Physical Education and Athletics

An Address by

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Physical Education and Athletics*
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WHEN I came to the actual work of preparing for this discussion I wondered why I had accepted the invitation. From one point of view everything that ought to be said upon this subject to such a group seems so obvious that one hesitates to say it. There would seem to be nothing that one not an expert in the field could say, except to exhort you to have courage to do the things which are so obvious. But any exhortation to courage suggests that the subject is a dangerous one, and so indeed it is. It is probably fair to say, in colloquial terms, that it is "loaded with dynamite."

If public interest in great questions of public policy were as keen as public interest in sports, if the public would inform itself through the press as assiduously on topics of public policy as it does about sports, the world would have no gloomy prophets as to the future of democracy. We are dealing, that is to say, with a subject of enormous public interest—and of considerable importance.

Moreover, the writers about sports are less jaded and more militant in their convictions than any other group of news writers. The commentators upon politics have become almost philosophical in their outlook. The writings in the newspapers upon religion and education are usually quite formal and are assignments dreaded by "live wires," but the sports reporter writes with zest and enthusiasm, and lays out policies for the Big Ten, or the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, or for a university, or for a college, or for a high school, with a good deal of assurance. He does not merely print the news. He comments upon it with great freedom; he exercises, in short, an editorial function. His editorials moreover are signed, and do not suffer from the usual editorial anonymity.

I asked a newspaper man once what news consisted of, and he said, "trouble." That is to say, ordinary good work, orthodox performance of a task, orderly industry, are not news. Only the unusual is news, except in sports. In sports everything is reported upon, from the appearance to the diet of the athlete—it is all good "copy." Reams of material are turned out upon the merest trivialities. It is really an amazing thing that in connection with sports there has come into the lives of the sports writers such a militant zeal for their subject that the expression of an opinion at variance with the one accepted by the writers becomes a subject of active, and sometimes acrid discussion.

There is one peculiarity about the topic assigned to me which I am sure

*In expanding my notes into written form, I have thought it best to preserve the colloquial style of the discussion.

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never occurred to those who made the assignment, and that peculiarity is
the more significant because it has entered into our consciousness so deeply
that we tend to be unconscious of it.

The topic is “Physical Education and Athletics.” What is the distinc-
tion between them? Is there a distinction, and if one is made, is it a de-
fensible distinction? The fact is that in practice there is a distinction, in
most schools. Athletics have come to be carried on to engender enthusiasm,
to develop school loyalties, to “sell” schools to the public, and for a hundred
other purposes which have nothing to do with physical education.

In this discussion, however, I am going to identify these two things and
speak of physical education including athletics, justifying athletics only
insofar as they contribute to the education of the individual. Problems of
promotion, problems of community interest, and problems of morale are all
important and significant. The cultivation of these things is a legitimate
function of those in charge of the public schools, but it is manifest that it
is not desirable, and it is not proper, to achieve these ends by any exploita-
tion of the students. Insofar as these things may be done by student activ-
ity which is educative in quality, insofar as these things may be achieved
without any deflection from the legitimate goals of the educational process,
it is all right, but I do not believe that anyone in this room would justify
athletics at the expense of physical well being, or at the expense of moral
well being, or at the expense of intellectual well being.

Inasmuch as physical education is directed at precisely those same ends
—at physical well being through the cultivation of habits of constructive
recreational activity, at moral well being through providing an outlet for ex-
cess youthful vitality and cultivating the virtues of sportsmanship, and at
intellectual well being by furnishing a sound constitution to bear the
stresses of modern life sanely—I shall deal with athletics only as an integral
part of physical education.

In approaching this issue we ought to establish some principle as the
basis upon which to conduct the discussion. It seems to me that the only
defensible principle is the interests of the individual, not of the few more
able individuals, nor even the greatest number of individuals, but of
every individual. In physical education, as in all other education, the most
significant thing about individuals is individual difference, and if we are to
deal intelligently with the subject of physical education and athletics we
must make the individual and his individual differences the subject of
study. It is manifest beyond any argument that this has not been done.
Few subjects have been standardized as fully as gymnastics, where every
movement is in unison. Even sports and games have sometimes been for-
malized to a demoralizing degree. The amount of correctional work done
in most high schools and colleges is entirely negligible, and the amount of
attention given to the especially gifted is much greater than the attention
given to those in need of correctional activity.

