

**The Cadet Physical Fitness Test: Overachieving  
or Overdemanding?**

**LD720 Paper**

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**14 November 1997**



Many officers who are not graduates of West Point find that the grading scale for the Cadet Physical Fitness Test (CPFT) is overzealous and wonder why the academy expects such high performances from its cadets. Cadets taking the CPFT at the United States Military Academy (USMA) must meet the Army's testing standards to pass physical education, but exceed the Army's standards to achieve a high academic grade. The difference between the Army's standards and those set by USMA raises the question "Why are they so high?" from both cadets and faculty. Reviewing the role of the physical education program at USMA reveals how much emphasis the academy places in physical fitness. After reviewing physical education's role at USMA, a review of why the Army developed the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) shows what the Army intends for the test to measure. Finally, combining the history of physical education at USMA with the Army's intent for the APFT leads to the reasons and the argument for the CPFT.

Throughout the development of the curriculum at USMA, military exercises proved critical in training the potential officer for his role in the military.<sup>1</sup> Studies conducted by DPE during the 20<sup>th</sup> century reveal that the physical education grade correlates with a cadet's aptitude for the service by a coefficient of .34. Comparing the PE grade to that of English and mathematics, both coefficients of 0, shows that the PE grade is important to the cadet's future military service.<sup>2</sup> Cadets exerting themselves to achieve grades based on an extended grading scale supports USMA's desire to foster military leaders that achieve above set standards. The CPFT's extended grading scale

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<sup>1</sup> LT Col F. M. Greene. "Physical Education for Military Leadership", Education. April 1948. 458.

<sup>2</sup> Vertical Folder, "Physical Education", USMA Archives, n.d.

supports the goals of USMA and is very effective at identifying young leaders with a high aptitude for service.

The role of the Department of Physical Education (DPE) in USMA's history traces to the year 1814 when Pierre Thomas became the first physical educator at West Point. Thomas instructed fencing, and his employment by USMA made the school the first institution of higher learning to employ a full-time physical educator in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Captain Alden Partridge, Superintendent of USMA from 1815 thru late 1816, believed that a regular and designed course of exercise preserved health, developed a great constitution, and prepared a cadet to enter manhood with an active and useful body.<sup>4</sup> The sentiment of Partridge found reinforcement from the Board of Visitors in 1826. The Board's report stated that "a thorough and careful physical education is of more importance to a military officer than to any other person."<sup>5</sup>

During the years between 1815 and 1858, the physical education program consisted of sword exercises, military drills and an early version of the game now known as football. The exercises gave the cadets a way to strengthen their bodies, stimulate ambition, prevent idleness, and keep their minds sharp.<sup>6</sup> Beginning in 1858, the physical education program expanded to include regular instruction in calisthenics, swimming, gymnastics, bayonet exercises, and fencing. Each of these classes lasted one hour each

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<sup>3</sup> Werner, "Physical Education at the US Military Academy". Journal of Health-Physical Education-Recreation. Washington DC, 1965.

<sup>4</sup> LT H.J. Koehler, "The Physical Training of Cadets, 1802-1902". The Centennial of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. West Point: United States Military Academy, 1904, 894.

<sup>5</sup> Greene, "Physical Education for Military Leadership", 458.

<sup>6</sup> Koehler, "The Physical Training of Cadets", 895.

day and occurred over the four years of the cadet's education. In 1885, Herman J. Koehler took over the PE program, adding boxing and wrestling to the program of instruction. Koehler implemented intramural competition at USMA to provide a way for every cadet to participate in organized athletics. This growth in the importance of the PE program supported the aim of improving the cadet physically, maximizing his intelligence, and providing him with a surplus of strength, energy and vitality during times of stress.<sup>7</sup>

The program of instruction in PE changed many times over USMA's first century, but PE remained important in the institution's life. The program's success made it the model for the Army, resulting in the Army incorporating much of the program into its field manuals during World War I.<sup>8</sup> The drills and physical training stayed with the Army through the interwar years until the manuals underwent revision in World War II. The PE instruction program at USMA also began to change during the interwar years, as a means of testing and evaluating cadets became necessary. The academy wanted to identify strengths and weaknesses of incoming cadets and measure their improvement during their years at USMA.<sup>9</sup>

Koehler, Master of the Sword, established the first standards for evaluating cadets in 1923. The procedure consisted of taking seven strength measurements, 26 body measurements, and administering a ten-minute breast stroke swim test.<sup>10</sup> USMA tested

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 899.

