

Of all the theories that Naismith had help creating basketball, one still hangs on

• By Kent Babb -- The Kansas City Star, Mar 16, 2011

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- They stood in the center of Kirkwood Hall, surrounded by dark marble columns and prepared to pull the copper-colored cloth from the latest exhibition at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

It was last Friday. The museum's director, Julian Zugazagoitia, and a millionaire CEO named David Booth were at the sides of the display, tucked into an alcove decorated with photographs of basketball's past. They drew the cloth, revealing James Naismith's more than 119-year-old "Rules of Basket Ball."

"The connection," Booth said, "between basketball and art."

There are masterpieces in this building, works that represent sentiment and mystery from bygone eras. It contains art from Caravaggio, Van Gogh and Monet, and most of the works - including its newest treasure, Naismith's two typewritten and scribbled pages - have a story.

Children learn this story in elementary schools, and in the heartland, where Naismith brought the game to Lawrence, Kan., this legend is sacred: In December 1891, Naismith tacked his rules to a bulletin board at the YMCA in Springfield, Mass., giving life to a game that became a national phenomenon. Now every dribble during this week's Big 12 tournament and in games across the country can be traced to Naismith and that gym in Springfield.

But there's a family that maintains that their grandfather had more to do with basketball's early days than he's credited for. There's even a 60-year-old book that suggests a man from Herkimer, named Lambert Will, not Naismith, was the game's actual inventor.

Will's family says Lambert Will did not invent the game, but the conspiracy theories haven't dried up.

Ian Naismith, the grandson of the man who wrote those 13 original rules, has fought these theories for decades. The constant swatting of the rumors even contributed to his decision last year to put the rules up for auction, where they sold in December to Booth and his wife for \$4.3 million.

"I'm tired of it," Naismith said. "I want Herkimer out of my life."

A bit of help

This much is certain: Lambert Will liked to tinker.

Even as a teenager, he would spend hours examining things and working on projects, trying to make something from nothing.

As always, the years yield stories and legends, passed through the generations and commemorated in scrapbooks. Family members still share them with pride.

At 16, Will helped develop a bicycle that another rider took on the first cross-country ride. Later he was a soldier in the Spanish-American War, and only a bout of yellow fever kept him from following Teddy Roosevelt up San Juan Hill. He was a mechanic and an artist, a leader and an athlete.

Will's descendants tell a story now about how an aging Will, pushing 70 and barely 140 pounds, bet a room of young firefighters that he could take a 16-pound turkey and hold it at arm's length longer than anyone. The youngsters took the bet, and then Will took their money.

There's one story, however, that the Wills can't endorse.

According to Herkimer native Frank Basloe's 1952 book, "I Grew Up With Basketball," a 19-year-old Will, then a volunteer at the Herkimer YMCA, sent letters to other recreation directors in the Northeast, explaining the rules for a new game.

Basloe contends Will organized a team in the fall of 1891, before Naismith is believed to have played the first game in Springfield, Mass., on Dec. 21 of that year.

There's also a photograph of the Herkimer basketball team, Will standing in the center, and a date - "91-92" - scrawled on the ball in white ink, suggesting Will played a game before Naismith.

Rick Will said his grandfather was an impressive man, but even he doesn't believe Lambert Will invented the game.

"That was Naismith's idea," said Rick Will, 62. "He never denied that."

Rick and his younger brother Lawrence remember hearing the stories that their grandfather helped shape the game, but Rick said his influence was limited to improvements - not inventions. Lawrence and Rick say their childhoods were filled with stories about their grandfather, including one about how he once received a letter from Naismith, asking for help developing a new kind of game.

They say Lambert Will responded with a few suggested rules. The family believes some of those suggestions - the ability to pass the ball instead of rolling it across the court, for instance, or cutting the bottom out of the peach baskets - made it onto the list of 13 rules being displayed through May at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

"He came up with some ideas," Lawrence Will said, "but I suspect he wasn't the only one."

Naismith stands alone

Ian Naismith says that Lambert Will had nothing to do with the invention of basketball and that Herkimer's influence has been exaggerated. He believes that Will simply witnessed a game long after James Naismith organized a team, and when Will introduced the sport to Herkimer, he was credited by the townspeople as its inventor.

"We know the story," said Ian Naismith, 72. "I hear 'em all, son."

Before long he's screaming, out of breath.

"I'm ready to kick some a--," he said. "I will hurt somebody. Whoever says it can face me, and I'm 260 pounds."

Naismith says he has heard the stories for years. His grandfather heard them, too. James Naismith tried to laugh off the hoaxes and the pretenders, from Herkimer to Japan, and Ian Naismith says this one is no different. Except that it hasn't died.

Two brothers, self-proclaimed historians George and Darril Fosty, have subscribed to Basloe's theory and are currently trying to prove the game was Lambert Will's invention.

David Booth listens to the abridged version of Basloe's theory. Did he pay a fortune for typewritten evidence of a lie? And what about that smudge on the bottom of the second page, in plain view now, where Naismith first dated the document "February 1892" before trying to erase it to write an earlier date, "December 1891," in its place? The original characters are faded but legible.

Booth attributes the altered date to Naismith trying to be precise months after typing the rules, saying: "We're comfortable. That doesn't even make my eyebrows rise at all. That's just the kind of nonsense you hear a lot of times."

But to Ian Naismith, this is more than a theory. These are fighting words.

"This is the first family of basketball," he said. "Don't call my grandfather a liar."

Seeking honor

Rick Will would like to see his grandfather honored alongside Naismith. He says that his grandmother, Mary, crocheted the first basketball net and that the first rim was cast in an ironworks in Herkimer.

"I'm sure - more than sure - that my grandfather had a lot to do with the history of basketball," he said. "He (Naismith) invented the idea. He just didn't invent the whole game. There's plenty of room for skepticism."

Lawrence says he once sat next to his grandfather during a high school basketball game in Cazenovia, N.Y. It was the early 1960s. The old man didn't say much. Instead of insisting that this was the game he created, Lambert Will sat in the bleachers and lamented that players just weren't as tough as they used to be; that there was too much scoring.

Many of the details of that memory faded, covered and dusty after so many years. When that much time has passed and witnesses are mostly gone, there's not much difference between the truth and a good story - a moment in time whose handle becomes more difficult to hold on to as time passes.

"Who knows what's really true and what's not?" Lawrence said. "A lot of the history that kids read in books, let's face it, it's just not true. It gets changed. It gets lost. It gets reinvented and claimed.

"We all wish we knew the exact thing. I just wish my grandfather got a little more credit than he did. Who deserves more credit? Who did what? Who will ever know?"

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