

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

(notes on a dozen lifelong sports)

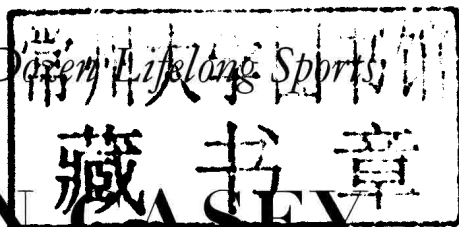
JOHN CASEY

WINNER OF THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Notes on a Dozen Lifelong Sports

JOHN CASEY



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ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Preface

People occasionally ask me why on earth I keep on doing what strikes them as a painful exercise at what strikes them as an advanced age. There's no single answer. One thing I'm sure of is that it's not masochism.

I recently had a conversation with a philosophical trainer in a gym. He said that most people have some kind of addiction. Some use "exogenous stimulants"—booze or drugs. Some people use "endogenous stimulants"—chemicals produced by their own bodies. Some of them are hooked on getting angry, falling in love, or taking risks. He thought I was lucky to be hooked on endorphins, the secretions released by the human body after a half hour or so of cardiovascular exercise. Endorphins are also released by people making love and pregnant women.

The philosophical trainer and I agreed that neither health nor vanity would be enough to keep us going. But I don't think endorphins, as pleasant a feeling of well-being as they provide, would be enough, either. There's something else. I'm not sure what that something else is. In the course of going over older essays on various sports and exercises and my forty-two years of logbooks, I think that there is more than one something. There is health (both physical and mental). There is vanity—

wanting both to look good and to be skillful, perhaps even feel graceful. Endorphins, check. Playfulness—sometimes it's just fun to feel like an otter. Adventure. Adventure includes being ready to say yes if someone says, "You want to climb Mount Katahdin?" Or "You want to canoe down the Delaware River?" Or "You want to run a marathon?"

And there's getting into the woods. A student of mine once asked me, "What is it with you and nature?"

I answered more or less like this: "I wouldn't write if I didn't read a lot. I also wouldn't write if I didn't get out in the physical world in my own body, sometimes as a 'sojourner in nature,' as Thoreau puts it, but sometimes pushing hard enough to see and feel the earth's surface differently. Thoreau did that, too. He hiked the Maine woods, climbed Mount Katahdin, walked great lengths of Cape Cod, went down the Merrimack River in a small boat. He wasn't looking for near-death trips, and neither am I. 'The bear went over the mountain . . .' There's a lot to see along the way."

Adventure also includes competition. Competition against others, against oneself, against challenging conditions. You have to read your opponent; you have to read a river.

I also found an additional dimension of friendship in team sports, a mostly wordless confidence and comradeship. This is particularly true of rowing in every size racing boat—eights, fours, quads, pairs, and doubles. In an eight and a four I've often felt deep affection for a good coxswain. I imagine it's something like what a racehorse feels for a good jockey—though, as I note later, animal-to-human communication is a tricky business.

Being useful in practical ways seems to come up last—but not least. Double-digging a vegetable bed, pruning trees, sawing firewood (it would be faster with a chain saw, but I love

my old long crosscut saw with wicked large teeth). I got in shape for a long canoe trip by digging out the silt from my flooded cabin—two hours a day for ten days. I was surprised that my pulse rate was as high as it gets when I am jogging, and surprised at how cheerful I was. Endorphins? Or just the satisfaction of taking care of things?

Redemption. There's redemption of a bad day at the writing desk. Okay, that was five hours of nothing—let's blow it off by running five miles.

There's also longer-term redemption. The subject of this book is exercise, from middle age into old age, but there are half-buried memories of feeling puny and humiliated. In his plump middle age, Cyril Connolly wrote, "Inside every fat man there is a thin man wildly signaling to be let out." A reverse of that notion is that inside every grown man, no matter how apparently at ease, there is a cringing little boy hoping to be kept in.

When I was thirteen I went to a boys' canoe camp in Ontario. The base camp was on an island in Lake Temagami, at that time, 1952, still mostly uninhabited. We canoed and portaged over a good bit of Ontario, sometimes traveling thirty miles in a day. We didn't see any people or houses. I loved the lakes and rivers. I loved seeing moose, ducks, black bears. We wore few clothes. We were in seven canoes—eleven boys, a counselor, an assistant counselor, and a guide (Stan Meilleur, who admitted he was the best guide in Ontario, maybe in all of Canada. I thought he was). All but two of us boys were fifteen or fourteen. Two of us, Schuyler van Kimball and I, were thirteen. We were the only ones without pubic hair, the ones still with little-boy tinklers. I was nicknamed Buddha for my fat tummy and chest. I also stuttered.

One evening after pitching the tents we all went swimming.

As usual, we went in bare. As we got out, one of the fifteen-year-olds said, "Who's got the smallest dick—van Kimball or Casey? Anybody got a ruler?" Another fifteen-year-old said, "Wouldn't work. But we could use the links on the little chain Ward's got his Virgin Mary medal on."

I dove back in and swam out twenty yards. I stayed there until it was dark.

At the end of that summer I went to a Swiss boarding school. All the classes were in French, except, of course, for English. The month after starting to learn French, I was called on in history class to give a summary of the Trojan War. "*Les G-grecs étaient fâchés parce que P-p-paris a volé Heb-beh . . . Hélène.*"

The school took three days off for All Saints'. We were put into teams of four for a competition that was part scavenger hunt, part orienteering. The clues were left all over Switzerland—one at the Berne Zoo, another at the Basel post office, then in smaller villages, and finally in the Alps. The clues were in French, German, Italian (the three official languages), and Latin and English. There were a number of English, Canadian, and American boys among the hundred and twenty students. Reale, an Italian, was our team leader. As at Camp Keewaydin, I was the youngest and shortest, no longer plump but still so squat I was almost square.

