

THE 1889 Boston Conference on Physical Training—A Reappraisal

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The American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, Dance (AAHPERD) was born in 1885, several years before the “Conference in the Interest of Physical Training.” The former was hardly noticed by the academic community, given little consideration by the educational administrative leadership of universities, and nearly ignored by newspaper and journal writers. No so with the 1889 Boston Conference, as a score of Eastern newspapers published day-by-day accounts and several national educational journals reported that 2000 persons attended the two-day meetings (November 29 and November 30, 1889) in order to hear 16 medical doctors; one general of the Army; one English earl; two barons; one doctor of law; one PhD, and a dozen more male and female gymnastic and sporting specialists.

In a real way the Boston Conference, rather than the emergence of the “Alliance,” marked the beginning of the physical education profession in the United States. Every American physical education history text mentions the Conference and its importance, but only Fred Leonard and Betty Spears dealt scientifically and in depth with this Boston meeting of exactly one hundred years ago.

Mrs. Mary Hemenway organized and paid for the scholarly program held in Huntington Hall of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. This is clear. What is not understood are: Who made up the invitation list and in what way were delegates and speakers contacted? Dr. Spears’ research at Wellesley College, Boston’s school committee documents, Boston University’s Sargent papers, the Boston public Library, the Library of Congress uncovered no motives by Mrs. Hemenway for convening the Conference. “No where,” wrote Spears, “did I find a letter asking anyone to present a paper...” Isabel C. Barrows was an eye-witness at the Conference and her “Full Report” of 135 pages indicates that Mrs. Hemenway invited speakers of all gymnastic persuasions. Why, in light of her repeated public acknowledgments that the Ling or Swedish system was best for the largest number, did she invite such a widely eclectic group of speakers? The third question of interest to this researcher deals with Mrs. Hemenway’s complete avoidance of any discussion of boys’ interscholastic and men’s intercollegiate athletics. Why was this important New England extracurricular activity for men (but not women) not on her agenda? Special guest from Paris, the Baron Pierre de Coubertin, did tangentially touch this area in his unvarnished praise of English “muscular Christianity.” In this paper the researcher will dwell on the last two questions; i.e., possible reasons for selecting such a diverse group of speakers and the glaring absence of any discussion of this important male after-school activity-competitive athletics.