Mens Sana . . . ?

Aidan Healey

"THE physical welfare of the boys is in the hands of Sister E. O'Rourke, S.R.N., (Dublin) and a trained staff", ran the message on page six of the prospectus. On page ten, in humble type, under the general heading 'Domestic Staff' was the following item:—

Physical Training & Tuck Shop:
C.S.M. BATTERSBY, D.C.M.
(Royal Fusiliers)

'Plum-bum' Battersby made his appearance in the Masters' Common Room twice daily, to refill the coal buckets, and would have been no less horrified than the rest of the staff to learn that he occupied in the affection of most of the school a higher and more permanent place than any of his loftier colleagues — despite their Oxons, their Cantabs and their place on page two of the prospectus. Yet such was the case. Indeed, more successful old boys returning in Crombies and motor cars made their way not to their Housemaster's study—that friendly scene of man-to-man chats and hot crumpets—but in less traditional fashion to the gymnasium, cold austere building reeking of leather and fusty woodwork.

The Sergeant Major's philosophy of training was rooted and grounded in the doctrine of original sin. In contrast to current educational theory, which hints that all will be well if the young are left to develop 'naturally', he was a firm believer in the basic badness of boys. In his view therefore education in general, and more particularly physical training, were concerned not so much with the permissive development of good qualities as with the ruthless extermination of bad ones. This policy was eminently acceptable to other members of the staff, delighted to concern themselves with 'Character Training'—the real stuff of education—unencumbered with the more pedestrian business of punishment. Plum-bum's policy enjoyed the great advantage of simplicity. All new boys were told precisely what was required of them in the gymnasium: punctuality, clean bodies, alert minds, hard work, and no underpants under your gym shorts. Boxing was, of course, compulsory throughout the school. The Sergeant Major's own appearance was exemplary. His white flannels were spotless, sharply creased and fitted snugly round the ankle so as not to hinder demonstrations on the horizontal or parallel bars. His gym shoes were blanco white and his sweater a cream colour with the red crossed swords of the Army School on the chest an inch or two below the V of the neck. In build he was of medium height, thickset with lightish thinning hair immaculately brushed down on either side of a centre parting. He had the puffy eyebrows and the slightly splayed nose of the boxer, and his shoulders, like those of most gymnasts, were thickly muscled and slightly rounded. In contrast to a rather belligerent and tough appearance his speaking voice was gentle in tone and his manner of dealing with classes or individuals was

competent, unruffled and entirely devoid of the easy conviviality which is normally the stock in trade of those who are 'good with youngsters'.

The gymnasium had about it an awesome sanctity. Shooting eights, O.T.C. groups, gymnastic and boxing teams from byegone years lined the walls, utterly safe from damage since nothing which was round, bounced or rolled was ever permitted inside the building. Each period of P.T. lasted one hour. A short inspection of knees and necks was followed by marching, running and formal free standing exercises. If this were done efficiently there would follow a short session of class instruction in boxing or gymnastics and the final quarter of an hour in work by groups on life saving drills, boxing, fencing or gymnastics. No talking was permitted in the gym.

In addition to the normal day to day P.T., C.S.M. Battersby was responsible for swimming, shooting, and, of course, the tuck shop. Although possessing some knowledge of athletics, particularly of field events, he was not encouraged to trespass beyond a brief appearance as timekeeper on sports day. The serious coaching was undertaken by a housemaster of late middle age who had run cross country for Oxford forty years earlier.

Tuesday and Friday were 'Corps' days. The Sergeant Major inspected the parade at 2 p.m. and then drilled the assembled company until 3 p.m. At 3.15 p.m. the tacticians took over and a cram course in the serious arts of warfare began in preparation for Cert. A. A Scout troop run by the chaplain met on the same afternoons. Membership was restricted to those who were excused boots or possessed a certificate from Sister O'Rourke restricting them from O.T.C. parade. Such a certificate was almost unprocurable, and even if successfully obtained, carried with it a stigma which was hard to live down. Plum-bum considered Scouts an 'unwholesome' business leading not only to absence from Corps parade but to the use on two afternoons a week of trouser pockets—a luxury denied to the remainder of the school whose pockets where sewn up on the first day of term and stayed so until the holidays began.

