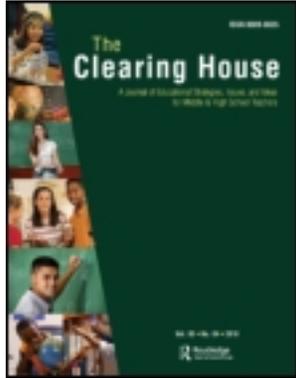


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### Physical Education

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# Physical Education

STEVE SHERWOOD

**Abstract:** This personal narrative explores bullying from a victim's perspective, relating experiences with bullying in a high school physical education class and reflecting on the long-lasting effects of such treatment.

**Keywords:** Air Force Academy, coach, bullying, fitness tests, victim, muscular development, pegboard, Martin Luther King Junior, Mahatma Gandhi, pacifist, alpha male, speed reading

*Editors' Note:* In the past few years, *TCH* has published a number of articles describing the research on bullying in our public schools and suggesting a range of strategies that teachers might employ to reduce this troublesome and persistent phenomenon. Readers might find such *TCH* articles as these especially helpful: "What Teachers and Schools Can Do to Control the Growing Problem of School Bullying" by Morgan (85, no. 5, 2012), and "Preventing Bullying and Harassment of Sexual Minority Students in Schools" by Bishop and Casida (84, no. 4, 2011), "Bullying and School Liability—Implications for School Personnel" by Essex (84, no. 5, 2011), and "Blocking the Bullies" by Terry (83, no. 3, 2010). This present article is a personal recounting of bullying the author experienced as a high school student, providing educators with a student's point of view to remind them that the effects of bullying are serious and may last a lifetime.

With a flick of his thick wrist, Coach taught me to pay attention and drew the year's first blood.

The volleyball rebounded from my face and into his hands as if he had bounced it off a wall. I wiped blood from the corner of my mouth and blinked hard a few times. A moment later, as if to let me know it was nothing personal, Coach flung the ball into the nose of another unwary freshman.

In our high school, the term *physical education* carried several meanings. It meant the normal lessons we learned in the gymnasium from Coach, but it also meant

the harsher lessons learned from classmates in the confines of the locker room or behind the gym after school. These lessons had links, forged and reinforced by the school's color-coded taxonomy of male physical education (PE) students. Feats of strength, speed, and coordination determined whether each of us would receive white, red, blue, or gold shorts.

White shorts went to boys who lacked the muscular development to climb a rope 40 feet to the gym ceiling, to climb a pegboard, to run a mile in under seven minutes, to run 100 yards in under 14 seconds, or to do a respectable number of push-ups, pull-ups, sit-ups, or bar dips.

Red shorts were a step above white, going to boys with average builds and some athletic skills.

Blue shorts went to boys, usually varsity athletes, with impressive wads of useful muscle and tufts of facial hair, who could climb a rope with their arms alone and speed along the track.

Gold shorts went to those rare creatures—two in the school's history—who set the standard for the rest, the demigods and superheroes of the football field and basketball court. Of the 30 boys in our 9th-grade PE class, 2 earned blue shorts, 20 earned red, and 8 earned white.

A brief description of my physique that year will make obvious the color of shorts I wore. At age 14, I had hair on my head, but nowhere else that counted. I had the apple-cheeked complexion of a preschooler, and adults often told my parents what a nice, cute, apple-cheeked boy they had. Some of the girls I liked also thought I was cute and nice in an apple-cheeked sort of way, and they continued to think of me in this way years later, long after I developed muscles and facial hair.

At five-feet, four-inches tall and weighing in at 125 pounds, I started my freshman year as a victim. Bullies took one look at my round face and my gleaming mouthful of orthodontia and demanded my lunch money. I hated to give in without a fight, but my resistance did not change the outcome—empty pockets and lips cut ragged on my expensive braces.

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So I ate lunch in the library, where during 40-minute increments I read William Hickling Prescott's 1,300-page opus *History of the Conquest of Mexico, History of the Conquest of Peru*. It's true I had an interest in New World history, but I had a greater interest in avoiding the daily muggings.

There was no avoiding physical education entirely, though.

