

Forty years after the Civil War had ended, many Americans still felt that their country was under siege. Some were confused, some were angry, and some were appalled by the fact that the social fabric of their country was so different than that which they grew up with. The forces of industrialization, immigration, and urbanization effectively terminated the Jeffersonian dream of an agrarian republic and ushered in a new image of America: one of factories, labor strikes, violence, poverty, slums, and foreigners.

It is within this context that the physical exercise culture of America developed. At the turn of the century, “more Americans than ever before began to participate in organized sports and outdoor recreation” (Kibler). This development is often attributed to the influence of immigration and urbanization; however, the major causes of the rise in physical exercise at the turn of the 20th century were the religious exercise movement known as Muscular Christianity and the educational reform movement known as Progressive Education. While the former was responsible for motivating Americans to exercise with Christianity, the latter established physical education as an essential element of education for generations to come. The impact of these two movements is evident in the legacies of the YMCA, Theodore Roosevelt, and education reforms of the early 20th century.

In order to evaluate why and how physical education developed most dramatically at the turn of the century, it is essential to understand its role in American society over time. The roots of physical education begin in the foundation of the nation, during the colonial era. During this period of Puritanical dominance over the culture and values of American society, the Puritans were interested in establishing a common education for their children. Like many other aspects of society at the time, at the heart of this movement were the Enlightenment teachings of figures such as John Locke and Jean Jacque-Rousseau.

John Locke taught that “vigor and discipline of the body were chief aims of education” (Lee

16). He called for instruction in “dancing, fencing, and horsemanship to be included in the school programs” (Lee 16). He emphasized his passion for physical education in his book, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, in which he wrote, “A sound mind in a sound body, is a short, but full description of a happy state in this world. He that has these two, has little more to wish for; and he that wants either of them, will be but little the better for anything else” (Locke, 1693). Similarly, Rousseau advocated physical education that encompassed “swimming, leaping and jumping, and scaling cliffs” (Lee 16). He believed that physical and intellectual education were “so intimately bound together,” so he recommended gymnastic exercises and games for society to play (Lee 16).

The impact of these doctrines was limited in early America, however, due to the entrenched philosophy of the Puritan community that was aversive to physical exercise. The Puritans considered all play to be a sin, “including sports and even physical exercises” (Lee 17). Thus, while they still wanted an education system in place for their children, they wanted one that would focus on intellectual discipline only. This same religious attitude impeded the development of physical exercise culture in America for the first half of the 19th century.

In the 1700's lived the first American promoter of physical education, Benjamin Franklin. He advocated the placement of schools in a “healthful situation” that included a “garden, orchard, meadow, and fields” for the students to play in (Rice 177). His successor in this field, Samuel Moody, had an equally important role in developing the physical culture of early American society. As the first headmaster of Dummer Grammar School, the first private boarding school in America, he promoted a physical education system based on Franklin’s recommendations. Although there was no set curriculum that included physical exercise, the Dummer School represented a larger movement towards physical culture in America.

From the end of the 18th century to the middle of the 19th century, a great influx of immigrants contributed to the development of physical exercise programs. These immigrants, particularly the Germans, brought with them “their enthusiasm for physical education, materially enriching the educational system of that period” (Lee 21). The Germans introduced a new gymnastics system called Turnverein under the leadership of Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, “Germany’s famous physical educator of that day,” and his disciples, Charles Follen, Charles Beck, and Francis Lieber. The initial efforts of these educators to implement their system in American schools were unsuccessful; however, they were able to instill “the conviction that something should be done in the schools for bodily development,” a conviction that “endured in the minds of leading doctors and educators so that there remained some fertile ground ready for a revival” later on (Lee 26).

During the early 1800’s, dance was also a popular physical education activity. It was mostly implemented in schools for girls; in fact, it often times was the only physical education program offered (Lee 25). Emma Willard, a famous educator of the day, explained that “exercise is needful to the health and recreation to the cheerfulness and contentment of youth...Dancing is exactly to this purpose” (Lee 25).

The scope of physical education for girls, and for all Americans in general, expanded when Catherine Beecher introduced her system of “calisthenics” (Lee 27). A system named after the Greek words “kalos” and “sthenos”, the former meaning “beautiful” and the latter meaning “strength,” the calisthenics program was the “first attempt of a native-born American to devise an exercise program for Americans” (Lee 27).

