
V-5: Sports Values and National Ideology

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During World War II sport was considered useful for the mobilization of deep-seated values of personal and group commitment, even to the point of training troops for combat. The most unique and doctrinaire approach was utilized by the United States Navy through its Aeronautic Preflight schools. Commonly called “V-5” training, this approach used a wide variety of team sports and combatives for both the physical and social conditioning of prospective pilots.

Although V-5 training had several modern antecedents in both Europe and America, it was incorporated into pilot training for the Navy through the planning of Thomas J. Hamilton, who drafted the first training syllabus and recruited the initial students and instructors. The V-5 schools, established on the campuses of four leading collegiate institutions, used “hard-hitting” team games to take away social inhibitions and to inspire aggressiveness and poise under pressure among prospective flyers. Compulsory instruction in both football and soccer was part of the over four and one-half hours of daily physical drill.

The preflight schools recruited some 2,500 instructors during the war. Many came directly from college physical education faculties and coaching staffs. Others were brought through the V-5 system itself. A total of 100,000 trainees were exposed to the principles of the preflight syllabus.

Each base ran a highly competitive athletic and intramural program which not only attracted extremely talented athletes but poured thousands of other potential athletic performers and coaches into the postwar education market. Some of the most famous football coaches in the United States during the 1950’s, ‘60’s and ‘70’s were products of V-5. Much of their influence was toward the adoption by amateur sport of quasi-military, “hardening” methods for training. Such luminaries as Charles “Bud” Wilkinson, Paul “Bear” Bryant, and Woodrow “Woody” Hayes were among those exposed to preflight.

The use of sport to train troops sparked a sharp debate both within the Navy and the profession of physical education. Gene Tunney, former heavyweight boxing champion and Director of the Navy's Physical Training Section, was in the forefront of those who opposed this particular use of sport. Tunney favored the use of team games as but a supplement to concentrated individual conditioning plan. This led to the existence of two separate authorities for physical training within the service. Physical educators such as Charles McCloy opposed V-5 on the grounds that such a heavy dose of team sports was inefficient and counterproductive. The opposition argued for a more compact strength, endurance and coordination plan without the baggage of highly publicized athletic programs.

The favorable publicity gained by V-5 within the print media led to the popular conception that patriotic values went hand in hand with highly combative athletic competition. Positive American cultural attributes were identified with the postwar resurgence of intercollegiate athletics, an antithesis of the negativism and pessimism of the prewar years.