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Basketball was invented by a Scot – a crucial and often ignored part of the game’s history

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Tension, excitement, glamour and big bucks: basketball’s popularity is soaring around the world, with 3.3 billion people interested in the game, according to one study. Strongly associated with North America, where players like LeBron James, Steph Curry and Caitlin Clark dominate the ratings, basketball is widely regarded as the creation of a Canadian, James Naismith.

But as my new research establishes, there is more to the origins of the game than most fans realise, and the story is underpinned by the influence of a very small Celtic country 3,000 miles away from basketball’s North American home: Scotland.

Basketball was introduced by Naismith on December 21, 1891, in a game that took place at the International YMCA training school at Springfield College, Massachusetts, in the US.



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Challenged to invent a sport that would appeal to rowdy trainee YMCA secretaries who shunned winter exercise, Naismith studied games from a philosophical perspective, and considered the reasons they were played. After combining aspects of various sports from lacrosse to football and rugby, he came up with basketball.

When he published 13 rules of play in the college newspaper on January 15, 1892, Naismith's sport was officially born. Soon its popularity began to take hold and the game spread around the world.

Now, beyond North America, basketball is popular in China, Japan, South America and Europe. In the UK, it is the second most played team sport after football for children between the ages of 11 and 15.



James Naismith in 1939. Wikipedia

Today, America is known globally as the home of basketball and Canada the home of the game's founding father. These views prevail in organisations worldwide including the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield.

Yet Naismith was born into a Scottish family in a Scots-dominated community in 1861 in Almonte, Canada West (now known as Ontario), which at the time was part of British North America. It was not until the 1931 statute of Westminster that Canada became an independent country.

As my research makes clear, Canadian citizenship was not legalised until the act of the same name was introduced in 1947. Naismith was born before the country's own birth and passed away in 1939 before citizenship was possible. The time of his birth makes him British. And given his family's nationality, more specifically, Scottish.

The Scots influence

Until 1891, Naismith lived in a "replanted" Scottish community in a Scots-dominated area, living a lifestyle similar to that back home.

In day-to-day life, Naismith spoke with a Scottish accent, used the broad Scots language, and enjoyed traditional Scottish activities such as Highland games. Raised by his parents as a “wee Scot” and brought up with the poetry of Robert Burns, Scottish culture, religion and nationalism were embedded in his identity.

Scottish Highland Games: Explained



Character traits and qualities engendered by the 18th-century Scottish Enlightenment – diligence, logic, pragmatism, innovation, resilience, self-reliance – plus a good dose of stubbornness, all helped Naismith create and develop basketball.

A robust upbringing that focused on hard work, resourcefulness, schooling and sport provided him with the necessary tools. Like many before him, the Scots immigrant experience in Canada promoted the extent to which his Scottishness underpinned his values throughout his life.

During his youth, Naismith became quite the inventor, creating a pair of ice skates and dreaming up new games to entertain himself and his friends. A commonly played game at the time was “duck-on-the-rock”, which Naismith learned from his family who had played it in Scotland. It required participants to throw a stone upwards and forwards in an arc to knock another stone off an elevated target – rather like a shooting for the hoop in basketball.

Refocusing basketball’s history

The purpose of my research is not to rewrite the history of basketball or undermine the influence of America or Canada on the game, but rather to expand and enhance it.

It is too simplistic to say that because Naismith was born in what is now modern-day Canada, this makes him Canadian. Or claim that because basketball was first played in America, it makes the game American.

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Exploring Scotland's input and influence adds depth to the origins of basketball and Naismith's own story enriches the sport and helps unite basketball fans worldwide by explaining and drawing connections to its heritage and influences.

My research poses two key questions: why is Scotland not included in the global narrative around basketball? And why is the country not credited with the creation and development of the game?

Scotland provided the key components for Naismith's identity, character and values which put him on the road to Springfield. Canada provided the environment in which Naismith could flourish and grow. And America was the ideal place for basketball to be invented, transformed and then ripple out around the world.



Laila Pheila of the Michigan Wolverines: the popularity of women's basketball is growing too. AP / Alamy

It was a collaborative effort between these three countries, and not solely down to America and Canada. Scotland deserves to be recognised as the catalyst which led to the creation of the sport. Without it, would the game exist today at all?

Basketball's story needs to be updated to include Naismith's origins and the singularly Scottish elements that informed his life. His connection to Scotland was not simply about his lineage; it represented who he was as a person, informing how he saw the world and what he wanted to do with his life.

Naismith, his family, his friends and his community did not see themselves as Canadians. The Scots in Almonte believed being Scottish was what "binds us to this earth".

Ignoring this crucial Scottish element underpinning the game simply undermines its true heritage and neglects the rich backstory to the man who invented basketball.