

The Evolution of Basketball

The Lima News – By Bob Seggerson – March 9, 2023

When in 1891, Dr. James Naismith hung a peach basket in a gymnasium and created the game of basketball, I doubt he could have imagined the impact his new sport would have on the future of athletics around the world including west-central and northwest Ohio. It may surprise you that, of his 13 original rules of the game, nine are still in effect although they are amended by a barrage of articles and subsections. Despite that, the evolution of Naismith's game over the last 132 years would be unrecognizable to him today. Just as his game can be unrecognizable to us.

In basketball's infancy, the ball used wouldn't bounce but it didn't make any difference because dribbling was not allowed. By the turn of the century the rule was revised to allow a player to bounce the ball once and come to a stop but he couldn't shoot the ball after his dribble.

Fouls were called, but the free throw line was 21 feet from the basket and every team had one player who was designated the free throw shooter. In 1913 someone had the bright idea to cut a hole in the bottom of the peach basket that allowed the ball to drop through cleanly and eliminated the poor guy who had to climb a ladder to retrieve the ball after every score.

By the 1920's the game had sparked a passion that reached the high school level. Because basketball only required five players, it became extremely popular with smaller rural schools that, before the consolidation of the 1950's, proliferated in states like Ohio and Indiana. Those smaller schools often had trouble rounding up 11 guys to play football and even getting nine athletes for baseball proved difficult in some cases. But basketball fit like a glove. Basketball hoops started popping up everywhere, including on garages in driveways and inside barns stretched across America. The passion for basketball that was born in all of those communities is alive and well today. The OHSAA seized on the interest and created the first post season basketball state tournament in 1922.

Early in the decade, bank boards were added and had to be at least two feet from the wall which prevented players from climbing the walls to gain a shot.

Throughout the early decades, there were no out of bounds rules because most gyms were surrounded by four walls with spectators sitting in a balcony. (The old Lima South is an example) A ball that bounced off to the side or up into the balcony became a free for all as players battled to gain possession of the ball. (Just imagine a fumble in football) Coaches even devised plays to block the competition from climbing the stairs to retrieve a ball that landed in the balcony. Many newer gyms were built with a wire cage around the boundary to prevent the problem, resulting in basketball being called the "cage game" and the athletes "cagers," a term still in use today.

In 1932, a midcourt line was established and teams had ten seconds to advance the ball past that line. Previous to the ruling, teams could use the entire court to stall the ball resulting in very low scoring games.

In this era, a jump ball was used after every score, giving teams with a tall player or an exceptional leaper a tremendous advantage. The jump ball was such a strategic part of the game that coaches spent hours devising plays and strategies to use in jump ball

situations. In 1936, the jump ball rule changed and was used only to start each quarter. Fifty years later, the alternate possession arrow at the scorer's table would all but eliminate the jump ball from basketball.

In the 1940's, players were allowed unlimited substitutions for the first time and players were permitted five fouls before being disqualified.

In 1949, one of the more interesting rule changes in basketball history occurred. Coaches were finally given permission to coach during time outs. Up until that year, coaches were only allowed to talk with their players before and after the game and at half time. I can only imagine the length some coaches went to in order to circumvent the rule. My first thought was that a squad's Captain must have played a vital role for teams up until the rule was altered.

In 1957 a bonus free throw was added after the 7th foul in a half of basketball.

In 1958, the free throw lane was widened from 6 feet to 12 feet. The previous dimensions of the free throw looked like a keyhole which became a popular term in basketball.

The NBA added a 24 second clock in basketball. There currently is a great debate in Ohio on if a shot clock should be introduced to high school basketball.

In that decade, the game slowly began to open its doors to African-Americans at every level of play and their arrival has transformed the game of basketball.

In the 1960's colleges and high schools decided to outlaw dunking. The rule was established with one player in mind, the great Lew Alcindor (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar). It didn't stop him from dominating the NCAA and NBA. The dunk rule was reinstated and freshmen were permitted to play varsity college basketball for the first time in the 1970's.

Although it wasn't an actual rule change, Title IX was enacted demanding equality in sports for women, a long over-due ruling that has changed the landscape for all sports. As a result, the level of play for women's basketball in particular has skyrocketed.

The 3-point shot made its appearance in the 1980's and has arguably had the most dramatic impact on the game of basketball in my lifetime. The NCAA adopted the 3-point rule in 1986 and high schools joined them the next season. It's taken a few decades for the new shot to alter the way the game is played but its impact has been enormous.

In recent decades there have been a few changes, including two free throws being rewarded after the 10th team foul and the number of players in the FT lane reduced from 8-6.

In spite of multiple changes over the long history of basketball, I think James Naismith would be happy to know that the main goal and rule of the basketball remains the same as the day he brought it to life: "You have to put the ball in the basket to score."

Thank you, Dr. Naismith