For the first two weeks of PE, while we took Coach's battery of fitness tests to determine the color of shorts we would wear, the strongest boys practiced an equal-opportunity brand of bullying. They picked on anyone who would take it. One budding felon, a football player named Rick, kept a supply of baggies in his locker. Each day, instead of visiting a urinal, he simply urinated in a baggie, closed it, and hurled it over the adjacent lockers. Rick was a junior varsity linebacker, who could climb the rope to the gym ceiling with only his arms, so he had nothing to fear from the boys at surrounding lockers—any one of whom would take a baggie in the face sooner than take him on. We dressed fast, eyes cast upward, ready to evade his missiles. But each day someone would look away in time to get a drenching and suffer the laughter of those lucky enough to be dry.

The fitness tests went well for most of the boys in the class, even some of Rick's victims, but less well for a few of us. Desperate to win red shorts, I did the required number of push-ups, bar dips, and sit-ups. I ran the 100 in under 14 seconds. With a surge of strength fed by a fear of falling, and relying on the use of my legs, I climbed the rope. Unfortunately, I ran the mile in a little under eight minutes and managed only 4 of the 10 required pull-ups. The pegboard—an eight-foot-tall, three-foot-wide torture device—was bolted to one wall of the gym, its lower end just out of the reach of my fingers. As Coach explained, to earn a pair of blue shorts, we had to climb the board by jamming large wooden pegs, held in our fists, into the holes and make our way to the top through a series of one-handed pull-ups. When it was my turn to try, I dangled from the first peg for as long as I could, straining to place the second in a higher hole, before accepting defeat.

The morning our shorts arrived, Coach singled out two of our classmates—Rick and a varsity wrestler named Ian—for special recognition. They stood before him like Medal of Honor winners, heads high, shoulders back, to accept a pair of blue shorts and anointment as class leaders. Coach tossed most of the other boys, who passed everything but the pegboard, pairs of red shorts, which they snatched out of the air with expressions of relief and pride. Then I and seven others—faces flushed, lips trembling, eyes cast down—took our white shorts like the beating Coach meant them to be.

Of average height but lean and muscular, Coach had large and hairy forearms, a square jaw, and an unshakable self-assurance. "Some of you have work to do." He

let his stern gray eyes rest briefly on mine. "If you don't like the shorts you're wearing, get motivated."

As he suggested, only a loser, a wimp, a lost cause, someone destined never to achieve manhood would suffer the indignity of white shorts without doing whatever he could to get stronger, faster, and tougher. The system sounded simple and fair, but it made no allowances for late bloomers or boys with abnormal physiques.

The color-coded shorts set the pecking order that would no doubt have formed even without Coach's help. Our school was, after all, located on the grounds of the United States Air Force Academy and blended the children of civilians, like me, with those of enlisted men and officers who literally whipped their sons and daughters into shape.

A quick look at my white-shorted cohorts told me I was the only varsity athlete among them.

Yep, a varsity athlete.

A state-ranked tennis player, I had during summer tryouts beaten all but two seniors to become the team's third singles player. I had a sizzling serve, quick reflexes, and a fierce determination to win. But my triumphs on the court meant little to the blue- and red-shorted boys, or even to Coach, who had let slip that he saw tennis as equivalent to softball or field hockey.

Our common status should have united the wimps in white shorts, if only for mutual protection. Instead, we shunned each other, preferring to suffer alone. This attitude became clear to me one day when I tried to befriend a boy named Philip. In response to my greeting, he glanced away and muttered, "Don't talk to me, man."

Maybe Philip meant, like me, to somehow pass the next round of fitness tests and cross to the refuge of red shorts. I figured I could lower my mile time and eventually manage the 10 pull-ups. Until then, we ran a gauntlet of boys whose colored shorts signified physical superiority. Even some of those who won red shorts by the smallest margin now felt free to shove, kick, or otherwise humiliate us. Three boys in particular took to heart their role as tormentors of the unfit. The ringleader, Jerry, looked like a blond coyote, with a rangy build, shifty eyes, and a prominent Adam's apple. As if he fed on his victims' emotions, he showed only a casual interest in the physical side of bullying, often culling the victims and then standing back to watch his followers work. Of these followers, Arturo, a Latino with a nascent mustache and a sullen expression, had the most dangerous reputation since the school had recently suspended his sister for pulling a knife on another girl. The other, Don, had curly blond hair and a pleasant-looking face that rage transformed into a scarlet mask that spewed spit, threats, and profanities. He often bragged that he'd broken every bone in his body except his nose, "and my old man says someone's bound to break it before I'm 16."