If the twenty intellectually best students in the school were sorted out
from their fellows and given the same proportionate attention that the
twenty best athletes are given by the coach and the department of physical
education there would be a shout of protest over the dangers of building an
intellectual aristocracy, and over the pampering of the especially gifted. Indeed, it is one of the notable educational facts in Wisconsin that, in general, we apply more energy, time, thought, attention, and money to the problem child than to the especially gifted child. But in the field of physical education and athletics we exactly reverse that policy and spend a disproportionately large part of our time upon the physically gifted. There are many high schools in the state so small and so poor that they cannot afford a full time director of physical education, but there are very few who do not have a coach, even if he be part time, and many have a part time coach who has no other work in physical education. In other words, in many schools only the physically gifted get any attention at all!

As the physically gifted get attention from the school staff beyond the intellectually gifted, so also with the notice of their achievement in the press. If we contrast scholastic achievement with athletic achievement we find the sharpest difference in the amount and character of the publicity. For example, we give, in Wisconsin, a state wide test of scholastic aptitude. We use the American Council test, and every high school senior in the state—twenty thousand of them this year—takes this test. It is the best single measure of achievement and capacity which is adaptable to being given at one time, and at many places. When those tests are completed and scored the students are arranged in groups upon a scale of one hundred, so that there are, from the twenty thousand, two hundred individuals in the one hundredth percentile, at the very top of the seniors in the state. That is to say, they represent in terms of intellectual capacity and achievement what a few star halfbacks and ends and centers represent in interscholastic football, or some forwards, guards, and centers in basketball. Do those two hundred in the one hundredth percentile have their pictures printed as individuals and by batteries in strange postures huddled over leather? Are they publicized from one end of the state to the other? Far from it. It is the definite policy of the co-operating committee not to exploit them for publicity purposes, and in the three years that the plan has been in operation I know of only one case where publicity was written about an individual in that topmost group. I suspect that that was accidental, and I know it was unwanted by the school system.

There is food for thought in this contrast. There are certain obvious inferences which I will not malign your intelligences by drawing, but after they have been drawn they need to be thought through and re-checked if we are to develop a sane and controlled policy.

Of course, there is this significant difference in the two situations which I would not have you think that I had overlooked. The athletic performance is by its very nature a public performance, and, therefore, the school cannot control, in the same degree, the dissemination of news and opinion about it, whereas the intellectual performance is by its very nature a private performance, and the control of publicity is entirely within the hands of the school system. But making all allowances for that point, I think it is perfectly manifest that the newspapers of this commonwealth have at heart sound educational policies, and if the school board works out a policy with reference to publicity for physical education and athletics which commends
itself to the newspaper as sound and wholesome and devised specifically for
the benefit of the boys of the state, we could depend upon the newspapers
to pursue that policy of their own motion.

This concentration of public interest and the spot light of publicity on
certain relatively narrow phases of interscholastic competition has other
unfortunate effects beyond those which are implicit in what I have already
said. It tends to reduce the variety of recreational physical activity. It is
perfectly obvious, for example, that many a boy who ought not to play
football ought to play tennis, and no one who knows anything at all about
tennis will contend that the values of that sport can be adequately exploit-
ed without some training in the execution of its plays. There is as much
"form" in a drive or a lob as there is in blocking or tackling. If there are
benefits, and I believe there are, in interscholastic competition, are we not
obligated to extend those benefits to as many students as possible, and
should we not, therefore, multiply the forms of competition so that students
with varied physical talents may participate? There is, I suppose, as much
value in swimming as in basketball—and again it is necessary to have in-
struction and training in order to get the maximum benefit.

