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Hansen: Fitness theories viewed as unfit

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Dr. Ed Thomas, physical fitness expert, walks into the room carrying what appears to be a red rubber seat cushion.

He places it in a chair and plops down, but it isn't a seat cushion. Thomas calls it a "Disco Sit" and begins talking about proper hip angles and pelvis basins and upper organs crashing into lower organs and lower backs flattening out and everything shifting seismically because of all the time we Americans spend on our backsides at school, work and home.

Imagine, he says, what that does to a first-grader. The lower back flattens out. The spine's natural S curve becomes a C.

If you don't lean backward every now and then, hang from a limb and turn the body upside down, gravity does its dirty work and you slowly become pear-shaped.

Thomas reaches across the table and lets me take his little red Disco Sit out for a spin. I feel like I'm sitting straight as an arrow high atop a horse. He says that's a good thing.

Thomas, the president of the Iowa Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, isn't selling or promoting Disco Sits. He isn't selling or promoting anything. He's teaching a new way of thinking about physical education and has been doing it for years.

Except the new way is so old it could be collecting Social Security.

The old new way goes back to the early 1900s, he says, before we went astray and started replacing true physical education with an overemphasis on sports and games.

"We've become more comfortable looking at a scoreboard than the posture of a child," he says.

Thomas, 65, grew up in Davenport. In the late '80s, he was a Fulbright scholar based in Burma and Thailand.

In the late '60s, he served in the U.S. infantry. In the '90s, he became the top expert at the Army Physical Fitness School at Fort Benning, Ga., where he helped train some of the military's elite combat troops.

He taught hatha yoga, judo and advanced physical training at the University of Iowa and is an associate professor of health and movement science at Graceland University.

In his spare time, he obtains government grants and outfits schools in Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin with physical education equipment.

Thomas is sorry to hear the talk about cash-strapped schools cutting physical education classes and teachers. He's glad to see first lady Michelle Obama all excited about getting kids in shape with her "Let's Move" program.

Still, he'd like to change the focus to children moving well. Children moving well, he says, will move often.

When the mind and body feel the harmony of graceful, balanced movement, they want to feel it over and over again, he says.

Simply getting the heart beating fast, history and Thomas tell us, isn't the answer. In his mind, the average kid today is like a car out of balance, wheels shaking.

He gives a quick history lesson about how European immigrants came to the United States in the mid-1800s with groundbreaking physical training theories and systems. Turner Hall in Davenport was a centerpiece.

He talks about the Turnverein gymnastics clubs that started popping up in the United States. The gyms were filled with devices that moved kids off the ground, allowing gravity to mold their muscles and body tissue. The gyms had rings and ropes and parallel bars. The emphasis was on hanging, climbing, jumping, vaulting.

"We are living clay," Thomas says, quoting one of his mentors, "and gravity is the potter's hand."

When we cut the link to those European roots, we took a big step backward, he says.

"It lasted until the planets aligned in 1920," he says, "and we began to see it all dismantled. It was laughed at and made fun of."

We wrongheadedly tossed those ideas out the window, Thomas will tell you, and it's time to get them back.

"In the 1980s, you went to the gym, the fitness leader turned on the music and you bounced around. There's a world of difference between physical activity and physical training. In order for movement to be meaningful, it must be mindful, purposeful and make the body better over time."

There's good news, though, Thomas says. Schools around the state are making room for functional fitness. Medicine balls, dumbbells, Indian clubs, agility ladders and callisthenics in their purest form are making a comeback.

Time to start hanging upside down again.
