

Long Island University

Colonel Herman J. Koehler:
The Father of Physical Education at West Point

For

LD 720

The American Military Experience and The United States Military Academy

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By

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23 November 1998

Physical education at the United States Military Academy can be traced to the first graduate and second Superintendent. Joseph G. Swift, the first graduate, cited in his diary of hurrying off to field sport in 1802 upon completion of the day's studies.¹ Since that time physical education at West Point has undergone significant changes, either through the work of an individual, several individuals, or by some external influence. Lieutenant Colonel Francis M. Greene, Director of Physical Education from 1944-1953, referred to Colonel Herman J. Koehler, Master of the Sword from 1885 to 1923, as the real father of West Point physical education.² Lieutenant Colonel Greene's assertion invoked the questions of when did physical education at West Point become embedded in the cadet experience, and was it convincingly attributable to the work of one individual? Physical education became a permanent part of the cadet experience during the tenure of Colonel Herman J. Koehler, because that was when physical education included a professional instructor, a systematic program of instruction, an adequate gymnasium, a curriculum, instructional manuals, and Academic Board and cadet acceptance. Prior to the Civil War, however, Lieutenant John C. Kelton, Instructor in Small Arms and Military Gymnastics, initiated a similar program of physical education that was interrupted by the Civil War. Had it not been for the Civil War, Lieutenant Kelton's program might have revolutionized physical education at West Point.

Prior to the tenure of Lieutenant Kelton, the Board of Visitors provided critical feedback and contributed significantly towards the allocation of resources for physical education. In 1814, West Point appointed the first physical educator at West Point.

¹ Robert Degen. *The Evolution of Physical Education at the United States Military Academy* (Office of Physical Education, United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, 1967), 18.

² *Ibid.*, 52.

Officially titled as Sword Master, Pierre Thomas' unsatisfactory performance in fencing emphasized the need for a professional expert in this position. The Report of the Board of Visitors of 1823 wrote of Pierre Thomas, "The Sword Master does not appear to be competent to his duties, if he understands the scientific part of his profession he either cannot or does not explain to his pupils."³

The Board of Visitors in 1826 also made a recommendation that marked the first time gymnastics training for cadets was officially mentioned.⁴ It also expressed the need for a gymnasium and an exercise program. In the report, the Board broadly recommended:

In the next place your committee believe that a building is wanted for gymnastical exercise, which will serve at the same time for a riding school, a fencing school and a military drill hall. A thorough and careful Physical Education is of importance to a Military Officer more than to any other person. But it is not yet offered at this Academy. The drill during the summer months is sufficient to give the cadets a healthful exercise and no more, but during the winter this source fails and the spirits and activity fail with it. It is proposed, therefore, that a plain building merely sufficient to afford shelter be erected, and that a systematic exercise of the whole person be diligently practiced during the winter under a gymnastical teacher, who shall be provided to superintend it.⁵

Although the building recommended by the Board was ready for use in 1839, the Academy made no provisions for gymnastic instruction.

Lieutenant John C. Kelton, an 1851 graduate of the Academy, made the first significant attempt to implement a systematic program of physical education. He served as the assistant instructor in Infantry Tactics and in the use of small arms as well as the

³ *The Annual Report of the Board of Visitors to the United States Military Academy made to the Secretary of War* (Washington, 1823), (the early annual reports did not contain page numbers).

⁴ *The Centennial of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York*, vol. I, 1802-1902 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904), 896.

⁵ *The Annual Report of the Board of Visitors to the United States Military Academy made to the Secretary of War* (Washington, 1826).

officer in charge of gymnastics at West Point from 6 March 1857 to 14 April 1861.⁶ As early as his cadet days, he had begun to envision a physical program comparable with that of developing military professionals. Lieutenant Kelton, as a cadet, wrote in a letter home to his family: "It has just occurred to me that I should like to be versed in the noble art of self defence I think sparring and boxing besides being a most gentlemanly exercise and accomplishment, is in a great degree necessary to one who has espoused the military profession, as it fits him for hardship, and may possibly come into play."⁷ Lieutenant Kelton recognized the importance of boxing, which did not become part of the curriculum until 1905.