The spot light of publicity upon football and basketball, and to a very
much less degree upon track, has thrust the minor sports out of the picture.
They are minor only in public interest—not in the rewards they carry for
the physical wellbeing, the sportsmanship, the spirit of teamwork, and the
joy of the participants. We offer in our courses of study a wide variety of
electives. The purpose of that variety is to meet the special interests,
needs, and capacities of the student body. But in the field of physical edu-
cation and athletics we tend very strongly, save in the largest schools, to
restrict the choice of activities very narrowly, and to have the choice based,
not so much upon the interests, tastes, capacities, and needs of the students,
as upon public excitement and other factors of that character. Thus we
lose the motivating force that comes from variety. Thus we tend to re-
strict the number of students who participate, and thus we tend to lay the
emphasis upon a small group with a specific skill rather than upon the very
much larger group with varied skills.

Again it should be pointed out that in building a thoughtful program
of physical education we should take into account the significance of habit
and utility in after life. There has been in this state an enormous drive
away from subjects whose utility in after life is not obvious. The emphasis
has been put upon teaching the students in the schools things which they
can use in practice afterward. Thus have come the exploratory courses in
the junior high schools. Thus the wide range of vocational studies offered
in many of our public schools. And yet in the same school that carries
vocational training sufficiently far so that there is a class for prospective
hotel chefs there is not the same emphasis upon building habits of physical
recreation which will have utility in after life. From the standpoint of
carry-over into after life, from the standpoint of building habits of exercise
which will be continued, the more highly publicized sports are the least
useful. If it is complained that the boy or girl who studies Latin never
reads a Latin book after graduation, it is equally true that the boy who
intellectual aristocracy, and over the pampering of the especially gifted. Indeed, it is one of the notable educational facts in Wisconsin that, in general, we apply more energy, time, thought, attention, and money to the problem child than to the especially gifted child. But in the field of physical education and athletics we exactly reverse that policy and spend a disproportionately large part of our time upon the physically gifted. There are many high schools in the state so small and so poor that they cannot afford a full time director of physical education, but there are very few who do not have a coach, even if he be part time, and many have a part time coach who has no other work in physical education. In other words, in many schools only the physically gifted get any attention at all!

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plays football almost never again plays football after leaving school, for
there are substantially no amateur leagues and the number who participate
in professional football is inconceivable to the point of being insignificant
in this discussion.

On the other hand, the minor sports, so called, the ones which carry
little or no publicity, are precisely the ones wherein recreative habits are
established which may be maintained in after years. I suppose if this were
carried to its logical extreme we should lay our principal emphasis upon
golf, full grown and miniature! But I am not advocating going to logical
extremes. What I am suggesting is that we have gone to illogical extremes
from an educational point of view, and that we should do something at
least to redress the balance. I am not assaulting football, which I keenly
enjoy, nor basketball, which fired me with enthusiasm in high school and
college, although I played it very poorly. I feel, however, that we should
bring to bear on this great problem of building adequate habits of recrea-
tion all that we bring to bear in trying to build intellectual habits by way
of variety of appeal, by way of recognition of special aptitudes and skills,
and by way of laying our emphasis upon training in those things which will
have a direct carry-over into after life. Our athletic program should be
founded upon the adequate functioning of what is done in high school as
preparation for life.

I hesitate in speaking to you to say one word about Lawrence College.
But is is obvious that if there is to be any reality or sincerity in the gospel
I am attempting to preach, there must be practice and experience behind it.
Every boy when he comes to college must have a physical examination, and
although it is well known that most boys between sixteen and eighteen,
who graduate from high school, have sound bodies, it will surprise you to
know that fifteen per cent of those who enter college require immediate
medical care or special exercise and attention.

We have three hundred and ninety boys in the four classes, but fresh-
men are not eligible for inter-collegiate competition, although they have
their own sports. Thus, there are in the three upper classes two hundred
and thirty-one boys in academic classifications eligible for intercollegiate
activity. For these boys we maintain, in addition to football, basketball,
and track; teams in swimming, crosscountry, wrestling, tennis, and golf; and
in addition to those intercollegiate sports we have intramural fencing, hockey,
volleyball, baseball, handball, boxing, and squash. The result is that
over ninety per cent of the men enrolled in college actually participate in
the sports program, and among those academically eligible for intercollegi-
ate competition half actually participate. It is altogether likely that the
maintenance of a program as varied and diverse as that, and the mainten-
ance of so many intercollegiate branches with relatively so small a number
of boys, has injured our percentage of victories in football and basketball.
If, however, we look at the matter from the point of view of the benefit to
the individual student and from the point of view of individual differences
and from the point of view of the enthusiasms that come from variety and
the values that come from habit formation, the gains are infinitely greater

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than the losses.

