

# Athletics Versus Education Challenges School Leaders

By MYRON ROBERTS

(This is the first in a series of articles on public education which will appear in the TORRANCE PRESS.)

The problems of public education in a community like Torrance are not entirely dissimilar to the situation of a middle class housewife whose husband has taken to comparing her to Marilyn Monroe. Try as she will, it is unlikely that a woman engaged in a daily battle with unwashed moppets, unpaid bills and pushing forty to boot, can manage to prance about in the evening looking like the girls in the Maidenform ads.

Ideal that the schools are constantly measured. An ideal that is unfair, unrealistic and—un-

der the present circumstances—impossible of achievement. For what the people of Torrance expect is merely that the school system shall take on the job of educating everybody—the children of the poor no less than of the rich, the ugly along with the handsome, the dolts along with the geniuses—and that they shall at least succeed in giving wisdom to the foolish, discipline to the weak and a working knowledge of the three "R's" to all.

### Cigarette Money

What's more they expect all this plus football and the social graces to boot—for less than 1 per cent of their annual income or about as much money as they normally spend on cigarettes.

In any previous historical era, and in most foreign lands, wise and learned men would have been shocked at such foolishness. They would have pointed out, quite correctly, that you would wind up inevitably sacrificing quality for quantity; that large numbers of parents and their off-spring would resist bitterly any effort to force them to absorb more than a few simple, manual skills and a bare minimum of semi-literacy; while the parents of superior students criticized the schools no less bitterly for failing to demand top-flight performance from all.

Nevertheless the sovereign state of California has decreed that this impossible ideal shall be attempted and in Torrance the man in charge of the attempt is Dr. J. H. Hull.

### "Siberia"

Ten years ago the people of Torrance, then a political and educational sub-division of Los Angeles, became convinced that the schools of this community were "the Siberia of the L. A. system" and decided to charter their own city and their own school system.

They chose Dr. Hull as their first Superintendent and instructed him to build a school system. "I had an apple box for a desk and used my car for an office until I managed to convince a local merchant that if he rented us an office he would eventually get paid," Dr. Hull is fond of recalling.

As Superintendent, his first job was to see to it that a football field, complete with bleachers and floodlights, got built. "The football field came first, the classrooms second—at the insistence of the citizens," Dr. Hull observed dryly.

### Minor Irritant

The event was somewhat symbolic since the subject of the athletic program at the high school and its relationship to the academic has remained a minor irritant ever since. In every community there are those who regard ball-players as the finest flower of American manhood and a winning football team as the supreme educational achievement, and when the Superintendent fails to share this enthusiasm, conflict usually results. "I'm not anti-athletic," Hull stresses, "but I want it kept in line."

Despite these and a few other irritations, the district has been

remarkably free from controversy in the ten years Hull has served as Superintendent, particularly when one pauses to digest the fact that it has grown from 1900 students in 1946 to 19,000 in 1956—an increase of 1000 per cent.

And yet it is a standing joke of the profession that school superintendents are well advised to keep one bag packed and the back door unbolted in case of a need for hasty evacuation. How has Hull managed it? "I know something about public relations" Hull admits. (he teaches a course in it at USC) "and I try to be right."

### Not a Pawn

In fact, Dr. Hull's relationship to the School Board has been so smooth that there have been some under-currents of feeling that the board was merely a pawn. It is a charge frequently leveled at skillful public administrators who deal with unskilled elected officials.

"What people forget, is that I know what the Board will and will not approve and I don't ask them to vote on anything they are likely to disagree about—or anything that they don't understand thoroughly. The Torrance School Board probably gets more facts and data than any other board in the country. That way we don't have public bickering. Remember the Board's thinking dictates what I recommend and my recommendations influence the Board—it works both ways."

What is really at issue here is that the lack of public controversy over a public institution can itself become controversial. Aware of this, Hull bends over backwards to work with such institutions as the Torrance Educational Advisory Committee—a semi-official body

of citizens who meet to debate and discuss the welfare of the community's schools.

But in a democracy, which in Plato's words "is a charming form of government full of variety and disorder," the menace of the carpet bagger always hangs heavy over the head of every public official. In welcoming discussion, they have learned to keep looking back over their shoulder for the Irate Citizen who would attain community prominence by leading a crusade against textbooks that mention the United Nations, maps that include Russia and the teaching of female biology.

### Knows Peril

As an expert in public rela-

tions, Dr. Hull is not unmindful of this peril. And in attempting to put into practice what he and the members of his staff think is a good educational system, they try not to forget the schools belong to the people.

"I won't say we give them whatever they say they want—because it's our business as educators to interpret what they tell us they want—sometimes the two are not the same."

One thing they clearly want is fair and reasonable treatment of their children. They may disagree as to the relative importance of ancient history and football—but they are practically unanimous in believing that the most important kid in school is their own. And every

child is a standing testimonial for or against the school system to his parents.

Which is why modern educators tend to emphasize that education is an individual—not

a group process. "What we're trying to do is individualize education—to get away from this mass idea. We're not interested in masses— (Turn to Page 19)



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