In 1858, Superintendent Colonel Richard Delafield appointed Lieutenant Kelton to develop a systematic course of physical development. Lieutenant Kelton outlined detailed requirements for cadets and submitted them as part of the study to restructure the curriculum at West Point. The Secretary of War had appointed a board of officers to conduct a study and make recommendations for the curriculum revision.⁸ Each professor or department head reviewed his course of study and recommended changes by submitting detailed statements of his views. Colonel Delafield, as Superintendent, presided over the board. Although technically not a sub-committee of the Academic Board, this board consisted of several Academic Board members.⁹ The proceedings took place from January to April of 1861.¹⁰ The board reviewed each report and voted on the

⁶ *Cullum's Biographical Register of the United States Military Academy*, vol. 2 (West Point, NY), 459.

⁷ Obituary of Brigadier General John C. Kelton in the *Annual Report of the Association of Graduates* (West Point, NY, 1894), 10.

⁸ Special Orders #138, Secretary of War, 4 October 1858 (Washington, D. C.), United States Military Academy Archives.

⁹ The board included Captain George W. Cullum of the Department of Military Engineering and Major Alfred Mordecai of the Department of Ordnance.

¹⁰ Records relating to a Board of Officers appointed by the Secretary of War to study curriculum revision, 12 January – 16 April 1860, USMA Archives, West Point, NY.

recommended changes. During the proceedings, the board called on several professors and department heads, including Professors Dennis H. Mahan of the Civil and Military Engineering Department and William H. C. Bartlett of the Natural and Experimental Philosophy Department, to appear before the board to answer questions with regard to their respective programs.

Lieutenant Kelton's recommendations to the board became the foundation for his systematic program of physical education. He recommended that "each cadet at the time of graduation should be proficient in all that is herein required."¹¹ In gymnastics, Kelton recommended that each cadet be able to scale a fifteen foot wall without instruments, to vault a horse fifteen hands high, to leap a ditch ten feet wide, to run a mile in eight minutes or two in eighteen minutes, to walk four and one half miles in one hour, and to walk three miles in one hour carrying a knapsack weighing twenty pounds with arms and equipment. In swimming, Kelton recommended that each cadet be able to swim a mile and repeat, dive and remain three-quarters of a minute under water swimming, to dive head foremost from a height of eight feet, and to leap into the water from a height of twenty feet. Additional recommended requirements were fencing skills with the foil, sword, and bayonet. These skills included guard and development, advance and retreat, parries, disengagements, counter-parries, feints, menaces, points, and cuts. Kelton also recommended calisthenics for each class. For the Fourth Class cadets he recommended calisthenics that included "supplings of the neck, arms, body, and legs without instruments, and the use of clubs—dumbbells and jumping poles."¹² In addition to the

¹¹ Reports of a Curriculum Study from various academic departments to review course of study and recommend changes, 1858-1859. USMA Archives.

¹² Ibid. (reports do not contain page numbers)

program outlined, Lieutenant Kelton included in his remarks that "Instruction in swimming should take place before breakfast, a time when there is the least danger from the attack of cramp."¹³ Surprisingly, the board made little reference to Kelton's recommendations and or to the content of military exercises, but it incorporated them as part of the recommendation for a four-year program.

The Commandant of Cadets, Colonel William J. Hardee, appeared before the board to comment about the curriculum, and was the only one to answer questions about the physical development of the cadets. The Commandant of Cadets commended horseback riding to the board--"A graduate leaves the Academy a good rider."¹⁴ He also recommended buying additional horses—one set for artillery and one for cavalry training. However, the Commandant did not mention exercises or gymnastics. One explanation for this was the influence of Sylvanius Thayer prior to the proceedings. During his tenure as Superintendent, Colonel Thayer's emphasis remained primarily on advancements in the academic program. His influence prior to the proceedings included comments to the board, which focused the proceedings on the academic curriculum.