Despite these developments, however, the rise of physical education was hindered by three main elements: “overly ardent advocates of manual labor”; “those still strongly influenced by the

Puritan's idea that play is a form of sin"; and "many scholars who felt that, although play might not be a sin, it was most certainly a waste of time" (Rice 197). Physical exercise did not play a major role in the curriculums of schools or in the lives of Americans at the time. However, that began to change near the end of the century, as religious incentives and educational reforms prompted a demand for physical education.

To begin with, the rise in physical exercise was a response to the growing questions and tensions about manhood and Christianity in the late 1800's. During this era, Christianity and masculinity were largely considered incompatible and discordant with one another. The Christian "celebration of tender, emotional virtues and the roughly three-to-two majority of women among church members" promoted a tacit understanding that "clergymen constituted at best a third sex and Christianity itself was unmanly" (Macleod). After all, true masculinity was usually associated with toughness and independence, "for the 'real' boy was Tom Sawyer, not a Sunday school pupil" (Macleod).

Furthermore, many "turn-of-the-century alarmists" were worried about "overcivilization": they feared that "sedentary lifestyles, excessive brainwork, feminization and the constraints of living in a highly organized, urbanized society" would drain "manly independence" and replace it with "nervousness and enfeeblement" (Macleod). This fear of loss of manly independence was underscored by the fact that schoolboys of that era "spent their weekdays doing book work under female teachers and then went home to their mothers' care" while their working white-collar fathers took orders from their corporate bosses (Macleod).

The prospect of the loss of masculinity among American men and boys was not new. It dated back to the writings of John Locke in his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, in which he wrote,

I shall explain myself more particularly; only laying down this as a general and certain observation for the women to consider, viz. That most children's constitutions are either spoil'd, or at least harm'd, by cockering and tenderness (Locke 1692).

These growing tensions about the “feminization of American religion” and the loss of masculinity in American men prompted a social movement called Muscular Christianity (Peterson). The phrase “muscular Christianity” was first used to describe a genre of characters in the works of English novelists Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes in the 1850’s (Macleod). Kingsley’s *Two Years Ago* and Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* both introduced “manly” heroes whose “Christian ideals and hardy physiques prepared them to struggle against the evils and evildoers of this world” (Macleod). The masculine figures of these characters were metaphors for “social, national, and religious bodies,” which led to the creation of the philosophy that “a man must discipline his body physically and morally to become healthy and influential” (Peterson).

The movement also justified its purpose with the words of the Scripture as well. In direct retaliation to the feminized Christianity that had become entrenched in American communities, advocates of the movement often quoted the Bible as a means of legitimizing the masculinity of Christianity; they would point to verses such as Mark 11:15 as evidence of how Christianity was associated with manly exertion:

Jesus went into the temple, and began to cast out them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves (Mark 11:15, KJV)

and 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 to prove that physical health was part of a Christian’s lifestyle:

¹⁹ What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?

²⁰ For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20, KJV).

As a result, the central tenets of this movement included “physical exertion, comradeship, and determination”; more importantly, however, the movement emphasized “manliness, morality, health, and

patriotism” (Peterson).

The direct effect of Muscular Christianity on American society is most clearly seen in the impact of the Young Men’s Christian Association, or YMCA. Although the organization was originally a program founded in England by George Williams, it was officially established in the United States on December 29, 1851 (Winter). At the beginning of its conception, the YMCA was not directly associated with the muscular Christianity movement. Its facilities started out as “self-improvement societies dedicated to evangelizing young men” and focused heavily on hosting Bible studies, religious seminars, and prayer meetings (Macleod). The YMCA in the New York City branch declared in 1866 that its goal was “the improvement of the spiritual, mental, social, and physical condition of young men”; however, its commitment to physical development was superficial (Macleod). Instead, the existence of physical programs within the YMCA curriculum was mostly “intended to rival commercial gymnasiums” who competed for the same demographic of young men as the organization (Macleod). The YMCA facilities offered “little more than a setting to act out boyhood dreams of circus stardom, with acrobatics, boxing, and weightlifting beckoning the foolhardy” (Macleod).

