Vanderbilt has case for Geneva's 'birthplace of college basketball' title

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There are some facts that are indisputable when it comes the history of college basketball, such as James Naismith invented the game in 1891 and the first basketball game was played at a YMCA that same year. Or that on Feb. 9, 1985, the first intercollegiate game was played between the Minnesota State School of Agriculture and Hamline College.

These beginnings are well-documented, black and white. There are others, of course -- these solid, concrete ‘firsts’ -- spread out over basketball’s birth and development. Some claims, though, come in shades of gray.

Such as Geneva’s claim to the title as the birthplace of college basketball.

There’s a section dedicated to the subject on Geneva’s athletic website, and when the phrase is searched, Geneva is the first result. It’s a distinction that seemed settled.

Far from it.

Geneva claims that in February 1892, the “first college basketball game was organized intramurally by students,” but that Geneva didn’t play in an official game until April 8, 1983 when it defeated the New Brighton YMCA 3-0.

The dispute, though, isn’t over the first college to create a team or the first to play an intramural game -- there might never be a way to pinpoint that other than James Naismith’s word -- it’s over the first college to field a team and play in an official game.

And, as it turns out, Vanderbilt has a strong case.

Geneva is used to other schools alleging they are the true birthplace of college basketball, said Cheryl Johnson, Geneva's director of marketing services and public relations.

She considered the topic closed in 2010 when Ian Naismith, the grandson of basketball founder, James Naismith, paid a visit to the school, saying he wanted to see the birthplace of college basketball for himself.

He provided Geneva with a quote from his father's book, Basketball: It's Origin and Development, where James Naismith details how then-Geneva athletic director C.O. Bemies brought the game back to Beaver Falls.

"Mr. C.O. Beamis [sic] a Springfield boy, had gone to Geneva College as a physical director," James Naismith wrote. "Beamis had seen the game played in the Training School gymnasium while he was on vacation. He realized it might solve the need of a winter activity in his school. I told him the success we had and explained to him the fundamentals of the game. On his return to Beaver Falls, he started the game in Geneva College; it is my belief, therefore, that this was the first to play basketball."

But while the story certainly provides evidence toward Geneva's right to call itself the birthplace of college basketball, since it's likely it was the first school to field a team, it's not that simple. When it comes to determining which college first played in an official game, it's Vanderbilt's evidence that carries the most weight.

"Organizing a basketball team, a college team and playing a game, that's different than a bunch of students getting together and playing," said Bill Traughber, who is in his 11th year researching and writing sports history stories for Vanderbilt's official website.

Traughber first became interested in the subject when a fan in North Carolina saw an article proclaiming Vanderbilt as the first team to organize and play a game. He asked Traughber if he knew anything about it, and that's how he found out about Geneva.

It was 2008 when Traughber looked into the issue, and, by the time he finished his research, he was convinced Vanderbilt had the more legitimate case.

His research led him to a Nashville newspaper article written in Feb. 7, 1893 saying that Vanderbilt would play a YMCA team that night. But that wasn't enough. He needed proof the game was actually played -- and he found it.

Another article, dated Feb. 8, read that the game was played and Vanderbilt won 9-6. There was also a roster and a game score listed in Vanderbilt's yearbook, the Comet. The date of that contest preceded Geneva's first official game by more than two months.

"Geneva calls itself the birthplace of college basketball," Traughber said. "I don't understand why they can say that. I just reported what I found. Vanderbilt played before Geneva did. Both played YMCA schools, which was interesting."

The Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame can't confirm or deny either assertion. Historian Matt Zeysing wrote in an email that the Hall does "not have an official position" and has "not investigated the historical record enough to make a claim."

The only 'first team' the Hall of Fame recognizes is the YMCA team that played in Springfield, Mass., in 1891.

As for Ian Naismith's statement that Geneva indeed deserves the title,, Zeysing wrote that while Naismith was "a wonderful man," his word wouldn't represent the final say when it comes to college basketball history.

"He was a promoter and spread the word," Zeysing wrote. "But I do not recall him being an historian, other than to know what he was told. The historical record changes, so that would not be calling Ian or any of the Naismith's liars. But there is evidence to support the Vandy claim."