Rational Gymnastics.

WM. SKARSTROM.

Gymnastics may be broadly defined as the practice of formal bodily movements for the purpose of improving the individual, considered as a member of civilized society. In order to accomplish this purpose, the movements should be well defined, as regards their bodily mechanism, and chosen and arranged with reference to the bodily functions. Only in so far as they tend to physical improvement, i. e., to the perfection of the body as an instrument of the mind, are they of any value. Gymnastics in this sense are a part of education in general, and of physical education in particular. Other conceptions of gymnastics it is not the purpose of this limited article to discuss.

What are then the particular directions in which this physical improvement is to manifest itself? Or in other words: What are the special aims and objects we wish to attain by a practice of gymnastic exercises? It is my purpose to try to answer this question, and also to describe briefly the methods by which those ends are most quickly and effectively gained.

1. The Hygienic Element. The conditions under which most of us live are not, to put it mildly, calculated to produce an ideal, but rather a deficient or even faulty physical development of the average individual. In our complex and somewhat artificial life, especially in the cities, our purely physical activity forms but a small proportion of our total activity. This means diminished work (and that under unfavorable conditions) for the great vital organs of the body with a consequent failure of those organs, and the functions they perform, to attain their greatest possible efficiency and power, and often leading to their impairment. Here, then, gymnastics have a place and furnish a means for the accomplishment of a purely hygienic purpose, namely, muscular exercise. On this the healthy activity of nearly all the organs of the body depends in a large measure. Especially is this the case with the organs concerned in the circulation of blood and lymph, the respiration, the digestion and excretion of waste products.

2. The Corrective Factor. The causes which lead to imperfect development and impaired efficiency of the physiological functions also tend to diminish the chances for normal development of the muscular and bony systems, too often with the result of producing faulty positions and abnormal relations of the parts of the body, and limited mobility in the joints. Such faulty anatomical relation of parts may be due to weak and untrained muscles, or to the lack of balance between antagonistic groups of strong, healthy muscles, or, finally, to the inability of the individual to form a mental concept of correct position. All this is especially true of the position and carriage of the head, chest, shoulders and back. Gymnastics may be made a very effective means to remedy these defects. By favoring a normal and harmonious development of the muscles, by obtaining and maintaining the full, legitimate amount of motion in the joints, they tend to correct already faulty postures or to prevent them from being acquired.

3. Coordination. Another fact which we are obliged to recognize is the lack of general bodily control in the average individual. This is due to an imperfect training of what is called the muscular sense, and shows itself in inability to assume a given position or to execute a given movement, even when there is no anatomical hindrance. This is often the case with the simplest movements, and usually is accompanied by a tendency to employ a greater number of muscles and joints than are needed. One sees a familiar example of this in the shambling gait and awkward movements of the untrained, over-grown boy, increased by his self-consciousness. Rational gymnastics should aim to give a more perfect control, especially in the smaller movements, such as occur in daily life, and the sum total of which make up what we call the "physical presence" of an individual.

These, then, are three of the most important aims of gymnastics. Let us now discuss the principles which should govern the selection and arrangement of gymnastic exercises and their application in practical class instruction.

As a form of bodily exercise, practiced for hygienic purposes, gymnastic work is particularly valuable, because it can be done at times and under conditions when no other form of exercise is possible. It is capable of being modified and adapted to the needs of the strongest as well as the weakest. It requires only a comparatively small amount of time and is not dependant on apparatus, although with this it