

REMARKS*
by
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House of Representatives

It's good to be back in Providence, and especially good to be here with friends who share my enthusiasm for the goal of physical fitness to which the YMCA and other organizations are dedicated.

The idea of a kick-off meeting for a membership drive, I suppose, is to give everyone a verbal kick that will send him out talking up the organization to all his friends and neighbors and bringing back sheaves of membership cards. But as I look around this table, I can't see anyone who needs to be kicked into doing that. Your records of service speak for themselves. The reason we have such a fine YMCA in Providence is because you've made it so.

Consequently, I am not going to exhort you to do more. Instead, I am going to use these few minutes to tell you why I think what we do for physical fitness in the Greater Providence area, along with what is being done in every community, has a very special significance to the whole Nation at this particular moment of history.

This national challenge to rebuild our vigor and toughen our fiber, like other national problems, has its roots in every home and home-town in the country. President Kennedy, in a recent article in a national magazine to which he gave the provocative title, "The Soft American," put it this way:

"We are, all of us, free to direct the activities of our bodies as we are to pursue the objects of our thought. But if we are

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to retain this freedom, for ourselves and for generations yet to come, then we must also be willing to work for the physical toughness on which the courage and intelligence and skill of man so largely depend.!

In this article the President called for a four-point program at the Federal level to give national impetus to the efforts of people like you across the Nation. This program includes, first, setting up a White House Committee on Health and Fitness to formulate and carry out fitness programs; second, stimulating research on ways to develop school fitness programs in our schools; third, holding annual conferences on youth fitness among the Governors of States, to examine program and exchange suggestions; and fourth, making the promotion of sports participation and youth fitness a basic and continuing policy of the U. S. government.

President Kennedy is, as all of you know, a man who practices well what he preaches. As a matter of fact, I don't think it was just a coincidence that both candidates for the presidency last fall were men of exceptional physical vigor.

But a leader alone cannot change the pace. That is why you find President Kennedy repeatedly calling for a resurgence of the frontier spirit, asking people to get out of their armchairs, to roll up their sleeves and to give the country, in peacetime, the high degree of fervent and patriotic action hitherto achieved only in wartime. Can we do it? Will people, all over the country, in all walks of life, respond to that call?

If we can, if they do, we can lead the world into the promised land that technological progress has made possible. And the peoples of the world will enter this promised land in freedom. If we fail, the people of the world are still going to enter a land of technological progress, but they will do so as the slaves, not the masters of the machines that have produced this age of technology. These are the stakes and certainly they are high enough to command the best from all of us.

How then, in a down to earth, practical way, do you build a vigorous national spirit? You can't legislate it. You can't make people change their attitudes and feelings merely by telling them they ought to.

Fitness, like so many other things, begins at home. In this time of spoon-fed entertainment, of labor-saving devices, of high-school parking lots choked with students' cars, every parent has a primary responsibility to build physical activity into the family pattern. By walking to the drug-store, by playing a game with the kids instead of watching one on TV, by going to the gym or bowling alley instead of the movies--not all the time, but even some of the time--you are getting across the idea that exercise isn't something to avoid like the plague. And you are toughening--even a little bit--our national fiber.

Fitness also is built in the schools. I was glad to note that the President made a big point of research--by the U. S. Office of Education and the Public Health Service--on better physical education and health education programs for the schools.

But while this research is being done, we can do a lot about this business of physical fitness in the schools with the facts we already have. We know, for instance, that most of the physical education instruction our children get in elementary schools across the Nation comes from their regular classroom teachers who don't have any special preparation for it. ~~We know that much too high a percentage of our~~

We know that much too high a percentage of our schools have inadequate facilities, and treat physical education as an unwanted step-child.

I understand that there are some unresolved questions among people interested in promoting physical fitness through the schools-- questions about interscholastic or intraschool athletics for various grade-levels, and about the kinds of physical activity that are best suited for children of various ages. These are some of the questions we need research on.

So, while we are studying the very best way, the very best balance of different kinds of exercise, sports and games, let's make sure that we are giving them more of all kinds until the final results are in. This is not just a job for professional educators; it's a job for everybody interested in the schools, and that ought to mean everybody.

You build fitness in homes. You build it in schools. You also build it in the community. And here is the place where organizations like the YMCA and others have essential contributions to make. Those organizations are in a sense our first line of defense against becoming a two-class Nation as far as sports are considered--a small elite of professional athletes at the top, and a vast majority of armchair managers and grandstand quarterbacks at the bottom.

You have the staff and facilities which give the amateur athlete, the would-be athlete, and even the never-was athlete a chance to get the thrill, and the benefit, of playing the game and building a fitter body. You are equipped and designed to reintroduce the people of the community to a way of life that all too many have begun to forget. The YMCA triangle is one effective symbol of that way of life--health, religion, education; body, spirit, mind; the whole man, the balanced man.

I put health first, not because I consider it the most important--actually, all three are of equal importance--but because I believe that for many it may be the most direct avenue to a revitalized way of life. When a man gets the flabbiness out of his muscles and the pillow off his waistline, he gets a different viewpoint on life. As he changes his personal pace, he finds enough energy for something more than earning a living by day and dozing over television every night. He starts looking for new worlds to conquer. And he'll find them, right in his own home town.

Moreover, these organizations dedicated to fitness have a responsibility to build balance into the national fitness movement. If we are to keep the athletic aspects of the fitness program in proper

perspective, we must recognize at the outset that muscle building is not synonymous with health. Medical authorities are agreed that there is not a shred of evidence that the athlete, the hard muscled man, lives any longer or is any less susceptible to disease than the soft muscled man. To make our Nation, and particularly our young people, as healthy as possible - and that is the real goal of the fitness program - we must push forward on many fronts:

Immunization programs to protect our youth from polio and other preventable diseases.

Casefinding programs to detect diseases and disabilities at their earliest and most treatable stages.

Physical therapy and other restorative services that will minimize physical handicaps.

With accidents the leading cause of death and disability among young people, safety and accident prevention programs are also an important part of any fitness program.

In brief, while our own interests in the athletic life may make us most active in that phase of the fitness program, let us proceed with a keen realization that we are not going to build a healthier nation merely by persuading all our youth to do calisthenics every morning and play team sports every night.

Instead, let us sell the vigorous life on its own merits to the millions of Americans who have never known or have forgotten what those merits are.

Let's find the men - there are hundreds of them here - who used to enjoy the athletic life but got out of the habit and now, being older, are afraid they'll get a heart attack if they resume it. Visits to their physicians for exercise tolerance tests are really all that stand between them and safe and enjoyable exercise.

Let's find the men who go on athletic benders - a hunting trip in the fall, a bout of tennis on a hot summer weekend, with long periods of sedentary living in between. They mean to get more regular exercise to put them in trim for those dangerous muscle-toughening sprees; but they need a push.

I think you may even find some younger men, raised in this age of soft living, who actually don't know the good feeling hard exercise gives you and who have never enjoyed that special type of friendship - the warmest kind there is - that begins with playing together on a team.

I want to wish you every success in the membership drive on which you are embarking this evening. Each of you will take part in this drive with the certainty that what you are doing is important--not just to your organization, but to Providence and to the Nation. You will recognize also that this membership drive, and similar ones, form one part of the interlocking structure upon which our national strength depends.

The fitness of a Nation stems from families which choose and practice the active life.

It stems from schools which provide for and encourage a balanced program of vigorous activity.

It stems from communities which create and make full use of opportunities to toughen the fiber of their people.