It is a fair question, of course, whether such a program as that is ruinously expensive. The answer is that it depends upon whether one is ready to sacrifice something of the perfection of the finish upon the teams which attract public attention in order that the coaches may have time to devote to the other activities. Of course, if there is no limit to the amount of money one can spend, one can put a high polish upon the activities in all of these activities. But so far as educational benefits are concerned, so far as the physical education specifically is concerned, there is no reason for spending more upon one type of activity than upon another, proportional to the number who participate in that activity. The program of a sport for every man need cost no more, that is to say, than the program of a sport for only the especially gifted athletes.

It is then, speaking from an educational standpoint, one of our functions so to organize our physical education and athletics as to develop the maximum intellectual capacity of the boy, rather than his maximum physical capacity. The refinements of physical skill which come from over-concentration in coaching do not compensate for the deficiencies in intellectual skill, for it is by the latter skills that he will ultimately earn his living, and make of himself an intelligent and useful citizen.

In this state we have the basis for studies to determine whether that is done. When the student graduates from high school we have two measures of his achievement and his capacity. We have, on the one hand, his high school record, and, on the other hand, his intelligence rating by the state wide test of which I have already spoken. Now if one will develop the matter statistically with sufficient care, he can determine whether the athletes as a group win high school grades which their intelligence indicates they should win. Just for experimental purposes we worked that out so far as the persons who entered Lawrence College during the last three years were concerned. We took the intelligence scores of the class and the high school averages and compared the athletes with the entire class. The results showed that so far as intelligence was concerned the athletes were somewhat better than the average of the class. That is to say, fifty-six per cent of all athletes were in the upper half of the class. This is effective demonstration that their skills were not peculiarly physical, that their intellectual capacities were more than equal to the intellectual capacities of the other students. On the other hand, when their high school grades were studied it was found that their averages were below the averages of the entire class, there being considerable margin in some cases. Thus we were led to the inescapable conclusion that concentration upon athletic activities had in a large number of cases (enough to affect the total result markedly) led the athlete to do poorer scholastic work than his intelligence warranted. I think no one would contend that the values he receives from participation in sports to such an extent that it carries his scholastic work down are comparable to the values he would receive if he participated in sports only to an extent which would make him physically vigorous for his intellectual work.

If only we, the older generation who control the policies, had the cour-
age and the fundamental honesty to shape our policies upon these grounds we would be doing athletics no damage whatever. It is true that in one or two sports the level of the competitive scale might be lowered somewhat, but it is equally true that if it were lowered generally and by all school systems uniformly and in accordance with these principles, the relative positions would not be greatly altered; and if our competitions were carried forward with sportsmanlike emphasis upon modesty in victory and generosity in defeat, we would gain the more.

That call for honesty and courage leads directly to the last point that I want to make, namely, to what I like to call the fourth dimension. An athletic career ought to have more than length. It ought not to consist merely in a multiplication of stripes upon the arm and a list of games played. It ought not to be conceived, either, in terms of breadth, so that the three-sport man or the four-sport man becomes our hero and ideal; at least not for that reason. Neither should it be considered only in terms of depth, that is to say, whether the player be a star or a duffer. Beyond length and breadth and depth, vastly more significant is the fourth dimension—namely, the values and the meaning of this experience for life. It is clear, beyond argument, that the four-letter man with a “swelled head” has impoverished his life and that the scrub who fights for all that is in him in his one chance as a substitute gains more; but between those two extremes lies the zone of values difficult to measure.

This whole matter is especially important just now, because this tends to be a two-dimensional age. Life is too often viewed in terms of a spectacle. It has length in years, it has breadth in interests, activities, and amusements, but little depth, because we know so little thoroughly; and all too often it has even less meaning. The drama tends to be the flat, flickering canned film, now unhappily accompanied by unreal and terrifying sounds. Music is the flat and mechanical reproduction of the phonograph or the radio. You can see more and hear more today that means less than ever before in world history. It is difficult to get a group to sing or to participate in real music. Even food has the deadly sameness of tinned goods, so that with a can opener and electric plate anyone may be a chef.

