

Physical Culture: Manly Men and Less Feeble Wives and Mothers

In the latter parts of the 19th and into the 20th centuries, classes in such arts as oratory and physical culture (aka fitness) were important aspects of self-improvement across the nation and in West Newbury. In 1890, the *West Newbury Messenger* suggested “the idea of furnishing a portion of the empty shoe factory on Post Office square for the purpose of Y.M.C.A. rooms” with “a simple gymnasium.” In 1893, recent Emerson College graduate Parker H. Nason (who would later become a West Newbury selectman, state representative, Town moderator, committeeman) advertised himself as “READER And Teacher of Physical Culture and Oratory.” In 1904, Post Office Square boasted an [Athletic Club](#), residing on the second floor of what had been Bailey’s grocery, and in 1905 it was reported that the [West Newbury Physical Culture Club](#) was gaining members.

In industrializing times when manual labor was making way for more sedentary employment, it was a truth universally acknowledged, that a fellow in possession of manly man status must be in pursuit of physical culture. Fitness advice proliferated. For instance, in 1887 the *West Newbury Messenger* proclaimed, “It will be found that the man who is physically strong in a special sport is weak in some part of his body.... Pedestrianism is wholesome when indulged for pleasure, but is bad in contests. The professional pedestrian finally becomes thoroughly broken up: the stomach and general system are exhausted by too much exertion.” Football was declared [similarly problematic](#): “It tends to produce an abnormal type of physical development simply for the purpose of intense competition, it does not produce either mental or physical normal conditions, but rather abnormal.” Some physical culturists extended the practice to diet, [embracing vegetarianism](#) on the theory that horses and oxen eat no meat yet enjoy great strength and endurance.

While the concept of manly men was largely a matter of consensus (except, perhaps, in the arena of individual sports and diet), the question of womanly women was decidedly unsettled, particularly in terms of physical culture. An [1880 Newburyport Daily Herald](#) story approved of females embracing physical culture, lamenting, “there is much room for improvement yet. Many homes are still presided over by invalid wives and mothers, who furnish a constant spectacle of sadness

and misery to their family and friends, and are a subject [of] unlimited expense to their husbands.” The same news page, however, advertised another approach: “FEEBLE WIVES, MOTHERS, and every sickly person can surely strengthen and build up the broken down system with *Richard’s Teetotal Tonic*.” [Others argued that housework should suffice](#): “Dusting, sweeping and bedmaking bring into play a number of important muscles, and the muscle movements are exactly the same as the expensive physical culture exercises so fashionable of late years.”

Women’s physical culture classes were generally [taught by women](#) and segregated from men’s, though they [sometimes included children](#). The Y.M.C.A. offered classes for [young ladies](#), and according to the *West Newbury Messenger*, women who studied aesthetic gymnastics could learn the “whole science in knowing how to enter and to leave a room properly.” Sometimes women’s classes were a source of entertainment: a [recital featuring “\[e\]xercises in physical culture](#) in Greek costume with dumb bells” was advertised in Amesbury in 1890.

While it was believed that physical culture could prepare girls for sports, competitive women’s games engendered controversy. In 1903 a [physical instructor at Wellesley warned](#) that basketball, especially for high school girls, raised dangers of “permanent injury to beauty and health, the evil influence of such excitement upon the emotional and nervous feminine natures, and the tendency to unsex the player.... [T]he competitive game, with traveling about, exhibitions before mixed audiences, and cultivation of the win-at-any-cost spirit, [is] not womanly, and make[s] neither for character nor refinement.”

It was not until the 1920s that West Newbury women began to participate in sports on a largely equal, if separate, basis as their male counterparts. In [July of 1920](#), the West Newbury Knights of Pythias Plum Island outing included foot races, tug of war, and boating contests for women as well as men. Around the same time the West Newbury Knights of King Arthur and their consort Queens of Avalon were a remarkably sporty group, [arranging field days](#) at the Central School, with the Queens invited to participate in some of the athletic events of the Knights.

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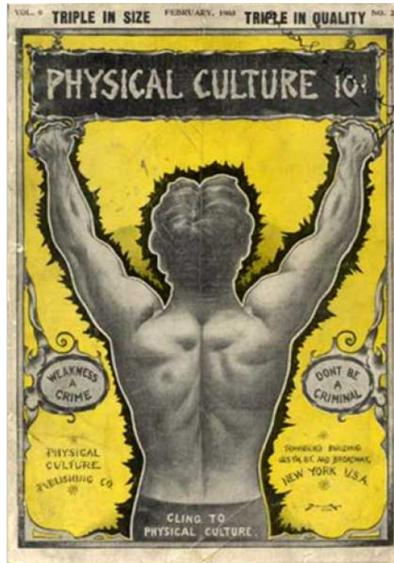
HOW TO GET FAT

Use Samose, Says Druggist Collins and Put on Good Flesh.

The almost universal interest in physical culture is the best evidence that can be offered as to the need of a simple and scientific method of making thin people fat, increasing strength and restoring health.

Athletics, when carried to an extreme, often result in straining the vital organs. How much better it would be for the average person to regain health, strength and flesh by using Samose. This flesh forming food is assimilated as soon as it enters the plate the food and extract the flesh forming elements. It builds up the muscles and rounds out the limbs into shapely plumpness.

Samose has been so successful in making thin people fat, and restoring the weak and run down to strength and health that Collins' Drug Co., the popular druggists, sell it under the personal guarantee to refund the money if it does not benefit.



FEEBLE WIVES, MOTHERS,

AND every weakly, sickly person can surely strengthen and build up the broken down system by taking

Richard's Teetotal Tonic.

Free from alcoholic dangers, physicians pronounce it the safest remedy ever sold, and it must be tried to know the perfect health and strength it will insure.

Source: 6/16/1880 [Newburyport Daily Herald](#)

Source Above & Left: [CoverBrowser.com](#)

Source: 12/10/1909 [Newburyport Daily News](#)



Source: CA State University Northridge, Betz' [A System of Physical Culture](#)

