

## Boston exhibit recalls President Kennedy's call to fitness

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If only we had listened to President Jack Kennedy, the slim, athletic commander-in-chief, back in the 1960s. Americans - and indeed the whole world - would not be wrestling with today's obesity epidemic.

As newly elected president in 1961, Kennedy's enthusiasm for physical fitness, and his concern for what he saw as a softening citizenry, propelled him to challenge Americans who were getting bloated on post-war prosperity, synthetic foods and unprecedented leisure time.

The president's fitness challenge helped define the youthful, vigorous New Frontier theme of the Kennedy administration, and is the subject of a new exhibit opening at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library on Thursday, September 27 and running through fall of 2008.

"Shaping up America: JFK, Sports and the Call to Physical Fitness" shows how President Kennedy's call to action proved to be a harbinger for a world gone pudgy.

Today, the World Health Organization has categorized over 300 million adults as obese. And it's not just Americans.

Ireland's National Task Force on Obesity found that "57 percent of Irish adults were overweight, including 18 percent who were obese."

In Britain, child obesity has jumped to 1 per cent and is expanding rapidly.

The exhibit is also a fresh reminder of how deftly



JFK and Jackie were both avid outdoors enthusiasts.

Kennedy used his presidential office and the emerging media of television to inspire a nation, in this instance and somewhat ironically, to get off the couch.

Images of President Kennedy golfing, or sailing with his wife Jackie, helped to shape an image of JFK as a youthful, vigorous leader.

And images of the Kennedy clan's famous touch football games at the Cape Cod Compound rounded out the Kennedy allure.

But as a health and fitness advocate burdened by his wartime wounds, Kennedy was

keenly aware of the declining fitness of Americans, this due to scientific studies done in the 1950s, includ-

ing a study of American veterans from the Korean War.

Scientists and nutritionists were already aware of the potential health effects of poor fitness, and Kennedy quickly moved to reverse the decline of fitness in America.

The exhibit shows that Kennedy was concerned about American fitness not purely for health reasons alone.

In a surprisingly candid article he wrote for *Sports Illustrated* in December 1960, president-elect Kennedy suggested that a weak America must be viewed as a "menace" to national security.

"We face in the Soviet Union a powerful and implacable adversary determined to show the world that only the Communist system possesses the vigor and determination necessary to satisfy awakening aspirations for progress and the elimination of poverty and want," Kennedy wrote.

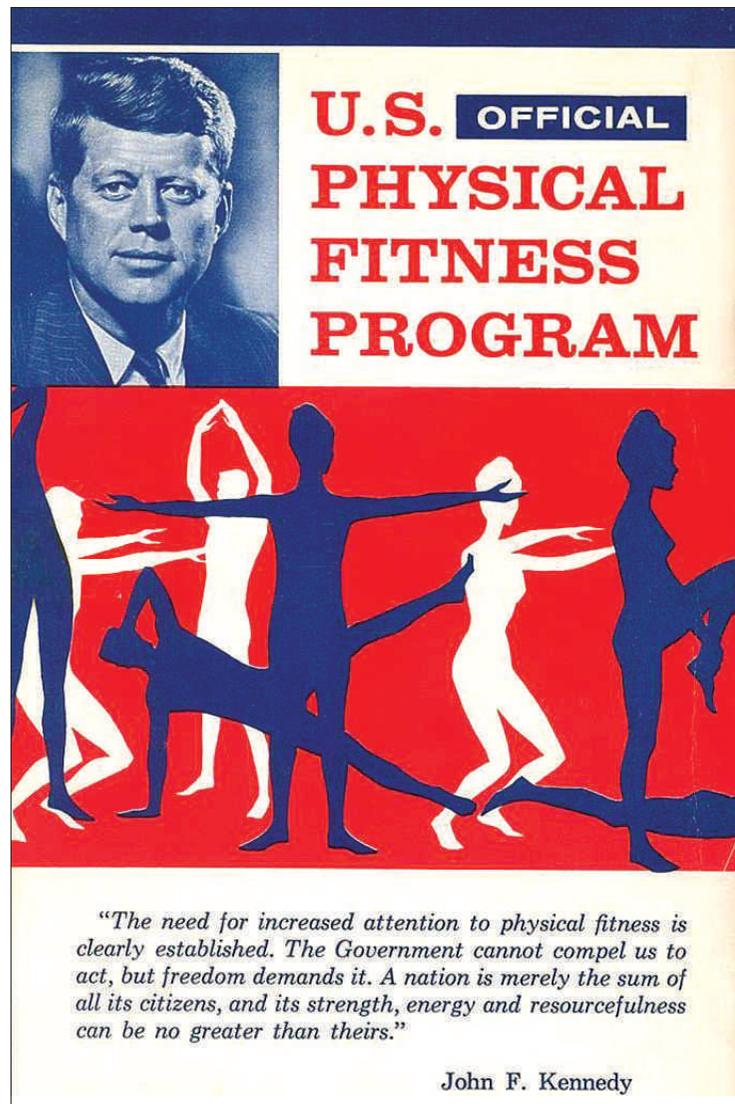
"To meet the challenge of this enemy will require determination and will and effort on the part of all Americans. Only if our citizens are physically fit will they be fully capable of such an effort."

A month after his inauguration, Kennedy convened a Physical Fitness summit that gathered a variety of federal officials, professional athletes, and health and education experts to look closely at the emerging health issues associated with being overweight.

He reinvigorated the President's Council on Physical Fitness started by his predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and initiated a fitness challenge to American high school students

In terms of pure public relations success, Kennedy's most notable initiative was to challenge the U.S. Marines to walk fifty-miles in 20 hours, followed by a challenge to his own Cabinet members.

This challenge entered the newly-minted media cycle, and



*"The need for increased attention to physical fitness is clearly established. The Government cannot compel us to act, but freedom demands it. A nation is merely the sum of all its citizens, and its strength, energy and resourcefulness can be no greater than theirs."*

John F. Kennedy

A poster supporting President Kennedy's campaign to get Americans off their couches.

before long, Americans, as well as people around the world, were responding by staging their own hikes.

Other portions of the exhibit underscore the Kennedy Family's love of sports and the family's commitment to athletics.

According to Library spokesman, Brent Carney, the president's fitness program was complemented by the work of

Kennedy's sister Eugene Shriver, who was working with disabled children in a camp at her Maryland home.

The camp, which taught children habits of physical fitness and how to play organized sports, is credited as the genesis for what would later become the Special Olympics.

More details on the exhibit are available at [www.jfklibrary.org](http://www.jfklibrary.org).



Long before the running and fitness center boom years, this trophy was presented to JFK by the American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation in recognition of his efforts to make the country fitter.

### The Sittard Kennedy March



In Sittard, Holland, the Kennedy challenge to hike 50 miles was taken up by 17 year old An van der Loo and ten of his friends - seven boys and four girls, who had found out about it on Holland's sole television station. Ten of the eleven Dutch teens completed the 50 mile walk, with eight of them finishing in just over nineteen hours.

That 50 mile hike took place in 1963, and has occurred every year since. Known as the Sittard Kennedy March, the walk starts at 5:00 a.m. on the Saturday before Easter, and crosses the German and Belgium borders. Last April it drew over 3,300 walkers, according to van der Loo, one of the event organizers.