No one was likely to break Don's nose during PE. Coach had banned fighting and threatened to flunk any offenders, but he stayed out of the locker room and tended to ignore any incident that did not become a full-blown fistfight. The ban only kept boys who cared about their grade from defending themselves. Jerry, Arturo, and Don revealed this sad fact one morning during a floor hockey game. Surrounding me, they jabbed their sticks into my ribs and laughed when I reminded them we might all flunk if we fought.

Arturo swung his stick into my left shin. "We're already flunking, ass-wipe."

Unwilling to tell my father what was happening at school, I covered up or explained away the worst of the bruises. An attorney and a decorated veteran of World War II made kinder and gentler by combat, my father had long urged my younger brother and me to embrace pacifism. "There's never a good reason to fight," he said often. Neither of us entirely bought his argument, and I began pleading a case of my own for judo or karate lessons. If forced to fight, I wanted to fight well.

While I worked on my father, I took some consolation from watching Ian, the blue-shorter wrestler, assume the role of alpha male—and in the process beat, torque, or terrorize into submission Jerry, Arturo, Don, and even Rick the linebacker. A second-year freshman, Ian had a reputation for psychopathic violence that began in middle school. In a shop class, he had over a nine-week period needled and harassed another boy to the breaking point. The boy, Patrick, picked up a nearby hammer and twice bounced it off Ian's head before Ian battered him. The school suspended them both, and Patrick's parents moved him to another district. Now Ian—a borderline albino with pale blue eyes and an acne-scarred face—made a decent living extorting lunch money from boys who had not yet discovered the library.

As alpha male, he focused his flat, pale gaze on potential usurpers and left the white-shorter boys alone. We were invisible, beneath his notice—until my mother washed my gym shorts with a pair of red ski socks. The shorts came out a shade of pink so subtle I didn't detect the dye job until I lined up beside another boy in white shorts. Jerry pointed me out to Ian. They stood together for a while, as if Ian needed time to comprehend what he was seeing. Then they came over for a closer look.

Ian's insolent smile and penetrating stare had frozen the blood of more than one boy in our class and froze mine now. He flicked his eyes down and back up to my face, as if assessing my apple cheeks and braces in the new light of my pink shorts. Under Ian's gaze, my fear and humiliation slowly turned into anger. And as if he sensed the change in me, he took a quick step forward, crouching slightly, hands raised as if for grappling. That's when Coach came into the gym and told us to line up for calisthenics. Ian shook his head slowly,

as if in disgust at the poor timing, and pointed a thick finger at me.

I skipped the shower after PE and developed a bad case of Ian-itis that kept me out of school for two days. My mother frowned in concern each morning when I complained of a gut ache, and she asked in various ways if I were having trouble at school. On the second day, she found my shorts in the laundry room, soaking in a vat of Clorox, and confronted me with the evidence. In the end, I told her most of the story, including Ian's implied threat.

"You know you can't hide at home for the rest of your life," she said. "Sooner or later, you'll have to stand up for yourself."

"Even if that means I have to fight?"

She surprised me by shrugging. "If it comes to that."

That night, my father came into my room to talk about the importance of facing one's fears head-on. He made no reference to Ian but spoke of Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent resistance to the oppression of the British Empire and Martin Luther King Junior's nonviolent resistance to racism in America.

"They found ways to resolve their problems without fighting," he said, "and they stuck to their principles no matter the cost. It's something I want you to think about."

Like my father, I admired both men for their willingness to die for a cause, but at 14 my chief cause was surviving to 15. And I had already tried turning the other cheek. My father's circumspection meant I did not have to spell all this out to him. At the end of his speech, he patted my knee and said, "I want you to go back to school tomorrow. I have every confidence you can face your fears and resolve your problems peacefully."

At school the next day, everyone I passed in the halls looked at me as if they saw the coward within.

In PE this sensation had greater force, only I was not imagining it. Instead of taking my beating like a man, I had run home to hide. So I stood now at the absolute bottom of the pecking order, once again beneath the notice of Ian, who for several days left me to the gentler fists, elbows, knees, and hockey sticks of Jerry, Arturo, Don, and the lesser bullies.