Lieutenant Kelton, whose presence might have generated stronger support for physical education, did not appear before the board because he was "on leave" from 15 June 1859 to 24 April 1861.¹⁵ During this leave period, Kelton, under the direction of Colonel Delafield, went abroad to study the best schools in Europe for physical

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Records relating to a Board of Officers appointed by the Secretary of War to study curriculum revision, 12 January - 16 April 1860. USMA Archives.

¹⁵ Photocopied page from the *Officers of the Army and Navy (Regular)*, 226, located in the historical file of Brigadier General John C. Kelton, USMA Archives.

education.¹⁶ Not only was his visit to observe the progress and condition of physical education in Europe but also to observe other advancements in professionalism applicable to the Academy.¹⁷ The physical education program adopted after his return was identical to the one he submitted before his departure.

Ultimately, Lieutenant Kelton's study abroad produced no significant changes to the program and his initial recommendations. He did publish *The Manual of the Bayonet* in 1861 upon his return from Europe. Though the program originally recommended by Lieutenant Kelton was officially implemented, it was discontinued in 1861 because of the Civil War. The Civil War dissolved Lieutenant Kelton's plan and subsequent program for a systematic program of physical education at West Point.¹⁸ Had it not been for the Civil War, Kelton's program might have revolutionized physical education at West Point, and he might have become the father of physical education.

The Civil War also created a stagnant pause in the progress of physical education at the United States Military Academy. From 1861 to 1882, there was no course of gymnastic instruction. Physical education once again consisted of only fencing, riding, and military drill. Cadets conducted exercises in the gymnasium, but the actual exercises were left up to them.¹⁹ Cadets felt that "this, at best, was considered little more than

¹⁶ Sidney Forman, *West Point: A History of the United States Military Academy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 180.

¹⁷ Obituary of Brigadier General John C. Kelton in the *Annual Report of the Association of Graduates* (West Point, NY, 1894), 12.

¹⁸ Sidney Forman, *The Educational Objectives of the United States Military Academy: A Historical Study of the Basic Academic, Physical, and Character Training Aims of the United States Military Academy* (Bulletin of the Library, USMA, No. 2, 1946), 22.

¹⁹ John Crane, and James F. Kieley, *West Point: The Key to America* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1947), 148.

drudgery.”²⁰ There was an officer in charge of the gym, but his purpose was to ensure that cadets kept busy.²¹ Again, this did little to inspire the cadets. One repeated that:

During the release from quarters, when the recitations of the day ended, some would take a stroll around Flirtation Walk . . . a small number, poor victims of athletics, would wrestle with parallel bars, etc., in the gymnasium; but the larger number would congregate in the fencing hall and dance to music of the band.²²

Once again, the Board of Visitors recognized this and pushed for physical education. In 1881, it further recommended that, “A building for the gymnasium is needed.”²³

In 1885, the gymnasium existed in name only because of the lack of a systematic program of physical education. The gymnasium itself was still the old gym, which lacked adequate heating and lighting. The Board of Visitors made repeated recommendations for a new gymnasium in 1883 and 1884. In 1885, the Board of Visitors recommended the appropriation of \$30,000 to build a gymnasium, with repeated recommendations in 1886 and 1887. In 1888, the Board of Visitors recommended an increase in the sum necessary to \$100,000. On 12 February 1889, Congress appropriated the \$100,000 for the new gymnasium, completed in 1892.²⁴

Mr. Herman J. Koehler reported on 1 February 1885 to accept the position of Master of the Sword at the United States Military Academy. He was a graduate of the Milwaukee Normal School of Physical Training.²⁵ Before reporting to West Point, Koehler had served as Director of School Gymnastics of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, from

²⁰ *Howitzer* (United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, 1898), 92.

²¹ *The Centennial of the United States Military Academy at West Point*, New York, vol. I, 1802-1902 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904), 898.

²² Morris Schaff, *The Spirit of Old West Point* (New York: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1907), 57.

²³ *The Annual Report of the Board of Visitors to the United States Military Academy*, (Washington, 1881), 12.