As for games, the most conspicuous fact about American sport is that it is a spectacle. The millions who see the big leagues in action dwindle to insignificance beside those who follow their activities in the paper, and any school boy can tell you the batting averages of a dozen stars. Hundreds of thousands of people go to see football each year without at all understanding the game. More people went from Wisconsin to Chicago to see a prize fight than ever gathered at any educational convention in the state. All too often sport is simply a spectacle.

Automobiles are so refined that a child can drive them, yet there are thousands of chauffeurs. Our clothes no longer have individuality or distinction. They are no longer hand woven and sewn, but are cut out in great piles with an electric knife and stitched in sweat shops. As for work, so much of it is done by machinery that it has become entirely routine, and most people do not feel that they “succeed” unless they escape into a white collar. Thus skill declines with conveniences, and our diseases are those of
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inaction physically and of tension nervously.

What is the significance of all this for a program of physical education and athletics in the high schools? Skill involves self-control, and not alone control of the body but control of the mind as well. Self-control is the foundation of virtue.

In this enterprise of developing skill in living, athletics have a significant contribution to make, both to the physical and to the moral development. I have spoken of the direct physical contribution of athletics, but there are indirect physical benefits which depend upon the fourth dimension. They depend upon seeing the meaning and value of athletics in correct terms. For example, there is the significance of training. Participation in athletics involves a strain; that is inevitable. The engineer takes care of stresses by compensating supports. The athlete who does not train and thus furnish adequate compensation against the stresses of his activity gets physical harm instead of benefit from his participation in sports. The record of the lives of men who were crew strokes twenty-five or thirty years ago, for example, furnishes an illustration in point. The record of professional football and hockey players in like manner shows the physical harm that comes from overstrain without compensating support. There tends, unfortunately, to be less training on the part of participants in high school athletics today than there used to be. Training is largely a matter of self-denial and self-control. Thus the greatest returns are in the fourth dimension again. That is to say, there is no physical benefit without self-control. If the coach is not able to persuade those who are under his care to compensate for the stresses by rigid training, if their interests are not sufficiently deep so that they are ready to yield up some of their customary pleasures, then there is no gain even upon the physical side.

We can develop the same idea in an entirely different way. Some boys are so over enthusiastic that they are enormously depressed when they have to sit on the bench, and if they get a chance in the game they are too eager and do badly because of the excessive tension. They are the kind of boys who run themselves out in the first quarter of a two-mile run. The physical results are fatigues and tensions that unfit them for other duties. The physical benefits that ought to come from training and from competition are negatived thereby. Others are lackadaisical. They never stretch a muscle. No nerve is ever taut. They never exert themselves to do their best, and they, at the other end of the scale, fail to get the physical benefits of athletics.

On the border line between physical and moral gains is the relationship of athletics to pain. No one can engage in vigorous athletics without suffering pain. When the distance runner puts on his final sprint the marks of suffering are usually manifest in every line of his face. When the football player is tackled or blocked, there is every chance of injury that will be painful. Whatever sport you suggest, this factor in some way enters in. It is a matter of greatest importance that athletics put pain in its proper perspective, as inseparable from achievement, as indivisible from pleasure, as part and parcel of the normal expectation of life. Only by exertion which involves pain will a boy ever come to feel the reality and significance
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of Browning's

"Be my joy three parts pain,
Strive, hold cheap the strain
Dare, never grudge the throe—"

It is essential that boys understand that law of life, else they will flee from pain and lose the lesson of physical courage. In all these matters it is plain it is the fourth dimension—value—which is the most significant.

