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High School Gym Class PTSD

I thought it was behind me, but a New York Times article on chin-ups brought it all back!

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If I thought my high school physical education coaches were still alive, I'd write them all demand letters:

I want the C's you gave me every semester changed to A's. In so doing, my GPA would be raised to where it should have been. I was an athlete, even if you didn't know it.

Yes, I'm aware that 46 years have gone by since I graduated from De Anza High School in Richmond, Calif. But I'm irked.

My latent outrage was sparked by an article in last Sunday's New York Times Magazine titled "Below the Bar," which was about why some people can do pull-ups and chin-ups and others can't. It takes a lot of physical strength to be able to put your hands on a raised bar and lift your body upward until your chin passes the bar. Just to be clear, a pull-up requires an overhand grip and a chin-up an underhanded one.

In high school, I was a chin-up champ, for whatever good it did me.

(More: [Why I Went AWOL From Boot Camp](#))

The Drill of It All

Today's generation may be shocked to learn that P.E. was once a required course in public high schools. As with English or algebra, you got a letter grade from A to F based on how well you performed. At De Anza High, P.E. class took place five days a week and was usually held outside. First-period P.E. started at 8 a.m. In Northern California, winter mornings could be surprisingly cold.

The only time we didn't have to put on our gym clothes was Nov. 22, 1963, when JFK was shot. I'm surprised the coaches didn't tell us to man-up and hit the lockers.

There were four activities at my school, depending on the season: softball, football, basketball and track. As a small, skinny kid, I didn't fare well in gladiator-type sports. Sadly, soccer wasn't an option. That was considered a socialist activity played in Eastern bloc countries. (The 1960s, remember, were the height of the cold war.) Only girls were allowed to play volleyball. That was too sissy a sport for the sons of GI's. I had balance and stamina, so tennis and ice hockey would have suited me well. But we didn't have them.

For me, P.E. was boot camp without the laughs. Our coaches had been drill sergeants in World

War II and the Korean War. They took pity on no one. As class started, we had to line up in rows and perform military-type exercises, like jumping jacks, push-ups and squats. Our coaches liked to do surprise jock strap inspections. If yours was at home in the dryer, you were publicly called out for it.

Rainy Days and S&M Volleyball

If it was raining too hard to go outside, class was held in the gym. On those days we played a version of dodgeball befitting *The Hunger Games*. Boys were divided into two teams facing each other. The rules were simple: Hurl volleyballs at one another across the lacquered floor. If you got hit, you were out, until the game got down to one person. But if you got hit and didn't go to the sidelines — and the coach saw you stay in the game — you had to take off your shirt and assume a duck-and-cover position center court. Then, when the coach blew his whistle, everybody got to pummel your bare back with volleyballs.

It wasn't just the coaches who encouraged violence. My parents once went to see the school principal after a student began picking on my brother, who was on the basketball team. The principal said he'd set up a boxing match in the gym so the boys could "settle their differences." He canceled his fight plans after my outraged parents told him just where he could put those boxing gloves.

Passing the Bar

Each semester our coaches administered a fitness test, which determined our final grade. We were judged on how far we could throw a baseball, run a long and short dash, and how successfully we could block an oncoming linebacker. I didn't stand a chance.

But there was one part of the fitness test that I *could* excel in: chin-ups!

For some reason, those came easily to me. I could do 10 — far more than my peers. Many young jocks were lucky if they could complete one or two. The football players looked like overloaded freight elevators as they struggled to pull their bulky bodies upward, emitting painful groans before dropping to the ground, defeated.

Unfortunately, I could not count on chin-ups alone to raise my grade above a C.

The Truth About Chin-Ups

Pull-ups and chin-ups, according to the Times article, are pretty much the domain of boys and men. Even with training, most females can't do them. Males naturally have stronger biceps and latissimus dorsi, the large back muscle that is activated during the exercise. I didn't have large muscles, but what I did have was strength, low body fat and shorter stature — the essential combination for chin-ups, as the Times explained. One thing you don't want to have when doing chin-ups is long arms. "The longer the limb, the more of a disadvantage," the article said, claiming it has to do with our bodies' "combination of levers."

I wish my high school coaches could read this line from the piece: "The Marines say a male recruit should be able to do at least three pull-ups or chin-ups." Apparently I was Marine Corps material and then some! So why did they define me as a wimp?

Six months ago I decided to lose 10 pounds. To guide me, I hired a personal trainer, Tyler. Through weights, aerobic activity and diet, I accomplished my goal.

When I started my regimen, I went to the unassisted chin-up bar to see if I still had it in me. I didn't.

But that was then. Yesterday I did 10!

"I don't know of many 64-year-olds who can do that!" I boasted to Tyler, who was watching me. "I don't know many 16-year-olds who can!" he replied.

I guess I'll forget about the demand letter to my high school coaches. The look on Tyler's face was better than any A.