²⁴ Sidney Forman, *West Point: A History of the United States Military Academy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 183.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

1882-1885.²⁶ Koehler immediately set forth his argument for a rational system of physical training:

It cannot be gainsaid that the curriculum at the Military Academy requires closer and more constant application than that of any other institution in the world. The constant mental strain which a successful mastery of the subjects taught here makes necessary is fraught with danger to the physical welfare of the cadet. To counteract this, to build up the weak so he may have an even chance with the naturally strong; to quicken the cadet physically, so his intellect may be at its best; to maintain him in a sound, healthful condition, and make him the possessor of a surplus of strength, energy, and vitality, against which he may draw in time of stress, are salient points around which a rational system of physical training must be constructed.²⁷

Koehler's first program included strength tests and anthropometric (human body) measurements. The strength tests included pull-ups, dips, right and left grip tests, back and leg tests to show how many pounds a cadet could lift, and lung capacity. The anthropometric measurements included height, weight, chest (normal and expanded), waist, and the right and left upper arm.²⁸ The curriculum included gymnastics, swimming, dancing, and equestrian arts.

The cadets not only accepted but also appreciated the changes in equipment and the program of instruction. Swimming as part of the instruction had become a regular part of cadet life—a competitive rite of passage. Cadets reflected on swimming in a song during the 100th Night Show:

Cadets who have not qualified
Down at one end must stay
Where H₂O is not enough
To carry them away
“Ducking” is not allowed to boot
And if you take a swim

²⁶ Robert Degen, *The Evolution of Physical Education at the United States Military Academy* (Office of Physical Education, United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, 1967), 32.

²⁷ *The Centennial of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York*, vol. I, 1802-1902 (Washington: Government Printing Officer, 1904), 899.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 901.

You must not wear that same wet suit
To walk around the "Gym."²⁹

Cadets also praised the gymnasium. "Our complete and finely equipped gymnasium presents a very lively appearance. Cadets from every class may be found there exercising"³⁰ The cadet's praise of physical education continued in 1898 to include the program as well.

With the building and equipping of the new gymnasium, the one hour's daily exercise of the fourth class . . . ceased to be the drudgery it formerly was, and became more of a pleasure, as it should be. The gymnasium . . . occupies its place in the hearts of the Corps, and the many profitable hours spent there will, by most of us, be looked back upon with pleasure, and as one of the best features of our course.³¹

The cadets also eagerly anticipated riding: "We begin riding tomorrow, and are glad to get at it I have laid in a supply of Vaseline By the time a fellow graduates here, he has to be a splendid rider The instructors generally being the 'Yearlings' with bare-back riding, but I hear we will begin with saddles this year."³²

Herman J. Koehler also introduced "setting up" exercises that were published in 1887 in his book titled, *A System of Calisthenic Exercises for use in School of the Soldier*. He designed the system of "setting up" exercises to meet the demands for a more general and varied physical training of the individual than that provided for by tactical training.³³ The "setting up" referred to preparing the body to perform the physical capabilities required in military training. The system of exercises focused on strengthening and developing the shoulders, chest, arms, loins, and legs to facilitate complete control of all

²⁹ 100th Night Program, 1893, 45. USMA Archives.

³⁰ Howitzer (USMA, West Point, NY, 1897), 73.

³¹ Howitzer, (USMA, West Point, NY, 1898), 92.

³² Charles D. Rhodes, *Intimate Letters of a West Point Cadet: An Epic in Blank Verse of the Class of 1889, United States Military Academy* (West Point, NY, 1889), 6.

³³ Herman J. Koehler, *A System of Calisthenic Exercises for use in School of the Soldier* (West Point: U.S. Military Academy Press, 1887), 3.

body muscles. The Board of Visitors in 1889 commented that "The new cadet on arrival at West Point receives his physical 'setting up.' The bodily 'slouch' is all taken out of him and he is taught to stand erect on his own two feet, as a man should, with head as near the sky as possible."³⁴ Koehler did not intend to replace the tactical training but offered these exercises as a complement to them.

