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Indian Clubs for Physical Exercise

Weighted wooden Indian clubs used for light exercise in the Women's Physical Education Department of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, c. 1900.

(Museum object #1994.108.1-2)

America's obsession with physical fitness is not a modern fascination. In fact, it began in the mid-nineteenth century, long before kickboxing, aerobics DVDs and mega-fitness centers. Time and tools specifically designated for exercise came into vogue in the late nineteenth century when American society became more sedentary, and farm work and other forms of manual labor no longer kept the majority of citizens physically fit. Instead, men and women across the country turned to Indian clubs and other early exercise equipment to build physical strength, flexibility, and stamina. The women's physical education department of the University of Wisconsin used these clubs as part of its callisthenic curriculum around 1900.

All Indian club exercises started from first position: standing squared with a club in each hand, arms hanging from the sides with hands grasping the handle of the clubs firmly near the ball end with thumbs extended along the club shank. Exercises included lifting and curling, like modern free weights, but most also involved swinging the clubs in different patterns.

British soldiers stationed in India adapted traditional Indian exercises and brought them and the clubs back to England during the early 1800s. Eventually, these exercises spread to America. The relocation of many Americans to urban centers from farms and small towns increased the popularity of Indian clubs. Exercise enthusiasts thought the stationary, dull, brain work found in cities had negative effects on the body, making city dwellers soft and weak. Gymnasium construction flourished to counter the ill effects of city life. Gymnasiums contained Indian clubs, dumbbells, and other forms of gymnastics equipment that are familiar today like parallel bars and the horse.

Proponents of Indian clubs believed their use stimulated the mind and the body, increasing flexibility. The importance of a healthy mind *and* body was not a new concept. In Germany, Turners, or gymnasts, participated in group exercises called "turnen," meaning gymnastics. The Turnverein Movement became a national pastime in Germany and other parts of Eastern Europe. German immigrants brought the Turnverein Movement with them when they began immigrating to the United States in large numbers during the 1840s.

German immigrants and Americans interested in increased physical activity combined to create a huge physical culture movement, especially in areas where there was a large German population, like Wisconsin. The physical culture also





Women's Indian club exercise proposed by Simon Kehoe in 1866. Exercises like this improved an individual's strength and overall flexibility, especially in the arms, shoulders and upper back. [Image from *The Indian Club Exercise* by Simon D. Kehoe, 1866]



Girls from the State School for the Deaf posing with Indian clubs, Delavan, Wisconsin, 1893. The girls standing in the back rows are holding their clubs in second position. [WHS Archives Image WHI-27582]

meshed with religion, creating "Muscular Christianity." Believers felt "the body was more than simply a container for the soul that should be kept free from disease; its form could be altered and perfected, and by doing so people could increase their energy and improve their life and, implicitly, their afterlife."

Simon D. Kehoe, author of the 1866 book *The Indian Club Exercises*, stressed the importance of the balanced individual. He believed focusing solely on mental strength would "produce only the weakness of sentiment or excess of passion," while focusing solely on physical strength would "establish only the right of the strongest." Kehoe strongly promoted "the due blending of physical and moral education" to produce the greatest possible individual.

Originally, only men were involved in the exercise movement, especially since the exercise clubs and gymnasiums were restricted to males. Women slowly became more involved, however, when concerns for women's health arose. Dioclesian Lewis, a physical education instructor, was one of the first to introduce women and children to exercise programs. Others also encouraged women to exercise. According to educator James Smart, a contemporary of Lewis, light exercise helped women produce a "sound nervous system... rendering them normally sensitive, and destroying the tendency to mental irritability and hysteria."

Ultimately, people like Lewis argued that healthy women would produce healthy children, a growing apprehension at this time. Concerns for the ethnic makeup of the United States' population by American nativists stemmed from the large influx of immigrants during the late nineteenth century, especially from Southern and Eastern Europe. Physician Edward H. Clarke questioned in 1873, "Shall they [the western lands] be populated by our own children or by those of aliens [immigrants]? This is a question that our own women must answer; upon their loins depends the future destiny of the nation."

After the University of Wisconsin admitted women to the university in 1874, female students lobbied for access to gymnasiums, while visitors to campus encouraged more exercise options for female students. The first physical education classes for women affiliated with the University were held in 1890. At this time physical education was synonymous with calisthenics. According to University historians, "classes consisted of drills and exercises using equipment such as dumb-bells, Indian clubs, wands, and various arrangements of bars, usually performed to live piano accompaniment."

Slowly, gymnastics and calisthenics lost followers to organized sports like tennis and crew, and once common objects like Indian clubs became foreign and obscure. Today, however, in some small circles, Indian clubs are again regaining some of the popularity they enjoyed during the nineteenth century.

[SOURCES: Green, Harvey. *Fit for America: Health, Fitness, Sport and American Society* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Kehoe, Simon D. *The Indian Club Exercises* (New York: American News Company, 1866); Warman, Edward B. *Spalding's 'Red Cover Series' of Athletic Handbooks: Indian Club Exercises* (New York: American Sports Publishing Co., 1913); Warner, Patricia Campbell. *When the Girls Came Out to Play: The Birth of American Sports Wear* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006); Hartman, Chris. "Health and Fun Shall Walk Hand in Hand": The First 100 Years of Women's Athletics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (Madison, WI: UW-Madison Archives and Records Management Services) online at <http://archives.library.wisc.edu/exhibits/athletics/athletics01intro.html>.]

EJS

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1913 advertisement for Spalding Indian Clubs ranging in weight from half a pound to 3 pounds each, 1913. The clubs also vary in quality and decoration, depending on use.

[Image from *Indian Club Exercises* by Edward B. Warman, 1913]

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