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Calisthenics – from Prisons to Stadiums

Abstract

The trend towards sport and its various kinds is indisputable today and, sport itself, undergoing dynamic changes, presents a broad variety of qualities and quantities of sport events and competitions. The progressing pauperization of the society alongside a simultaneous demand of being trendy results in our seeking for such solutions, which do not involve considerable capital expenditure and will allow to achieve individual or team sport targets. Focused on a great world of sport, rarely do we notice that at the same time, new social movements are being created spontaneously on the lower levels of social – sport stratification. At these levels there is a world of physical activity undertaken by passionate individuals. The present work aims at zooming the issues regarding the growing popularity of *Street Workout*, the basis of which is calisthenics.

Keywords: convict conditioning, street workout, passion, sport.

Introduction

Recently there has been an increase of interest in active practicing sport and its various kinds as well as a significant increase of the level of social awareness regarding the beneficial influence of physical activity upon health. The man of today is *cool* if he looks fit, and the common worship of human body and the trend to succeed intensify the will to undertake activities which focus upon this area of human aspirations. The border between amateurship and professionalism constantly becomes less clear and the acceptance of extremes in sport and beyond it is intensified. New solutions are being created, the examples of which are the world championships in swamp football, snow volley, or an evaluation of fighting forms (MMA)¹. Moreover, beyond sport there have been created numerous ideas to manage free time and to employ the financial resources of the society.

¹ I heard about calisthenics for the first time when i became interested in a growing popularity of mixed martial arts, about which I wrote in articles: *Dynamika zmian w formach walki – Mixed*

Furthermore, functioning in today's social reality, which is very absorbing for an individual, does not change his need for acceptance or preventing from alienation. Multiple institutions and organizations on the sport and recreation services market seem to serve those needs. They are to offer different possibilities of shaping the body and boosting the spirit for a reasonable price. Fitness clubs, gyms, bungee jumping, ropes courses or a water board practicing (not to be mistaken with skiing), these are only a few of numerous suggestions of spending leisure time in a more or less extreme way. Today it is common to see individuals and groups who practice jogging, Nordic walking, or use more and more inventive tools for the body conditioning.

An extremely large number of reports on the subject of sport events of local, country, European, or global scope causes certain overload. Focused upon the great world of sport, rarely do we perceive, that on the lower levels of social-sport layers, new social movements are being created spontaneously. On these levels there has appeared a world of enthusiasts with different sport passions, one of which is calisthenics. This is a force training without any special equipment, which consists of only six not sophisticated exercises. The exercises, properly arranged, constitute an exceptionally effective system of progressive training. Activities that have been known since prehistoric times, have evolved into a system, which is now known as art, that has given foundations for calisthenics of the twenty first century, mainly for its variety called *Street Workout*². The present work has come into being in the face of dynamic changes in this field and, having in mind that, sport is "a very complex social phenomenon and a kind of multilevel social practice"³.

The background of calisthenics

Man has been using his own body to achieve different aims for ages and one of those aims was to possess control over the body in terms of marital art. Various forms of physical development, including strength exercises, were commonly used by ancient Greeks and Romans who practiced body conditioning. They trained in gymnasia and in their sections called palaestrae⁴. It is necessary to in-

Martial Arts, [in:] Z. Dziubiński, P. Rymarczyk (ed.), *Kultura fizyczna a zmiana społeczna*. AWF, SOS RP, Warszawa 2014 and *Zawodnik MMA – sportowiec, wojownik czy gladiator?*, [in:] Cz. Tukiendorf (ed.), *Edukacja. Wychowanie. Sport*, WSEwS, Warszawa 2015.

² *Street Workout. Kalistenika XXI wieku. Fitness* (guidebook). Magazine: „SHAPE”, December, 2014; <http://www.bing.com/images/search?q=kalistenika&view=detailv2&id=2BE61A7C7DC5219C14D7686C581CEEB7870F9AA4&selectedindex=134&ccid=EPYv7XXf&simid=608033048942938243&thid=JN.bq1ehZHluAYuOG2zDz49Hg&mode=overlay&first=1> [accessed: July, 2015].

