

IPHA History

Is the football scene too violent?

View from 1902

By Dr. Ronald Eckoff

Background

In 1887, Josiah F. Kennedy, MD, Secretary of the State Board of Health began publication of the *Iowa Health Bulletin*. It was a monthly publication for communication with local boards of health, other health organizations and practitioners and anyone else interested in public health. It continued as a monthly publication through 1909. After that it was a quarterly publication, usually with a specific topic. Each edition had 6,000-11,000 copies printed. The publication was discontinued in 1941.

A few months ago, Penny Leake, PhD, RN, Professor Emerita of Nursing, Luther College, contacted Jeneane Moody (Iowa Public Health Association Executive Director) to inquire about a home for a collection of the *Iowa Health Bulletin*. The collection was rescued by Luther College colleague, Nancy Maloney, PhD, RN, Professor Emerita of Nursing, when the college library decided to remove them from the shelves. The collection came to Dr. Leake in 2000. I am now the proud custodian of many issues of the monthly publications between 1902 and 1909, and most of the quarterly issues from 1910-1941. The item below was in the August 1902 issue.

Athletics

The following from a late member of the State Board of Health is timely and should receive careful consideration, especially from those in charge of our private and public institutions of learning. The number of persons killed or maimed annually through the abuses of football alone, if faithfully tabulated, would be shocking to our readers. The fault is not against the game itself but against the rowdiness too often practiced and condoned if not commended:

When we mention this subject we are aware that it is like running your cane into a hornet's nest – you immediately create such a buzz of the bees that ere you can explain your position, you are called an old fogy, and numerous expletives of like character.

Athletics properly cultivated and practiced, are hygienic and useful – when improperly practiced, are deleterious physically and morally. Take for instance the manly sport of football. Statistics, as far as obtained for the past season, give a result of nine killed and 171 badly injured: quite a serious mortality for the manly art in one season.

A recent writer of note calls this a gladiatorial sport, masquerading under the name of “Athletics.”

Worse than the deaths and injuries, however, he thinks are the immoral concomitants of the game as played, the gladiatorial spirit, the betting evils and the liquor drinking habits encouraged, and lastly the time wasted by students; to say nothing of the vicious imitation of the grown-ups by small colleges and school children. In a minor sense, the encouragement of noise-making, betting, obscenity and profanity amongst millions of children who practice the game.

I this day read of two rival medical colleges who kept up a fight for a whole day and had to be separated and sent to their rooms by a company of police. A noted Cuban statesman and educator, while recently visiting the educational institutions of this country, witnessed a game of football. He exclaimed: “You Americans send us missionaries to teach us Christianity and the practice of Christian virtues; who cry out against our bull fights, as degrading, cruel and immoral. We only kill and maim animals, while you destroy the flower of your young manhood.”

In the name of true athletics and gentlemanly sport, is it not time that those in charge of the great institutions of learning, insist that the gladiatorial exhibitions as practiced in the modern game of football be immediately changed; that its demoralizing influences upon the youth of our country be a once and forever obliterated. This course, and this only, will prevent a disgraceful example to the civilized world.

Though protective equipment has significantly changed since 1902, traumatic brain injuries still happen and are of particular concern among youth participants. The CDC offers information to coaches, athletes and parents through their [Heads Up: Concussions in Youth Sports](#) initiative.

For more information on injury prevention activities in Iowa, contact John Lundell, Deputy Director of the University of Iowa Injury Prevention Center john-lundell@uiowa.edu or 319.335.4458.

Submit content for considered inclusion in Public Health Matters to Jeneane Moddy at lowapha@gmail.com

Deadline for submissions for the Fall issue of PHM is 8.15.2014.