

Fun Facts

YMCA Sports History

Everybody plays, everybody wins—sports at YMCAs

Millions of people have been introduced to sports at YMCAs. Many of the sports people play were introduced at YMCAs.

Volleyball was invented at the Holyoke (Mass.) YMCA in 1895, by William Morgan, an instructor at the Y who felt that basketball was too strenuous for businessmen. Morgan blended elements of basketball, tennis and handball into the game and called it mintonette. The name "volleyball" was first used in 1896 during an exhibition at the International YMCA Training School in Springfield, Mass., to better describe how the ball went back and forth over the net. In 1922, YMCAs held their first national championship in the game. This became the U.S. Open in 1924, when non-YMCA teams were permitted to compete.

Racquetball was invented in 1950 at the Greenwich (Conn.) YMCA by Joe Sobek, a member who couldn't find other squash players of his caliber and who did not care for handball. He tried paddleball and platform tennis and came up with the idea of using a strung racquet similar to a platform tennis paddle (not a sawed-off tennis racquet, as some say) to allow a greater variety of shots. After drawing up rules for the game, Sobek went to nearby Ys for approval by other players, and at the same time formed them into the Paddle Rackets Association to promote the sport. The original balls Sobek used were half blue and half red. When he needed replacements, Sobek asked Spalding, the original manufacturer, to make the balls all blue, so they wouldn't mark the Y's courts.

Softball was given its name by motion of Walter Hakanson of the Denver YMCA in 1926 at a meeting of the Colorado Amateur Softball Association (CASA), itself a result of YMCA staff efforts. Softball had been played for many years prior to 1926, under such names as kittenball, softball and even sissyball. In 1926, however, the YMCA state secretary, Homer Hoisington, noticed both the sport's popularity and its need for standardized rules. After a gathering of interested parties, the CASA was formed and Hakanson moved to settle on the name softball for the game. The motion carried, and the name softball became accepted nationwide. Shortly thereafter, the Denver YMCA adopted a declaration of principles for softball, adhering to noncommercialized recreation open to all ages and races and demanding good sportsmanship. When the Amateur Softball Association of America was formed in 1933, the Denver YMCA team represented Colorado in its first national tournament, held in Chicago.

Professional football began at a YMCA. In 1895, in Latrobe, Pa., John Brailer was paid \$10 plus expenses by the local YMCA to replace the injured quarterback on their team. Years later, however, Pudge Heffelfinger claimed that he was secretly paid to play for the Allegheny Athletic Association in 1892. The NFL elected to go with Pudge's version of events.

Yes, it was at the International YMCA Training School that in December 1891, James Naismith invented the game of **basketball**, doing so at the demand of Luther Gulick, the director of the school. Gulick needed a game to occupy a class of incorrigibles—18 future YMCA directors who, more interested in rugby and football, didn't care for leapfrog, tumbling and other activities they were forced to do during the winter. Gulick, obviously out of patience with the group, gave Naismith two weeks to come up with a game to occupy them.

Naismith decided that the new game had to be physically active and simple to understand. It could not be rough, so no contact could be allowed. The ball could be passed but not carried. Goals at each end of the court would lend a degree of difficulty and give skill and science a role. Elevating the goal would eliminate rushes that could injure players, a problem in football and rugby.

Introducing the game of basketball at the next gym class (Naismith did meet Gulick's deadline), Naismith posted 13 rules on the wall and taught the game to the incorrigibles. The men loved it and proceeded to introduce basketball to their home towns over Christmas break. Naismith's invention spread like wildfire.

Not only was basketball invented by a YMCA institution, but the game's first professional team came from a Y. The Trenton (N.J.) YMCA had fielded a basketball team since 1892 and in 1896 its team claimed to be the national champions after beating various other YMCA and college teams. The team then severed its ties with the Y. It played the 1896-97 season out of a local Masonic temple, charging for admission and keeping the proceeds.