

Why

All the Fuss

about Fitness?

IN the greatest nation in the world, where individual material advantages are accepted as commonplace and at a time in our history when they are accessible to the greatest number, we remain a nation physically unfit. We rank high in many of the accepted indexes of health status such as dietary level, infant mortality rate, general standard of living and in our medical capability to combat pathology. Our children are among the tallest, heaviest, most robust of any nation and are perceptibly larger at comparable ages than their parents were. With these facts in mind, one might well ask, "Why all this fuss about physical fitness?" Although the answer is simple, factual and straightforward, it is apparently not well comprehended nor perhaps even believed.

While it can be argued that good nutrition, living standard, and medical skill beneficially affect the entire population, their contribution toward a dynamic life, while positive, is nevertheless relatively inert. They merely maintain a passive level of health, although admittedly one heretofore not possible. The term "physical fitness" implies ability to perform, and therein lies our weakness. Contemporary American life belies the efforts of our forebears to build this nation—efforts

which demanded performance, dynamism, and relentless energy. The comfort and luxury which symbolize our present status also symbolize our physical deterioration. If, in our material wealth, we can be considered fortunate, then our European, African or Asian neighbors are less fortunate; yet they outperform us, both sexes, consistently, and at all ages. While this is not true in the athletic world, athletes are not a representative cross-section of any nation. Despite our advantages, we do not measure up in physical fitness, people to people.

The straightforward reason for our physical unfitness can be summed up in two words, *circumstance* and *attitude*. Our circumstances may be thought of as a series of status symbols: relative material wealth and security, an abundance of home appliances and comforts, public and private transportation facilities galore, "exclusive" memberships, food, clothing and shelter previously unheard of, ad infinitum.

The efforts of a physical educator to make our children physically fit are often greeted by a series of attitudes: those of

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the parents who are often dominated by a demonstrative and vocal clique of status-seeking "intellectually elite," who push their children hard academically and defend them overprotectively from things physical, and who want to maintain the status quo at all costs; the school administrator, sometimes intimidated, who therefore follows rather than leads; and finally the teacher in the classroom, whose efforts are spread far too thin, who is too often unmotivated, untrained, and actually rebellious about physical education. These circumstances and attitudes set the climate in the school.

What happens to adults in these circumstances, with these attitudes? "I play golf every Sunday"; "I just don't have the time"; "I've been overweight this way for years"; "At my age I'm afraid my heart wouldn't stand it"; "My doctor says I'm fit as a fiddle"; "It's a normal part of aging"—again, ad infinitum. Few argue with physical fitness but with most of us, it is for the other fellow. With such excuses for action, some of our most productive and brilliant people, but dynamically only about half alive most of the time, finally submit to a coronary attack often at the zenith of a promising career. What an appalling rationalization for action to set as an example for the upcoming generation and what an appalling waste of human resources where a complete reversal of the picture is possible not only in prevention but in treatment as well. The extent of the coronary problem is almost a million deaths annually plus an additional 14 million who suffer from sub-acute cardiovascular ailments. Increasing numbers of physicians agree with Dr. Edward Bortz of Philadelphia's Lankenau Hospital that "... exercise is the master conditioner for the healthy and the major therapy for the ill."

Tests of muscular function on thou-

sands of very young boys and girls reveal them to be virtually destitute in strength, flexibility, and balance. These conditions worsen when left unattended. However, the effort to build or rehabilitate the physical fitness of youngsters by greater attention to sports and "social games" is one of the most pathetic fallacies we encounter. In essence, physical fitness is aimed at keeping people first alive, then dynamically alive, by educating them to its benefits and methods continuously throughout their lifetimes.

What Changes Are Needed?

Despite numerous statements of "objectives of physical education" found in any general text on the subject, only two are unique to the *program* of physical education. *First*, development of a high state of physical fitness enabling one to perform physical tasks more efficiently; and *second*, development of the ability to perform those tasks with greater neuromuscular skill. The reader is invited to define "physical tasks" and "efficiency"; to interpret how "high" is a high state of physical fitness and to set the limits of "greater neuromuscular skill."