In 1889, the Board of Visitors also recognized Herman J. Koehler's work. It recommended his position:

In recognition of the admirable work accomplished by Herman J. Koehler, in view of the fact that he is doing here unaided the duties devolving upon three or four instructors at the Naval Academy . . . the rank of first lieutenant of infantry be conferred upon him as master of the sword and instructor in gymnastics and swimming at the Military Academy.³⁵

As a result, Koehler was commissioned as a lieutenant in the infantry. From that point forward, only members of the regular Army filled the position of Master of the Sword.

The overall emphasis on physical education in the United States further strengthened Koehler's influence as Master of the Sword. In a letter to the Surgeon General, Dr. Charles R. Greenleaf wrote:

The importance of this subject to the well-being of the cadets is not fully appreciated by laymen, who are apt to regard gymnastic exercise as a sort of circus training, by which the cadet may perform the feats of an acrobat or those of the sawdust horseman The leading universities throughout the land—Harvard, Yale, Cornell, Johns Hopkins, Amherst, Trinity, and many others—recognizing the vast importance of this subject, have placed it in the hands of scientific men, who have in all instances been made members of the faculty, and attendance by the student upon the course has been made mandatory.³⁶

³⁴ *The Annual Report of the Board of Visitors to the United States Military Academy* (Washington, 1889), 38.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

This emphasis on physical education in the United States facilitated the appropriation of additional resources and emphasis that contributed to the solidification of physical training at the Academy.

In addition to his work at West Point, Koehler also made significant contributions to the program of physical education in the Army prior to World War I. In 1919, Lieutenant Colonel Koehler published his second manual, *Koehler's West Point Manual of Disciplinary Physical Training*. This manual was based on his experience at West Point and his training of 200,000 men prior to World War I. The purpose of the manual was to prepare men rapidly for military service. The Secretary of War, Newton D. Baker, stated that the manual's greatest value was that it was orderly and systematic, and was based upon principles.³⁷ The physical training that Koehler outlined in the manual included setting up exercises, marching, double timing, jumping, rifle exercises, bayonet training, vaulting exercises and overcoming obstacles, and athletic games and contests. The Secretary effectively summed up Koehler's contributions to the war.

If we could follow Colonel Koehler's graduates, either from the Military Academy or from these training camps, to the battle fields of France we would find an impressive story of physical and moral adequacy which made these young officers themselves able to endure the hardships of modern war and also able to with the democracy of sympathy which characterizes life in America, to lead and inspire training in their men which made them fit for their part in these fiery trials.³⁸

Colonel Herman J. Koehler's vision of leadership guided the program of physical development at West Point well in to the twentieth century. Koehler focused on the following qualifications: "Leadership, superior physical qualifications and the ability to

³⁷ Herman J. Koehler, *Koehler's West Point Manual of Disciplinary Physical Training* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1919), xiv.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, xii.

discharge intelligently every phase of military training, particularly that pertaining to the conditioning of men, are some of the qualifications that the experience of the war are demanding of the graduates of the Academy.”³⁹ General George C. Marshall echoed these sentiments after World War II when, talking about the relief of field officers, stated that “their tenacity of purpose, their power of leadership over tired men was broken through physical fatigue. They became pessimistic. They became nervous impossibilities in positions of leadership.”⁴⁰

Colonel Koehler’s program of physical development was not complete until Brigadier General Douglas MacArthur added the third dimension to go along with a systematic program of instruction and an adequate gymnasium. During his tenure as the Superintendent (1919-1922), MacArthur placed significant emphasis on intramurals at West Point. During this period, intramurals and physical training became as much a part of West Point as the study of physics, chemistry, military topography, or foreign languages.⁴¹ MacArthur’s experience during World War I had convinced him that cadets needed to be able to conduct physical training in their own commands. Lieutenant Colonel Francis M. Green, Director of Physical Education, articulated these principles more than two decades later stating that “it is the responsibility of officers to lead their own men in physical training; hence every officer must be qualified to plan and direct this phase of training.”⁴² Additionally, MacArthur felt that athletics produced the attributes of fortitude, self-control, resolution, courage, mental agility, and physical

³⁹ Herman J. Koehler, “Athletic Life at West Point,” *Infantry Journal* (May 1924): 548.