³ E. Hajduk, F. Hajduk, *Szkice z socjologii sportu*, Published by WSB, Poznań 2013, p. 6.

⁴ Id est: a back yard, designed for boys and young men to do physical exercises. J. Chelmecki, S. Wilk, *Zarys historii sportu*, WSWwS, Warszawa 2013, p. 25.

dicate that the exercises with one's own body weight were also used by gladiators training in *ludi* (conditioning camps)⁵. It was the gladiators who achieved the greatest mastery in athletic craft. The evidence of the incredible physical endurance and skills in marital craft was the brawn and professional background of Spartacus gladiators and the uprising initiated by them, which nearly brought about the fall of the empire.

Reports regarding Greek *kalokagathii* (*kalos* – beautiful, *agathos* – good), are commonly known. It shaped the pattern of upbringing of versatile men, which was predominant in the period of classical Greece. Calisthenics (*kalos* – beautiful, *sthenos* – strong). However, it was perceived by the ancient as a method of training to work out a combat strength and a terrifying musculature⁶. Such an attitude was especially evident in the system of education of the Spartans, who in a slightly different way than the Athenians, “substituted beauty and wisdom of spirit with the demand of fighting for the interest of their own *polis* [...]”⁷. The severity of Spartan education complemented the traditions of the next generation on a permanent basis and the contemporary, proper understanding of the term: “Spartan conditions”.

One of the first reports regarding calisthenics is the testimony of Herodotus, who says, that it was used by Spartans during their training before the forthcoming Battle of Thermopylae⁸ (c.a. 480 BC). God-king Xerxes I with an army of over 120 thousand Persians against 300 Spartans commanded by king Leonidas was to hear, that: “warriors of Sparta are busy with callisthenic body exercises”⁹. As it is commonly known, king Leonidas and his 300 warriors refused to fulfill the ultimatum made by king Xerxes I, stopping the great Persian army for three days. The climate of that battle as well as the image of the ideal bodies of Spartan warriors has been excellently conveyed by a historical film called *300 Spartans*¹⁰.

Calisthenics survived the fall of ancient civilizations. It is necessary to indicate, that such a kind of training was used in the training camps of the armies of the Middle East. It returned to Europe during crusades, becoming a meaningful part of schooling squires to become knights. The fact is that medieval warriors, thanks the strength workout were incredibly strong, long before the invention of

⁵ It was mentioned by a Roman historian Liwiusz (<https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalistenika> [accessed: July, 2015]). However, Pausanias reported, that all the great Greek athletes of the Olympic Games trained according the indications of calisthenics. P. Wade, *Skazany na trening. Zaprawa więzienna*, JK, Łódź 2011. W.L. Janczyca, Printing House Publishing, Łódź 2014. The original title: *Convict Conditioning*. Published by: *Dragon Door Publications*, Kanada 2009, p. 24.

⁶ Ibidem,

⁷ J. Chelmecki, S. Wilk, op. cit., p. 24.

⁸ <https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalistenika> [accessed: July, 2015] and P. Wade, op. cit., p. 24.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 24.

¹⁰ Directed by Zac Snyder (2007).

barbells and dumbbells. It is worth quoting a commentary of those times: “prolific archers of Henry V are so strong, that they are able to uproot trees” whereas nowadays, today’s archers “are not expected to be able to use monstrous bows of those times”¹¹.

In the period of renaissance, strength exercises with body weight were preserved within marital training. They were spread in Europe thanks travelling troops of artists, who performed strength and gymnastic stunts to earn money for living. However, in the era of the Renaissance, when all knowledge on any subject was appreciated, such skills were also valuable. In the second half of the 19th century there was a significant rise of interest in body weight training, and the experts of health, appreciating that type of exercises, started to make scientific reports on them¹².

