

FEATURES

YMCA in Hawaii started with Christian focus, embraced sports later

By Bob Sigall, Special to the Star-Advertiser

Posted March 31, 2019

March 31, 2019

Updated March 31, 2019 7:47am



CINDY ELLEN RUSSELL / 2004

Analia Herminosillo, 12, runs to catch a basketball during a game of "poison" at the Nuuanu YMCA.

When most people think of the YMCA, they think of an athletics-based organization that does other good things, too. But in fact, the organization, when it was opened in Hawaii in 1869, felt that our climate was too warm for serious exercise, according to the Hawaii newspaper *The Friend*.

Instead, the YMCA here focused on Christian evangelism. It held Bible classes, prayer meetings and helped provide respectable Christian lodging and employment.

The Hawaii YMCA was founded in 1869 by Peter Cushman Jones, Thomas Rain Walker and Sanford Ballard Dole. Dole would later be governor of Hawaii. Jones would become president of C. Brewer and founder of the Bank of Hawaii.

It wasn't until the 1880s that the YMCA in Hawaii and the United States embraced athletics. And amazingly, it was the work of a local man from Honolulu. His name was Luther Halsey Gulick Jr., and he was the son of missionaries.

His father, Luther Gulick Sr., founded Kawaiahae Seminary in 1865. It joined with Mills School in 1908 to become Mid-Pacific Institute.

To those who felt the “Y” should focus on religious and educational work, Gulick argued that the “body is the temple of God, and its care and development are not inconsistent for Christians.”

RELATED

>> [Students in YMCA's teen volunteer program learn from hands-on experiences](#)

>> [Once separated by race, the Nuuanu YMCA brought four cultures together](#)

>> [Community gives back to rejuvenate the 150-year-old YMCA of Honolulu](#)

Gulick Jr. graduated from Oahu College (Punahou School) and became a physical-education instructor at the International YMCA Training School in Springfield, Mass.

He presented his ideas for the “unity of body, mind and spirit” to the International Young Men’s Christian Association convention in 1889. He developed an equilateral triangle showing that all three are necessary for a whole person. They embraced his idea, and the triangle is now part of the YMCA’s symbol worldwide.

By 1891, Gulick was the head of the physical education department at the school. During that winter he noticed that YMCA staffers were bored with calisthenics, and asked his instructors to develop indoor games that were “interesting, easy to learn, easy to play in winter and by artificial light.”

YMCA instructor James Naismith came up with a game “as free from roughness as possible, adaptable to large and small groups of men, and give all-around development.” His idea? Basketball. And it spread like wildfire through YMCAs across the country.

Initially the size of each team was determined by the size of the gym’s floor space. By 1898 it became standardized at five players on the floor at any one time, the Philadelphia Times reported.

A referee and umpire watched to see if a player kicked the ball or ran with it. Tripping, kicking or roughness was not allowed.

The two halves began with a jump ball of the two tallest players. The “forward” then took the ball down the court by “dribbling.” Guards spread their arms to block throws. The game is quick, fast and furious, the Times said.

The first game of basketball in Hawaii was played in 1895 at the YMCA here, just four years after its invention.

In 1895 another instructor, William Morgan, came up with volleyball, which he called “mintonette,” in that it reminded him of badminton.

Morgan thought basketball was too strenuous and didn’t hold the interest of some players. He took an old basketball bladder, and he and friend, John Lynch, started knocking it back and forth, trying to keep it in the air.

He asked the sporting goods company Spalding to make a special ball, and the early players batted it over a 6-1/2-foot net. Over time the net was raised to 8 feet for men and 7 feet 4 inches for women.

Initially the ball could be hit many times on one side before being hit over the net, but that was soon reduced to a maximum of three.

Gulick invited Morgan to demonstrate the game at his gym in Springfield. Dr. Alfred Halstead of the college faculty suggested a better name that was more descriptive, and the crowd embraced "volley ball."

So, a local boy, Luther Gulick, and two YMCA men who worked with him gave us both basketball and volleyball.

Honolulu Advertiser writer E. Fullard-Leo said in 1960, "Basketball is perhaps the only real American game in that it was not borrowed in whole or part from a foreign country."