Once each year at the Staff Concert Plum-bum, thinly disguised as a wealthy man about town, would be set upon by a gang of thugs—a trio of junior masters wearing cloth caps and chokers—whom he proceeded to throw in all directions until they lay prostrate on the stage. He would then dust off his striped trousers, pick up his bowler and walking cane and stroll nonchalantly into the wings amid hysterical applause and shouts of 'encore'.

The Sergeant Major lived in a small house at the rear entrance to the school which enabled him to scan the lane for smokers and take the names of those coming in late from pass. He had a large, friendly wife and three sons. The sons he chased mercilessly and denounced as idle—and occasionally 'unwholsome'—two of these were decorated for gallantry in the war and are now in business, and the third is a doctor.

Some years have now passed since Plum-bum's last public performance. His place has been taken by two trained teachers, the tuck shop is in the care of two ladies in blue nylon overalls, the house by the back lane is occupied by a dietician, membership

of the 'Corps' is voluntary, compulsory P.T. is restricted to Junior boys, the athletics is first class, the boxing a disgrace. The boys are happier, everyone maintains, natural aptitudes are developed, self-discipline encouraged, physical training has broadened into physical education, the P.E. staff join their colleagues in the Masters' Common Room for morning tea, all continue to train characters.

This is not the occasion to discuss sociological aspects of physical activity nor to consider how a subject which was once non-U is now becoming respectable—nor, even if this be so, whether respectability is really worth all the fuss.

It is, too, a risky business to attempt a comparison of the old with the new in any field of activity. If the comparison is to be objective then considerable effort of will and as near complete emotional detachment as possible are both essential. Many accept new developments because on rational grounds they are evidently worthwhile, yet they remain, in De Berker's phrase, 'emotionally attached to the old regime'. Others embrace all innovations that come their way on the tenuous ground that if a little of the 'new' is good, then a lot must be better still. Whatever opinion may be held about 'old' or 'new' methods of training, the problem of character building through physical activities is one which has particular relevance in this service. This whole problem is of fairly recent origin.

From 393 A.D., when Theodosius abolished the Olympic Games, the 'body' and things physical virtually sank without trace. The shapelessness of human figures in Byzantine art testifies to this. Moreover the word 'flesh' denoted in Christian doctrine all that should be avoided for the good of the soul. Apart from a short lived emancipation in the Renaissance, the 'body' continued to be considered as an appendage to be mortified rather than as an integral part of the growth and personality of the individual. Mortification of the flesh remained until the heyday of the newer Public Schools of the 19th century, when the playing field startlingly became a training ground for character, and good sportsmanship the key to the kingdom of heaven.

Depending on their own natural ability, and of course on the way they earn their living, most people now occupy an uneasy position somewhere between Theodosius and Dr. Arnold where their claims for the character training value of physical activities are concerned—assuming that they think about it at all.

Consider team games. These of course vary so greatly, not only in their equipment and laws, but in the assortment of characteristics, temperament, skills, physiques, training methods, degrees of fitness and co-ordination which each particular game requires.

Social distinctions which surrounded certain games, notably those labelled 'Made in England', have now largely disappeared, or at any rate are not so evident, so that the sanctions and generally recognised code of conduct attached to each game are less well defined than they were. True, one or two remnants of more honourable years are still embodied in some of our sports, the F.A. Law relating to 'ungentlemanly conduct' is one example of this, but the antics of Football League players each Saturday suggests that this law is retained for sentimental reasons only.

It must be recognised, then, that there is nothing automatically beneficial, reformative, character building or therapeutic in team games. They provide as many opportunities for the acquisition of bad habits and characteristics as they do for the learning of good ones. This can hardly come as a very startling revelation to any who have watched, for example, the progress of a schoolboy Rugby League player through intermediate school games to top class club play—this cannot be attributed merely to professionalism, since the same deterioration frequently occurs in the amateur game.

