

COMMENTARY

What I Learned as a Physical Educator

Jerry Freischlag

All professions foster an identity among practitioners. Physical education is no different. How this identity influences and is expressed throughout one's life and lifestyle is a topic not seen in our literature. In this essay, I provide a perspective for those entering as well as those engaged in the profession to reflect on the scope of being a physical educator. I'll start with my beginning in the profession.

It has been over 60 years since I matriculated in college as a physical education major. My program constantly stressed having a professional attitude. This was to be reflected in our appearance, behavior, and language. We spent considerable time in performance-based classes. We wore uniforms. Our skills were tested to demonstrate mastery. We were not allowed to show our bellies. Instructors were great models. Their lessons became ingrained. My reward was a first position as a school PE teacher and coach. Eager for advancement and fortunate for mentorship from the first of several critical professionals in my career, I enrolled in a master's degree program at a major university. High expectations and scholarship were unwavering requirements. My advisor there, John Nixon, had a profound influence on the direction of my professional life. An enthusiasm for learning and pursuit of a career in higher education after completing 3 years as a high school teacher and coach brought me to a doctoral program led by Pete Everett and Ken Miller, both of whom took turns as president of our national organization, SHAPE America, then called the American Alliance for Health, Physical

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Education, Recreation, and Dance (AAHPERD). From them, I developed a commitment to four types of initiatives in my professional career:

- on and off-campus service
- program development
- research and writing for publication
- professional participation

Today's physical education majors preparing for a school career might not recognize their counterpart of the 1950–60s—my generation. Then, the physical educator was a generalist expected to teach all activities in a curriculum, coach any sport, and serve as the final word on related issues in school and community. Skills such as athletic training were acquired through publications from Cramer, a supplier of training products. Volunteer direction of events such as Punt, Pass, and Kick competitions each fall was expected, as were ancillary school roles seldom receiving more than minimal remuneration, if anything.

Starting in junior high, classes were separated for males and females in physical education, as were many college departments and facilities. Sports competition for females in school was in the form of occasional “play days.” Emphasis on physical fitness occurred in the form of “15 minutes of vigorous physical activity every day” and state-prescribed fitness testing and statewide fitness competitions through school physical education programs.

With Harvard President James Conant's influential writing of “The Education of American Teachers” in 1963 and the Russian launch of Sputnik, traditional practices were redirected. Fewer days and hours were scheduled for physical education. High value was placed on academics. Science and math emphasis pushed specialties into a corner. At the same time, Cooper's Aerobic Institute and Jackie Sorensen's development of aerobic dance gave impetus to cardiorespiratory activities and programs. Their efforts can be seen today in the lives of Americans. These developments created new industries for fitness-related specialists and have challenged school and college programs to keep pace.

The conceptualization of physical education began to change in the late 1960s. Heretofore, we were content to be an applied field of study and work. Stature around the tables in higher education was linked to disciplines—bodies of knowledge. Accordingly, cutting-edge thinkers searched to find a focus—movement, sport, exercise—to define physical education. Each focus has had advocates. Once these focuses were adopted as college curricula, new applications followed. Specializations prepared for a host of new career paths, of which school-linked employment was only one. The era’s generalists during this transition period eagerly tell stories of the narrow visions sometimes possessed by specialists under our umbrella.

Concurrent with this professional evolution have been youth sport specialization and yearlong “seasons.” While the results might questionably be higher level performances, the costs, both human and capital, have been excessive. These put pressures on schools and our practitioners. Education and physical educators have lost some of the control of athletics in schools and communities.

More recent decades have ushered in pursuits, some esoteric in nature, well beyond general programs of the past. These include rock climbing, kayaking, yoga, and ultra-marathons, among others. Yet the level of inactivity and the health of people today, especially young people, is disturbing. “Taking it easy” has been taken to heart.