<sup>8</sup> Werner. "Physical Education at the US Military Academy."

<sup>9</sup> Deegan and Remly. "Testing and Grading 1966-1991" West Point: United States Military Academy, 1992, 72 .

<sup>10</sup> PE Department, West Point, History of Fitness Testing at the United States Military Academy, United States Military Academy, 1996. 1.

and measured all entering plebes and those with deficiencies worked on their shortcomings during their years at USMA. In 1927, a spring outdoor track test for fourth class cadets, consisting of five events chosen by the Master of the Sword, became a part of the PE program.<sup>11</sup> From 1936 until 1943, USMA experimented with numerous modern methods to evaluate cadet physical fitness. Beginning in 1943, Superintendent MG Francis B. Wilby, dictated a General Order that required cadets to maintain a minimum standard of military physical fitness.<sup>12</sup> In 1944, USMA discharged its first cadet for deficiency in physical education. In 1946, Superintendent MG Maxwell D. Taylor, dictated a General Order that included a cadet's Physical Efficiency grade into the Annual Order of Merit List for each class.<sup>13</sup> During these progressive years, the academy took great strides in setting precedents for measuring the physical ability of the young leaders it produced.

The early efforts of the PE department in creating the physical fitness tests paid great dividends in the leaders produced by USMA. Cadets took more tests than soldiers on active duty and the standards they maintained prepared them for future conflicts. The academy even continued to maintain its rigid testing standards after admitting women in 1976.

The final change to testing came with the administration of President Jimmy Carter. Carter noted that the fitness level of the US military lagged behind the fitness level of Mexico.<sup>14</sup> Carter ordered the Secretary of Defense to design a physical fitness test

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>14</sup> BG (Ret) James L. Anderson, former Master of the Sword. Interview by Author, 29 Sept 1997, West Point, NY. Phone Conversation.

among the services that could measure the fitness level of US soldiers. In 1980, a committee formed at Fort Benning, Ga, to create a test that measured a soldier's fitness level. The group consisted of a representative from the Army, the Marine Corps, leading civilian physical educators, and members of the Army Fitness School. The Army's representative was COL James L. Anderson, Master of the Sword at USMA. The group settled upon a test that focused on three areas of soldier fitness. The first area was a test of aerobic capacity, the second area was upper body strength, and the final area was trunk and abdominal strength and endurance. The Army adopted the two-mile run to test the aerobic capacity, the push-up for testing upper body strength, and the sit-up for testing abdominal strength and endurance. The new test benefited the Army because it was short in duration, easy to administer, and a more accurate determinant of physical fitness.<sup>15</sup> The newly designed test gained approval from the senior leaders of the Army, and testing under the new standards began in 1981.

USMA began testing cadets under the new test, the Army Physical Readiness Test (APRT), in 1981 also. USMA executed the test like the active component, with cadets taking the test in combat boots and fatigued pants. It became apparent early in testing that cadets did very well on the new test. Approximately 60% of the cadets received As and Bs with the average being a B- for all cadets. The high grades required the academy to adjust the standards, resulting in cadets needing a minimum of 201 points out of 300 points to pass, with a minimum score of 60 points in each event. In 1985, the APRT

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<sup>15</sup> The Superintendent's Annual Historical Review 1981, West Point: United States Military Academy, 56.

administering requirements changed to stay current with active duty requirements, and the uniform changed from boots and fatigues to shorts and athletic shoes. In 1987, the Army changed the name of its physical test from the APRT to the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT). The name change occurred because the Army wanted to emphasize the test's importance in measuring fitness levels, not just evaluating physical readiness.<sup>16</sup>

The testing standards for cadets continued to fluctuate during the 1980's. The fluctuation resulted because the academy adjusted the scores of the APFT to reflect how well the cadets did on the APFT and DPE's desire to make the cadets earn their physical education grade. Commandant John H. Moellering ('81-83) found that the academy could not use the same scores for the APRT as the active component. Therefore, DPE designed a separate grading scale based on 125 points per event, instead of the Army's 100 points per event, and the overall maximum elevated to 375, compared to the Army's 300. Since the standards for the APFT changed, the academy decided to change the name of the test from the APFT, and it became the CPFT.<sup>17</sup> The test standards varied slightly over the last 15 years, yet the overall intent of the CPFT remains the same, motivating each cadet towards obtaining and maintaining the high state of fitness required of an officer in the United States Army.<sup>18</sup>

Reviewing the PE department's history and role in developing young cadets underscores the numerous contributions it has made to the Army and USMA. However,

