



HERMAN J. KOEHLER: The Father of West
Point Physical Education, 1885 - 1923

BY

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The present course in gymnasium began to take shape in 1885 with the appointment of Colonel Herman J. Koehler as Master of the Sword. In fact, Colonel Koehler did so much work in this connection that a history of his service is one of the course itself.¹

¹ Howitzer, 1940 (U.S.M.A., West Point, New York), p. 92.



INTRODUCTION

Physical training for cadets has taken place at the United States Military Academy since its establishment in 1802. From the very beginning, the aim of West Point has been to develop excellence in all its students.² Academy and military leaders have always recognized the need for at least rudimentary physical skills for cadets and officers. As an institution chartered to produce military leaders, it is reasonable to assume that West Point would have placed and maintained a strong emphasis upon the physical development of its cadets. An historical analysis suggests that the Academy was deficient in the field of physical education until 1885. West Point failed to stress physical development among cadets for its first 83 years of existence.

In the early 1800's, the Academy lagged behind other American and European institutions of higher education in physical education. Universities such as Yale, Harvard, and Amherst were the leaders in the developing field of physical education.³ Professional educators such as Dr. Dudley Sargent of Harvard and Dr. Edward Hitchcock of Amherst College were the leaders in stressing the need for physical education throughout the United States.⁴

² The Army Athletic Council's Report on, The Theory and Practice of Athletics at the Military Academy, West Point, 1927, p. 1.

³ Fred E. Leonard, A Guide to the History of Physical Education. (Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1947), pp. 268 - 293.

⁴ Ibid.

The year 1885 was the Academy's turning point. That year, West Point hired its first professional physical education instructor, Herman J. Koehler. Within six years after Koehler's arrival, West Point devoted more institutional attention and resources towards physical training than the other leading universities in America.

This paper argues that Herman Koehler deserves to be known as the "Father of West Point Physical Education." He personally changed the Academy's methodology and focus towards physical education. Through his tireless efforts, West Point's physical education program developed into a program worthy of national recognition and emulation. His 38 year tenure as the Academy's tenth Master of the Sword⁵ represents a formative period for Physical Education at West Point.

Some of Koehler's programs instituted in the 1890's are still in use today, more than 100 years later. Neither cadets nor most faculty members realize that current physical aptitude testing and height/weight measurements are modifications of programs that Koehler introduced at the Academy in the late 1800's. A common misconception among cadets is that General Douglas MacArthur had the greatest impact upon physical education at West Point. This belief is based upon MacArthur's famous epitaph engraved above the entrance of West Point's Arvin Gymnasium:

⁵ Alden Partridge bestowed the title of "Master of the Sword" upon West Point's first fencing instructor, Monsieur Piere Thomas, in 1816. The title has subsequently been handed down to each director of the fencing/physical education program.

Upon the fields of friendly strife
Are sown the seeds
That, upon other fields, on other days
Will bear the fruits of victory.⁶

When MacArthur was a cadet, his instructor and physical training mentor was Herman J. Koehler. Many of the physical training programs credited to the MacArthur superintendency, such as mandatory intramurals, may actually have been the fruit of seeds planted during MacArthur's cadet experience.

Koehler wrote many of the Army-wide physical training programs in use by the turn of the century; however, this paper focuses primarily on his contributions to West Point. Many of his programs are still in use at the Academy and his long tenure significantly influenced the direction of physical education at the Academy. Herman J. Koehler is indeed the Father of Physical Education at West Point.

The pre-Koehler period

Between the period 1802 - 1884, West Point's physical education program was marked by inconsistency.⁷ In the early years of West Point, faculty members used gun drills and crude calisthenics to keep cadets physically fit when simple chores such as collecting water provided insufficient physical activity.⁸ Drill and manual labor were the early

⁶ Robert Degan, History File, (Office of Physical Education, West Point, New York).

⁷ Robert Degan, The Evolution of Physical Education at the United States Military Academy. (West Point, New York: Office of Physical Education., 1968), p. 30.

