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Marjorie Fume

Are Your Children Overplayed?

"The tendency nowadays is for the serious instruction of children in sport. At an early age many become accomplished athletes." This quotation is the text of an article by Mr. F. A. M. Webster, in the "Royal Magazine" whose remarks we have adapted in considering the same query from the Dominion point of view

ARE children overplayed? The question needs a deal of answering. Long ago, when we were children, we made and played our own games by the light of nature and in accordance with the degree of our own inventive faculties. The children of to-day crave instruction in the technicology of athletics, swimming, tennis, and other strenuous pastimes, which were not properly considered "games" for children in the days of our childhood.

Active participation in competitive sport was, in fact, withheld until the schools had claimed us. Even then the matter was not taken seriously in the preparatory stage of our education. How things have changed! The speeding up of school education and the wider cult of competition in sport have both set their seal upon the present generation.

Indeed, children nowadays take part eagerly and efficiently in public competition, and their photographs get into the papers.

It is true that the youngster who gains too great or too early success, and perhaps gets a little newspaper boom of its own, is apt to become precocious; but, whatever the parents' feelings may be, the faces of our scholastic authorities are still sternly set against the public exploitation of youthful talent, and therein lies our saving grace. It is true, also, that some fond and foolish parents forget that early success is bound to be ephemeral, if it is developed to the stage where the naturally gifted child is turned into an infant prodigy.

THEN again the child's own instinct turns it against specialisation and undue concentration upon any one phase of sport. It is the inclination of every healthy-minded child to flit from game to game, as a butterfly from flower to flower. The normal child does not mind how well or how badly it may play so long as it enjoys the game and, without knowing it, finds a means of working off its own superabundant energy.

Every child seeks change, and until the cranks prevail and that very natural, very healthy desire is educated out of the youngsters there is no fear that our children will be overplayed.

In the process of initiating many children of preparatory school age

into the mysterious first principles of athletics, cricket and football, it is found that they very soon tire of what they are doing, and want to try something else. In other words, the average child would rather play at games than practise them seriously in the competitive spirit.

If children are allowed to follow their own inclinations no possible harm can befall them; but, in this respect, parents are very often the worst offenders. The man who has won his place in Ranfurly and Plunkett shield matches, to say nothing of champions who gained "All Black" honours, is dead keen that his son shall attain equally high honours. He, therefore, bids him concentrate his thoughts upon the game in which he himself has proved super-excellent. In one case out of a hundred the boy follows in his father's footsteps; but normally, the parent's over-insistence upon the importance of his own pet particular pigeon so bores the child that it turns its attention to some other branch of sport.

FORTUNATELY the present generation of games-masters understands child psychology and realises the limitations of the growing youngsters. The whole system of sport at our secondary schools is based, therefore, upon Kipling's creed that "The ship is more than the crew." Each boy is taught to play for the honour of his side, and the individual who is out to make a name for himself does not find favour.

That is why team games, such as cricket, football, hockey, swimming, and basket-ball are still so much more popular at our schools than tennis, or golf, in which the individual has a greater chance to shine alone.

Our secondary schools system of sport is not all that it might be. Boys are expected to play all the standard games, and alternative recreations are the exception rather than the rule. For example, a great many boys nowadays have no affection for cricket, and others small aptitude for football.

At the present time there is a distinct and very proper inclination to teach children to play efficiently and to practise proper methods from the very earliest age. The result of this is that the standard of performance has improved very con-

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