

JANUARY, 1962

THE BETTER WAY

■ This country has traditionally been proud of the competitive excellence of its leading athletes, both in individual and team performances. Consequently, it is difficult for much of the public to accept claims by some authorities that the physical fitness of American youth has declined despite widespread efforts to halt the downward trend. There *is*, though, substantial evidence to support these claims. For instance, in a comparison study, it was found that even British girls, in certain strength tests, outscored American

boys. The American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation called these results "shocking." And in spite of the high level of physical aptitude required of candidates for the United States Military Academy, the fitness of entering cadets has declined noticeably in recent years.

These findings reflect a general decline of physical fitness in American youth. This usually has been attributed to the lack of adequate physical education programs and facilities. Too, youngsters lead a more sedentary life than was the case 30 or 40 years ago. However, there is a growing opinion that continued school emphasis on varsity sports, which makes spectators out of most students, is just as significant in the widespread lack of fitness. One authority, Dr. Charles

A. Bucher, Co-ordinator of Physical Education at New York University, says: "*Varsity sports, which serve about three percent of the students, dominate the facilities, teachers and money in many schools.*"

In spite of increased awareness that a high percentage of students are *not* getting proper physical training, many physical instructors still believe games and team sports are the modern American way to fitness. Calisthenics, gymnastics and body building, these instructors say, are old-fashioned, European and unsuited to the American temperament. Nevertheless, in comparison

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AUTHORITIES URGE EMPHASIS ON CALISTHENICS, GYMNASTICS AND BODY BUILDING TO IMPROVE FITNESS

studies of tests for muscular strength and flexibility, European children have consistently outscored Americans by a wide margin.

WHY CAN'T OUR YOUTH DO BETTER in basic fitness tests? To start with, there are not enough facilities or programs directed toward the nonathlete. The American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation recently reported:

- Only about half of the students in senior high schools are enrolled in physical education classes.
- Only one state—California—requires by law that all students have a *daily* physical education class.
- In the nation's elementary schools, less than 28 percent of grades one to six have a daily physical education period of at least 30 minutes.

The emphasis on team sports adds to the problem. Critics of current school practice insist that physical education for the non-team student in schools is frequently meager or unbalanced. Many physical education instructors, it is charged, operate on the theory that a physical education period is one solely for recreation and play. As a result, the year-round program consists mainly of games. In the fall, a touch-football league may be organized. In the winter, it is basketball; in the spring, softball.

SOME EDUCATORS ALSO BELIEVE the gymnasium and the playing field should be a developing ground for social, aesthetic, spiritual and moral values—not just muscle building. On the other hand, more and more educators, alarmed by the trend, now stress physical fitness as the number one objective. In 1961, President Kennedy, after receiving a report on the continuing decline of youth fitness, urged each school to provide a *minimum* of 15 minutes of vigorous activity every day for *all* students, boys and girls alike. His request raised a serious question. *Were there many schools which did not already provide at least 15 minutes of such activity?* The President's Council on Youth Fitness already knew the answer. It had found there were adequate programs for athletes, but the

needs of the physically-underdeveloped frequently had been overlooked.

This lack of adequate physical education training in the schools has clearly affected the fitness of students entering college. For example, in 1947 only 3 percent of those appointed to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point failed the physical aptitude test. Last year, 15 percent failed. The Academy's Office of Physical Education reports that about half of those who fail the physical aptitude test are overweight.

Physical fitness tests given to freshmen at Yale University and other colleges have produced equally discouraging results. The scores have been steadily dropping in recent years. In 1951 tests at Yale, 51 percent of the class passed. Those passing dropped to 43 percent in 1956 and to 38 percent in 1960.

The trend for high schools to produce a few trained athletes and a majority of others who are underdeveloped continues on the college level. Charles B. (Bud) Wilkinson, football coach at the University of Oklahoma and special consultant to the President on physical fitness, says his own school's athletic program is helping those who need it least—the varsity athlete.

HOW DOES THE PHYSICAL FITNESS of Americans compare with that of other countries? A series of tests designed by the American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation has been used as a guide for several years. These tests measure arm strength, leg power, speed and agility. Pull-ups, jumping and sit-ups are used. To compare the results of these tests with children of other countries, 10,000 British boys and girls were given the same tests. The British children surpassed our youngsters in practically every category. Their average was 14 percent higher. In a few categories, even British girls exceeded the U.S. boys' scores. Some 20,000 Japanese children given the test also surpassed the American youngsters.

Such results have led to demands for overhauling our present attitudes about physical education training. For instance, Dr. H. Harrison Clarke, of the University of Oregon Department of Physical Education, says: "The tragedy is that our services to children have been ineffectual. The need to improve fitness through proper physical activity is more critical in 1961 than in 1955 due to the cold war becoming warm, the results of medical research showing the necessity for a physically active life and the demonstrated fitness inferiority of our youth as compared with the youth of other countries."

WHEN THE NEWBORN ROOMS IN WITH MOTHER

■ Until around 1900, it was common practice in this country for a mother and her newborn infant to be kept together in the same room, almost from the moment of delivery. However, central nurseries were introduced in hospitals as a way to

fight the high mortality rates among infants. Starting after World War II, though, there was a return to *rooming-in* facilities at a number of hospitals. Rooming-in, still in widespread use in other countries, gradually is gaining popularity in the U.S.