⁸ Lieutenant Herman J. Koehler, "The Physical Training of Cadets, 1802 - 1902", The Centennial of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), p. 896.

forms of cadet physical training. Superintendents during the early 19th century, such as Sylvanus Thayer, were more interested in academic development than physical training and physical education. The Academy's lack of interest in physical education reflected a societal lack of interest in physical conditioning. The idea of teaching physical education in the schools faltered because of three distinct groups: the overly ardent advocates of manual labor as a sufficient means of exercise, those still strongly influenced by the Puritan idea that play in any form was sin, and the many scholars who believed that play was a waste of time.⁹

Because of the physical nature of the military profession, military drills and sword exercises were routine to cadet training throughout the nineteenth century. Jonathan Williams, the Academy's first Superintendent, recommended the addition of a riding master and swordmaster to the academic staff, but Congress turned down this proposal.¹⁰ Captain Alden Partridge was one of the first administrators and teachers in America to recognize and promote the development of "A sound mind in a sound body."¹¹ During his superintendency, Partridge introduced the first

⁹ Lee, Mabel, A History of Physical Education and Sports in the U.S.A., (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1983), p. 33.

¹⁰ Sidney Forman, West Point (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), p. 18.

¹¹ Lester A. Webb, Captain Alden Partridge and the United States Military Academy, (Northport, Alabama: American Southern, 1965), p. 199.

physical education program at the Academy which included fencing, swimming, skating, hiking, marching, and rowing. Despite the sound reasoning behind his philosophy, Partridge's influence upon physical education and training lasted only as long as his tenure.

Captain Partridge's departure in 1817 marked the beginning of a regressive period for physical training at the Academy.¹² As West Point's fourth Superintendent, Sylvanus Thayer's academic renovation caused a sharp decline in the interest in physical education at the Academy. While Sylvanus Thayer vastly reorganized the academic portion of the early 19th century "West Point experience", he failed to continue the physical training programs started by Alden Partridge. Without any emphasis or innovation, Thayer's system of physical education and training soon degenerated into purely military drills.¹³ During the long period of neglect, cadets turned to voluntary athletic pursuits for their physical training.¹⁴ Reports by the Board of Visitors indicated the Board's continuing concern over the decline in the time devoted to military drills and physical training due to the expansion of the academic courses.¹⁵ Sylvanus Thayer and his successors concentrated purely on intellectual advances versus the original balanced

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The Centennial, op. cit., p. 895.

¹⁴ Report of the Board of Visitors, 1826.

¹⁵ The Evolution of Physical Education at the United States Military Academy. p. 25.

approach of Captain Alden Partridge. During much of the 1800's, Academy leaders believed that military drills and exercises constituted physical education. As one cadet wrote:

We had no sports, no games, no exercise but drills and fencing; baseball and football had never then been seen at West Point. We had no gymnasium proper, though a dark space under the "Academic" had been floored with tan-bark and supplied with rings, swings and parallel bars, but no one ever seemed to dust them off.¹⁶

Instead of leading the nation in physical development, West Point consistently found itself falling behind other prominent schools such as Harvard and Yale in the area of physical education.

The conclusion of the Civil War brought with it a realization among the Army's leaders that the Academy needed a renewed emphasis upon physical training. Reports of the poor physical condition of over a million Civil War recruits resulted in a renewed drive for military and physical training in schools.¹⁷ The beginnings of physical education in colleges go back to the period immediately following the Civil War.¹⁸ With the close of the Civil War, physical education developed in earnest in many colleges in the 1870's.¹⁹ West Point joined the physical education movement

¹⁶ Howitzer, 1913 (U.S.M.A., West Point, New York), p. 16.

¹⁷ Lee, Mabel, A History of Physical Education and Sports in the U.S.A., (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1983), p. 80.