Maybe it was the open contempt of the other white-shorter boys; maybe it was my mother's urging me to stand up for myself. Whatever the reason, when a notorious towel popper—Doug—left a welt on my upper thigh after my shower one day, I popped him back with the speed and hand-eye coordination gained from years of net play. Tall and chunky, Doug had a curly red afro, pale freckled skin, a nasally voice, and teeth so big he seldom closed his mouth. He let out squeals of pain as I traded him welt for welt. Then he turned and scuttled for his locker.

Doug's retreat was my first victory and served notice to the others that I would no longer run home to hide.

It gave me a dose of overconfidence that led, a few days later, to trouble with Jerry, Arturo, and Don. The trio had pinned me against the gymnasium's folding bleachers. Jerry looked on while Arturo and Don gave me the usual lighthearted pounding and added a few more bruises to my collection. To get Don to back off, I feigned a punch toward his perfect nose. To the surprise of everyone in the class, including me, the punch landed.

It wasn't much as punches go, but it sent Don stumbling backward. Though still intact, his nose trickled blood. Tears welled in his savage eyes. Jerry and Arturo looked at me, their own eyes somber and their mouths hanging open. Don started toward me, his face scarlet. Coach arrived then to break things up and to send me on my first trip to the vice principal's office.

A large wooden paddle—its lacquer stained and flecked—hung like a trophy above the desk. The vice principal looked at Coach's detention slip and across at me, puzzlement and irritation on his wide, ruddy face. He pressed the intercom button and asked the school secretary to deliver my file, which he scanned. "Your grades are good. You haven't been in trouble before, or I'd know you. What the hell's your problem, son?"

I explained the situation with Jerry, Arturo, and Don. "I guess I'm tired of getting hit."

"So you hit back."

"Sort of by accident," I reminded him.

He glanced over his shoulder at the paddle. "No more accidents. Understand?" He waited for me to nod. "I'm giving you a week's lunch detention in the study hall, starting today."

The study hall had two rows of tables and chairs, roughly half of them occupied by the school's delinquents. Arturo's sister Angela, back from her suspension, was among them. So was Ian, who greeted my arrival with a blood-chilling stare. I sat at the other table, across from Dorn, my lab partner in biology. Over six feet tall, African American, and the first cousin of a football player tough enough to routinely hijack from Ian the lunch money Ian hijacked from boys like me, Dorn could not bring himself even to touch a frog. So when assigned to dissect one, I did all the cutting while he took the notes. We had been friends ever since. At lunch and between classes, he often stood in the hall at his cousin's toll station, and thanks to our friendship I had a free pass. We smiled at each other across the table and he raised his eyebrows as if to ask what I was doing there. I couldn't tell him because the study hall monitor, Mr. Johnson, had recited the rules at the door: no eating, no drinking, no gum chewing, no talking without permission. "Read a book," he said. "Get some homework done."

So I opened my biology text and, to amuse Dorn, pretended to speed read it, scanning pages almost as fast as I could turn them. During the first week of biology, I had pretended to do the same thing before a chapter

quiz. "You're shittin' me," he said. "No one can read that fast."

Dorn had quizzed me, and I'd answered all the questions right. In the end, I admitted, "Okay, I'm shitting you. I read it last night."

Not so funny the first time, the joke gave Dorn a case of the giggle-snorts today and earned us a scowl from Mr. Johnson. The next day, in PE, I learned that we had also caught the attention of Ian. As he approached me before class, I thought the time had come for a reckoning. Instead, he asked, "Can you teach me how to speed read?"

His acne-scarred face bore an earnest expression almost as terrifying as his psychopathic stare.

"I don't know," I said.

I did not know if I could teach Ian how to speed read because I did not know how to speed read. To avoid a beating, I suggested we start the lessons in detention the next day, giving me time to find a book on the subject. That night I bought *Triple Your Reading Speed* by Wade Cutler and read it as fast as I could.

Mr. Johnson smiled when I asked if I could tutor Ian during detention. He even ushered the other delinquents, including Dorn, to the far side of the room to give us some space. Ian actually read pretty well. Until then, I thought, "How hard can it be to triple his reading speed if he reads twenty words a minute?" According to the diagnostic test in the book, he actually read about two hundred words a minute with slightly below average comprehension. That day we worked on scanning clusters of words rather than one word at a time, and by the end of the first tutorial, his speed and comprehension had increased. Even so, he frowned. "As fast as you read the other day," he said. "That's what I want to do."