Whether or not there is deterioration depends upon many factors: on organisation, on training, on the coach and what he teaches, but chiefly it depends on the climate of opinion current in those taking part in this game as well as those watching it. If, for example, heavy tackling and free use of the boot on the opponent meet with approval of team mates and spectators then you may rely on it that men who play football for that team in that institution will become heavy tacklers and freebooters. If skill and sportsmanship are at a premium then it is probable that, for ninety minutes at any rate, the most anti-social will pass for a sportsman: a possible explanation of the excellent reports which prison and borstal teams receive when playing 'outside' matches. The creating of the right climate of opinion is the most difficult of all tasks in any organisation as well as the most important so far as effectiveness or ineffectiveness of team games within that organisation is concerned.

Can some at any rate of the qualities essential of this healthy climate of opinion, then, be built through team games? Possibly they can, but with this qualification. Frequently those qualities of character supposedly built through a physical activity are in fact prerequisites of it. Cross country running is held by many to produce perseverance, mental stamina, and a capacity for physical endurance whereas these are the very qualities which good cross country runners already possess, and which in fact make them good performers. The team game of Rugby football calls for considerable bodily resilience and, amongst Welshmen certainly, the enjoyment of hard physical contact with an opponent. Yet it is most unlikely that a youngster temperamentally and physically unsuited to the game could, through Rugby, be taught to 'take hard knocks and come up smiling'.

Surprisingly, this medieval reasoning may still be heard; worse, is occasionally put into practice and called training. The result of this mental gymnastics is to teach the unwilling participant to appear from the touchline to be doing great things whilst in fact doing nothing; at this, many of those with whom we deal are already experts: we merely enlarge their sphere of operation.

It may seem a statement of the obvious to assert that if there is to be any character training in team games, it is most likely to occur where those of a team who possess the characteristics of good sportsmanship heavily outnumber those who don't. This poses problems in prisons and borstals where it is probable that the opposite is the case, and where there sometimes appears to be a depressing lack of improvement in what we have come to call good sportsmanship, the

general standard tending to settle downwards rather than move upwards. Two conclusions must be drawn from this. First that the more staff participation in recreative work that there is, the greater the likelihood of leavening the lump. Second, that the quality of sportsmanship, unlike a tetanus injection, does not automatically 'take' in cases of those exposed to it.

At one time it was considered that if two men were taught to head a ball to each other, back and forwards, in the gymnasium, this would improve their football. We now realise that all this really improves is their ability to head a ball back and forwards to each other in the gymnasium. That there is in fact no transfer of training to the football field or to the game itself, where the ball comes at all angles, at all speeds, and where as likely as not it arrives wet, heavy and at the same time as the opposing centre half. In much the same way there can be no guarantee that habits of conduct, even if they can be instilled on the games field, will carry over to a man's behaviour off the field, where he is mixing with others without even the slim common ground that they are taking part in the same activity. He faces entirely different stresses in his work, in his house, on his wing, amongst the men in his mess than he has learnt to cope with on the games field. It is not surprising then that so often, as compliment or criticism, can be heard 'He's a different man off the field'—of course he is, and likely to remain so. Even very well adjusted and highly respected citizens vary alarmingly when set in different environments. Ask anyone who has crewed for a friend during the critical stage of a dinghy race. It is probable, however, that though a satisfactory change in conduct on the playing field may not be necessarily indicative of any real change for the better, off it, a change for the worse over a period of time on the field is almost certainly an indication of general all round deterioration in morale, and probably if too long uninvestigated, of the likelihood of more serious permanent effects.

In this connection it must be remembered that the sanctions imposed in well organised and efficiently refereed games, if less severe in consequence than the laws of the realm, are more restrictive, more immediate, more publically administered, and permit of positively no deviation from the laid down rules of the game. Were the same minute observance of the law enforced off the field, few could hope to avoid public disgrace and most would face a heavy term of imprisonment. Perhaps it is a legacy of our past tradition that we still demand an infinitely higher standard of conduct in our games than in private and public life.