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<sup>16</sup> Department of Physical Education Department. History of Fitness Testing. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Deegan and Remly, "Testing and Grading". 77.

even though the department's history is rich with physical achievements, many cadets and faculty members debate the need for the CPFT's extended grading scale. One of the first arguments against the CPFT is that more cadets receive a failing score on the CPFT as compared soldiers' performances on the APFT. The CPFT, prior to Academic Year (AY) 1997-1998, maintained a minimum passing score of 213. If a senior cadet scored below that level, the cadet failed the PE portion of his grade, did not graduate with his class, and would have to attend the DPE Summer Term Academic Program (STAP).<sup>19</sup> During AY 97-98, Superintendent LTG Daniel Christman, changed the minimum score for the CPFT from 213 back to the Army's standard of 180. Christman's action made the Academy's testing minimums equal to those used in the Army, which eliminated arguments over the CPFT's more difficult standards. Unfortunately, the more difficult minimum standards are only one half of the argument over the CPFT's grading scale. Another argument still against the CPFT persists over the extended maximum scale used for the CPFT.

In an effort to support the need for the extended scale, I developed the following criteria to evaluate the CPFT based on research by DPE and my own personal experience. The short titles for the three criteria are applicability, empirically supported standards, and correlated uses of test results. The definition for applicability is the test's ability to support DPE's mission, the overall mission of USMA, and its use as a local discriminator. The definition for empirically supported measurements are standards being rooted in historical data and achievable by the cadet population. Finally, the definition for correlated uses of test results is the ability of USMA to use the test's results in

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<sup>19</sup> Department of Physical Education. "Physical Fitness Testing". 5.

determining a cadet's leadership potential at USMA and most likely on active duty. An analysis of these criteria demonstrate that the CPFT's grading scale is useful and relevant to the Corps of Cadets.

In order to show that the CPFT supports DPE and USMA's missions, one may begin by examining each organization's respective mission statement. DPE's mission is "to contribute to the preparation of each cadet for a career of military leadership by an intensive and progressive program of physical education."<sup>20</sup> The USMA mission is "to develop leaders of character for our Army who are inspired to careers as Commissioned Officers and lifetime service to the nation."<sup>21</sup> Combining the two mission statements yields a common purpose of inspired leadership through intensive and progressive physical education. The CPFT fulfills DPE and USMA's mission because the test's design makes it an intensive test that is very demanding in comparison to the rest of the Army.

Applicability measures the way the test is used at USMA. Individuals that question the test's validity say that the scores USMA expects cadets to achieve are not equal with the Army's expectations. Others make a point of the fact that other leader-producing programs, such as ROTC, use the standards of the APFT for their testing. These arguments fail to realize that USMA cadets are in a separate category from all other officer-producing sources in two important ways. First of all, the Army groups all USMA cadets together on a promotion list by year group. The Army uses their West Point class

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<sup>20</sup> Office of Physical Education, The Evolution of Physical Education at the United States Military Academy. (United States Military Academy: West Point NY, 1967), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Office of the Superintendent, "Letter to Alumni on New USMA Mission Statement". (United States Military Academy: West Point NY, 6 August 1997).

ranking when they establish the order in which they will receive promotions. USMA uses the CPFT as a way to shape the order of merit list (OML) for each year group of cadets. All other officers fall outside the USMA officer group and their APFT results have no impact on the rank structure used for promotions or accessions. Secondly, USMA cadets are also in a special rank structure, subject to UCMJ, a special delineation from ROTC cadets. These two facts support the fact that the CPFT is applicable only to USMA cadets. Finally, those who say the CPFT is not equal to the APFT should consider the name of each test. The full title of the CPFT is the CADET Physical Fitness Test. The name is only applicable to USMA cadets. Comparing the test to the rest of the Army is not a legitimate comparison. The points made here support the first screening criteria of applicability.

