The Physical Miseducation of a Former Fat Boy

BY LOUIE CREW

When I was six, a next-door neighbor gave me my first candy bar, and I fattened immediately in a home where food was love. It is hardly surprising that when I first entered physical education courses in the eighth grade my coaches were markedly unimpressed or that thereafter I compensated by working harder at books, where I was more successful. Although I did learn to take jokes about my size and experienced
the “bigness” of being able to laugh at myself (the standard fat man’s reward), at thirty-five I am furious to recall how readily and completely my instructors defaulted in their responsibilities to me. Some remedies I have learned in my thirties persuade me that it is not inevitable that the system will continue to fail other fat boys.

My personal remedies for physical ineptitude have a firm base in ideas. Four years ago I weighed 265 pounds. Only my analyst needs to know how much I consequently hated myself. In six months I took off 105 pounds and initiated a regular jogging and exercising schedule that has gradually, very gradually, led to increased self-confidence. Yet my physical educators in secondary school and college never showed the least interest in my physical problems, never sat down and initiated the simplest diagnosis of my physical needs, never tempted me into the personal discoveries that I had to wait more than a decade to make for myself.

Instead, my physical educators offered two alternatives. Either I could enter the fierce competitive sports that predominate in our culture and therein make and accept the highest mark I could achieve; or I could opt for the less-competitive intramurals, modeled after the big boys’ games, and accept my role as a physically incompetent human being, sitting on the sidelines to cheer for a chosen team of professionals. These limited alternatives were repeatedly justified as teaching me how it is out in the “real world,” in “the game of life,” allegedly divided between the participants and the watchers.

Now, as I jog in midwinter dawn, all muffled with socks over my hands, making tracks with the rabbits in Carolina dew, I am not competing with anyone, unless I whimsically imagine Father Time having to add another leaf to my book. I am celebrating me, this morning, this pair of worn-out tennis shoes, the tingle in my cheeks, the space being cleared in my stomach for my simple breakfast when I get back . . . . I was very articulate at fourteen —fat but articulate—and I believe that a sympathetic, interested coach could have shared this type of insight, this type of reality, with me, and perhaps thereby he could have teased me into the discoveries I had to make many years later. But the coach would have had to love kids like me more than he loved winning if he had hoped to participate in my physical education. I had no such coach.

Perhaps an athletic friend could have shared insights into my physical needs and suggested alternative fulfillments. I certainly had many athletic friends, because I sought avidly to compensate for my physical failures by liking and being liked by athletes. Unfortunately, these friends were all schooled in the competitive rules of keeping trade secrets and of enjoying and hoarding compliments. Human sharing had not been a part of their education.

I recall how at thirty-two I tentatively jogged around a block for the first time; how the fierce hurt in my gut was less bothersome than the fear that I would not make it. I had to learn to love myself for making it, and for making it again the next day, rather than to participate in my hecklers’ mockery of the sweating fat man. I remember jogging no faster at sixteen and being lauded at by the coach, who kept me that much longer a prisoner in my role as the jovial class clown.

I became a water boy and trainer, winning the school’s award for “most selfless service.” Is not the role familiar? I even served two summers as a camp counselor. I could not walk to first base without puffing, but I could call a kid “out” with a tongue of forked lightning. I had been taught well.

My physical educators were signally unimaginative. We played only the few sports that had always been played in our area. Further, they maintained a rigid separation between “sports” and “play.” Football, baseball, basketball, and track were “sports.” Fishing, hiking, boating, and jogging were “play.” Golf was “play” until you had a team that won five trophies; then

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you developed the cool rhetoric of "sport."
I remember going on a boy-scout trip in the Talledega National Forest in Alabama for a week. My anticipation was immense. I liked the woods. I liked walking. I liked the sky, trees, rocks, ferns... We were to walk only about five or ten miles a day through a wilderness, camping out around an authentic chuck wagon that would move in advance during the day. The trip itself, however, was a nightmare for me. The coach/scoutmaster led at a frantic pace, because he wanted to get each lap done with and, as he said, he wanted "to make men" out of us. The major activity was to race ahead so as to enjoy "breathers" while waiting to heckle us slower folk when we caught up. When we came to a clearing overlooking the vast chasms of blue-green shimmer, the biggest breach of the unwritten code would have been to stop and look for ten minutes. The trip was to get somewhere (nobody quite knew why or where), not to be somewhere.

For a long time I treasured illusions that my experiences with physical mis-education resulted merely from my provincial isolation, that real professionals elsewhere had surely identified and rectified these ills. But as I have moved from south to west to east, even to England, I have found very few real physical educators. Almost no one is interested in educating individuals to discover their own physical resources and to integrate them with all other personal experiences. Almost everyone is interested in developing ever-better professionals to provide vicarious entertainment for a physically inept society.

Most of the professional literature describes the training of professional sportmen and evaluates the machinery developed to serve this training. My favorite example of this perverse pedantry is my friend's M.A. thesis studying the effects of various calisthenics on sweat samples. One is scared to imagine what secretions he will measure for his doctoral dissertation. Yet it is fashionable to mock medieval scholars for disputing how many angels could stand on the head of a pin!

Once while working out in a gymnasium at the University of Alabama, I jestingly asked some professionals, how many pounds I would have to be able to lift to be a man. To my surprise, I received specific answers: one said 280 pounds (he could lift 280); another said, "one's own weight"; another. . . . But I was born a man! It is surely perverse for a man to trap himself by confusing being with becoming.
SR/UP FRONT

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