The agenda of the YMCA became more similar to that of Muscular Christianity as a result of the influence of a few prominent figures. For example, in 1876, Robert Roberts became the “YMCA’s first professedly Christian gymnasium superintendent when he took charge at the Boston association” (Macleod). He was responsible for overhauling some of the exercise programs that the YMCA maintained; for example, he made exercises involving dumbbells and medicine balls “easier and safer” (Macleod). As a result of his improvements on the physical fitness aspect of the organization, class enrollment multiplied by twelve times in the first four years of his employment (Macleod).

Another monumental figure responsible for the shift in the YMCA’s dedication to the physical

fitness of its members was Luther Halsey Gulick. Often considered the “leader in the promotion of the social and health benefits of play and physical education” during the era, he carried a “combined interest in evangelical Christianity and recreation” that led him to advocate muscular Christianity because it “aligned physical and spiritual strength” (Berg). His contributions to the YMCA spurred it to “extend its concern with men’s souls to include their bodies” as well, one of which was his “1889 design of the YMCA’s triangle logo inscribed with the words ‘spirit,’ ‘mind,’ ‘body.’” (Winter). As the YMCA “emphasized...the integral role of physical education within the ideal of a balanced development,” Gulick “expressed this rationale as a symbol, the red triangle, whose three sides signified the symmetrical physical, mental, and spiritual development of young men” (Macleod). He and his colleagues “established the red triangle as the YMCA’s de facto emblem by the late 1890’s, and balanced development of young men and boys as the association’s d’être” (Macleod). It was under his guidance as well that “formal training of physical educators began in 1887” (Macleod). He replaced the routine drills of traditional physical fitness with “athletics and sports” (Macleod).

Yet there was still another important figure that fused the purpose of the YMCA with the goals of muscular Christianity: James Naismith. Best known for his invention of the game of basketball, Naismith embodied the very combination of religion and exercise that he sought to advance in the YMCA. As an undergraduate at McGill University in Montreal, “Naismith was a classic all round athlete, a success in sports as diverse as rugby, gymnastics, and lacrosse.” (“Naismith”). However, when he “began graduate studies in theology, Naismith’s professors disapproved of his active athletic career” (“Naismith”). However, instead of losing hope, he “advocated that it was possible, and even desirable, to encourage young men to pursue both an athletic and a spiritual life” (“Naismith”). This personal philosophy played a central role in shaping his career in athletics (“Naismith”).

He eventually became acquainted with the YMCA branch in Montreal. He approached the organization leaders “regarding his desire to become a physical education instructor who combined spirituality and physical training in a program for young athletes” (“Naismith”). As a result of these conversations, he was admitted into the faculty of the international YMCA training school at Springfield, Massachusetts in 1890 (“Naismith”).

Perhaps the most important contribution Naismith made to the YMCA was the game of basketball. In the winter of 1891, he was assigned to formulate a team sport that could be played in doors. He knew that because “the new game would be played on an unforgiving hardwood floor, a new sport that involved tackling or excessive physical contact was not feasible” (“Naismith”). He drew his inspirations from various outdoor sports “such as soccer, lacrosse, and rugby football” and even from childhood games that he used to play (“Naismith”). Eventually, he and his colleagues came up with the definitive game of basketball within two weeks. New team sports such as basketball advanced the goals of muscular Christianity, as they “prepared boys and young men for corporate life by making subordination to the group and obedience to coaches’ orders seem manly. Eventually, joining the team became the master metaphor for participating in both business and church life” (Macleod).

As the YMCA became more focused on advancing the proliferation of physical fitness programs, its membership grew as well, particularly among boys of ages 12 to 16. In 1890, there were 11,455 registered members. In 1900, that number grew to 30,675. Ten years later, in 1910, there were 103,570 members, and in 1921, there were 219,876 members (Macleod). The organization’s growth in size is a testament to how it successfully helped to spread the muscular Christianity movement across the country. Overall, Muscular Christianity “offered defensive assurance, in the 1884 words of a YMCA leader, that a ‘real’ boy ‘need not cease to be a boy because he is a Christian’” (Macleod). The

“vigorous exercise and all-male companionship” that it encouraged “helped conscientious Christians bolster their sense of masculinity” (Macleod).

