

# College Sports and Motherhood

MISS COWDRAY'S protesting voice soars slightly above the chorus of school managers, recently raised in London against athletics for girls. The burden of this lady's lament is that the Victorian girl was a better mother than our modern feminine athletes. Every girl, it seems, has a large store of vital and nervous energy, upon which to draw in the great crisis of motherhood. If the foolish virgin uses up this deposit account in daily expenditures on the hockey field or tennis court, as a boy can afford to do, then she is left bankrupt in her great crisis and her children have to pay the bill.

Is there something in this idea, or is it merely a manifestation of the recurrent nostalgia for the Good Old Days (whether of edible mammoths, knightly jousts or genteel females), which no generation can escape?

Dr. H. N. MacCracken, President of Vassar College, has no doubt that the English revolt against the modern girl has in it more of sentiment than science. Miss Cowdray's assertion, he says, is unphysiological.

"You might as well urge a young man not to deplete his mental energies by study during the year, but to keep them intact for the great crisis of examinations.

"Good muscular development is an advantage in childbirth. A case was recently brought to my attention in which a woman was almost unable to bear her child because her abdominal muscles were undeveloped. Motherhood was the first hard work she had ever been called upon to do, and naturally she was unequal to it.

"Proper athletic training improves a girl's general health and physical condition. Far from injuring the next generation, I believe that it gives her children a superior inheritance of health and strength."

Dr. MacCracken speaks only for the system in force at Vassar, which, however, he considers typical of the athletics of American women. He bases his opinion on his own experience, and on the experience of many years crystallized in the college records. His convictions are supported by Dr. Elizabeth B. Thelberg, resident physician for thirty-four years, and Miss Frances Ballentine, head of the Department of Physical Education, who inaugurated Vassar's first Field Day twenty-seven years ago.

"If anything, our women have been coddled too much," said Dr. MacCracken. "Athletics are nothing more than strong muscular exercise. Hockey is not as hard physical work as doing a family wash.

"We have only to consider the most populous sections of Europe to realize that muscular development

does not interfere with maternity. Holland, Belgium, Italy and Poland have the highest birth rate in proportion to the sustenance they yield per acre. In all these countries the peasant women perform heavy labor. In Holland and Belgium the women pull heavy loads along the roads. In Italy they work in the vineyards, and in Poland they do the work of the farm. I have seen Bedouin women in Syria tramp long distances with unbelievably heavy loads; endurance tests that make our girls' long distance hikes look like morning strolls. Yet the missionary doctors say that the Arab woman bears children with less effort than any other race but the American Indian.

"Vassar today presents living proof of our system, in the daughters and even the granddaughters of physically trained women. If acquired traits were hereditary, we might suppose that some of the girls playing on our present teams inherited their skill in basketball and hockey, along with their splendid physique, from their athletic mothers. While the sturdy babies of recent graduates argue irrefutably that the increased

motherhood difficult. This build is not the result of athletics, but the girls who have this inherent characteristic can jump and run better than girls with wider hips.

"The objections of the English school people may be based on the mistakes of their own system. In England rough games and roughness in games have been carried further than in America. Hockey, association football and cricket, as played by English girls, are much more strenuous than our version of hockey and basketball.

"It is true, too, that the English system is more apt to put each girl through the same training, regardless of individual differences. Here at Vassar every girl is examined by the doctor and the physical director when she enters college, and her physical work is prescribed according to her individual needs. A normal girl, physically sound, can take part with profit in all the sports and gymnasium work, but the girl who is abnormal or weak is given special exercises and corrective work. Sometimes a girl will be required to come into the gym every day for an hour

of England are far outnumbered by short, heavy girls, who look almost squat to American eyes. They are especially numerous in the manufacturing towns. This type is apt to develop large bunched muscles, which become flabby and degenerate unless

the grand stand instead of in direct participation.

"Last Fall we offered a cup, the Roosevelt Cup, to the class that brought out the largest per cent. of its members in a six weeks' course of games and sports. We excluded the major sports, such as hockey and basketball, and held informal games, gymkhana races, hikes, folk dances, light forms of exercise in which every one but a few delicate girls who were debarred by the physical director could participate."

Dr. MacCracken's approval of athletics for women finds support in his own home. Mrs. MacCracken, the mother of three healthy, normal children, was a member of the New York Hundred Club, whose members were pledged to a hundred miles a month, and she still plays a hard game of tennis and golf.

That the Victorian girl made a better mother than the modern athletic girl was emphatically denied by Dr. Thelberg, who has been Vassar's resident physician for the last thirty-four years. During this time she has kept careful records of the physical condition of each girl upon entering and upon graduating, and of defects and illnesses during the whole college period.

"There are," said the doctor, "quite certainly many points of improvement in the condition of college girls on entrance as contrasted with their condition thirty, twenty-five, twenty and fifteen years ago."

She commented particularly upon the diminution of spinal curvature and backache, organic heart conditions and troubles of the nose and throat. She said that during this time there had been a most encouraging increase in chest expansion. The chief credit for this improvement is given to "a generation of more intelligent, better educated, more sensible mothers, who feed, dress and exercise their children in a manner infinitely superior to that of thirty years ago."

The healthful, active life led by these mothers has given their children a fine physical inheritance. Moreover, their own athletic experience has made them encourage their daughters to take part in outdoor sports and gymnasium work during their school years.

Statistics collected by the Department of Physical Education show that the useful, though mythical, average freshman of 1920 is somewhat more husky than her equally mythical Yorbear of the year 1884. This modern girl is 3.3 centimeters taller, and six and a half pounds heavier. Her age is 18.21, as against 18.76, the average age of entrance in 1884. Strange to say her waist is only three-quarters of an inch larger. The smallest waists came to Vassar between 1901 and 1905. This phenomenon is explained by the theory that the first girls to come to college were a picked group of the intellectually ambitious, who cared more for comfort and ideas than for style. Twenty years later college was becoming a matter of course, and the average girl followed the fashion in all its strictures.



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Basketball at Vassar.



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Another Basketball Game.

range of athletics in the last twenty years or so continues beneficial.

"It has been stated that many of the young women who are trained to become instructors in physical education suffer at childbirth. The type attracted to this work, because they excel in it, have the narrow hips and pelvis that naturally make

to lie on a mattress and take breathing exercises. This is physical training for her particular case.

"The English girl is, physically, a harder type to deal with than the American. The popular idea of the English feminine type is based on the drawings of Du Maurier: tall, slight and fair. In fact, the willowy Maudes

they are constantly exercised. This is a bad thing, just as overdevelopment of any part of the body is bad.

"On the whole, American girls are a rangy lot, and it is almost impossible for them to develop bunched muscles.

"Women's colleges in America do not imitate men's colleges in their athletics. Compare basketball as played at Vassar and at Yale. The difference is not only in the rules and the excellence of the players, but in the whole object of the sport. At Yale the goal is to develop a star team to win the intercollegiate championship; at Vassar it is to get as many girls as possible to play a good game. Excellent teams develop naturally out of that system, which is now being developed at Pennsylvania University by Dr. J. Meylan.

"The stiff, intensive training necessary to develop stars is admittedly bad for girls. But over-specialization, which is its danger, is just as bad for men. It results in hypertrophy of one part of the body, and its effects are seen in many ex-stars suffering from heart strain, loosened tendons or fatty degeneration of the muscles. Doctors say that they can tell what form of athletics a man has specialized in at college from the part of his physical machine which wears out first.

"The two canons of Vassar athletics are, first, to give each girl the training she individually requires; and, second, to avoid the star system, which is bad not only for the star but for her audience, who indulge their interest in sports from



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Jumping Contest.