As it follows from available sources, the German gymnastic system, whose author was Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, a Prussian military leader, was also based on body weight training. The characteristic trait of German gymnastics was a gradual but systematic incorporation of different gymnastic equipment. In 1811 he invented the so called “Turnplatz” (from the German word: “turnen”, which means gymnastics), which was a playground where, there were various facilities like: a horizontal bar, parallel bars, a vaulting horse and a balance beam. The presentation of strength and agility while exercising on that gymnastic equipment created the background for artistic gymnastic to come into being¹³.

Calisthenics traditions survived in the circus and gave rise to the era of athletes such as: Arthur Saxon, Eugen Sandow or G.W. Rolandow, for whom exercises with their own body weight were crucial in building up strength. The men mentioned above have been considered the strongest people in history. Rolandow, for example was able to tear three decks of cards simultaneously, and Sandow was able to break apart chains which were rolled up around his chest¹⁴. It is worth noticing that the first probable scientific work devoted to calisthenics already appeared in the United States in the half of the 19th century. Catherine Beecher wrote a dissertation entitled *Physiology and Calisthenics for Schools and Families*, in which she promoted such exercises as a method of improving one’s own skills for women, but men became also interested in those types of exercises¹⁵.

With time flow, however, calisthenics was forgotten or incorporated in today’s gymnastics, mainly because of the rise of popularity of gyms in the second half of the 20th century. In the second decade of the 21st century calisthenics has become popular again among others, thanks to books by Paul Wade or films up-

¹¹ P. Wade, op. cit., p. 26.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Ibidem, pp. 26, 27 and J. Chelmecki, S. Wilk, op. cit., p. 128.

¹⁴ P. Wade, op. cit., p. 27.

¹⁵ <https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalistenika> [accessed: July, 2015].

loaded online on YouTube¹⁶. Calisthenics has been evolving, adopting the form of physical activity undertaken outdoors, which is labeled *street workout* (pol. *Trening uliczny*).

Prison order

The ability to survive, born in the reality of one of the most dangerous environments which are prisons, demands shaping a strong body and psychics. It seems that it is possible to create a kind of personal freedom and one's own space in spite of isolation. Socially adapted individuals are not aware of the conditions connected with serving a sentence by a prisoner and usually the conditions are not a subject of great interest. We get in touch with prison's reality most often when either a friend or a relative of ours falls into a conflict with the law or we get some information on this subject from films. Only then we are ready to spend a while reflecting on the problem of people's functioning in the most solitary place on earth – in a prison cell.

In prisons and in similar institutions, there is a saying: "How they are scared of you, that is how they perceive you"¹⁷ (Strength makes a man). What does it have to do with calisthenics? In fact, it seems, that there is a lot in common. Firstly, I will give an example of Paul: "When I found myself behind bars for the first time [...] I weighed 65 kg. At the height of 185 cm my long dangling arms were as thin as sticks and about twice weaker than them. After a few disgusting incidents [...] I was not willing to be someone's blow-Up doll; I realized that the most effective way of getting off the target line was to gain body weight as fast as possible"¹⁸. Secondly. In the cult movie *Con Air* – the Polish title *Lot skazańców* (dir. Simon West), the main hero, played by Nicolas Cage performs callisthenic exercises. Why are hand push-ups and pull-ups on the horizontal bars shown in the film? The answer seems to be a truism, though the uninitiated might not be able to call this kind of physical activity – calisthenics. Thirdly, I made a free oral interview with an imprisoned man just after his coming – out of prison. The main aim of my investigation were the questions that involved undertaking a physical effort and its influence upon serving a sentence. The answers confirmed the thesis about an irreplaceable power of strength training with body weight in daily survival. The respondent gave examples of exercises, which he had done in prison and he was not aware that he had been practicing callisthenic training¹⁹.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ The quoted fragment comes from the film *Big Stan*, directed by Rob Schneider, USA.

