

# SPORTS MEDICINE & PHYSICAL EDUCATION

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## *Antebellum School Exercise in the United States: Consumption, and Ned Wright's Dilemma*

With good reason, most scholars trace the beginnings of widespread organized school sport in the United States to the post-bellum era. However, exercise and sport did make up part of the school day in America before the Civil War. In fact, educators and reformers from 1830 to 1860 became increasingly convinced of the need for designated play spaces and times, and even formal athletic activities, often for girls as well as boys. Boarding schools put special emphasis on exercise, but all schools were urged to provide for frequent outdoor recreation. German and Swedish gymnastics and calisthenics, long walks and ball games, domestic chores (for girls) and manual training (mostly for boys) all figured as solutions. In this paper I first review the forms of exercise and sport that made the most impact, and the notions of gender, health, and the body they expressed and reinforced.

One assumption about health stood out above many others: that school heightened a young person's vulnerability to the consumption that was robbing the nation of so many people in their prime. Those students who excelled in school, bookish lads and lasses with narrow chests, were most at risk from excess study, poorly ventilated classrooms, and lack of healthful recreation. Thus the most academically talented youngsters frequently found themselves whisked out of school by concerned parents, a solution that pleased no one. The second part of the paper, introduces Ned Wright of Montpelier, Vermont and Boston, Massachusetts, who experienced this predicament firsthand. He was a gifted student and an exceedingly active boy but physically slight. Without explaining their reasons, his parents removed him from school for months at a time (illegally so in Boston), bought him memberships to gymnasia and swimming clubs, and sent him on ambitious outdoor excursions. Though often mystified, Ned sampled nearly the whole range of exercise options available in the antebellum years and recorded his athletic activities in a six-volume diary spanning the years 1850 to 1867, beginning when he was ten years old. Ned's diary allows a close analysis of his athletic attitudes and practices, in and out of school settings, in a small town and in a city. It also allows us to see the sadly misplaced wisdom of his parents' fears of consumption. Furthermore, a case study such as this enriches our understanding of the antebellum campaign for school exercise in the context of the consumption epidemic and of more general ideas about health and gender.