

# The Physical Education Hall of Shame

• NEIL F. WILLIAMS •

**A**t the heart of our physical education curricula is usually a configuration of activities and games that we present to our students for the purpose of achieving the ultimate goals of physical (motor skills and fitness), emotional, cognitive, and affective development of the child. We are, as a profession, attempting to assist our students in the development of the unity of their minds and bodies to enable them to live as healthy and productive adults in our society.

Over my 23 years in the field of physical education, I've observed that several of the most popular and widely used activities and games at the heart of our curricula have many features and traits which are contrary to accepted practices of good physical education teaching—either they are patently dangerous, have minimal participation by the majority of the students (Klesius, 1988), have limited physical activity, require little training or pedagogical skill to teach (Faucette, McKenzie, & Patterson, 1990), barely promote any of our major goals, or single students out for potential embarrassment in front of their classmates. It is in the hope of eliminating these types of activities and games (and the inappropriate and misguided thinking that goes with them) from our curricula, that the Physical Education Hall of Shame (PEHOS) has been established.

After giving the matter and the potential candidates a great deal of

thought, it has been decided that the following games will be declared as "Charter Inductees," with all of the rights and privileges pertaining. They are presented in alphabetical order because it would be impossible to establish a hierarchy of "quality."

## Hall of Shame Inductees

■ *Dodgeball*. PEHOS is not the first to decry a game which has as its main focus the attempt to inflict pain, harm, injury, and embarrassment on one's opponents (Zakrajsek, 1986). It is unfortunately a staple, if not the backbone, of many school programs and may have done our profession more harm than any other single factor. Over the years it has been called more descriptive names, such as "Bombardment," "Murderball," "Killerball," or "Poisonball." This is a very popular game which some children (typically the highly skilled) love to play.

Generally speaking, the game is a litigation action waiting to happen. At most, about half of the students really play—the rest hide in the farthest reaches of the gym. There is no denying that the game involves throwing, catching, running, thinking, teamwork, and strategy. However, there has to be a better way to do it than to endanger the health and well-being of our students—not to mention the security of our jobs. This game is usually played until someone gets hit in the head. At

that point, the teacher decides that the game might be dangerous and stops it temporarily. Therefore, it is not surprising that dodgeball is a PEHOS Charter Inductee.

■ *Duck, Duck, Goose*. This circle chase game, usually played with primary grade children, involves one student selecting another to chase him or her. While the "ducker" is making the selection for the "goose," the other children are forced to sit still while having their heads "tapped." Once the goose is picked, he or she is faced with the unlikely prospect of jumping up and trying to catch the duck who has a running head start. The two of them race around the perimeter of the circle, with the duck trying to get back to the goose's original spot before being caught by the goose. The task for the goose is nearly impossible, but usually the goose is encouraged by the incessant high-decibel screaming of the other students, who have little else to do. The failing goose now becomes the ducker, and the game continues in this pattern.

In this game, it is entirely likely that at least half of the students in the class will never be picked (and consequently will never move from their spots on the floor, except to spin in circles on their backsides during the entire game), and generally, about five students do all of the "playing." Friends usually pick friends, but some students are occasionally picked by the duckers just

to see them fail and be ridiculed. With minimal student participation time, an almost impossible task to complete, and minimal activity for those who do participate, Duck, Duck, Goose is a unanimous choice for the PEHOS.

■ *Giants, Elves, and Wizards.* A modern version of the more basic "Crows and Cranes" chase/capture scenario, this game is now quite widely played in physical education classes. The concept is that in every round, each of two teams assumes the role of one of the three title characters (each of whom has "power" over one of the remaining two characters and is also "overpowered" by the remaining one of the other two characters). The more "powerful" group then chases its potential victims back to a safety zone in an attempt to capture them. Captured players become part of their captors' team and successive rounds are played, with players changing groups as they are captured, until one team captures all of the class members and "wins."