The moral values have been the theme of many a panegyric. L. P. Jacks, the great British publicist, has said: "To accuse a man in these days of disobedience to the categorical imperative, or neglecting the precepts of Christianity seems no longer to be an effectual mode of bringing him to a state of repentance. But to accuse him of 'not playing the game' is to launch a bolt at the very bull's eye of his self-respect. And I observe that when the question is of finding a working model for civic virtue, even distinguished philosophers, who themselves have long forsaken the field of athletics for a less muscular occupation, are much given to choosing the teamwork of a boat race or a football match as the readiest example to hand of unity in difference, reciprocity in obligation, self-effacement for the common good, and suchlike heavenly principles." We are all familiar with the old saw about the war being won upon the playing fields of England.

Among the moral values must be counted enthusiasm. That quality of enthusiasm is the mainspring of joy in a work-a-day world. It transforms dull and drab things, and makes them colorful and lively. The blase' sophistication which is one of the distressing characteristics of our day, and one of the disheartening ones because it denies the very law of life, is impossible in a good athlete. It is simply inconceivable that a person should approach a contest in sport in a blase' manner. It is impossible even to get much from watching sports if one is blase' and bored. Thus, in all athletics, whether on the part of the player or the watcher, one of the values is, and should be, enthusiasm.

Another of the values within this fourth dimension is social development. The crowded character of our world is one of its outstanding qualities. The rugged individualism of the old rural life, and the sturdy independence of the home industrialist are gone. Jefferson, at the very moment when he announced his individualistic philosophy, stated with perfect clarity that if men gathered into cities, if great aggregates of capital threw manufacturing into factories, individualism and independence would give way. The fact is that teamwork is now of the essence of life itself. "No man liveth unto himself" has a new and more direct meaning than ever before in human history. It is upon this new organization of life that the philosophy of social justice has been developed; but social justice involves the abandonment of individual interests and rights and liberties for the sake of the group. That is to say, it is teamwork upon the highest social plane.

Industrial leadership wants to have boys entering its employ who have, first of all, integrity, which is self-discipline, and an orderly personality, where values are dominant. They are seeking boys who are ready to solve problems and who will subject themselves to the strains and stresses which

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come from the attempt to master issues. And, finally, they want boys who have learned in the school of experience to get on with men. At least the first and last of those qualities may be learned in athletics, if athletics are conducted with due regard to the fourth dimension.

If independence and individualism have given way to social pressure and the need for co-operation in domestic life, so in international life we are facing a new day. War is the enemy of mankind. It represents the failure to carry the lessons of athletics over into the field of world affairs. Teamwork would go far to end war. To be a star and at the same time not to steal the play takes moral fiber. For a nation to have great power, but never to abuse it in its relationships with its weaker neighbors takes the same kind of moral fiber. To be a mediocre man and yet an effective one takes capacity for teamwork. To be a nation of small resources and at the same time to fit harmoniously into the body politic of an organized world requires the same sort of teamwork. Teamwork is more than mere muscular co-ordination. It depends upon a sense of values—and upon the fourth dimension.

Independence is the most essential moral gain. The first type of independence should be intellectual independence. The athlete should do his own work, and remain eligible without crutches furnished by faculty or students, without prodding, tutoring, or coaching. There is only one way to profit by an education. That is to win it by one's own efforts. Any other emphasis which comes from the desire to remain eligible constitutes a distortion and tends to take away the essential quality of independence without which no man can be said to have arrived at maturity.

Beyond intellectual independence there should be financial independence. I know that boys in high school are not any longer paid to play. But high school boys often have to meet the recruiting agent of the institution of higher learning, seeking for athletes. The boy is forming his business habits, and if he accepts pay for play that is supposed to be amateur in character it is dishonest. If he accepts a job with nominal duties and disproportionate financial compensation, he is building up expectations which cannot be fulfilled. If he is induced to accept a loan which he is given to understand need not be repaid, some banker in later years is going to resent that phase of his education.

The program of physical education can make or break students. If it is built upon false premises it will exalt one phase of life’s activity at the expense of more significant ones. It will operate as an actual detriment to the education, not only of the large group of students who are substantially excluded from any program, but even to the detriment of those students whose program is too much intensified and whose sense of values is correspondingly distorted. On the other hand, a sane program of physical education, aimed at building habits of recreative activity among all students and with proper emphasis upon variety and upon values, makes for intellectuality and for the vigorous body which will support the sane mind.