An equally illogical and peculiarly English custom is that of reserving the right to play the game badly. Countless worthy men turn out Saturday upon Saturday for an Extra 'B' XV, play in appalling conditions, usually two men short on a waterlogged pitch so far from the changing rooms that the last of the hot water has been taken by more eminent colleagues in Senior XV's by the time they return. Such men deserve nothing but praise. When they maintain that they enjoy this, one is prepared to believe that in the case of one or two eccentrics this may possibly be true. Unfortunately from here it is a short step to the dangerous

conclusion that skill really doesn't matter and that the all important thing is 'having a go'. This is not only false logic but self-deception of the most serious kind. Consider first the question of enjoyment. Most people find that in thinking of the past the pleasurable obscures the less pleasurable, the hot bath after the game obscures the rushed lunch, the cold wait for the referee to arrive, the first heavy fall on the cold wet mud. Just so, do many mistake for the enjoyments of the game itself what are in reality concomitants of it. Do away with the club bar, the cosy companionship after the match, the beery songs, and most Extra 'B' XV's vanish overnight. To people in our own establishments these congenial accompaniments to the game are denied and therefore the inadequacy of a poor standard of play as providing enjoyment is more plainly evident. But there is a more pressing reason for the necessity of skill. If there is to be any character training in physical activity then there must be satisfaction gained from that activity—and there can be little lasting satisfaction without skill. Few enjoy beating their way round a golf course in 127, each stroke a functional failure. To teach men, particularly young men, to do one thing well should surely be a first principle in physical education. Does this mean the cultivation of 'star' performers? Indeed it does, but star performance by everyone—in something. Since men are no more stereotyped than methods this is the overwhelming reason for the widest possible range of activities in any training programme. It is an important reason also for the inclusion where possible of those activities which we know as 'Outward Bound' and which include climbing, sailing, canoeing, track walking, orienteering, and camping. The growth of 'Outward Bound' activities is probably the most significant as well as the most valuable development in post-war physical education.

Any reader who has reached this point can scarcely be in need of character training—he might do worse than consider cross country running which calls for similar qualities of self discipline. He will, however, be considering the relevance or irrelevance of the opening pages of this article. A description of what must have been in many schools pre-war the physical training programme is included here because, though limited in some respects, it nevertheless contains many of the factors on which any attempts at character training must be based. These are as valid today as they were in Sergeant Major Battersby's time.

Consider first the activities for which the Sergeant Major was responsible: gymnastics, boxing, fencing, shooting, swimming. These are all pursuits at which individual skill is at a premium; at which a measurable improvement can readily be seen; in which youngsters can satisfy those natural instincts to fight, to struggle, to win; in which individual as well as group teaching is required; in which because of this a closer and more effective instructor/pupil relationship is necessary; at one of which boys of all ranges of physique, of stamina, of co-ordination can do well; where in the teaching of each activity there are assessable means of progress and definite objectives at which to aim.

Consider the atmosphere in which these activities were taught.

It might well be termed restrictive —even antiseptic — in the light of modern teaching method, but there were standards of efficiency, turn-out, punctuality, hard work, cleanliness, alertness, appearance and personal ability which all understood. These were entirely consistent with the overall aims of the physical training programme and never varied.

Consider the results. Certainly there were those who arrived at the school hating the very sight of the gymnasium, and left it with much the same feeling. This is inevitable. But they were few, and even these carried away at any rate an idea of what was worthwhile and what was worthless, of what was poor work and what was first rate—and it is perhaps worth remembering that delinquency may sometimes be due less to defects of character than to lack of an ideal at which to aim. The majority, however, achieved some measure of success in at least one of their activities.

In the last resort any permanent effect upon character depends upon the conviction that certain standards of behaviour are right, and because of this desirable and worthwhile. This is as much a question of emotion as of logic, and because this is so the man matters more than the subject he teaches. For this reason also personality is more important than technique, and no single subject, no particular form of training can possibly claim a 'corner' in the building of character.

Contributions

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