

Are Gymnastics And Tumbling Essential?

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ARNOLD TOYNBEE, IN his study of world civilizations, has pointed out that 19 of 21 great civilizations have died from within and not by conquest from without. Their decadence was a slow, quiet decline of which few were aware. This process of decay began when the people of a nation became complacent and self-satisfied, when their lives became too soft, and where they became primarily concerned with making their lives more comfortable and more secure.

The Greeks

The ancient Greeks are a classic example of Arnold Toynbee's thesis. In their early beginnings all the Greeks participated in athletics. Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* writes that among the early Greeks, people meeting on the street would challenge one another to a foot race, wrestling match, or throwing contest. All the people participated in sports. It was during this, their energetic and physically fit period, that they made their greatest and most lasting contributions to the arts and sciences.

However, as time went on an increasing number of people received their ego satisfaction in athletics by identifying with and cheering for their champions. The number of spectators at athletic contests increased while the number of participants decreased. The great masses of Greek citizens became first physically unfit, then morally unfit, and finally were weakened culturally and intellectually. They became an easy target for the rugged, strong, ambitious, and dynamic Romans.

The Romans

The early Romans kept themselves strong, vigorous, and agile by constant practice at war games because they were ambitious for world conquest. After they achieved this goal, they saw no further reason for undergoing the unpleasantness of war games and tough physical conditioning. They forced their captured people to do all the manual work and to entertain them with displays of their athletic prowess. They luxuriated and dissipated. They became an easy target for the rugged, strong, tough barbarians who swept down from the north.

The Sumerians, Assyrians, Greeks, and Romans were also the greatest nations for a period of time in history.

The Americans

The early settlers of this country were a vigorous and energetic people. They had to be to clear the



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land, erect log cabins, till the fields, and fight the Indians. Their recreational activities too were vigorous and rough. They valued work, strength, energy, and skill. As a result of this philosophy and these values this Nation has become the greatest in the world—for the present.

If we are to remain great we must hang on to the qualities which made us great. But will we? Haven't we already lost some of these qualities? There is ample evidence that we are becoming soft. We don't have slaves to do our work. We have machines. The Kraus-Weber study which compared the physical fitness status of American youngsters with that of European youngsters showed that American children are considerably inferior in this quality. Our children spend too much time sitting and not enough in moving about. They sit while being driven to school. They sit throughout the school day. They sit watching TV. It is no wonder that the male hip girth has grown larger.

Architects studied Milan's 19th century world famous opera house, La Scala, to find reasons for its acoustic perfection. They found that they could seat many more people in the same space in the 19th

century than we now can. The reason for this they discovered was because the seats in La Scala are only 18 to 19 inches in width. Today's American requires seats 22 to 24 inches wide. Physical activity can trim off some of this fat.

The Problem

Man has changed little, if at all, physiologically since cave man times. His body was designed for movement and still depends upon movement for development and growth. A child who doesn't run and play, whose heart isn't exercised, may have a weak ineffective heart. Experiments have shown that exercised rats become larger and heavier and have larger vital organs than do confined rats which cannot exercise. Up until the Industrial Revolution man had to move in order to survive. This is no longer true. He can survive without hardly moving a muscle.

Something must be substituted for ground to till, trees to chop, log cabins to be built. This something can and must be athletics and sports for everyone. There is a different sport for everyone. Basketball for the tall and agile; football for the big, sturdy, and aggressive; track for the swift; swimming for the buoyant and streamlined; wrestling for the light and aggressive; gymnastics for the strong and well-coordinated. The introduction of the student to and the selection of the sport which will best meet his needs and desires is best made through a complete and well-rounded physical education program in the elementary school, junior high school, senior high school, and in college.

Even today with the evidence of the unity between mind and body there are educators who are so myopic that they think that the only way we can out-shine Russia is by concentrating all our energies on the sciences. They are suffering from "Sputnikitis"—a dread disease of the brain caused by fear which makes one unable to see the whole because he is hypnotized by the part. Men who burn the midnight oil to invent Sputniks must be physically fit, strong and healthy. That Russia realizes this is evident. They beat us in the Olympics!

All Russian children from primary grades on are required to take three periods per week of fifty minutes each of strenuous physical education activities in which they are motivated toward better performance by the knowledge that their performance will be graded and evaluated.

Evidence is beginning to accumulate to substantiate the subjective judgment of physical educators that gymnastics is a superior activity for accomplishing the most important objective of physical education activities—that of improving people's physical fitness status. It is a sport which could serve thousands more than it now does.

