A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

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Training of athletes

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A paper read before the Abernethian Society of St. Bartholomew's Hospital

There are a great many absurd misconceptions associated with training of athletes. Surely none more absurd than the fanciful importance with which certain articles of food are invested. To this day one hears of things "good or bad for training", "things good or bad for the wind". I am sure that many oarsmen believe that the whole art and secret of training is, to use their own phrase, "to stuff as much beef and mutton into them as ever they can and then go on the water to work it into them". They are trying to put a quart of wine into a pint bottle.

Observe the look of consternation with which such men eye a few inches of jam tart! Such forbidden aliments are avoided on the principle that respiratory power is obtainable from special articles of diet, an idea which realises the extreme of absurdity when we are solemnly told that mutton is better than beef for wind and roast better than broiled!

"The practice of runners drinking half a pint of champagne or a stiff brandy and soda immediately before leaving the dressing room is a familiar one"

If I were asked to put a finger upon what I regarded as the fundamental error of training dietetics I should select the restriction that is put upon the amount of fluid which a man may take. We never think it necessary when hungry to refrain from eating, when tired to refrain from resting, when cold to refrain from warming, then why refuse to drink when thirsty, a requirement so natural and springing from causes so apparent? That is thirst which is the result of the diminution of fluids of the body and which is the exponent of its demand for their replacement. Well, there appears to be a notion that it is solids only which conduce to strength and that all moisture and even moist food is injurious or in some way objectionable.

Regarding diet, there is little more to advise than the avoidance of heavy meals within two hours and a half at least of exercise, and the maxim that cross-country runners go on of " running a little hungry" may well be followed. We should, I think, contradict the usual principle of heavy clogging breakfasts, the weight of which may well oppress anyone of ordinary digestion the rest of the day. The late dinner at about 7 p.m., when the athletic part of the day is over, should be the heaviest meal.

I think the question of alcohol in training might be considered. I do not include beer, but the more fiery liquors. I am glad to observe that there is a growing tendency to realise that healthy young men are best without stimulants, although a bottle of champagne or a few glasses of port can work wonders when a man is a "bit through." But I am prejudiced against alcohol as a routine in the dietary, nor should we encourage the fanciful regulations of professional trainers who allow to walkers two glasses of wine per diem and to boxers the same amount, but to the former sherry and to the latter port!

Second wind and "bad time" in Marathon running

Second-wind is an extraordinary phenomenon, the existence of which in long-distance runners is as certain as its causation is obscure. It is almost as if a big new supply of energy had been tapped.

During a discussion on this subject, Mr. Spencer Phillips advanced a hypothesis, and together we have elaborated the following. At the beginning of violent exertion the heart-beat and respirations are accelerated, but insufficiently to give the rapidly metabolising tissues a full supply of oxygen. On this account CO_2 accumulates. When this accumulation reaches a certain point the cardiac and respiratory centres are by its presence stimulated and increased activity results and therefore increased oxygen to the body generally.

It would follow from this that distress could be prevented or at least delayed by insuring a vigorous action of the heart before the exercise starts. The administration of alcohol and caffeine would be indicated on this principle, and the practice of runners drinking half a pint of champagne or a stiff brandy and soda immediately before leaving the dressing room is a familiar one.

The expression, "a bad time," is closely associated with second-wind. It is a phenomenon encountered in feats of endurance such as a 24-hours' walk, a Marathon race, a Channel swim and so on, during which some period of the feat, variable in the case of different men but remarkably constant for each individual, he seems to go to pieces, often quite suddenly. Those who look after long-distance men are well acquainted with their man's bad time, are on the watch for it and are quite well aware that it is only a question of coaxing him over his temporary distress by threats, abuse, flattery, or such material encouragement as champagne. Can we explain this on the supposition that muscles, as a rule, never perform their complete contraction, but that, at some period of excessive stimulation, they will do their extra little bit; or is the phenomenon entirely a mental one?

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