The ideals of the Muscular Christianity movement were also embodied in the personal life and beliefs of Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th President of the United States. He actively promoted masculinity and manliness through physical fitness to the nation as a direct result of his personal experiences: as a child, Roosevelt was often sick due to his struggles with asthma, leaving him with a poor physical frame. During his teenage years, “he decided that he would 'make his body,' and he undertook a program of gymnastics and weight-lifting, which helped him develop a rugged physique” (“American President”). Among the exercise he undertook were boxing and hiking.

As the President, Roosevelt “viewed factors such as urbanization, sedentary office jobs, and non-Protestant immigration as threats not only to...health and manhood but to...[his] privileged social standing” (Putney). He reflected the country's concerns that the masculinity of the American population was being threatened by the changing social fabric of the country. In his 1899 speech entitled “The Strenuous Life,” he called for a strengthening of the masculine backbone of the country:

I wish to preach, not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous ~~life~~ life of toil and effort, of labor and strife; to preach that highest form of success which comes, not to the man who desires mere easy peace, but to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph (Roosevelt, 1899).

He later directly associated physical health with masculinity in the same speech: “In the last analysis a healthy state can exist only when the men and women who make it up lead clean, vigorous, healthy lives...The man must be glad to do a man's work, to dare and endure and to labor” (Roosevelt, 1899).

Roosevelt's public advocacy of physical fitness and manliness ultimately transformed him into a

symbol of exercise. His insistence for the American people to live active, healthy lives “gave sports a national heritage” (Hodges). At the same time that he helped promote physical culture in the country, however, he also reflected how the country was moving towards a more physically-focused culture as well.

Thus, the impacts of both the YMCA and President Roosevelt exhibit the extent to which the Muscular Christianity movement manifested itself in American culture and society. The need for a revival of masculinity in the country, combined with the mandates of Scripture, effectively produced a widespread urge for Americans to become physically fit, which bolstered the physical exercise culture of the United States. Equally as important, however, was another movement known as “Progressive Education.” This movement sought to reform the structure of education by implementing practical instruction aimed towards developing the “whole child” in order to produce productive and effective citizens. An essential tenet of Progressive Education was the instruction physical education and the development of the physical, as well as intellectual, aspect of children, which is how the educational needs of the country gave rise to the development of physical education in the United States at the turn of the century.

In a larger scope, the Progressive Education movement developed as a result of a widespread desire to address the problems of the traditional education system. Under this system,

students were required to memorize endless facts and formulas from a dreary academic curriculum remote from their own youthful interests. Most teachers defined good pedagogy as drill and practice; their job was to hear recitations, not lead discussions. Classroom life was austere. Teachers established unilaterally the rules and regulations, and they punished misconduct harshly. Administrators deferred to school boards often enmeshed in factionalism and political patronage (Hampel).

Education was not geared towards helping each individual student succeed; rather, it was largely defined by drills and lectures that

In light of other reforms during this time, the Progressives sought to abolish the traditional form of education and replace it with a more practical, effective system. They believed that “education should be ‘child centered’ rather than grounded on the authority of a ponderous textbook or a stern teacher” (Hampel). Their philosophy on the nature of children, and on mankind in general, was that they were not “willful, obstreperous creatures that had to be tamed,” as the traditional education system treated them. Instead, they believed that children were “by nature curious and creative, with a wide range of worthwhile interests” (Hampel). Thus, the goal of education was thus to give direction to the inner potential of each and every child, not to crush the students under the weight of administrative discipline and structure. In other words, its focus shifted “away from the curriculum and subject matter” and onto “how the child develops, how he learns, and what needs and interests he has” (Dalen and Bennett, 368). This included the physical interests of the child as well.

