

## **The Most Popular Sport You've Never Heard Of**

You're a sports fan. Maybe you remember the score of the U.S. soccer team's victory in the finals of the 1999 World Cup (5-4 in a shootout), how many Olympic Games Jackie Joyner-Kersey competed in (four) or who was the first pick in the 2006 WNBA draft (Seimone Augustus by the Minnesota Lynx).

Now name one of the most popular women's sports in the world that is played on a court with shooting, passing, a basket and a ball. If you said Netball, then you are probably one of the twenty million people from more than seventy countries that currently play this fast and exciting sport. If you said basketball, you're probably an American. But if the Netballers around the country have anything to say about it, you just might find yourself playing with them on a court near you.

Ironically, Netball originated in the United States. In 1895, four years after inventing basketball at Springfield College in Massachusetts, Dr. James Naismith sent the diagrams of his game to a sports teacher in New Orleans named Clara Baer. She interpreted Naismith's drawings of the court to mean that the players could not leave certain areas and women's basketball was born.

The game soon spread to Great Britain where it was transformed into the game of Netball. While points are scored in both basketball and Netball by putting the ball through a 10-foot high basket, Netball has seven players on a side, uses a smaller ball and like Clara Baer first envisioned, players are relegated to certain areas of the court. There is no dribbling and players must pass or shoot in less than three seconds. Only two players on the court are allowed to shoot and to make things more difficult, there is no backboard. The game is quick, explosive and if the passion Netballers feel for the game is any indicator, a lot of fun.

Australian-born Jo O'Key, U.S. National team member and player/coach of the California State Champions Santa Monica (CA) Waves, is one of many expatriates now living in the U.S. who are committed to introducing Netball throughout America.

“I truly believe the game will catch on in a big way,” said O’Key during a recent break from the San Francisco Open which was played on the first dedicated netball court in Northern California. “It’s such a powerful sport. The passing skills are phenomenal and you can play from age 7 to 70. And because the players work from specific areas of the court, height isn’t a factor as it is in basketball.”

Netball currently has clubs in 35 states throughout the country and that number is growing as more Americans are being exposed to the sport. Efforts are underway to incorporate Netball into school physical education curriculums and when that happens, United States of American Netball Association president Edina M. Bayne sees the U.S. soon becoming one of the dominant teams in the world.

“We are competing against countries where Netball receives the same kind of attention and support as the major sports in America do,” says Bayne. With the National team currently ranked ninth in the world, she adds, “We are just now beginning to tap into the incredible pool of athletic talent in the U.S. and see a very bright future for the team.”

In the meantime, U.S. Netballers continue to draw stares from curious onlookers who wonder what the women in the skirted uniforms are playing.

“We train every weekend at an outdoor basketball court and after each practice, we are approached by people wondering exactly what we are doing,” says O’Key. “We teach them the basic rules and then invite them out on the court to play for a while. When we see them back the next week, we know we’re on the right track.”