

# Soldiers May Fall! But Athletes Never!: 19th Century Conceptions of Male “Nervous Diseases” in Europe and America

Roberta J. Park

University of California, Berkeley

Neurasthenia, Janet Oppenheim has recently written, was a middle-class Victorian preoccupation. Coined in 1869 by the American physician George Beard, the term was quickly applied to a vast (and often bewildering) assortment of “diseases of the nerves.” The malady could affect males as well as females, but was likely to take different forms since, according to 19th century dogma, males and females differed so markedly in their essential natures. Some physicians recommended the cessation of all but the most mild forms of physical exertion; others, such as Dr. N.P. Dandridge, maintained that prolonged and “severe out-of-door exercise” was the surest way for a man to restore his mind and nerves as well as his body. Much of the debate over neurasthenia-and even hysteria-in the male reflected Victorian middle-class conceptions of gender and what it was “to be a man.” Not surprisingly, therefore, the athlete was typically held up as the opposite of the sickly, “neurasthenic” male. Nothing was as pitiable, proclaimed Dr. C.W. Eaton in 1884, as the pale, effeminate man who teetered on the brink of nervous collapse. Although not as virulent in denouncing the non-athletic man, other contemporaries were of the same opinion. Strength, stamina, courage, and “steady nerves” were what was desired in a man. Not only did athletics develop these qualities; only those who possessed them were competent to engage in demanding athletic contests. Writing in 1898 for the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, Dr. Morton Price asked whether accidents incurred in football might cause “traumatic neurasthenia and hysteria” in the way they did among men engaged in a military battle. He concluded that this was highly unlikely since players were physically and mentally so well-prepared that there was “no shock or terror” attendant on injuries incurred in football games. This paper explored the medical, the general circulation, and the athletic literature of the late 19th and early 20th century which debated the influences of exercise and strenuous physical activity in relation to the “neurasthenic” man and his opposite—the virile, “steady” athlete.