¹⁸ P. Wade, op. cit., p. 17.

¹⁹ A free oral interview I made in March, 2015 in Katowice. The ex convict performed push-ups, squats, pull-ups the so called "set of six" exercises or "kaloryfer" (Eng. "radiator") and many

P. Wade, who was a prisoner for many years, described his knowledge about “the great six” shaping strength, coordination and condition, which was jealously protected by people behind bars. The author, who spent over 20 years in one of the toughest penitentiaries in the USA, presents the secrets of a simple system of strength exercises²⁰. As he admits, the old school of calisthenics was able to remain there, where the maximum strength and power are necessary to survive. Most often these are the places in which barbells and dumbbells or other training equipment are rather unavailable. These places are obscure – prisons, penitentiaries or other places of different names. Such names are given “by civilized people to cages, in which the less civilized are isolated”²¹.

It took Paul Wade several years to write the book and the idea of writing it came from the jailer Ronny, who was respected by prisoners due to the fact, that, as Wade puts it – “he was an important triathlete on the local stage, as big as a truck and not less strong”²². This is yet another evidence that prison respect is based on an athletic appearance and real strength. The author of *Convict Conditioning* (Polish: *Skazany na trening*) admits, that writing was a totally new and not easy task for him. Transferring notes about exercises and methods, which lasted for years, into a book form, required a lot of effort. The idea has proved today to be marvelous and Paul’s manual has been arousing great interest and constitutes inspiration for many, not only young people to start their adventure with calisthenics.

“The Big six” and ten steps

Calisthenics is for “a professional sportsman and for a frail official [...], for single mothers and for [...] vagrants [...], for everyone [...]”²³. It is an amazing method of training which is based on exercises that use the weight of the body. The number of exercises is endless and so is the number of their variants. The big six is a set of six, primary and selected exercises, which constitute a base of the training system. The exercises train the main muscle parts and are more or less complex. They complement one another perfectly and their application allows to develop human body in a marvelous way. Due to the limited framework

others. He confirmed that this was the only chance to build up strength in prison conditions, because the access to a small and poorly equipped gym was very difficult.

²⁰ P. Wade, except the book discussed in the present work, is an author of two other books, mainly: *Convict conditioning 2* and *Convict Conditioning 3*, which are a continuation of the extraordinary part one. There have been certain controversies around Paul Wade, connected with the fact that he might be a fictional character. The author of the present work has not found any evidence supporting this thesis.

²¹ P. Wade, op. cit., p. 16.

²² Ibidem, p. 49.

²³ Ibidem, p. 8.

of the present work I am going to focus only upon a general notion outline. The idea of calisthenics is the rule, that it is necessary to use a relatively small number of repetitions, in a small number of series of a particular exercise, using this particular exercise in different variations – beginning from the easiest one and finishing with the most difficult one. Among the ten steps, the last masterful ones are handstands pushups (picture no 1).



Picture No 1

Source: <http://www.bing.com/images/search?q=kalistenika> [accessed: July, 2015].

Each of the 6 exercises of the “big six” (Pushups, squats, pullups, leg raises, bridges, and handstand pushups) can be done in 10 variants – 10 levels of difficulty. The first variant is for a novice, the tenth variant is for the best and most persistent practitioner. Summing up: the six exercises, each of them in 10 variants, are clearly determined, of short-term aims and which are relatively easy to do. All the information regards the performed exercises, their technique, intensity and training schedules as well as much more interesting information can be found in the specialist literature.

Is Street workout a calisthenics of the 21st century?

