

How the YMCA Helped Shape America

NPR June 2, 2015



Baseball legends Jackie Robinson (kneeling) and Roy Campanella of the Brooklyn Dodgers teach basketball to a group of young boys at the YMCA in Harlem in 1948.

Bettmann/Corbis

The American wing of the Young Men's Christian Association — a worldwide organization founded in London in 1844 — launched the first basketball teams and group swim lessons in the U.S., popularized exercise classes and created the oldest summer camp still in operation, the YMCA's historians tell us.

In fact, you could argue that many aspects of our nation's present-day obsession with physical fitness can be traced back to the nonprofit association — popularly known as "the Y" — that now has more than 2,700 YMCAs around the country. Originally geared toward young Christian men, the Y today is open to women and men of all ages and creeds.

"Innovation and impact are in the Y's DNA," says CEO Kevin Washington. "For more than 160 years, the Y has delivered lasting personal and social change by listening to communities and providing innovative, effective solutions to community needs."

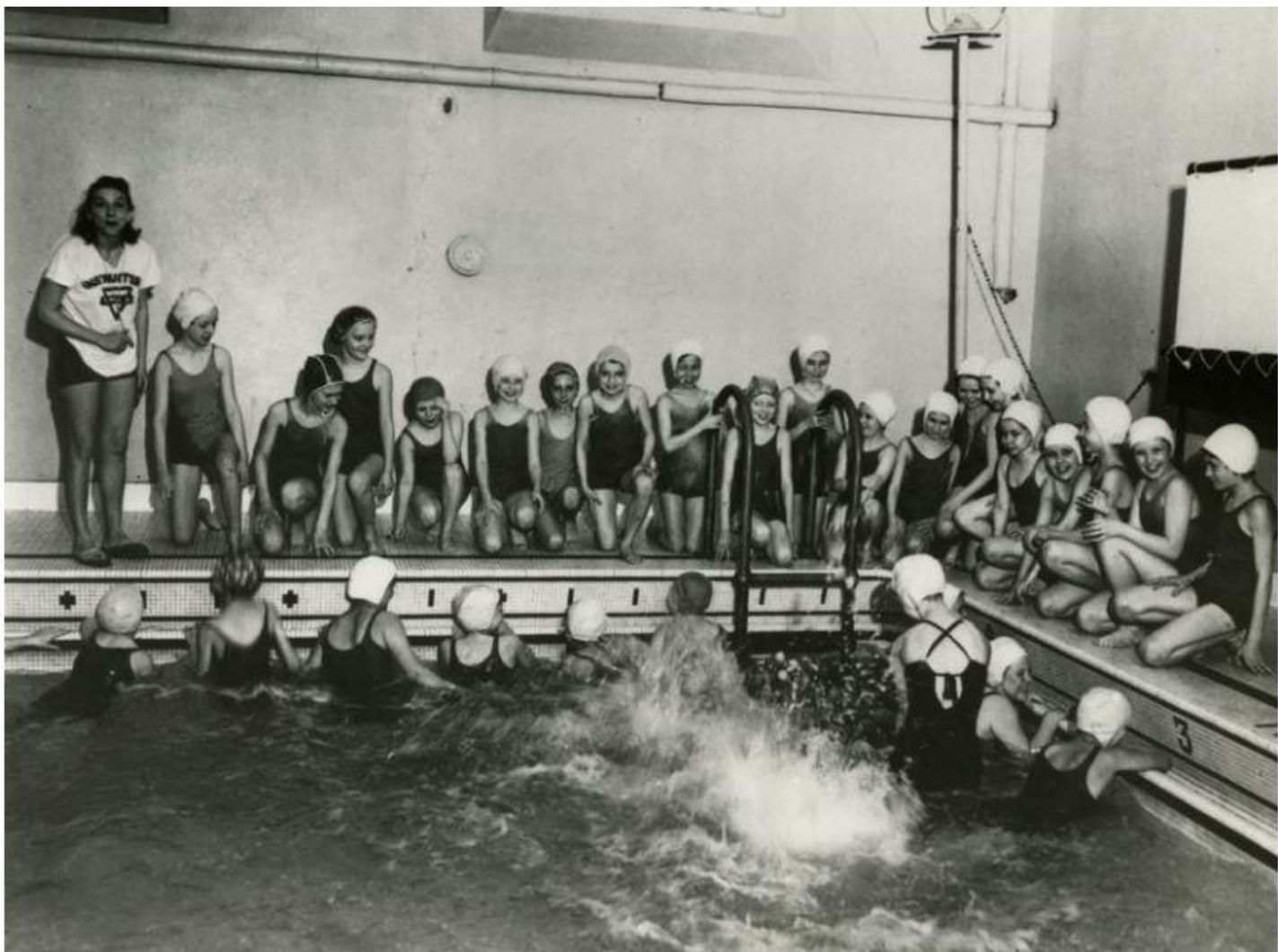
Here, according to the Y archives, are four of those innovations:



The first known basketball team at the International YMCA Training School in Springfield, Mass., 1892

Courtesy of Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries

First basketball games, 1891. James Naismith, the granddaddy of American basketball, was teaching physical education at the International YMCA Training School in Springfield, Mass., when he dreamed up a new indoor winter game using a soccer ball and two peach baskets. The first contest was played at the Y school in December 1891. The *Statesman* of Salem, Ore., reported on Feb. 7, 1931, that during those earliest games the school's custodian, "whose antipathy to the students was well known," retrieved successful shots from the baskets — using a ladder.



Girls learn to swim at the YMCA. Circa 1960.

Courtesy of the Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

First group swimming lessons, 1909. George Corsan, a Canadian swimming enthusiast, designed group swimming lessons — including on-land instruction — at the Detroit YMCA in 1909. According to the International Swimming Hall of Fame, Corsan pioneered radical breathing methods, and he was the first instructor to teach beginning swimmers the crawl stroke instead of the breaststroke. Corsan traveled coast to coast teaching people to swim. He scheduled a week in Berkeley, Calif., in 1911 — the *Oakland Tribune* noted on April 14 of that year — to offer lessons to all boys. In Newark, N.J., the Y historians report, Corsan taught 800 kids to swim in a four-week course.



An adult gymnastics club performs a group stunt on the parallel bars at the Rochester, N.Y., YMCA at the beginning of the 20th century.

Kim Vintage Stock/Corbis

Earliest public fitness workouts, 1881. The group's historians point out that the first YMCA buildings to include gymnasiums opened in 1869. In 1881, Robert J. Roberts, a staff member at the Boston YMCA, coined the term "bodybuilding." Roberts organized exercise regimes that morphed over the years into the fitness classes of today



YMCA camp leaders at Camp Dudley in New York. Sumner Dudley, founder of the camp, sits in the center with a mallet.

Courtesy of the Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries

- **Oldest summer camp still in operation, 1885.** One of the first known summer camps for children in the U.S. was the YMCA's Camp Dudley, founded in New York in 1885. Camp Dudley — which is no longer owned by the Y — is believed to be the oldest American summer camp in operation today. At a gala dinner in New York City, according to the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* on Feb. 10, 1906, campers had goofy names for various foods served at the camp. Roast beef was called "muscle maker" and rolls were dubbed "What the Bowling Ball Does."

Ryan Bean, archivist at the Kautz Family YMCA Archives at the University of Minnesota Libraries, says, "Early Y leaders understood that if they could shape the values of the youth, they could shape the values of the nation."