¹⁸ Leonard, Fred E. A Guide to the History of Physical Education., (Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1947), p. 280.

a full decade later by hiring the Academy's first professional physical educator, Herman J. Koehler.

Professional physical educators started schools dedicated to producing professional physical instructors. One of those schools dedicated to physical training was the Normal School of the Turnerbund of Milwaukee.²⁰ George Brosius, a German-American gymnast, who had fought in the Civil War as an officer with the Ninth Wisconsin Regiment, started this particular school. He insured that his students realized the importance of physical fitness among soldiers. One of the first pupils to graduate from his school was his nephew, Herman J. Koehler.²¹ Physical development and education programs quickly gathered momentum after the Civil War.²² Civilian colleges such as Bowdoin, Amherst, Harvard, and Yale were taking an active interest in the science of physical education.²³ As a reaction to these societal changes, West Point leaders chose to develop and implement their own physical education program. The man chosen to lead the Academy into its new era of physical fitness and education was Herman J. Koehler.

¹⁹ Lee, Mabel, A History of Physical Education and Sports in the U.S.A., (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1983), p. 86.

²⁰ Leonard, Fred E. A Guide to the History of Physical Education. Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1947), p. 303.

²¹ Ibid.

²² VanDalen, D.B., E.D. Mitchell and B.L. Bennett. A World History of Physical Education. (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1953), p. 396.

²³ Lee, Mabel, op. cit., pp. 37 - 40.

The Koehler Period

Physical education in the United States from 1865 to 1900 was influenced and shaped by a variety of systems and practices of European origin.²⁴ Herman J. Koehler attended the Milwaukee Normal School of Physical Training in 1879 and learned the German turnverein style of gymnastics. This German-American form of gymnastics sought to promote individual abilities for the purpose of making the body of the student healthy, strong, and agile; in other words, to preserve it and to train the pupil to discretion, resoluteness, courage, and endurance.²⁵ Upon graduating from the gymnastics school in 1882, Koehler served as the Director of School Gymnastics of Oshkosh, Wisconsin.²⁶

The Academy was quick to accept Koehler's application of turnverein gymnastics. His style of massed calisthenics and exercise seemed quite appropriate for the highly disciplined military atmosphere of West Point. "Any young man of physique good enough to pass the entrance examination can gradually gain the strength, agility, and grace that will fit him for the future career of an army officer."²⁷ The discipline of West Point, combined with the pride and

²⁴ VanDalen, D.B., E.D. Mitchell and B.L. Bennett. A World History of Physical Education. (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1953), p. 398.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 399.

²⁶ The Evolution of Physical Education at the United States Military Academy. p. 33.

²⁷ Irving H. Hancock, Life at West Point, (New York: Putnam, 1902), p. 78.

ambition of cadets proved to be extremely fertile ground for Koehler's large scale teaching techniques. Koehler readily admitted that, "Surrounded upon all sides by splendid specimens of young manhood, it is only natural that the newcomer should find himself impelled to emulate them, and gladly accepts any instruction that will tend toward improving his physique."²⁸

In addition to instructing the compulsory physical education program for the fourth class (See Annex 1), Koehler also established West Point's first height/weight measurements and strength tests for all cadets.²⁹ As a professional physical educator, Koehler's impact upon the Academy was immediately apparent. The Board of Visitors in 1889 reported that, "We confess that it was exceedingly difficult to believe that the gymnastic exercises performed by the fourth class could be the result of only one year of practice under the instruction of Professor Koehler."³⁰

Physical training by calisthenic exercise became an integral part of the academic curriculum just one year after Koehler's arrival. Koehler developed his version of

²⁸ Lieutenant Herman J. Koehler, "The Physical Training of Cadets, 1802 - 1902", The Centennial of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), p. 900.

²⁹ Lt. Colonel Charles R. Greenleaf, "Physical Training in the U.S. Army" (unpublished paper read before the American Association for the Advancement of Physical Education, Boston, Mass., April 4, 1891.)

³⁰ Report of Board of Visitors, 1889, p. 111.