Although he did not found the movement, philosopher and professor John Dewey is “viewed by many as the primary leader and spokesperson of the movement” (“Democracy and Education”). The essential ideals of the Progressive Education movement are embodied by his teachings and philosophy. Central to his beliefs was that “students should be taught how to think, rather than what to think, so that they will be able to function in a constantly changing society” (“Democracy and Education”). He expressed this belief in an illustration he gave in a speech titled, “Physical Education and the Science of Education,” which he delivered to fellow educators:

I think observation will show that when a child enters upon a really fruitful and consecutively developing activity, it is because, and in as far as, he has previously engaged in some complex and gradually unfolding activity which has left him a question he wishes to prove further or with the idea of some piece of work still to be accomplished to bring his occupation to completion. Otherwise he is at the mercy of chance suggestion, and chance suggestions are not likely to lead to anything significant or fruitful (Dewey, 1928).

He contended that children must be shaped by the proper environments, such as schools, so

that they would grow up to be productive members of society. The environment, he believed, is what molded the child's capacity to think for himself, much like Rousseau's belief that the environment shapes character. In a larger scope, Progressive Education stressed the importance of providing proper guidance to individual students.

As a result of this shift in focus towards "education of the 'whole child'," physical education gradually became a more common aspect of curriculum in American schools. John Dewey and his colleagues made educational reforms that "led to the expansion of the 'three R's'--reading, writing, and arithmetic--to include physical education" as well (Boyce). This change was supported by Thomas Wood, an important figure in the Physical Education movement, who stated that "the great thought of physical education is not the education of the physical nature, but the relation of physical training to complete education, and then the effort to make the physical contribute its full share to the life of the individual" (National Education Association, p. 621).

The legislative reforms that came after the ideology of education focused on physical education illustrate the extent to which the Progressive Education movement advanced the development of physical education. For example, a physical fitness instructor named William Gilbert Anderson met with fellow instructors in 1885 to discuss the role of physical education in schools; this group eventually became the American Association for the Advancement of Physical Education. The organization made its first contact with the National Education Association in 1893 (Troester and Culligan). In 1889, the Conference in the Interest of Physical Training was held in Boston. Its purpose was to discuss the various the various types of physical education programs that could be implemented in American schools, including the German system, the Swedish system, and the Beecher system mentioned earlier (Zeigler,). The meeting is considered to be a pivotal point in the advancement of physical education, as

it was the first meeting of its kind.

Physical education became a more accepted portion of the education curriculum when the goals of physical education were officially defined by the President of the Physical Education Department of the National Education Association during the early 1900's. These goals were: "organic education for vital vigor"; "psycho-motor education for power and skill in neuro-muscular activities"; "character education for moral, social, and spiritual powers": and "intellectual education acquired through free play or development of social thinking" (Rice 295).

In 1918, physical education made another milestone when a meeting was held by the U.S. Commissioner of Education in Atlantic City about the improvement of health and physical education in the country. Over 60 national leaders in physical education gathered and created the National Physical Education Service (Dalen and Bennett, 440). Its purpose was twofold: the "promotion of federal and state legislation requiring physical and health education for all school children"; and the "assistance to state departments of education in developing statewide programs under trained leadership of state directors on the staff of state superintendents of public instruction" (Dalan and Bennett, 440). In the same year, the National Education Association listed the Seven Cardinal Principles of Education, three of which were "health, citizenship, and worthy use of leisure" (Cardinal Principles of Education, Department of the Interior). These principles made specific mentions to "health education" and the recreation of "body, mind and spirit," which indicates that physical education had completely been established as a fundamental aspect of American education by this time (Cardinal Principles of Education, Department of the Interior).

Thus, the changing values of education due to the Progressive Era gave rise to various legislative reforms that implemented physical education to the curriculum of American schools. Physical education

became an essential element of education as it was regarded as a necessary step in educating the “whole child” and producing effective citizens of American society, and the extent to which it was advanced by Progressive Education is evident in the legislative acts that were passed at the turn of the century.

In conclusion, the desire for social change in American society led to the development of physical education and exercise. The call for re-instated masculinity among men and reformed education among Progressives was answered by the rise of physical exercise programs that penetrated ordinary adult life and the school. The religious incentive for physical exercise combined with the educational benefits of physical education served to promote and establish physical exercise as a hallmark of American culture in the early 20th century. The rise of physical exercise illustrates how desperate Americans were at the time to protect what they held valuable, such as their masculinity, and fix what they thought was flawed, as seen in the education reforms. It is no surprise that they reacted in this way in the midst of the shifting landscape of their nation.