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Fitness For What?

At first glance there seemed something pretty ridiculous about the latest and most publicized [Washington](#) investigation, the inquiry into TV quiz fixing. There was a palpable absurdity in the fact of an august tribunal of the Federal Government, majestically ensconced in the marmoreal splendor of a huge congressional caucus room, earnestly and solemnly devoting itself to a search for simony in a parlor game, and—even more absurdly—finding it. Yet the snickers and the grins of embarrassment that followed the revelations of one seemingly respectable witness after another were in some sense akin to the snickers that might arise in a family when father has been caught cheating at solitaire. It was funny in a way, but behind the fun there was, and should have been, a furtive sense of national shame.

For a long time now the prickly predicaments of the already overcaricatured Madison Avenue huckster have been good for a laugh, but it was quite another thing to contemplate the feeble and unconvincing alibis by which a clergyman and the representative of a chain of women's clubs attempted to justify to themselves as well as to the world at large the shabby deceits which, willingly or unwillingly, they had helped to foist on a too-believing public. It was all very well to chuckle at the confusion of a great and overblown industry, but it was something else again to get a laugh out of the fact that a young college instructor of undeniable intellectual attainments and background was suddenly the object of a tabloid manhunt almost as sanguine as the search for [John Dillinger](#).

What, some people asked, was the point of all this embarrassing revelation? Surely there was no law against cheating at parlor games, even parlor games telecast from coast to coast? Surely there was not even a likelihood of any law? It was all in fun, wasn't it? What then was the point? The point, it seems to us, was one that was made succinctly and clearly in another national investigation that was held virtually without publicity last month. This was an investigation conducted by the members of [President Eisenhower's](#) Citizens' Committee on Youth Fitness whose interest in the physical welfare of the nation's youth has been extended to include his mental, moral and spiritual fitness as well. The committee's questions, discussed at the committee's annual meeting in [Colorado Springs](#), went to the very heart of the question reflected in the more sensational TV quiz: the question of the standards and values being reflected today among the nation's youth.

"The most important question we have to ask," said Marion Hanks of [Salt Lake City](#), "is not 'What is fitness?' but 'Fitness for what?'"

"Neither muscular development, intellectual brilliance, social competence, satisfactory adjustment nor church attendance is itself our objective," he went on. "What we really want for our young people is that they be fit to live meaningfully, wholesomely, constructively, joyfully as husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, neighbors, teachers and citizens. By and large, the young are like their parents. They are responsive to adult influence outside of their homes. They are prone to idealism. They are very susceptible to environment. They can be guided toward decency and moral behavior, but they are quick to discern when conduct is not consistent with counsel."

Whether for better or for worse, it is an unavoidable fact amid the bustle of the times we live in that much of the idealism, much of the example, much of the adult influence that affects our nation's young today is engendered by the television set, the 20th century American's substitute for the council fire around which the elders of old relived the legends of the past and recounted the lessons for the future. Like those elders, today's TV is quick to counsel virtue, but from recent evidence seemingly not so quick to follow it. If the nation's adults think it is funny to cheat a little at parlor games, the nation's youth is justified in thinking the same. But do we truly think so?

The doctrine that any game is the better for being a little bit rigged is one which no one dedicated to sport can accept as valid, for in sport honesty is not merely a desideratum; it is the life breath, the atmosphere and the ambiance without which the game cannot exist at all. Honesty makes sport possible by leaving its denouements to skill and chance so that the thrilling upset is always possible. We all want to see Mantle strike out occasionally. We don't want to see him lay down his bat. The blatant dishonesties of professional wrestling provide rowdy entertainment, but their very predictability rules them out as sport, and nobody pretends they are more than a burlesque.


Again and again, however, TV turns its eye on true sport, bringing the honest competition of the diamond and the gridiron to millions of living rooms. By deft manipulation of his dial a televiewer in the **New York** area last Saturday could watch 10 hours of virtually uninterrupted sport. In hours such as these, TV serves as a worthy agent in setting standards for the nation's youth, and it seemed not too much to expect that it would follow these standards in its own parlor games. It was on this expectation that a nation's ready sympathy was seduced in the isolation booths of the quiz shows by a series of supposedly honest people seemingly and statedly alone with their wits and their luck and their chance of a lifetime. Then—boom—it turned out that the whole thing was a fake and everyone was a sucker to believe it in the first place.

Whose fault was it? That was, in essence, the real question of the quiz shows, the question implied by the conferee in **Colorado Springs** who asked, "Fitness for what?"

The answer, for young and old alike, for editor and ad man, for doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief, might well be fitness to face both ourselves in the loneliness of the isolation booth and the millions of viewers peering in from outside with equal candor and honesty and the supposition that everyone concerned is playing fair at all times.

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