To a program predicated on such objectives, the general elementary classroom *teacher* of physical education brings a set of attitudes unmistakably detected by the class and conditioned by the circumstances of his environment and by his previous experiences. Genuine assimilation of complex neuromuscular skill patterns year by year requires skillful teaching and repeated practice. If one adds to this the need for systematic development of physiological and sensorimotor changes which result from persistent physical training, the overwhelming need for a skillfully guided daily program is crystal clear. Realisti-

cally, half the time should be devoted to acquisition of skills, the other half to developing physical fitness.

About 30 doctoral dissertations directed by Professor Karl Bookwalter of Indiana University and included in his massive survey involving more than 2600 U.S. high schools have some interesting results. They indicated that: (a) our general instructional physical education program operated at about 30 percent effectiveness nationally; (b) athletics, on the other hand, ranked very high in effectiveness; and (c) attainment of program objectives by students was closely related to attainment of program standards by the schools they attended.

The question was, "What changes should be made?"—by whom and at whose insistence?

How Check on Quality?

We assume the reader agrees that physical fitness is worth all the fuss and that changes at school are therefore necessary for its systematic attainment. For our purposes here we further assume (hypothetically) that the proper changes have thereupon been made, thus resulting in positive program redirection. This being the case, the problem of evaluating program quality—checking program outcomes against program objectives—then becomes vital.

The concern for youth fitness during the Eisenhower administration resulted from the use of the Kraus-Weber Test of Minimum Muscular Fitness. As a clinical type of basic screening test requiring no testing equipment, its main value to schools lay in the facts it revealed and the resultant alarm sounded about the astonishingly low level of physical fitness of ostensibly healthy, vigorous children. For the mass testing needed in

schools, however, this instrument had some drawbacks. Some of these were the necessity for its individual administration, its provision of only a pass or fail verdict, and the passing of countless numbers who failed other validated tests.

In 1958 the American Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation (NEA) published a test battery of seven items to measure several of the elements in physical fitness. Without implying a blanket endorsement of this test, the use of some valid test to gauge pupil status in the elements of physical fitness is a basic necessity. This test, as well as many of the state tests, meets the criteria of ease of administration, ease of understanding and interpretation, use of scaled normative standards, and others. It is intended only as a relatively simple assessment of physical fitness to be used by the classroom teacher. Presumably, physical education specialists might use it to complement other tests given for other purposes. It has reputedly been administered to more than 20 million youngsters throughout the free world.

Although the test described is adequate for the purposes named and its extensive use speaks well for its utility, the most important justification for testing is to reveal necessary program emphasis. We strongly suspect that nowhere near 20 million boys and girls have done anything substantially different in physical education as a result of taking a physical fitness test. Lack of adequate follow-up is one of our serious shortcomings in education.

The teacher needs to know and understand what fitness elements the test measures. He needs to know why these elements are important and how they are rooted permanently in the process of adequate living itself. Hopefully, the teacher

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competence should not, in educational practice, be isolated from the motivational system of the child. Physical competence should be developed so that the child's individual physique, level of maturity, previous experience are all considered, similar to the way the many psychological, cultural and biological variables are taken into account in developing a reading program. We should not be too concerned about comparisons on a few factors, but we should develop better techniques for clarifying our concepts of fitness, better ways of assessing those aspects of fitness which are meaningful in America in the coming decade, and better approaches to understanding those aspects of physical fitness most closely related to the concept of high level mastery.

As for me, I will continue to play volleyball—now not only for my waistline but also because as my skill increases it contributes to my sense of achievement and mastery.

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got this information in his undergraduate preparation. If not, from whence must it come? From the school administrator as a part of in-service education or from a supervisor who is adequately prepared in depth on the subject? Far better still—from the physical education supervisor working closely with the school administrator in a coordinated merger of authority on one hand and knowledge on the other, each one welded immutably to a belief in the importance of the problem.

We wish to summarize with the following points: (a) physical fitness is a justifiable goal but not obtainable through sports or games education; (b) the concept of the unity of man dictates that an alert mind be accompanied by a fit body; (c) an effective method of measuring progress is vital to success—it implies program change to avoid getting caught short a second time; (d) to fail to redirect effort after testing is analogous to checking the oil level in the family car and doing nothing about it after finding it dangerously low.

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