⁴⁰ George C. Marshall, “Selected Speeches and Statements of General George C. Marshall,” 45. In a speech before the Committee on Military Affairs, 9 April 1940, USMA Archives.

⁴¹ Sidney Forman, *The Educational Objectives of the United States Military Academy: A Historical Study of the Basic Academic, Physical, and Character Training Aims of the United States Military Academy* (Bulletin of the Library, USMA, No. 2, 1946), 27.

⁴² Francis M. Greene, “Physical Education for Military Leadership,” *Education* (April 1948), 459.

development.⁴³ With the addition of intramurals, the program of physical education at West Point included Disciplinary Physical Training (setting up exercises, marches), Physical Training (gymnastics, fencing, swimming, boxing, wrestling, and dancing), and Compulsory Intramural Athletics (football, baseball, basketball, soccer, lacrosse, tennis, track and field, golf and polo).⁴⁴

Colonel Koehler's influence on physical education was felt after his retirement in 1923. His influence initiated debates about the Master of the Sword title, and the need for a separate Department of Physical Training with a permanent director and a seat on the Academic Board. Although the Superintendent made the initial recommendation in 1937, the Master of the Sword did not become an established member of the Academic Board until after the arrival of Colonel James L. Anderson in 1974. On the back of each chair are the names of the respective department heads that have sat on the Academic Board. The chair of the Master of the Sword in 1997 earned only its second name.⁴⁵ The curriculum has evolved throughout this century, but the physical education program remains largely a reflection of Colonel Koehler's. Professional instructors administer the systematic program of instruction. Of the fifty instructors currently forty-nine of them hold at least a master's degree in physical education.⁴⁶ The standardized testing of cadets includes the Cadet Physical Fitness Test and the Indoor Obstacle Course.

Colonel Herman J. Koehler's contributions to the physical education program at West Point were the most significant. During his tenure, physical education became a

⁴³ Sidney Forman, *The Educational Objectives of the United States Military Academy: A Historical Study of the Basic Academic, Physical, and Character Training Aims of the United States Military Academy* (Bulletin of the Library, USMA, No. 2, 1946), 27.

⁴⁴ Herman J. Koehler, "Athletic Life at West Point," *Infantry Journal* (May 1924): 548.

⁴⁵ Colonel Maureen LeBoeuf, Master of the Sword, interview by author, 28 October 1998, Department of Physical Education, West Point, NY.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

permanent part of the cadet experience, because that was when physical education included a professional instructor, a systematic program of instruction, an adequate gymnasium, a curriculum, instructional manuals, and Academic Board and cadet acceptance. Koehler also benefited from the overall advancement of physical education at the time, not only at West Point, but also across the major colleges and universities in the United States. Therefore, Lieutenant Colonel Francis M. Greene was correct when he referred to Colonel Herman J. Koehler as the real father of West Point physical education. If not for the Civil War, Lieutenant Kelton's program might have revolutionized physical education at West Point, but instead it planted the seeds that would not take root until the arrival of Herman J. Koehler.

As the former USMA archivist, Sidney Forman, so aptly pointed out, "West Point's history—the collective experience of many generation of superintendents, professors and cadets—must be taken into consideration in the evaluation of any change. It may be the past which will determine the future; the details of the past therefore deserve the utmost consideration."⁴⁷ Although boxing gloves, mountain bikes, and rock climbing have replaced the swords, horses, and dancing, the physical education program at West Point still produces military officers in a way that both Lieutenant John C. Kelton and Colonel Herman J. Koehler would recognize.

⁴⁷ Sidney Forman, *The Educational Objectives of the United States Military Academy: A Historical Study of the Basic Academic, Physical, and Character Training Aims of the United States Military Academy* (Bulletin of the Library, USMA, No. 2, 1946), 2.

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