

CHC: Vanderbilt Was the First College to Play Basketball

by Bill Traughber

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Vanderbilt vs. Geneva College!

This was not a traditional basketball game played in a gymnasium. This is a basketball game played in the sports history books. Both schools record that they played a basketball game against a local YMCA team in 1893. It is important as to which college played first. This would designate that school as the first college to field a team and play the new game of basketball.

But which one was first?

The evidence says Vanderbilt!

As a researcher and writer of Vanderbilt athletics history, I receive comments and Vanderbilt history questions nearly each week from Commodore fans across the country. One of these Commodore fans is Bill Kaminer of Asheville, NC, a 1974 Vanderbilt graduate. Two years ago Kaminer sent me an inquiry about something he read in *USA Today*. He read in the newspaper's section "Today in Sports History" the comment that Vanderbilt was the first college team to play in a basketball game.

I could not find anything to substantiate it as fact. Last month Kaminer, a very devoted and loyal Commodore fan (no Tar Heel or Blue Devil influence here), asked me again about the historical observation. So, following in the spirit of Columbo, my favorite TV detective, I searched for the truth.

James Naismith invented the game of basketball while working as a physical education teacher at the International Young Men's Christian Association Training School in Springfield, Mass. Naismith needed an indoor game to be played during the cold winter months and to keep his students interested while performing a physical activity.

In the fall of 1891, Naismith divided his class of 18 students into two teams of nine players each. Two peach baskets were located and hung from the 10-foot balcony of the gymnasium. A soccer ball was secured and the game of basketball was born. On January 26, 1892, Naismith published his 13 rules for the game.

In my investigation I learned it has been recorded that Vanderbilt did indeed play the first basketball game involving a college. It appears that this piece of basketball history has been kept a secret. But the exact date was a mystery--until now.

BASKET BALL NINE.

B. G. WHITE,	Centre Home.
E. H. HAWKINS,	Left Home.
J. P. HANNER,	Right Home.
H. A. DAVIS,	Centre.
R. W. GREENE,	Left Centre.
W. W. NEWBERRY,	Right Centre.
F. L. DAY,	Guard.
L. J. LOVENTHAL, JR.,	Right Guard.
G. W. WILLIAMSON,	Left Guard.

Result of Game Played.

Vanderbilt vs. Nashville Y. M. C. A., 9-6.

The Vanderbilts defeat Y.M.C.A., 9-6, in 1893. (from the Vanderbilt yearbook *The Comet*)

Geneva College is an NAIA member located in Beaver Falls, Pa. The school will be moving into NCAA Division III competition in the future. The college's web site states with a caption "The Birthplace of College Basketball." It also reads "Geneva College was the site of the first-ever collegiate game, April 8, 1893." That game was against the New Brighton YMCA., in Beaver Falls.

Many publications and sports online web sites will reference Geneva College as the first college to field a team and appear in a basketball game. The Brighton YMCA is recorded as their opponent on April 8, 1893. I contacted the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Mass., and they told me they didn't have anything regarding the first college team.

Now the Vanderbilt side.

Zander Hollander, a very respected sports historian wrote in "The Ultimate Basketball Encyclopedia" (copyright 2003, by Sport Media Publishing, Inc.) "Earlier, teams representing colleges had faced YMCA teams: Vanderbilt defeated the Nashville YMCA as early as March 1893."

Hollander also wrote much earlier in "The Modern Encyclopedia of Basketball" (copyright 1973, published by Four Winds Press) "The first college to field a men's team was Vanderbilt University, which defeated the Nashville, Tennessee YMCA in March 1893."

Hollander has written, co-written and edited more than 200 books including six encyclopedias. He was a sportswriter for the *New York World Telegram* for more than 20 years.

A few online sites will mention the Vanderbilt/YMCA game as March 1893. But there wasn't any source or details to support that incomplete date.

The smoking gun discovered.