Paul Wade is right when he remarks: “The modern fitness scene is largely defined by the presence of pumped up, muscle-bound bodybuilders, expensive ex-

ercise machines, and steroids. [...] It wasn't always this way. There was a time when men trained to become inhumanly strong using nothing but their own bodyweight. No weights. No machines. No drugs. Nothing"²⁴. Taking into consideration the example of Core, the amateur sport team which has spontaneously come into being and been training for nearly two years, as well as, having analyzed the available sources²⁵, I recognize that, *Street Workout* has become calisthenics of the 21st century. This is a physical activity which uses the elements of urban infrastructure to perform exercises based upon calisthenics and the term *Street Workout* itself has appeared recently (c.a. 2009).

This relatively new social movement in sport has been the earliest and the strongest and has spread mainly in the countries of the former Soviet Union, such as Ukraine, Russia and Latvia as well as in the USA. Since 2011, there have been Street Workout World Championships held, organized by the World Street Workout & Calisthenics Federation. The first official event of this kind took place on the 27th–28th of August, 2011 in Riga, Latvia. There have been over twenty local groups dealing with this sport in Poland already²⁶. Due to the fact that there are more and more parks specially adapted for this aim and equipped with horizontal bars at different heights, parallel bars or ladders, the popularity of *Street Workout* is still growing.

Last year, in the first days of August there were the third Polish Street Workout Championships organised in Biłgoraj, and about 50 individual competitors took part in them²⁷. For the first time, one of the members and creators of the CORE group – Tomasz Waleczek was present at the event, taking the 15th place. Except Tomasz, there were Marek Dyoniziak, Filip Lekki, Rafał Majlinger, Bartosz Oszczyda, Mateusz Smak, and Kacper Spicha (members of the group – picture No 2), who have started the adventure with calisthenics thanks to Paul Wade's book. From the scientific point of view, entering sport was for each of those 18 or 19 year old young people beyond institutional channel, and the motivation was simple – the lack of funds to exercise in the gym.

The competitors of the amateur sport team have been training for only two years, mainly individually, and sometimes they gather to practice the common arrangements. All of them agree that, they started from reading Paul Wade's manual and then they began callisthenic training and now they get information from the literature on the subject and from Internet. None of them has done any

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 12.

²⁵ Preparing the present work, I have been able to get Paul Wade's books, I have visited a lot of websites, I have analyzed the shows of *Street Workout* on You Tube I have made free oral interviews as well as a panel interview with the members of the CORE group, I have carried out a participant observation during the performance of the Core group in Żory, in the Cegielnia Park (26, July, 2015).

²⁶ https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Street_workout [accessed: July, 2015].

²⁷ <http://www.fabrykasily.pl/treningi/street-workout-mistrzostwa-polski-2015> [accessed: July, 2015].

gymnastics, but what they can do with their own bodies, makes a great impression on those who watch their shows. It is not possible in such a compact work to present all their achievements. However, they systematically develop themselves and infect others with their passion. I can only encourage a potential reader to visit the fantastic world of calisthenics also the one of the 21st century.



Picture No 2. CORE group during training

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/CORE/1440837939538456?fref=hovercard>

Conclusions

The good and old school and the return to the sources is in my opinion a proper characteristics of calisthenics – an art in which push-ups, pull-ups, or squats, which are basic exercises of this system, are recognized by everybody. They are used not only in gymnastics, but actually in all sport activities as well as practically on each lesson of Physical Education. However, it is just the systemic approach towards body conditioning with the help of one's own body weight that gives the expected and long-term effects and can be called a calisthenic training.

I do not diminish the advantages of great sport, but only indicate what is available for each of us and what we can observe, recognize or achieve, etc. Personally I am a bit lost in a great number of reports from the big sport arenas and in a growing number of different types of events, records, competitions as well

as different types of championships which are sometimes hardly recognizable. This made me investigate and seek for a physical activity at the lower level of the social and sport layering. Today, calisthenics is in the streets and tomorrow it can become one of the events of the Olympic Games as it used to happen in the past. I would like to thank all my respondents and those whom I observed during trainings and shows, for a growing engagement and non-profit, for the passion, true effort and modesty.

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