"First, you have to learn to scan clusters of words, then sentences, then paragraphs, then pages." I almost compared the challenge to learning a topspin backhand. Instead, I said, "It's like learning to do a takedown, only harder. You have to do it in steps." And I would have to learn the steps before I could teach him.

Ian gave a grudging nod, and my prospects for surviving to 15 looked good until Arturo's sister Angela said, "Dummy can't read."

Most of the delinquents laughed. Dorn didn't. Neither did Mr. Johnson, who rewarded Angela with another week's detention. Ian froze in his chair, his thick neck bent in shame. With a sudden movement, he swept the Cutler book off the table and turned his flat gaze on me.

The reckoning came after school the next day. As I hurried toward the varsity locker room to dress for tennis, I had the usual load of books clamped under my arm. Ian crept up behind me and punched the books, scattering them across the hardwood floor of the gym. Among them was Cutler's *Triple Your Reading Speed*. Crouching, hands up, he circled to block my way to the locker room.

"Pick 'em up," I said.

His mouth fell open and his pale eyes widened for an instant. I shared his disbelief but could not take back the words. He swung his fist in a looping punch that should have put me out. By reflex, I rolled my head at the instant his fist struck my chin and mouth. The blow rocked me. The world flickered. I tasted blood. The teeth in my lower left jaw felt loose but stayed put thanks to the braces. My knees wobbled but did not collapse.

I glared at Ian, chin thrust out. "Now you can pick 'em up."

What he did next rocked me as hard as the punch. His acne-scarred face drew down in a look of regret, and he bent to gather the books. He handed them to me. "I'm sorry," he said.

In biology the next day, Dorn made a face at my swollen jaw. A football player had watched me, the tennis player who wore pink shorts in PE, take Ian's knock-out punch without going down, Dorn said. The witness also saw Ian pick up and hand back my books.

I had no answers for Dorn's questions—spoken or unspoken. I could not explain why Ian had not battered my face or broken my elbows. Like the eyewitness, maybe he believed he had given me his best shot. Maybe he wasn't the psycho everyone thought. Maybe he had a streak of decency in him. Or maybe he still hoped to become a speed reader and realized, after his first punch, the foolishness of concussing his tutor.

My father liked this last interpretation—the idea that I'd averted a fight by using my brain. I had turned the other jaw and peace ensued. Whatever Ian's motives, and I never had the courage to ask him, the rumor of my having fought him and survived brought an immediate decline in the bullying. Each day in PE Ian nodded or greeted me by name, a gesture that for a while kept even Jerry, Arturo, and Don at bay.

The respite gave me time to grow. By sophomore year, I stood four inches taller and had gained 25 pounds of muscle, with which I earned my first pair of red shorts. Having crossed to safety, I did what I could for the underdeveloped or genetically unlucky bastards in white. These boys would someday mature, lose or gain weight,

develop muscles and facial hair, grow into men. The outrages heaped on them by those in blue or red shorts, or via the lessons delivered by Coach or other institutional bullies, would leave scars, some of them permanent. Not long ago, 73-year-old Carl Ericsson (Lammers 2012) admitted to murdering a former classmate for putting a jockstrap on his head, a high school locker-room prank that occurred more than 50 years earlier. Ericsson rang the man's doorbell, confirmed his alleged former bully's identity, and shot him down. Articles about this event convey puzzlement, as if the authors cannot fathom how Ericsson could harbor rage about this seemingly trivial event for so long a time. News articles more commonly recount the stories of sweet, sensitive souls who, unable to face their humiliation, have killed themselves instead of their tormentors. For example, Joel Morales (Hibbard 2012), age 12, hanged himself after bullies teased him about the death of his father, and Amanda Cummings, age 15, jumped in front of a city bus after suffering intolerable bullying for having the temerity to date a boy on whom one of her victimizers had a crush (Boyle 2012). Such cases are, thankfully, relatively rare when one considers the magnitude of bullying that occurs in schools. Most victims do not embrace the darkness of revenge or suicide, though they may understand at least a part of what motivates those who do. Perhaps like me they have contemplated revenge without seeking it, electing instead to earn a black belt in Tae Kwon Do, join the Marine Corps, or pump more iron than Lou Ferrigno—determined never to be bullied again. Bruises fade and cuts heal, but the effects of bullying can last a lifetime.

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