

The Limits of Science and the Appeal of Quackery

DONALD J. MROZEK

Kansas State University

“Genuine” medicine and faddish quackery are often remarkably close and disturbingly similar. Moreover, neither institutional sanction nor scientific method seems sufficient to establish the difference between accepted medicine and dubious fad. The persistence of sweeping health schemes has depended greatly on their very overstatement. However broad the reach of medicine, it depends on tedious verification. But the reach of quackery is complete, much like the sweep of the American vision of perfectability. Obedience to the regimen allowed one to fulfill the nineteenth century quest for “character,” even as the promise of perfect health fed the twentieth-century hunger for “personality.”

Ultimately, such ways of thinking affected sport - how one trained for it, what one expected from it, what one claimed it had achieved, and how much it seemed to promise for a better future. But the scientific prediction of social “pay-offs” often yielded to faithful pursuit of unproven regimens. As sport came to center on satisfying the individual, one could not truly verify results nor predictively reproduce them. To this degree, science became impossible; and quackery was merely a state of mind.

Examples abound showing the American preference for total solutions to medical risks and degeneration. Among them have been extremist “posture workers” and chiropractic promoters. Yet the scientific basis of chiropractic was scarcely less firm than that of the posture movement, which enjoyed substantial favor within the mainline medical establishment. Also, Dudley Sargent’s emphasis on “corrective gymnastics” in order to achieve a “symmetrical” body was hailed as a triumphant step for scientific method in physical education. Yet it paralleled the view of neurologists and many psychiatrists that physical asymmetry was a sign of insanity. Even more damning, however, was the association of distinctly eccentric characters and even clear madmen with the enthusiasm for physical culture. A chilling example was Charles J. Guiteau, the assassin of President James A. Garfield and a sometime health fanatic. The career of physical culturist Bemarr MacFadden similarly confuses personal eccentricity with professional quackery, even if he was at least manifestly less lethal than Charles Guiteau.

The final presumption that what is good for the individual must benefit society is perhaps the ultimate in presumptuousness. But it is an integral promise of twentieth-century sport. Results thus can not be reproduced to the satisfaction of the tests of science, since one can never be sure whether they have been reproduced at all. And sport itself begins to look uncomfortably like a kind of quackery.