The game is supposed to teach students creative movement (in their portrayal of the title characters), develop anaerobic fitness (from the sprinting), improve decision-making skills (in students' choices to chase or be chased), and enhance group cooperation skills (through the groups' cooperative choice of which characters to assume at what time). In fact, most of the time spent on this activity—about 98 percent—is spent explaining all of the confusing rules and in the huddles where students choose their characters. In the course of a typical game of 15 to 20 minutes, students get to play about eight to ten rounds. In each of those rounds, students are anaerobically active for about two seconds for an active participation time factor of less than 2 percent.

Is the game fun? Sure! Do the students enjoy playing it? Yes, they do! Is there a better way we could accomplish all of this? If you think that this kind of game is worth-

while, then at least choose a more basic type of tag or chase activity where the participation time factor is somewhat closer to 50 percent and the students can actually understand all of the rules.

■ *Kickball.* Physical educators often begin to play and teach this soccer/baseball combination in their classes as early as kindergarten. It helps reinforce many aspects of baseball (running to bases, fielding, throwing, batting) and soccer (kicking a moving object strategically), and the students generally seem to enjoy playing. They enjoy the game so much, in fact, that as early as the second grade, we can also observe them playing it by themselves, without any adult supervision, during their recess periods. They seem to be perfectly capable of organizing teams, establishing a field, and working their way through the game without any help at all. Why, then, do we insist on teaching this game in our physical education classes all the way through secondary school?

Wilson (1976) observed that in a typical kickball game, more than one third of the children never caught the ball and more than one half of the children never threw the ball, and a highly disproportionate number of these uninvolved children were females. If we consider additional negative features such as putting the batter on display for embarrassment in front of all of the rest of the class, a participation time factor of 5 percent for most of the players (a few strong players dominate the field and the rest of the players bat about once every 15 minutes), and the opportunity to get players "out" by hitting them as hard as possible with a thrown ball, this game surely qualifies for PEHOS.

■ *Musical chairs.* This is a classic "elimination" game, not unlike Simple Simon in concept, in which students supposedly develop their listening abilities, thinking skills, and quickness. In the gym, musical chairs is often played with hula-hoops (instead of chairs), and the

students also can move in a particular locomotor pattern or practice a sports skill (i.e., soccer dribbling) while the music plays. The last student to find a hoop when the music stops is sent out of the game.

What usually happens is that the least skilled or least attentive students are the first to be eliminated, and then they spend the rest of the time it takes to produce a "winner" sitting on the floor as "losers" with little to do but watch their classmates. Elimination games are self-defeating, because the students who are in the greatest need of skill development are immediately banished, embarrassed, and punished, and then given no opportunity to improve. The next time they play, those students will be first out again. The average participation time factor for students in this game is about 50 percent (which is not bad), but for some students, participation time is over 90 percent while for the students who need the most practice, participation time is generally less than 10 percent. While some elements of the game have merit, we must find a way to increase the amount of participation for everyone to higher levels.

■ *Relay races.* There are some teachers who believe that relay races are a wise use of physical education time: they enable students to practice skills, promote teamwork, teach students to follow rules, and the students "love" them. The PEHOS Charter Induction Committee sees it differently.

Usually, a relay race takes about six to ten minutes to run when including the time it takes to make fair teams, set up the race and equipment, explain the task and rules, actually do the race itself, calm the students down when it's over, and move on to the next activity. During that time, each student "goes" once with a turn that might last 30 seconds—of the average eight-minute race, a student is likely to be active for, at the most, 6 percent of the time spent on the activity.

If useful sports or motor skills are involved at all, and often they are not, the students are asked to perform them under stress and in front of 80 percent of the class who have little else to do but watch and make fun of their classmates' mistakes. And woe is the student who does make a mistake, because he or she has to go back and do the task over again—the "right" way. Since the teamwork aspect is only centered around who "won" and who "lost," what values are really being taught?

■ *Steal the Bacon (STB)*. STB is a venerable sideline game in which two players at a time (one from each of two teams) compete against each other in the center of the playing area in front of the watchful eyes of all of their screaming teammates (vaguely reminiscent of Roman gladiator contests). The teacher assigns numbers to all players which ensures that everyone will get a fair share of playing time, and the team with the highest number of points "wins." The game purports to enhance competitive strategies—feinting, deception, quickness, and agility—while promoting a team concept.