"military gymnastics" during his first year at West Point.

These gymnastics were defined as:

Simple exercises and combinations of exercises, arranged progressively, to develop muscular strength, activity, grace, and agility. Each exercise was executed upon command.³¹

Acting upon his own initiative, at the beginning of each year, Herman Koehler assessed the physical aptitude of every cadet using prescribed methods established by the American Association for the Advancement of Physical Culture.³² Since the Army did not have manuals covering physical fitness, Koehler relied heavily upon professional civilian organizations for technical guidance. The tests and measurements identified individual weak areas and aided Koehler in prescribing specific exercises to achieve required improvements. The original tests and measurements used were: height, weight, wrist, bicep and forearm measurements; horizontal bar, parallel bars, and broad jump tests.³³ Detailed statistics demonstrated that Koehler's programs were consistently successful in improving the physical performance of cadets.

Working tirelessly without assistant instructors or a staff, Koehler continually developed new exercises,

³¹ William H. Wilbur, The Koehler Method of Physical Drill, (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1918), pp. 12 - 13.

³² Greenleaf, Lt. Colonel Charles R. "Physical Training in the U.S. Army" (unpublished paper read before the American Association for the Advancement of Physical Education, Boston, Mass., April 4, 1891).

³³ Ibid.

measurements, and tests for the cadets. Koehler gave all USMA physical education, training and instruction until 1900. Besides instructing military gymnastics, Koehler also taught fencing and swimming. For their part, the cadets expressed a desire for the physical challenges that Koehler's programs provided. "The habit is hard to break, and every afternoon finds the gymnasium floor well occupied with cadets, who realize what an opportunity they have."³⁴

Within four years of his arrival at the Academy, Koehler's program and its proven success drew the attention of the War Department. In its 1889 report to the Superintendent, one general officer on the Board of Visitors stated, "The necessity for his careful physical training of the soldier is now recognized, and undoubtedly will soon command the attention it demands in our Army."³⁵ In 1892, the War Department published its Manual of Physical Training, which was based heavily upon Koehler's methods of "calisthenics exercises."³⁶

Koehler's positive impact on the cadets was reported to members of Congress and assisted the Academy in gaining congressional funding for a huge gymnasium. When construction of the Academy's new gymnasium was completed in August of 1892, it was "superior to any in the world."³⁷

³⁴ Howitzer, 1924, p. 76.

³⁵ Report of Board of Visitors, 1889, p. 111.

³⁶ U.S. War Department, Manual of Physical Training for use in the United States Army, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1914).

³⁷ The Centennial, op. cit., p. 901.

Armed with a new and modern facility and a nationally recognized program, West Point could boast that its students were receiving the finest physical training and education available among higher level institutions.

Koehler wrote that, "Probably at no other time are cadets in better physical condition than at the close of their first year."³⁸ Koehler was determined to change the Academy's policy allowing the exemption of the upper three classes from mandatory physical training. He made several attempts between 1890 - 1895 to instigate a four-year mandatory physical education program but was turned down by Superintendents John M. Wilson and Oswald H. Ernst. By the turn of the century, Koehler's arguments won the cooperation of the Commandant, Charles G. Treat. Herman Koehler's hard-fought victory finally came in 1905, when Superintendent Albert L. Mills agreed to expand compulsory physical training to the entire Corps of Cadets (See Annex 2).³⁹

Another area in which Koehler had a lasting impact upon West Point was his effort to establish intercollegiate athletics and compulsory intramurals at the Academy. During the late nineteenth century, the United States experienced a great increase in the popularity of sports competition; colleges were showing great interest in intercollegiate contests.⁴⁰ While the Military Academy was one of the first

³⁸ History File, (Office of Physical Education, West Point, New York).

³⁹ Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1905, p. 9.

⁴⁰ The Evolution of Physical Education at the United States Military Academy. p. 44.

prominent educational institutions to concern itself with the physical development of its students, it was reluctant to recognize the role of competitive athletics.

