 (1891) season number inscribed on their ball?"

Carroll agreed it must be explored.

"If it didn't happen, we are open to it," Carroll said. "Basloe might have had his head on wrong. But all the evidence we are finding is about what the facts were at the time. Now it has become fiction in the minds of some."

## PRE-K

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state's investment in early education but raised concerns about the long-term sustainability of these new programs, which are largely funded by COVID-19 relief dollars.

"While the Regents have long supported increased funding for pre-kindergarten programs, we are concerned with the budget's use of time-limited federal funds to support this increase and will continue to advocate for these programs to be fully funded with state dollars in the future," Board of Regents Chancellor Lester Young and State Education Department Commissioner Betty Rosa said in a statement.

Pre-K funding has existed in the state in some form since the 1990s, but in 2014, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo vowed to universalize access to free, high-quality preschools across New York.

Currently, about 400 of more than 700 New York public school districts offer some form of part-time or full-time pre-kindergarten. While big city districts in New York City and Rochester have successfully made full-day pre-kindergarten available to all families who need it, access to free, full-time preschool in the rest of the state is patchy.

In the Capital Region, pre-kindergarten options in suburban and rural districts are particularly



Lori Van Buren / Times Union archive

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo vowed to expand access to free, high-quality preschools across New York in 2014. The 2020-21 state budget will provide funding for pre-K to several Capital Region school districts for the first time.

scarce. Across 11 regional districts, just 37 percent of 4-year-olds are served by state-funded preschool programs, according to state data.

Six districts in New York still do not offer full-time kindergarten, including Shenendehowa, which cites a lack of classroom space. Efforts to mandate full-time kindergarten legislatively have been unsuccessful.

Statewide, 34 percent of public school superintendents say their community's preschool needs are being met by existing public and private programs, according to a survey conducted in August 2019 by the New York State Council of School

Superintendents.

More than half of superintendents surveyed cite insufficient state funding as the largest hurdle to implementation of full-time early childhood programs in their districts, according to the poll, which sheds light on the haphazard implementation of New York's universal pre-K push in recent years.

Roughly 77,000 4-year-olds across the state still lack access to state-funded pre-kindergarten programs, according to the Alliance for Quality Education. The advocacy group earlier this year warned that 2021's pandemic-related budget cuts, which threatened to

cut into districts' state aid allocation, could pose an additional burden to uni-

versal pre-kindergarten programs.

The state's investment

in preschool education, plus its three-year commitment to reimburse districts for owed Foundation Aid — a formula-based aid that directs state dollars to districts with the greatest need — is a major victory for public school education, according to AQE policy director Marina Marcou-O'Malley.

"The Pre-K dollars included in the budget are an incredibly positive step in the right direction towards achieving 'Pre-K for all' in our state," Marcou-O'Malley said. "Combined with the childcare investment through federal dollars and the commitment to fully funding Foundation Aid within three years, we can begin to build a solid foundation for our children."

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