



Dr. Thomas has invested his life in the study and practice of physical culture. The Fitness Products Council of the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association named Thomas a "Quotable Authority on Fitness and Health." He is a Fulbright Scholar and an Assistant Professor of Health and Movement Science at Graceland College in Lamoni, Iowa.

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InOtherWords / Ed Thomas

Kalos Sthenos

Calisthenic comes from two Ancient Greek words that mean "beautiful strength." It emerged in American physical culture during the early-1800s, and described light exercises employed to maintain minimum physical well-being. By the late-1800s, calisthenic had become more vigorous, and was an integral part of the German, Swedish, Czechoslovakian and numerous other imported and domestic systems of physical training found throughout the United States.

Using only their body weight or hand-held tools like medicine balls, dumbbells, weighted wands and Indian clubs, people sometimes numbering into the thousands would exercise together in beautifully orchestrated drills. The rational progression, variety and precision of quality calisthenic training provided the strength, endurance and mobility for the complex and physically demanding off-the-ground and combatives training skills that also prospered in the United States during the "Golden Era" of physical training from around 1885 until around 1920 when, unfortunately for the USA, those highly evolved restorative and martial systems were denounced by mainstream America in favor of spectator sports and games.

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Turners were still active in Davenport, Iowa, when I was born there in late-1945. World War II renewed our national interest in fitness-based activities, and I lived within walking distance of three wonderful old gymnasiums filled with classical training equipment and instructors who still knew how to use it. From around the age of seven or eight, I began going to these gyms almost every night after school and in the summer. We practiced calisthenic, off-the-ground skills and martial training including wrestling and boxing.

It is difficult to imagine now that school physical education programs after World War II were often warrior-based. In my home state Iowa, for instance, activities like marching, calisthenic, mass boxing and wrestling, tumbling, posture training, weight training, combatives, obstacle courses and swimming were all recommended. More importantly, students were encouraged to carefully learn these skills rather than mindlessly perform them.

Military training today. In the early 1960s, around 60% of young men failed to qualify physically for military service.



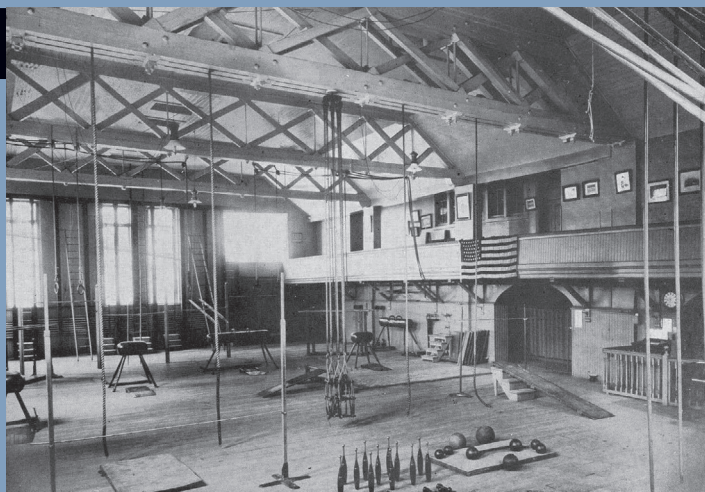
University of Iowa gymnasium in the 1920's

It was called the "Battle of the Systems" and, by the late-1920s, the relatively few people interested in calisthenic or its off-the-ground cousin "gymnastics" were often ridiculed.

Calisthenic, gymnastics and combatives quietly endured the inhospitable 1920s and 30s. The German-American Turners, for instance, built gymnasia and continued producing teachers. The

Much of the national interest in functional physical training that grew out of World War II began to diminish when the fighting stopped and the public started to focus again on spectator sports and games. School physical education programs eventually denounced calisthenic exercise, and national youth fitness levels began to deteriorate. By the time I was in high school in the early-1960s, around 60% of the young American men failed to qualify for military service. In the early-1950s, a widely publicized test of basic core strength showed that around 58% of children and youth ages 6-19 were unfit. In spite of these alarming statistics, many if not most school physical education leaders continued to argue that a sports and games focus would solve the problem. Weight training, calisthenic and gymnastics were often ignored or rejected outright.

Cosmetic fitness began to emerge and prosper in the late-1960s, and it has recently given way to the rebirth of "functional fitness" that employs many of the older and classical physical training methods, material and motivators. The medical community, fitness club industry, martial arts instructors and forward-thinking human performance experts have fueled much of the progress, but the mainstream physical education profes-



ABOVE: An typical gymnasium of the late 19th and early 20th century. BELOW: A humorous print depicting people of all shapes and sizes working out.

sion continues to denounce calisthenic and group exercise. This is unfortunate because schools are the ideal environment in which to teach it.

Mass calisthenic training requires tremendous attention to detail, precise formations and carefully structured commands. Students must learn the theoretical value of the drills, and how to teach as well as perform them. In groups larger than twenty, it is best to teach from an elevated platform with student assistants available to make corrections. Outstanding students should



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be molded into platform instructors. Good command voice, personal fitness and a thorough knowledge of calisthenic drills are all important teacher qualities. Most of the useful calisthenic books were written before the 1920s, but some of the later Army physical training manuals written before 1980 have much to offer.

The martial arts school is an ideal training environment for calisthenic, and many instructors are incorporating fitness instruction into their programs. Excellent calisthenic equipment is now available, and some great teachers are appearing as interest in calisthenic continues to grow. Those wishing to lead the way can learn much from studying past systems of physical training. The pioneers that originally shaped calisthenic in the USA are long gone, but it is still possible to find some great written resources. Hatha Yoga, Tai Chi Chuan and just about any other rational system of physical training with only body weight or hand held tools could be classified technically as calisthenic, but the true test of a system's worth is in its physical, mental and moral benefits. To fully link itself to its ancient roots, a system must be more than simply a series of movements. In other words, it must be Kalos Sthenos.

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