The philosophy of competition was a vital component of turnverein as well as Koehler's military gymnastics. He made competition a vital component of his physical education program by instituting fierce competition among his students. Due to the extreme conservatism of the Academic Board, Koehler's early attempts to expand competition to the intercollegiate level met with negative responses.⁴¹ The event which forced a reversal in Academic Board policy was a challenge and subsequent defeat in football by the Naval Academy in 1890. Koehler wrote an article in 1924 saying, "It is doubtful if this concession would have been made even then if our friends from the Naval Academy had not jolted the extreme conservatism obtaining here."⁴²

Slowly, and under the watchful eye of the Academic Board, competitive athletics began to flourish at the Academy in 1893. Following the creation of an Army football program, the Academy fielded teams in tennis and baseball during the 1893-1894 season.⁴³ Competitive athletics quickly expanded at the intra-Corps level as well as at the

⁴¹ "History of Athletics at West Point", Howitzer, 1896, p. 1.

⁴² Herman J. Koehler, "Athletic Life at West Point", Infantry Journal, May 1924, p. 546.

⁴³ Annual Report of the Army Officer's Athletic Association, U.S.M.A., West Point, New York, 1893, p. 2.

intercollegiate level. The Superintendent's Report of 1899 stated:

The interest the cadets show in games of baseball, football, polo, golf, and tennis is gratifying in the extreme and cannot but be beneficial in fitting them for their profession as well as a needful relaxation from the mental strain the acquirement of the academic course entails.⁴⁴

Originally, individual officers donated their time and energy to coach and organize cadet intercollegiate teams. By 1908, however, intercollegiate competition became so important that volunteer officers could no longer satisfy the demands placed upon them; therefore, with Herman Koehler as a charter member, the Army Athletic Association was created to shoulder the responsibilities of cadet athletics.⁴⁵ Not only was Koehler instrumental in organizing intercollegiate competition, he also played an important role in instigating mandatory intramurals.

For years, Koehler had been unsuccessful in his efforts to make intra-corps sports mandatory for all cadets. As early as 1896, in a letter to the Boston Physical Education Society, Koehler wrote, "If we have athletes, we shall never be without soldiers."⁴⁶ Koehler reiterated that philosophy again in 1904, writing that, "Competitive athletics have

⁴⁴ Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1899.

⁴⁵ Headquarters, U.S. Military Academy, Special Orders No. 110, West Point, N.Y. June 12, 1908.

⁴⁶ Herman J. Koehler, "Letter to Boston Physical Education Society, March 23, 1896", American Physical Education Review. Vol. I, Sept-Dec, 1896, pp. 45-46.

many excellent practices and should be indulged."⁴⁷ It was not until Douglas MacArthur's superintendency that Koehler's philosophy towards cadet athletics became policy.

As early as 1909, cadets were engaged in athletic events during release from quarters in the early evening and after the recitations for the day were over.⁴⁸ Athletics developed a strong sportsman-like attitude among the Corps of Cadets. Even though the program was still voluntary at the time, its popularity continued to grow. Cadets who suffered from low academic standing were prohibited from participating in the voluntary program. As a consequence, Koehler's athletic programs acted as an academic incentive. Under the supervision and guidance of physical education instructors, the volunteer intramural program was quite successful throughout the early 1900's.⁴⁹ When Douglas MacArthur became Superintendent in 1919, he simply made the volunteer intramural/intercollegiate program mandatory for all cadets. The ideal of "every man an athlete," which is commonly attributed to MacArthur, had actually been in practice since the turn of the century.

CONCLUSION

When the Academy hired Herman J. Koehler in 1885, it lacked a strong physical educational program. For 83 years,

⁴⁷ History File, (Office of Physical Education, West Point, New York).

⁴⁸ Annual Report of the Superintendent, 1909.