Some Studies

James Bosco in *The Physical Educator* of March, 1959 reported on a study of the physical fitness status of children enrolled in a tumbling and gymnastic program conducted in Champaign, Illinois. This school is known as Pond's Palaestrum and is directed by Charles Pond, Coach of Gymnastics at the University of Illinois. Children from 6 to 12 years old attend classes of one hour duration from one to three times per week for twelve-week sessions. The test used was the Kraus-Weber Test of Minimum Muscular Fitness. Only 9.5% of the children enrolled in the Palaestrum tumbling classes failed this test. Studies made of other unselected groups of children show an average of 55% failures. A study conducted at the University of Iowa showed 66.1% failures. The original Kraus-Weber study showed 57.9% failures. The Slippery Rock State Teachers College study showed 49.77% failures. The Indiana University study showed 45.1% failures. Furthermore, Bosco's study showed that while the percentage of failures increases with age from six through twelve years old for other children, the percentage of failures among children who have participated in tumbling decreases with age.

A comprehensive physical inventory of Judy Wills, an eleven-year-old champion tumbler and gymnast from Gulfport, Mississippi was made by George Marcoulier of Mississippi Southern College. Judy Wills practices tumbling, gymnastics, and related activities for two hours four days each week. She participates little, if at all, in other physical activities. Therefore, we can attribute her physical fitness status entirely, or at any rate, largely, to tumbling and gymnastics. Heredity may account in part for her phenomenal performance on this battery of tests, but this is doubtful since neither her mother or father were athletes. Her participation in gymnastics and tumbling is very likely the primary reason for her outstanding performance.

Judy Wills passed all items on the Kraus-Weber Tests of Minimal Muscular Fitness. She passed the 'Picking Up Paper' test. She scored in the *excellent* category on both the Larson Test of Muscular Strength and the Harvard Step Test. Both of these tests and norms are designed for college men! She rated *excellent* on the Brace Test of Motor Ability for children 8 to 18 years old. She rated *good* on the Schneider Test. She rated *good* on the Indiana Physical Fitness Test for high school boys and girls. She rated *high average* on the JCR test. The JCR or Junior Officers Candidates Test is a test of fundamental motor skills designed for pilots 18 to 45 years of age. On the AAHPER test for junior high school girls her scale score average was 87.

It will be noted that the battery of tests included tests of physical fitness, tests of muscular strength, tests of motor ability, and cardiovascular tests. On all of these she rated from high average to excellent. Though by no means conclusive, this is additional evidence to bear out our conclusion that gymnastics and tumbling is a superior activity for achieving the objectives of physical education. Without a doubt it should be a part of every physical education instructional program, every intramural program, and every interscholastic or inter-collegiate athletic program if our objective is primarily to serve our students rather than the spectators.

A Practical Solution

The author directs the Hattiesburg Recreation Department Tumbling Tots and Teens program for children four to fifteen years old. The children participate in tumbling, rebound tumbling, calisthenics, pyramid building, doubles balancing, and balance team for one hour each Tuesday and Thursday. The children were given the initial Kraus-Weber Test of Minimal Muscular Fitness in October and the final test in December after ten weeks of instruction. Thirty-six per cent of the children failed one or more of the six test items on the initial test. Only four per cent failed one or more items on the final test.

Gymnastics is not an activity which is easy to teach. The physical educator must give each student indi-

vidual attention. He should possess skill and fitness adequate to demonstrate the fundamental stunts. He must have knowledge of more advanced stunts in order that he be enabled to challenge the more skilled students. Gymnastics will not immediately appeal to the physically indolent. However, as students improve in strength, flexibility, endurance, and balance their interest will grow by leaps and bounds.

Gymnastics

The inevitable conclusion that we must draw from these studies, if we believe in the importance of physical fitness, is that schools at all levels must provide facilities, instruction, and motivation to make possible gymnastic and tumbling programs at the instructional, intramural, and the interscholastic levels. Teacher preparation institutions must qualify future teachers to teach these anthropologically old activities. Children in elementary, junior, and senior high schools and young people in colleges and universities must be taught the basic stunts. Intramural competition in gymnastics and tumbling must be promoted, organized, and administered. In order for each to become all that he is capable of becoming, intercollegiate and inter-scholastic competition should be made available for the more highly skilled in order that they might compete against others at their own level of ability. We might add that this should be the pattern followed in all sports.

A PROFESSIONAL CREED

I AM A PROFESSIONAL . . .

When I have determined goals to be sought in the lives of individual members.

When I believe that the individual is more important than the activity.

When I use the activity as a means of achieving goals in the life of the person.

When I am willing to recruit and educate leaders and thereby magnify myself.

When I'm emotionally mature enough to stay in the background and let the lay or student leader assume the foreground and permit some of his needs to be met.

When I have developed insight in understanding individuals.

When I have mastered the techniques of instruction and leadership.

When I have the ability to administer a program with efficiency and effectiveness.

When I recognize that offering a person the opportunity of rendering service is giving him a chance for some of the finest growth experiences.

When I see in the program one of the essentials that makes life full and abundant—an essential in life of the individual along with food, clothing and shelter.

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