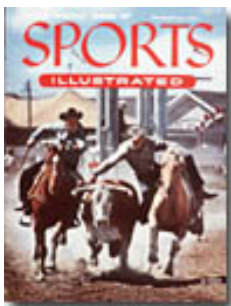
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September 20, 1954

How Fit Are Our Kids?

They lack strength and stamina because schools concentrate on "stars" and neglect those who need physical education the most

Arthur Morse

This week more than 30,000,000 American children will return to their classes in elementary, junior and senior high schools. Their minds, despite overcrowding and understaffing, will be adequately trained. But what about their bodies?

Americans like to think of themselves as an athletic people among whose youth physical fitness can be taken for granted. What we fail to realize is that a large proportion of our youth is growing up pitifully weak in stamina, seriously neglected by the average school program. The full meaning of certain widely publicized and alarming statistics has yet to sink in:

During the Korean war 47% of American draftees—nearly half of all young men called up—were rejected as physically or emotionally unfit.

THE BIG-TIME CONCEPT

In a recent comparison of European and American children between 6 and 19 conducted by [Dr. Hans Kraus](#) and Mrs. Ruth P. Hirschland of [New York University](#), 57.9% of the American children—more than half of thousands tested—failed to achieve minimum standards of muscular strength and flexibility. Only 8.7% of the European children failed.

One of our real troubles is that the concept of the big-time sports competition has captured the imaginations of too many teachers and parents right down to the grade-school level. Our schools are concentrating on the star system, oblivious to the many that this excludes, particularly those who need physical education most of all—the ones who are not "naturals." In [New York City](#), for example, only an estimated 5% of all school children participate in school sports.

The big-time sports concept also puts our younger children under strains which are far beyond their childish capacities. We know that heart and lungs and other organs do not keep pace with the body growth in weight and height of children, yet we cheer them on to give their all as though they were grown-up players. The same is true of tackle football for 12-to 15-year-olds, a practice which is spreading in our schools. Of 242 doctors who were recently questioned about interscholastic football for this age group, all but 22 were against it.

A PACE FOR PROS

Basketball too has invaded the ranks of the young. In many places, elementary-school competition for those who have star potentialities is on the rise. In **South Dakota**, for instance, coaches are assigned to grade schools to spot and develop likely prospects for high-school competition. **Indiana** carries basketball in schools to enthusiastic extremes, making high-school games into really big-league affairs. Last year more than 1,380,000 spectators watched the state high-school tournament, which grossed \$750,000. Some of the high-school teams played two games a day for three successive weekends, a pace not even matched by pros.

Nowhere, however, is the sad physical state of the Union more dramatically illustrated than in swimming. This is an ideal body-building sport, and a vital skill in war and peace as well. Facilities for it are ample. Yet of **America's** 80,000,000 bathers, only 12% know how to swim. And less than one American school in every 10 offers swimming instruction.

To answer the challenge of the big-time sports concept in our schools, imaginative and colorful programs are needed. The mass calisthenics of earlier days will not suffice. But a concept of physical education which can meet the challenge is available. Its teacher is a graduate of a four-year college course, with an educational background equal to that of a teacher of academic subjects. Given a chance, he can work wonders with his students and capture their enthusiastic interest as well.

Here, for example, is what modern physical education, in the person of Dr. Helen M. Starr, a former associate professor at the **University of Minnesota**, has done for the 70,000 elementary-and high-school children of **Minneapolis**.

RECREATIONS FOR A LIFETIME

Dr. Starr moved across town to become Director of Health, Physical Education and Recreation for the **Minneapolis** public schools after 17 years at the University. In Superintendent Rufus Putnam she found an educator who fully shared her views on good physical-education programs. Their concept of physical education as an integral part of the total educational program has permeated school life, keeping the children not only physically fit but also teaching them leisure-hour skills and recreation which they can enjoy all their lives.

On a sunny afternoon last June, a random tour of schools showed the following activities taking place:

Play Day at Sheridan Junior High involved all 522 boys and girls. There were track and field events, volleyball, dodge ball and other games.

At the Franklin School, in **Minneapolis'** most depressed neighborhood, a swimming class was splashing in the pool. Badminton, Ping-pong and volleyball games were going on in the gymnasium, and a softball tournament filled the sunny air with shouts outside.

At Southwest High School, the students were practicing archery. Some others were setting out on a bicycle trip, while still others were headed for bowling lessons. Three intramural tournaments—softball, tennis and golf—were in progress. The golfers were among 3,000 students who had been given free lessons by local pros.

The sports program was spread to include everyone. **Minneapolis** coaches do not receive preferential salary treatment, nor are they paid a portion of the gate receipts, an incentive still practiced in some **New England** communities. No coach's job depended on a winning record.

Nor does the **Minneapolis** program stop with athletics. School doctors and nurses, dental hygienists, physical educators, social workers and teachers of handicapped children have all been coordinated by Helen Starr. Health classifications determine the activities which a child is permitted and there is no being excused from physical education. Thus even the handicapped child gets in a game—like the girl

with polio at Franklin School who gets her turn at bat in softball while one of her teammates runs with the hit.

What does all this cost the taxpayer? About \$300 per year per pupil. This is about average for cities of 200,000 or more. **Minneapolis** is a city of 540,000.

OTHER BRIGHT SPOTS

There are other bright spots in the nation besides **Minneapolis**. In **Boston**, every youngster who tries out for a school team is kept on the squad, whether he is a hot-shot or not, so that he may learn the sport he enjoys. In **Great Neck, Long Island** 80% of the children take part in intramurals. In **Michigan**, one of every three high-school students plays on at least one interschool-league team.


Another promising program is the establishment of school camps, launched in 1940 by Julian W. Smith, Associate Professor of Outdoor Education at Michigan State College. Besides learning to plant trees, construct game shelters, blaze trails and perform the routine chores of a camp, students learn the art of living with each other and their teachers. Social barriers fade away. "It is every American child's heritage to have experiences in the outdoors," says Smith, "and every teacher should be able to teach outdoors as well as in a classroom."

Today, thanks largely to Smith's tireless efforts, more than 80 **Michigan** school districts send elementary-and high-school children to camp for a week or longer. The cost is about seven dollars a week for food. And the idea has spread beyond **Michigan** to 24 other states which now report at least one camp program in action.

With the knowledge and equipment which the modern physical-education instructor has ready to hand, there is no reason why any American child who is not seriously handicapped need grow up a weakling, oppressed by the feeling that he "couldn't make the grade." It's easier to lure the children from the cheering sections, the TV sets and the movies than we think. Given a chance, they will embrace a modern program of sports and physical education with enthusiasm and will remain enthusiasts all their lives.

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