⁴⁹ History File, (Office of Physical Education, West Point, New York).

the Academy had failed to maintain an educational physical training program. Mired in rudimentary military drills, the Corps of Cadets felt bored and unchallenged. When physical education programs gained momentum among colleges during the second half of the nineteenth century, the Academy realized the need for reform. Physical education supplemented military training.

Herman J. Koehler, a professional educator, brought with him a style of physical training which seemed tailor-made for the Military Academy. Turnverein gymnastics, with its holistic approach towards physical fitness and its demand for strong discipline was ideally suited for West Point's conservative Academic Board. Once accepted by the Board, Koehler implemented many programs still in use today with only minor modifications. The following programs were introduced during the Koehler tenure:

- 1.) Physical Testing.
- 2.) Physical Measuring.
- 3.) Fourth Class Curriculum (Gymnastics, Swimming, Boxing, & Wrestling).
- 4.) Four Year Physical Education Curriculum.
- 5.) Intercollegiate Sports.
- 6.) Intramural Sports.
- 7.) Physical Training Formations with Massed Commands.
- 8.) The Creation of the Army Athletic Association.

Herman J. Koehler personally instructed and mentored some of the most famous graduates of this institution. Men such as Douglas MacArthur, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Omar Bradley represent just a few of the military leaders who carried forward Koehler's philosophy of the importance of physical fitness.

"On December 14, 1923, Lt. Col. Herman J. Koehler, Master of the Sword, retired from active service after forty years of duty at West Point. His work during this period and his value to the Academy, to the Army, and to the country, are so well known and appreciated as to render superfluous any remarks on that subject here."⁵⁰

Similar accolades acknowledging Colonel Koehler's efforts and dedication to the Academy now reside in historical files in Arvin Gymnasium and the West Point archives. Koehler dedicated 40 years of his life to the Academy. The impact of Herman J. Koehler is felt every day by more than 4,000 cadets while they participate in physical education. Herman J. Koehler was the last non-West Point graduate to hold the title of Master of the Sword. He began his tenure at West Point as a civilian and retired as a Lieutenant Colonel. His name and contributions are unknown to most, but based upon his life-time contributions to this Academy, Herman J. Koehler deserves a plaque in Arvin Gymnasium declaring him "The Father of West Point Physical Education."

ANNEX 1: Herman Koehler's Fourth Class Program: (1885)

4th Class Only

Setting up exercises	45 min. daily	1st three weeks
Gymnastics	45 min. period (3 per week)	1 Oct - 1 June
Fencing	45 min. period (3 per week) (40 - 50 per section)	1 Oct - 1 June
Swimming	Attendance regardless of class until cadets passed a test consisting of a ten minute swim with breast stroke.	

1st, 2nd & 3rd Class Programs

Riding	This program fell under the control of the Commandant's Tactics Office, and all training was conducted by Regular Army Officers. The Master of the Sword had no influence over this program of instruction.
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ANNEX 2: Koehler's Schedule for Physical Training: 1905

4th Class Course

- I. Preliminary Period. These "Setting-Up Drills" consisted of breathing exercises, simple movements, combined movements, walking, and running.
- II. Preparatory Period. This period was titled "Gymnasium," and consisted of prescription and/or special development work, weights, dumb bells, wands, medicine balls, jumping, climbing, and apparatus work.
- III. Swimming.
- IV. Fencing.
- V. Saber
- VI. Bayonet.
- VII. Boxing.
- VIII. Wrestling.

3rd and 2nd Class Course

Work during the first year was entirely preliminary and instruction was given to large squads at one time. The object was to ground cadets in the fundamentals of the different branches constituting the 4th class course. In the second and third years, the work in gymnastics, fencing, sparring, and wrestling was progressively advanced in order to develop as high a standard of proficiency as time and conditions would allow.

1st Class Course

Work during the preceding three years had been entirely practical, that of the last year dealt with theories of physical training and focused upon their practical application to the needs of the service. In other words, the last year was spent training cadets to take charge of unit physical training in their future companies, troops or batteries.

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