

## JAMES NAISMITH: SPORTS INNOVATOR AND ARMY CHAPLAIN

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Dr. James Naismith  
Inventor of the Game of Basketball



CH (CPT) James Naismith  
Kansas Army National Guard

As “March Madness” makes its annual appearance on the American sports scene, fans that understand the history of basketball know Dr. James Naismith invented the game in 1891. What many fans probably don’t know about Naismith is that he served as a chaplain in the Army National Guard and as a volunteer chaplain in France during World War I.

Naismith hailed from Canada. He attended McGill University in Montreal, where he excelled at athletics. His sports resume at McGill includes playing Canadian football, lacrosse, rugby, and soccer; he was also an accomplished gymnast. He received a bachelor’s degree in physical education from McGill in 1887. Naismith remained at McGill upon graduation, teaching physical education and serving as the university’s director of athletics. A man of diverse interests, while working at McGill he enrolled at nearby Presbyterian College. He received a degree in theology in 1890.

After completing his studies at Presbyterian College, he came to the United States to teach physical education at the YMCA International Training School (now Springfield College) in Springfield, Massachusetts. It was there that he devised the rules for a new game, one that could be played indoors during winter. Basketball proved to be immensely popular from the very start, and through the YMCA it quickly spread across the nation. Today it is one of the world’s most popular sports.

After Naismith earned a medical degree in 1898 from the Gross Medical School (now the University of Colorado School of Medicine) in 1898, the University of Kansas hired him to be its first basketball coach. The Jayhawks’ record during his nine-year coaching tenure was nothing spectacular—55 wins

and 60 losses—but he remained at Kansas for more than forty years, serving in such diverse roles as physical education instructor, director of the university chapel, university physician, and director of athletics.

His diverse interests came to the fore again in 1916, when he applied to be a chaplain in the Kansas Army National Guard. His desire to be a chaplain was much the same as his motivation to devise the rules for basketball: to help young people and guide them to their full potential. Poncho Villa provided additional motivation. In March 1916 the Mexican revolutionary led his guerilla army in a cross-border raid on Columbus, New Mexico. In response, the U.S. Army began patrolling the border with Mexico, and a punitive expedition under Brig. Gen. John Pershing was sent into Mexico in pursuit of Villa. The Kansas National Guard was tapped to send troops to the border. After quickly obtaining an endorsement as a Presbyterian minister, Naismith was commissioned as the chaplain of the 1st Kansas Infantry Regiment. His regiment mobilized at Ft. Riley in late June, and a few weeks later the Kansans were at Eagle Pass, Texas, on the Rio Grande.

Chaplain Naismith and his regiment spent about three months on border duty. During this time he performed the traditional roles of a chaplain of a deployed unit: conducting services, counseling homesick soldiers, advising his commander on the moral and spiritual needs of the unit. He made a concerted effort at convincing his Soldiers to steer clear of the houses of prostitution that sprang up near their posts. With his expertise in athletics, he organized numerous boxing matches, basketball games, and a baseball league to keep his soldiers occupied during their off duty time.

The 1st Kansas returned home in October 1916. Naismith wanted to continue his military career as America entered World War I in April 1917. He considered applying for an active duty commission as a U.S. Army chaplain, but there were two things working against him: he was 55 years old in 1917, and he was not an American citizen. He found another route to military service because the Army was woefully short of chaplains as it mobilized for war. A number of civilian agencies, such as the Red Cross and Salvation Army, took up the slack by arranging for volunteer civilian clergymen to provide religious support to Soldiers, primarily at stateside posts and in hospitals. In June 1917, Naismith went to work as a volunteer chaplain for the YMCA, another organization that assisted the Army with religious and morale support activities. He was one of a small group of lecturers that the “Y” employed to travel around the United States and conduct programs at training camps to strengthen the moral character of Soldiers.

In September 1917 the YMCA sent Naismith to France, where he worked as one of the organization’s “overseas secretaries” in the war zone. Based out of Paris, Naismith spent most of his time near the front lines, working to improve the “social hygiene” of the troops. “I feel I am fitted for this work,” Naismith once said of his military service. Indeed he was—with his background as a clergyman, medical doctor, athlete, educator, and National Guardsman, his mix of skills had a depth and breadth that few of his peers in France could match. “It is a pretty big job,” Naismith wrote in a letter to his wife shortly after his arrival in theater:

Go over and make the camps clean places for the boys to fight. And also get the right spirit into the men. That involves two things. Educate the men and eliminate the evils from the camps and vicinity. Pershing is very anxious to have this done. I go without instructions to find out the best thing to do and then get the machinery working. It is no child’s play, especially when it is among the old-fashioned type of soldier and in France where ideals are so different. The responsibility is great but I am going into it determined. I

do wish that you and the family would pray for me, for I have never felt so much in need of help as I do at this present minute.



Chaplain James Naismith (center)  
France, 1918

*Although Naismith and his companions appear to be wearing U.S. Army uniforms, note the YMCA insignia on their right sleeves*

Naismith spent nineteen months in France, a longer period of time than most American soldiers who served overseas in World War I. After the Armistice, he continued his service in Europe as the American Army redeployed home. On Thanksgiving Day, 1918, he wrote a long letter home in which he listed a number of things he was thankful for. One of them was: “the knowledge 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.”

James Naismith returned to the United States in March 1919. He resumed his duties as the athletic director of the University of Kansas, a position he held until his retirement in 1937. He died two years later. He has been honored numerous times over the years for his contributions to American athletics, including being a member of the inaugural hall of fame class at the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Massachusetts. But he always considered his time in uniform and his work with the Soldiers of the American Army to be among his most significant accomplishments.

Further reading:

James Naismith, *Basketball: Its Origin and Development* (New York: Association Press, 1941).

Bob Rains, *James Naismith: The Man Who Invented Basketball* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).