Rooming-in plans differ, but it generally means that the mother is in continual or almost continual contact with her baby, and she—and her husband if he wants to—share, in varying degrees, in its care at the hospital. This can begin as soon after birth as the mother feels up to it. In some hospitals, the baby accompanies its mother from the delivery

room; elsewhere, the baby may be kept in a separate nursery for observation, for 12 to 24 hours after birth.

Originally, rooming-in was a 24-hour-a-day operation. The baby's bassinette was placed next or near to the mother's bed, and it remained there during the entire hospital stay. More recently, a modified plan has been adopted by some hospitals. In this case, the baby is kept with the mother during the day, taken to the nursery during visiting hours, and returned to the nursery at night. Where there is a choice, most mothers prefer the modified plan. But regardless of the plan, it is common

IS ANYTHING BEING DONE about the situation?

Efforts to improve physical fitness are underway in some schools which use a graded program built around body conditioning, calisthenics and gymnastics. Students can readily see the improvement in appearance,

ability and confidence. This type of program generally does the job of attaining physical fitness. In a study at Hammond, Indiana, 145 high-school girls took a series of six tests at the beginning of the year. Only 53 percent passed the test. After nine weeks of no formal conditioning exercises, the same tests were given again. About the same number—57 percent—passed this time. Then, after nine weeks of conditioning exercises—running, jumping, stretching, crawling, bending and twisting—the girls were tested again. This time, 92 percent passed.

To start a remedial program, there is a need to overcome many schools' use of sports facilities only for varsity teams. In others, the need is to reduce class sizes. In some schools there may be from 100 to 150 students, ranging from freshmen to seniors, in one physical education class with one teacher in charge. Other schools may need more frequent and longer physical education periods.

A GOOD TRAINING PROGRAM covers many points.

Among the most important:

- Classes should have no more than 40 students (all of the same grade or age).
- Courses should include games of skill and tumbling for lower grades, as well as sports. As youngsters advance, gymnastics, body conditioning and rhythmic dancing for girls can be added.
- More difficult work should be given the child as he advances, so fitness, skills, etc. increase.
- Both boys and girls should have daily classes and use of proper facilities, such as lockers, showers, equipment, outdoor areas and gymnasium space.
- Physical education should develop good sportsmanship and the desire to maintain physical fitness.

Many schools throughout the country are re-evaluating their physical-education programs. The type and extent of training decided on can determine the future fitness of much of our youth.

(Overweight is a definite part of the physical-fitness problem for youth. For an up-to-date report on what can be done about it, read "The Fat Child Can Be Helped!" in GOOD HOUSEKEEPING next month.) ♦

A STATEMENT BY PRESIDENT KENNEDY

prepared for GOOD HOUSEKEEPING reflects his deep concern over the physical fitness of our youth:

"Despite our unparalleled standard of living, despite our good food and our many playgrounds, despite our emphasis on athletics, American youths lag far behind Europeans in physical fitness.

"Softness on the part of the individual citizen can help to destroy the vitality of a nation. The physical vigor of our citizens is one of America's most precious resources.

"No matter how vigorous the leadership of the government, we can fully restore the physical soundness of our nation only if every American is willing to assume responsibility for his own fitness and the fitness of his children. We are, all of us, as free to direct the activities of our bodies as we are to pursue the objects of our thoughts. But if we are to retain this freedom, for ourselves and for generations to come, then we must be willing to work for the physical toughness on which the courage and intelligence and skill of man so largely depend.

"All of us must consider our own responsibilities for the physical vigor of our children and of the young men and women of our community. We do not want our children to be a generation of spectators. Rather, we want each of them to be a participant in the vigorous life."

for the mother to bathe, diaper, feed and otherwise care for her baby—at first under the guidance and watchful eye of a nurse.

Many hospitals with rooming-in facilities offer it to private, semi-private and ward patients. There is usually no extra charge for this service.

Rooming-in probably has the greatest advantage for the first-time mother, especially if she will have little or no help during the first weeks at home with her baby. Supporters of rooming-in believe that it supplies the mother with greater self-confidence and peace of mind. She really learns to know her baby—his natural

rhythm of sleeping and waking, what his crying "means," and so on. Too, rooming-in mothers generally seem to have fewer vague anxieties than those whose babies are in nurseries. The rooming-in mother usually has her baby right next to her (or reasonably nearby) and she can check on it and comfort it immediately. From a father's point of view, rooming-in means he does not have to wait until his child is brought home before he gets to know it. Some plans even encourage fathers to feed, diaper and bathe the babies.

For the baby, rooming-in offers the advantage of constant supervi-

sion by its mother. Many medical authorities also believe it is a way to curb staphylococcus infection outbreaks (The Better Way, August, 1961) among infants. Too, rooming-in babies tend to have fewer cases of diaper rashes and minor skin lesions because they are changed more frequently.

The major disadvantage of rooming-in is that some mothers get less rest under it than they otherwise would, particularly in 24-hour rooming-in programs. Doctors also point out that women who are ill or extremely nervous should not have rooming-in. ♦