The second screening criteria of empirically supported standards is substantiated by reviewing the development of the CPFT standards over the last 16 years. During the 16 years of implementation, the CPFT scores underwent five different revisions. The revisions occurred because DPE had numerical results compiled and statistically checked to ensure the CPFT was measuring what the academy wanted it to measure. The revision policy insured that the Corps of Cadets had the best chance to achieve the standards expected by the Academy. Changes to the scoring standards also occurred when the conditions of the test changed. When the test went from being in boots and pants to shorts and athletic shoes, the two mile run time maximum passing requirement reduced by 50 seconds for both men and women.<sup>22</sup> Today, a cadet wanting to achieve the maximum

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<sup>22</sup> The Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1986. (West Point: United States Military Academy, June 1986). 59.

score on the CPFT must exceed the Army's maximums by 18/13 repetitions in the pushup, 8/12 repetitions in the sit up, and run the two miles in 1:24/2:24 faster (men/women).<sup>23</sup> Each year DPE makes a book that compiles all the testing results from an academic year and they review the results to ensure the validity of the test scores.<sup>24</sup> The DPE's efforts result in standards that are applicable, and if the need is there, they revise the standards ensuring the test is realistic but demanding. The CPFT truly meets the criteria of being an empirically supported set of standards.

The support for the final criteria of correlated uses of test results comes from how the academy uses the test scores to evaluate a cadet's overall ability at USMA and the cadet's leadership potential. The grade earned on the CPFT is a measure of ability as opposed to credit for time and effort expended.<sup>25</sup> The academy wants cadets to score high on the CPFT because "cadets of high physical ability will be more able to serve the mission of the Military Academy."<sup>26</sup> The fact that cadet officers "were shown to come mostly from the high physical aptitude groups"<sup>27</sup> supports this assertion made by DPE. Therefore, cadets that achieve high scores on the CPFT end up serving the academy in key leadership positions. The final results of high CPFT scores also reflect in the graduation rate of cadets. Cadets that achieve high scores on the CPFT "were shown to possess as

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<sup>23</sup> Testing Booklet AY97-98. West Point: United States Military Academy.

<sup>24</sup> BG (Ret) James L. Anderson. Interview by Author.

<sup>25</sup> Vertical Folder, "The Physical Education Grade", USMA Archives, n.d.

<sup>26</sup> Department of Physical Education. A Positive Approach to Physical Aptitude for Improved Selection of Cadets. (West Point: United States Military Academy, 1961).

<sup>27</sup> DPE, The Evolution of Physical Education. 70.

high as a five to one chance of graduating, whereas the chances of the lowest scores were less than one half.”<sup>28</sup> This statement makes a strong argument for the practical use of the CPFT score at USMA. Monitoring a cadet’s CPFT results can give the cadet’s chain of command an early indication of whether a cadet may need extra help in graduating from USMA .

Another strong statement about the use of the CPFT score is its ability to predict leadership potential. “Rankings from the Office of Physical Education became valued as primary source for leadership indicators.”<sup>29</sup> All through the history of physical fitness tests, the academy looked for indicators of how well a cadet would function on active duty. Research determined as early as 1954, that “physical ability measures were more related to the criterion of Combat Officer Success than any of the academic course grades or final class standings.”<sup>30</sup> Determining the relationship between physical ability and leadership is the subject of many DPE studies. The studies noted over and over again that “physical ability is actually part of the essence of leadership qualities because all personality factors develop as a totality.”<sup>31</sup> All of DPE’s studies supported the conclusion that physical fitness tests, like the CPFT, “were good predictors of leadership potential.”<sup>32</sup> Having higher standards on the CPFT provides the academy a solid measuring tool that predicts not only how well a cadet performs at USMA, but how well the cadet will

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 71.

<sup>30</sup> DPE. A Positive Approach to Physical Aptitude.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

perform as a future serving line officer, both of which support the third criteria of correlated uses of test results.

The evidence presented above supports the academy's intent for high standards on the CPFT. The academy's ability to apply the test to help it achieve its overall mission and use the test results as a local discriminator makes it a critical tool in determining the best cadets for future service. The empirically supported measurements indicate that the academy is not establishing unrealistic goals that force cadets to maintain and achieve unnecessarily high levels of physical fitness. Finally, the correlated uses of the tests suggest that USMA is doing everything it possibly can to ensure it identifies the best potential leaders while they are still cadets, and then selecting these individuals for active duty service because of their high potential for success in the Army.

The CPFT is not overdemanding on cadets, nor does it force cadets to overachieve. Cadets that excel above the APFT standards and achieve the CPFT standards are demonstrating their desire to exceed standards. The CPFT is a managed tool that helps identify effective leaders for the Corps of Cadets and the US Army. Effective leaders will always push themselves to the best in every mission they undertake. Achieving high standards on the CPFT or APFT proves to the Army's senior leaders that high-scoring cadets are willing to give high amounts of effort to accomplish any mission. USMA must continue developing the CPFT so that it is challenging and pushes the cadets to achieve the highest standards in physical training just as if they were in the classroom.

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