I was directed to a Nashville newspaper, *the Daily American* (February 7, 1893), which told this story:

BASKET BALL

Teams From Vanderbilt and the Y.M.C.A. to Meet Tonight

"The new game known as basket ball which has been recently introduced into gymnasiums throughout the United States has gained a large following. Its advent in Nashville was marked with an enthusiastic reception. The game is very much like foot ball with much of the roughness eliminated, and instead of keeping the ball down it is kept up. To-night at 8



1893 ad for a basketball goal

o'clock in the gymnasium of the Young Men's Christian Association the public will have an opportunity of witnessing a spirited contest in basket ball between teams from Vanderbilt and the association. The two teams are well trained and an exciting game will be played. The public is invited to witness the contest. Seats will be placed on the running track for ladies, who are especially urged to be present."

Also listed in the article were the last names of each team's nine players. *The Daily American* did not mention the results after the game in the next few editions. But there needs to be documentation that the game was actually played. As a researcher and historian this was not documented proof.

The game could have been snowed out and never rescheduled. The Nashville trolley cars might have been shut down. The horse and buggy rentals closed. Then I checked the newspaper microfilm in the Nashville Public Library's main branch to search in another Nashville newspaper of that time. The *Republican Banner* (February 8, 1893) did have an anonymous reporter at the historic game giving this report:

THE VANDERBILTS WON

They Defeat the Y.M.C.A. Team at Basketball

"The game of basketball at the Y.M.C.A. gymnasium last night between the Vanderbilts and the Association team was witnessed by a large audience, who greatly enjoyed the first public exhibition of this new game. The game in many of its features resembles football, but is not nearly so dangerous to life and limb. Nine men constitute a team At each end of the hall is a shallow bag, the mouth of which is held open by a metal hoop a foot or so in diameter The bag is fastened securely to the wall about five or six feet from the floor, and the object is to put the ball into the opponent's goal. A goal counts three points. The game last night resulted in favor of Vanderbilt by a score of 9 to 6."

This will document that the game was played on February 7, 1893 and not in March. It also beats by two months the Geneva College game.

Another great source of information would have been Vanderbilt's school newspaper *The Hustler* that dates back to that era. But the dates needed in 1893 were missing from the Vanderbilt Archives. Vanderbilt's 1893 yearbook, *The Comet*, does have one page that list the nine Commodore players and the YMCA game score.

Also I checked with the main branch of the Nashville YMCA to see if they had any information such as newsletters dating to that era. But they never got back to me after my inquiries.

Vanderbilt was the first college to field a basketball team and play an official game. Vanderbilt has always counted this 9-6 win as the school's first basketball game. The game was in February 1893 and not March 1893 as reported.

Other "firsts" would be the February 9, 1895 game between Hamline College and the Minnesota State School of Agriculture (now the University of Minnesota-St. Paul). MSSA won that game 9-3. This would be the first intercollegiate game. The first intercollegiate game with five-man teams is credited to the January 18, 1896 contest when the University of Chicago defeated the University of Iowa, 15-12 in Iowa City, Iowa.

Of course, someone could find something different after 100 years have passed. But the 1893 Vanderbilt/Geneva case is now resolved and closed. I will report any conflicts or

challenges that may dispute my findings on the 1893 game.

Special thanks goes to Linda Center of the Nashville Archives who found the "Smoking Gun" with the 1893 Daily American newspaper article revealing the date of the game. I also would like to recognize and thank Linda Gray and Henry Shipman of the Vanderbilt Archives. I am ending my fourth year of researching and writing exclusive Vanderbilt athletic history stories for vucommodores.com. Shipman has been very valuable and enthusiastic in helping me locate some of the vintage and historical photos of Vanderbilt athletics that have appeared with my stories. The public has not seen most of these photos ever or for decades. Certainly the present generations of Vanderbilt fans have never seen what I have discovered. Photographs tell the story better than myself and can be hidden and unseen in files forever. And, of course, thanks to Bill Kaminer who assigned me the 1893 Vanderbilt/Geneva case.

If you have any comments or suggestions you can contact Bill Traughber via e-mail at WLTraughber@aol.com.