In the past, school programs and our literature highlighted concomitant learnings such as creating safe spaces and feeling comfortable. These seem to have been pushed to the forefront, sometimes replacing core contributions of fitness and skill development. Substituting online and distance learning mediums in education might change our method and product in less desirable ways.

With the foregoing and personalized view of some of our profession’s changes, I will describe what these lessons have meant to me.

More Than a Teacher-Professor

I taught and coached for several years in a public school before a 32-year career as a college professor. It would have pleased my mentors to have known I fulfilled the four types of initiatives they encouraged and I embraced as a professional physical educator. In the early 1970s, I was fortunate to work with graduate student Kerry

Ellison, a 4-minute miler, as well as Rick McCarty in developing a Special Olympics program. I learned and enjoyed much from each. I was fortunate to work with those especially skilled as well as those with special needs.

Health and physical activity have been continuing parts of my lifestyle. I enjoy learning and participating in new sports and trying to see how my body responds to exercise in my eighth decade. I am pleased that my wife, daughter, and three sons live and enjoy physically active lifestyles. Endorsing the Y theme of body-mind-spirit, I have been a Y board member while also writing opinion pieces for newspapers on fitness information, school athletic issues, and values in sports. I served as a technical advisor for sport-related litigation for 15 years.

Bumps in the Road

Personal

I have needed resiliency from health setbacks. I have learned lifestyle cannot prevent all illnesses and I do my part to help medicine heal me. Exercise has helped bring me back from difficult times.

Professionally

As a Life Member of AAHPERD, now SHAPE America, and Phi Epsilon Kappa, I have followed philosophical and program changes. It is regrettable that some school instructional programs do not physically innervate or stimulate kids for good health; children are not required to shower after classes or practices and athletes are excused from academic requirements. Similarly, PETE programs have diminished to the point at which mastery has been replaced by students “experiencing” only performance-based subject matter and the physical educator as a model has been de-emphasized for those planning to enter our profession. Yet the tired old canard “those who can’t—teach and those who can’t teach—coach” no longer annoys me. I have learned as a physical educator to care for my body, to learn and engage in things new and challenging, and to be the go-to person in my community with questions for which my profession serves as a resource. And I’m glad for my decision to major in physical education.

These things I have found to be true:

1. Find and utilize the guidance of a respected professional as a mentor.
2. Aim high in your choice of professional preparation programs; not all are equal.
3. Establish how you want to frame your career in the profession.
4. Embrace the traditional tenets of physical education in your lifestyle.

What are these tenets, what should guide choice of undergraduate and graduate programs, and how might one benefit from a mentor?

Physical education influences the whole child—body, mind, and spirit. Our process educates through physical activity as well as of the physical. Effective professionals model what is taught. They are advocates and spokespersons for physical education in education programs. School programs are built as pyramids with instruction as the base, intramurals for interests, and athletics at the apex for the talented.

The choice of a professional program in higher education must blend personal resources with academic considerations. The latter should begin with a discussion with valued teachers or professors about programs' reputations. Due diligence can be pursued by learning about department faculty and supporting resources. Is there adequate disciplinary scope and diversity among faculty? Do full-time faculty cover the core areas of the curriculum? To what extent are faculty engaged in professional associations, scholarly activities, and student development? Does an emphasis in one compromise another? Is campus life one in which the prospective student can easily fit? Are there opportunities and support for involvement in clubs and interest groups? What are the retention rates and success of graduates?

The seriousness of entering this stage of a career cannot be over-emphasized. Choosing a program should not be conducted alone because of the varied offerings in our institutions, some of which might not be what they are advertised. Enter the mentor, a role proven of value in life's major decisions.

Two considerations may be interchangeable in their importance: Choose someone who has an interest in you and with whom you can easily converse. You will have questions to ask. Your mentor should have credibility from experience, background, and training. Once these deliberations are complete, a program chosen, and/or a career engaged, return to those who helped you along the way to express your appreciation.