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Cage Start Authenticated By Man Who Was There

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JACKSONVILLE, Ill., Dec. 10 — Were peach baskets really used in the first game of basketball ever played?

How many men were on each side?

Was dribbling the ball one of the original requirements?

In Jacksonville, just across the street from the Illinois College campus, lives a man who has the answers to these questions. He is the Rev. Ernest G. Hildner, a retired Presbyterian minister, and he knows all about the first game of basketball because he was there.

The Rev. Mr. Hildner not only was a witness when Dr. James Naismith first outlined his new game 75 years ago at Springfield (Mass.) College, but he played in the initial scrimmage.

"Yes, peach baskets were nailed up at each end of the gymnasium when Jimmy (Dr. Naismith) got us together for that first game," recalled the Rev. Mr. Hildner. "And everybody who was present was allowed to play. That made about 14 on each side. We used a soccer ball.

"There were practically no rules at first. You didn't have to bounce the ball or anything like that. Just get it into the basket. That made it a pretty rough sport, of course, but nobody worried about that."

The Rev. Mr. Hildner recently



The Rev. Edward C. Hildner

observed his ninety-third birthday. He is in reasonably good health, is able to take daily walks in the neighborhood by himself, and manages to watch nearly all of the Illinois College home basketball games, although his eyesight is poor. He lives with one of his sons, Ernest Jr., a history professor.

Basketball was introduced at a YMCA near the Springfield campus, where students, faculty members and businessmen often came for an hour or so of exercise at lunch time.

"Jimmy wanted to give us something more interesting to

do than just calisthenics," the Rev. Mr. Hildner said. "I think he had the businessmen more in mind than the students."

Surprisingly, women were attracted to basketball right at the start.

"I stayed at Springfield only two years, but I remember seeing wives of students and teachers playing the game," said the Rev. Mr. Hildner. "And they played it just as rough as the men. The gym was only about one-third the size of present-day courts, so there was a great amount of bumping and shoving. The ladies sure pasted each other."

However, basketball made no great impression on the Rev. Mr. Hildner, as a young man, and he never played it again. At a branch of Union College in Schenectady, N.Y., he played varsity football, but the cage game hadn't reached there. He entered the ministry after attending Michigan University, and later married.

Neither did basketball appeal to any of the Rev. Mr. Hildner's seven sons.

"We were an athletically-minded family and some of the boys earned their letters in football and hockey," the Rev. Mr. Hildner recalled, "but none played much basketball."

The Rev. Mr. Hildner and Dr. Naismith remained friends over the years, but seldom saw each other. In the mid-1930s Dr. Naismith visited the Hildners' residence in Hillsdale, Mich., but the minister was out of town.

Dr. Naismith later died. As for modern basketball, the Rev. Mr. Hildner enjoys the game, but is disturbed by the interruptions.

"There are too many whistles," he said. "Every time they get something going, somebody toots a whistle because some silly rule has been broken. Why don't they just let them play?"

It wasn't until 1950 that the Rev. Mr. Hildner really became aware of the importance of basketball. He was visiting Tijuana, Mexico, with his wife, who died a year ago.

"I was startled to see some Mexican children playing the game on an outdoor court," he said. "I'll never forget it.

"I had never thought much of the game until then, but seeing youngsters in a foreign country playing a game that I had been in on the start of — that convinced me."