



PHYSICAL FITNESS— OUR PRIMARY OBJECTIVE

*To make your heart and nerve and
sinew
To serve your time long after they
are gone
And thus hold on when there is
nothing in you
Except the will which says to you,
“hold on”!*

—Rudyard Kipling

The noblest thoughts in the minds of men are but wishful thinking in a body physically unable to put the thoughts in action. Kipling's “hold on” requires a physical wherewithal. Even charity, the ability to give of oneself without thought of return, is limited to the physical powers of the organism. The virtuous behavior of mankind and the rewards of a rich

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and full life are tied as closely to man's physical capacity as the bark on the tree is tied to the tree itself. Physical strength to initiate something and muscular and cardio-respiratory endurance to carry it through are still the essentials, the *sine qua non*, of a civilization.

This physical wherewithal is an indispensable quality in man. With it he is able to strive and struggle through life seeking to achieve a certain happiness. This is accomplished “not by acquiescing with what is but by struggling for something else, not by accepting but by doing, not by receiving but by giving, not by rest but by activity.”¹ Life by its very nature is activity. Any stable happiness, therefore, is related to the ability of the organism to be active.

To a health and physical educator the above words are “old stuff.” Why, then, is there so much talk regarding the proper emphasis in physical education? Why, at numerous conferences, do rational men raise their voices and almost come to blows over the words “physical fitness?” Is it not true that to

¹Shailer Upton Lawton and Frederick Rand Rogers, *Educational Paths To Virtue—I*, Newton, Mass: Pleides Company, 1937.

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seek and maintain an optimum level of health is a primary aim of education. Is it not true that to seek sound organic development is a proper objective of physical education? Why, then, isn't it true that physical fitness is the primary objective of physical education?

In 1885, at the founding meeting of the Association for the Advancement of Physical Education, Dr. Edward Hitchcock, the first president, endorsed the idea of a “physical basis as a prime necessity.” For years, the organic or physical fitness side of physical education was stressed. Then some physical educators began to interpret the naturalistic theories of education in such a way that schools dropped body building exercises and gymnastics and substituted sports activities for the well-rounded programs of physical education. This may have been an error, for schools by the hundreds have nothing more than “free play” programs today. In the last year or two many administrators and physical educators have taken time to pause and reflect on the programs of the past

40 years and to seek where changes in emphasis can be made which will make a real contribution to the education of the individual.

Despite all the talk relative to physical fitness there are still leaders in the field who are gaily marching down the wrong roads happily carrying the wrong banner, with many of their compatriots following along completely confident that they are headed in the right direction. Recently a well-known leader in physical education—a former state and district association president—said to a large group, “Don’t talk physical fitness to me. I don’t know what it is. I can’t define it. No one can. Use the term total fitness. Use the word fitness.” He went on to advise that “we must not be harrow and talk about physical fitness.”

Alas, how lost can we be? We are indeed lost if this is the prevailing attitude.

In recent years considerable discussion has been given to the topic of fitness, total fitness, and physical fitness. One group of physical educators uses the terms fitness and total fitness in a general way where physical, mental, emotional, and social factors are considered together. Another group views fitness specifically and proclaims physical fitness as the primary objective in physical education. These terms need clarification; confusion has existed too long.

Physical Fitness Is Optimum Health

Certainly the whole man can profit from physical education in the area of emotional development, mental development, neuro-muscular skill development, and organic development. It is evident that all developments are bound into an integrated whole, but “physical fitness” should be reserved for a quality of organic power. Physical fitness is optimum health. It is positive; it is unique; it is the quality of the person who is “in the pink.”

The term “total fitness” is too vague. According to Jay B. Nash it is something of a hoopskirt concept which covers everything but touches nothing.

Nash goes on to say:

A well-rounded individual should be high in all four levels of development.

The well-rounded individual, when involving such popular terms as physical, mental, and moral fitness, even emotional and financial fitness, becomes a trite expression. Such broad terms as “total” or “well-rounded” can be applied to all education, to life itself; but as the whole is the sum of its parts, can we not discuss the relationship of parts? We must isolate *physical fitness* as the primary objective of physical education.

We know that health is only one phase of the total man, but it is a most important phase. Health teachers, social studies teachers, home economics teachers, school physicians, and physical educators all contribute to its advancement. But the physical education approach through large muscle activity is unique. Nash continues:

The physical education, health, and recreation aspects of our schools have been criticized for attempting to be all things to all men. In view of the various contributions made by the schools, physical education and its associated areas cannot be *all things to all men*, but there are some things which they must be to *all men*. . . various phases of education are assigned points of emphasis. One stresses history and literature; another, the sciences, another languages; another citizenship and still another, vocational training. All are, or should be, interested in the health and physical fitness of an individual; and physical education should be interested in and contribute to all educational objectives; but the physical educators primary responsibility remains focused. Any one group of educators must select only a small portion of the total problem. Our attempt to do everything, reminds me of the young suitor who sought the hand of a young lady in a large family. The father said to him, “Young man, do you think you can support a family?” The young man answered, “I’ll do my best, sir, but I only want Sarah.”²

When physical fitness is considered as a primary objective, the school curriculums in many towns and cities will take on a new look. Programs will sharpen to develop and maintain muscular strength and muscular endurance, and there will be a corresponding increase in individual organic development. Physical educators will begin to work, as

²The comments by Jay B. Nash are from an unpublished report entitled “Contributions and Relationships of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation to Fitness,” delivered at a meeting of county health personnel in Oswego, New York, in 1959.

in days of old, with school physicians and school nurses in an effort to properly appraise health status and bring about significant pupil program changes in the laboratory, playground, and gymnasium. Remedial or adapted physical education classes will grow in numbers, and the program content will hold the interest of every child, for there will be something which is personal to him. Measurement and evaluation techniques will be employed to chart individual and group progress. The new AAHPER Youth Fitness Test will become a highly valuable instrument. Individual parents will take an intense interest in the school because of what is being accomplished for their child. Respect for physical education will rise measurably in the minds of students, teachers, and administrators.

A Potentially Powerful Force

There are some who argue that by having physical fitness as the primary objective other objectives tend to be slighted. Nothing could be further from the truth. One has only to study the many school systems from New England to Oregon to see the close relationship between physical fitness activities and such other items as sport skills, the competency of athletic teams, the extent of the intramural program, and the development of social efficiency and recreational competency. This author knows of no program in which physical fitness is properly appraised and developed where other goals of physical education have been slighted. The opposite is the rule.

Physical education is a potentially powerful force in present-day society. The need for physical exercise and physical recreation is tremendous. But the potential value will not be reached by merely working on social efficiency and the mental-emotional adjustment goals that all educators are interested in. Physical education will be most effective when it does the unique thing which it can do best. Certainly it must give attention to all present goals, but the objective of physical fitness must take precedence over the rest. In so doing we will have considered first things first. ★