

The Development of Character Through Athletics

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In looking back over the years we may very truthfully say that athletics have had a stormy career, and this has been especially true in educational institutions. In 1876 football became an intercollegiate sport in the United States though it had been accepted as such for many years in Canada and England. At First it was considered as a necessary evil, to be endured because of a desire of the students to compete against other institutions. The faculty refused to supervise or assist in the sports, and it was necessary for the students to carry on of their own volition. Somewhat later athletics became recognized as a means to develop brawn, and as the faculties were mainly concerned with the desire to develop mentality, sports received little encouragement from them. At this time the game had little interest for the spectators, and even though no admission was charged, the crowds were small. The players bought their own equipment, paid their own railway fares all for the fun of playing.

In the fall of 1890, six young men met in Springfield, Massachusetts at the Training School for Physical Directors. Without any correspondence or intercommunication these men from widely separated areas had come to the conclusion that athletics had a moral value, under certain circumstances. Most of these young men were preparing for the ministry as a life work. One had graduated from a seminary, another was a junior in another seminary, two were graduated from college in preparation, and one had been a Y.M.C.A. (YMCA) worker for some years. Each of these felt that there was a possibility of using athletics for the betterment of young men. One of these six was A. A. Stagg of Chicago University whose influence in Yale had been felt in his college life on the athletic field as well as off the field. He felt that the field of athletics was a better instrument in his hands for the building of character than preaching. A few years ago a newspaper said that A.A. Stagg was leaving athletics to take up the ministry. However, meeting him soon after this, I asked him how much truth there was in the statement. He made this answer, "If I could do nothing else, but to put out good athletic teams and to make fine athletes I would leave my work tomorrow. But so long as I can use athletics to make finer and better men, I will stick to my present work."

This had been his attitude before he came to Springfield and it has become deeper and more impressive as the years go by. Today he is called the dean of coaches and has been such for many years, due largely to his splendid influence in athletics.

Many think that there has been little or no progress made in this respect, but those who have been associated with athletics for years know the wonderful change that has taken place.