

The 1831 Athletic Controversy - New England Educators' Dilemma

by
Roxanne M. Albertson
University of Bridgeport

On August 26, 1831 educators attending the American Institute of Instruction in Boston debated “ought athletic games, combining exercise with amusement, to be united with manual labor in the education of youths, as a means of forming and invigorating the body?” The educators confirmed the need for physical exercise programs in schools, but wanted to determine what type of exercise program would be invigorating, utilitarian, interesting, and provide moral development.

Advocates of manual labor programs, including Theodore Weld and E. Cornelius, stressed that physical labor provided students with serviceable and healthy exercise. Wilbur Fisk stated that games or gymnastics did not form useful adult habits, but young men who spent their free time in agricultural or mechanical labor formed habits of industry and useful employment. Few labor programs instituted in New England academies, such as at Wesleyan Academy in Wilbraham, Massachusetts and Fellingerg School in Windsor, Connecticut, remained in existence for more than two seasons. The programs proved to be financially unprofitable and drudgery for the students. Manual labor advocates were seeking additional healthful physical activities that students would enjoy.

During the early 19th century children played games and sports during recess, including one-old-cat, marbles, hide-and-seek, football, and “rounders.” At some schools instruction was given in utilitarian sports such as swimming at Dummar Academy and New Haven Gymnasium, archery and tumbling at Round Hill, and boxing and fencing at Hartford Grammar School. Though schools prohibited rough and tumble activities near buildings youthful offenders broke school windows with balls and disrupted passing townspeople with their recess activities. Therefore educators were seeking methods of controlling student play, plus using these activities as learning experiences in moral development.

William Woodbridge thought teachers should join students in playing sports to provide a good moral example. Other teachers believed they would lose the respect of their pupils by participating in games, but that student monitors should supervise recess activities. If games and sports could provide moral development opportunities they could be considered educational and included in school programs.

The athletic controversy of 1831 was one that has been debated throughout the past 145 years. Though education purposes have changed, this early athletic controversy brought into focus interest surrounding sports and games as possible educational activities.