During the last leg of the trip we had to climb a hill. It seemed endless. It began to snow. My shoes, unlike Reale's boots, didn't have nubby soles. I was wet from head to toe, and lagging behind. The higher we went, the deeper the snow. It was dark when we reached the rendezvous, a large chalet. Our team came in last. After supper we sat on the floor. The headmaster told us we were going to move on another few kilometers to a large barn near a Swiss Army camp. The headmaster added, "If there is anyone who thinks he can't keep up,

my wife has room in her car. By road it is longer, so we will arrive at the same time. Raise your hand if you wish to ride in the car."

I was in the front row, beside a small Indian boy. He raised his hand. I raised mine. We were the only two.

The other boys started off. Sat, short for Satrahalisinji, and I were consoled by Madame Johannot. Sat had never seen snow. I had no excuse.

The next day I kept to myself. The headmaster, like all Swiss men, was in the Army Reserve, a major. He arranged that we be allowed to fire rifles under the supervision of the Swiss noncommissioned officers. They had set up balloons on the far side of a gorge. Any volunteers? A few of the older boys stepped forward. Everyone else seemed shy. Were they afraid of guns? I raised my hand. The headmaster raised his eyebrows. He finally nodded. I thought I could redeem myself. I'd shot .22 rifles since I was seven. I had a sharpshooter model from the NRA.

The older boys shot first. They couldn't hit the broad side of a barn door. The rifles were bolt-action, took a clip of eight rounds and one in the chamber. The Swiss noncoms had been putting in single rounds. I pointed to the clip. The noncom looked at the headmaster. He looked dubious. I said, "*Je sais f-f-faire ça.*"

"*Voyons alors. Vas-y, Casey.*" He pronounced it *Kah-zay*.

One balloon. Work the bolt. Two. Work the bolt. Three . . . Nine shots, nine balloons.

What did I expect? That my contemptible weakness would be erased? That someone would clap me on the back? There was only uneasiness. Nothing was erased. Instead something was added on. I was a show-off. And something else. Some confirmation of the European suspicion that all those Ameri-

can movies weren't fantasy. America *was* Al Capone and Jesse James. If armed, even a squat little twerp might have a vicious streak.

In the winter the school moved from the shore of Lake Geneva to the mountains. During the Christmas break those boys who lived very far away stayed in the school's chalets. I spent hours ice-skating by myself on the enormous outdoor rink. I watched the hockey players. The school had a number of teams, one of which was made up of faculty members and three Canadian boys. It played in the Swiss national league. Not the NHL—Switzerland is small—but still . . . The star of the team was Monsieur Rupik. He'd left Czechoslovakia after the Communists took over. He'd played on the Czech Olympic hockey team. He was a rarity in that he'd also been on the Czech Olympic rowing team. He coached cross-country running in the fall (his hero, not surprisingly, was Emil Zátopek), hockey in the winter, and rowing in the spring. He was admired, even idolized. I knew him only from afar, as I wasn't a likely candidate for cross-country.

One day Monsieur Rupik skated over to me. The second-string goalie was missing. Would I put on the goalie pads?

Monsieur Rupik suited me up, gave me the right-hand blocker glove, the left-hand catching glove (that was familiar—like a first baseman's mitt). He showed me how to hold the goalie stick, and then the scrimmage was on. I stopped a few shots just by standing there. Then a shot came in slightly to the left. I caught it and flipped it behind the cage. Monsieur Rupik gave me a pat on the shoulder. After the scrimmage he asked me to stay for a bit. He and a Czech friend of his named Bruno spent an hour shooting pucks at me. They taught me how to play goalie—that day and every day of the Christmas break. Monsieur Rupik called me *opíček*, Czech for hedgehog—I was

small and had a bristly crew cut. He also told me to practice skating on my own—lots of short bursts and stops.

When school started in January I played goal for the under-fourteen team. When we went to the schoolboy championships in Zermatt, I also played on the under-sixteen team, whose goalie was sick. We lost in both finals, but my teammates said encouraging things, which by now I could understand.

Just before the Easter vacation I went skiing with two friends. We were walking back through the village with our skis on our shoulders. In a shop window I saw a reflection. Three boys—there was Paolo Serra, and Antony Velie, but who was the third? *I* was at the far end, taller than Serra or Velie. No longer pug-nosed, chubby-cheeked, and squat. I'd had a growth spurt, a usual thing for someone turning fourteen. Like Pinocchio, I'd wished and wished to become a real boy. I thought it was something I owed to Monsieur Rupik.

In the spring Monsieur Rupik asked me to row. The fourteen-and-under four were Winthrop, Casey, Hadley, and Watson, four Americans. An advantage of being an American born in 1939 or 1940 was having been safe and well fed. (These days Italian kids are taller than their parents, tower over their grandparents. The new generation is called *i vitaminizzati*.)

I took to rowing. I would have taken to anything for Monsieur Rupik. I can still hear his Czech-accented French. "*Longue dans l'eau!*" Or, if our strokes weren't exactly synchronized, "*C'est une mitrailleuse!*" (A machine gun.) If we still didn't get it right, "*C'est un bordel!*" (A whorehouse—not as shocking in French as it is in English, just a tangier way of saying it's a mess.)

What would unredeemed fourteen-year-old boys do without a Monsieur Rupik?

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Casey was born in 1939 in Worcester, Massachusetts, and was educated at Harvard College, Harvard Law School, and the University of Iowa. His novel *Spartina* won the National Book Award in 1989. He lives in Charlottesville, Virginia, where he is a professor of English literature at the University of Virginia.

A NOTE ON THE TYPE

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