# Getting Physical: The Rise of Fitness Culture in America [Book Review]

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## Abstract:

A review of the book "Getting Physical: The Rise of Fitness Culture in America" by Shelly McKenzie.

**Keyword:** book review | exercise | fitness

## Article:

When it comes to exercise, most people think of the meaning of "fitness" as a forgone conclusion. Shelly McKenzie's *Getting Physical* challenges this assumption. McKenzie questions historiography that positions postwar physical fitness as essential constructs subject to periods of "boom and bust." Instead, she argues for "a continuum in Americans' interest in and practice of exercise" (p. 6). Focusing on white, middle- and upper-class Americans, she specifically argues that affluence and fears about diminished physicality shaped fitness. McKenzie's insightful work shows how fitness "is constantly being reexamined" in relation to "developments in scientific research, trends in popular culture, and health promotion policies" (p. 178).

McKenzie begins by recounting the government's emphasis on "total fitness" (not just physical). She credits Eisenhower's 1950s President's Council on Youth Fitness for paving the way for future *physical* fitness programs, such as Kennedy's President's Council on Physical Fitness. McKenzie also considers concerns over the physical capacities of U.S. soldiers stemming from Cold War anxieties. Furthermore, she delves into gendered constructions of "health," considering the 1960s stigmas of women's obesity and men's cardiac health. McKenzie also outlines how commercialism (i.e., Nike) entwined with ideals of spirituality and self-help gave rise to the 1970s running boom. Finally, she examines the 1980s desire for outward toughness (especially in men) and aesthetic appeal, which along with social benefits, brought people to community gyms, clubs, and fitness centers. Over-all, McKenzie presents a convincing case that fitness has often had less to do with health and more to do with historical contexts and culturally constructed ideals.

*Getting Physical* benefits from strong primary sources. Drawing on the visual and print media, advertisements, government propaganda, and instructional health pamphlets, McKenzie shows that the culture of fitness permeated upper-class society. For example, in her second chapter, she uses Jack LaLanne's television show and Debbie Drake's *How to Keep Your Husband Happy*, articles from *Good Housekeeping*, and documents from the President's Council's to examine how a "new exercise media culture sprouted during the last years of the 1950s" (p. 55).

McKenzie demonstrates a strong understanding of postwar American history. She links her analysis with Elaine Tyler May's work on domestic life for white, middle- and upper-class families in the postwar era. She draws on Lizabeth Cohen to show that fitness became a necessity in the postwar era because of overabundant lifestyles, specifically attached to Americans' focus on material goods and consumerism as a way to promote "the supremacy of the American political system over the Soviet one" (p. 41). Further, she connects the nation's growing concerns over the "cardiac crisis" within Michael Kimmel's "crisis of manhood," showing in the third chapter that the escalation of heart disease-related illness for men came at a time "when gender roles were in flux and cultural critics feared that the American male was in decline" (p. 86).

*Getting Physical* is also situated within physical culture historiography, drawing on scholars such as Clifford Putney, Nancy Struna, Jan Todd, and James C. Whorton. However, in this area McKenzie may overstate the importance of her case. She claims that in the three decades after World War Two "the American population at large struggled to reconcile the physical needs of their bodies with an environment that had made them largely irrelevant." Yet, this is precisely the dilemma Muscular Christians dealt with before the turn of the twentieth century. It may be over zealous to say that in the 1950s "the solution to this problem was the invention of exercise" (p. 2) when Thomas W. Higginson and Catharine Beecher discovered the same solution significantly earlier.

Furthermore, McKenzie's focus on white, middle- and upper-class Americans represents the most obvious absence of *Getting Physical*. In her introduction, McKenzie argues that black Americans were more likely to enjoy team sports, rather than join health clubs, because they presented "a path to potential financial success" (p. 10). Her mention of why black Americans were underrepresented in exercise movements is an interesting notion, yet she does not flesh this claim out, instead focusing only on a lack of fitness opportunities, such as the limited number of YMCAs. Only focusing on unequal opportunities is troubling as McKenzie seems to allude that black Americans were not exercising. Additional scholarship may be called for to further understand "the cultural baggage we have attached to the practice of exercise" with regard to race and racism (p. 9).

Even with these critiques, *Getting Physical* has a lot to offer sport historians and scholars of the second-half of the twentieth century. McKenzie points to an under examined cultural phenomenon, providing new and useful interpretations. There is much to be gained in *Getting Physical*, even as there remain unanswered questions to be worked out.

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