While the students are concerned with which team has "won" or "lost," how can a physical education activity which has none of its participants active more than approximately 5 percent of the time promote any of its objectives? With such minimal levels of participation time, the great potential for embarrassment (as two students perform under pressure in front of the entire class), and with physical activity almost totally absent, STB in this form easily qualifies for PEHOS.

What emerges from all of this is a picture of what physical education often is, but should not be, and perhaps some indications of factors we must consider when planning games and activities which are at the core of our teaching. Some of the less important characteristics of these Hall of Shame games and activities are:

tasks which are extremely difficult to achieve; directions which are too complex and involved; activities which the students can and will do totally on their own; encouraging and/or ignoring breaking the rules; and an overemphasis on win-

***In Duck, Duck, Goose, at least half of the students in the class will never be picked, friends usually pick friends, and generally, about five students do all of the playing.***



Photo by Faith Ferris

ning and losing. These are bad enough, but they would have to be considered minor when compared with the elements of popular physical education activities and games which have necessitated the establishment of the PEHOS in the first place. Such elements include:

- absence of the purported objectives of the activity or game;
- potential to embarrass a student in front of the rest of the class;
- focus on eliminating students from participation;
- overemphasis on and concern about the students having "fun";
- lack of emphasis on teaching motor skills and lifetime physical fitness skills;
- extremely low participation time factors;
- organizing into large groups

where getting a "turn" is based on luck or individual aggressiveness or competitiveness; and

- extremely high likelihood for danger, injury, and harm.

Students' class participation time factors must be maximized, and a minimum of 50 percent for all of the students in every class is suggested as a guideline for acceptable planning and teaching. Furthermore, when there is a high level of participation, there is a much lower chance for student embarrassment because each student is too busy working to be concerned about the performances of others.

"Fun" is both the boon and the bane of our profession. Gross motor physical activity, in almost any form, is enjoyable for our students, and we do not need to be overly worried that they are or are not enjoying themselves in class. It is fairly certain that fun is not a major consideration when planning classes in other fields of study, and we should not judge or define the value or quality of what we do in physical education classes by whether or not the students have a "good time." If our lessons are well-conceived and planned, and if they reach constructively toward the attainment of our ultimate goals, students will automatically have a "good time," and they will actually derive all those important benefits we claim to promote.

We must eliminate, as much as

possible, the elements of undue danger and harm from our teaching. While many physical education activities and games do and should involve some elements of risk taking, we must also make intelligent decisions and plans, and not teach games or activities which promote and encourage our students to humiliate and injure one another. It is enough dishonor to be in the Hall of Shame, but it is better than the possibility of being in court on the wrong end of a lawsuit.

It is incumbent upon us, as professional physical educators, to structure and teach our classes with the intention and purpose of achieving our ultimate goals. We are not the only discipline in the schools which emphasizes emotional, cognitive, and affective development—all subject areas have these considerations as goals. However, we are the only discipline to include the development of physical fitness and gross motor skills as goals; therefore, these two elements must be present in all of our planning and teaching if we are going to keep ourselves from being enshrined in the Physical Education Hall of Shame.

*Author's note: If you know of an activity or game that should be inducted into the Physical Education Hall of Shame, please send a brief description and supporting evidence to the author.*

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## PROGRAM...from page 35

to promote learning in these domains. Competitive activities are offered to students of similar ability and those interested in measuring their skill level in relation to others.

4. *Ample learning time.* All students have equal opportunities for learning and participating in the program. Learning and participating opportunities are the right of all students.

Developmentally appropriate physical education increases the likelihood of enjoyable, challenging, and successful learning for all students. Teachers need to continue or begin to think in terms of the children they are teaching and not what activity can keep a class of children "busy, happy and good" (Placek, 1982). Our instruction should be geared to meet age group needs while allowing for the individual differences within any group of children.

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