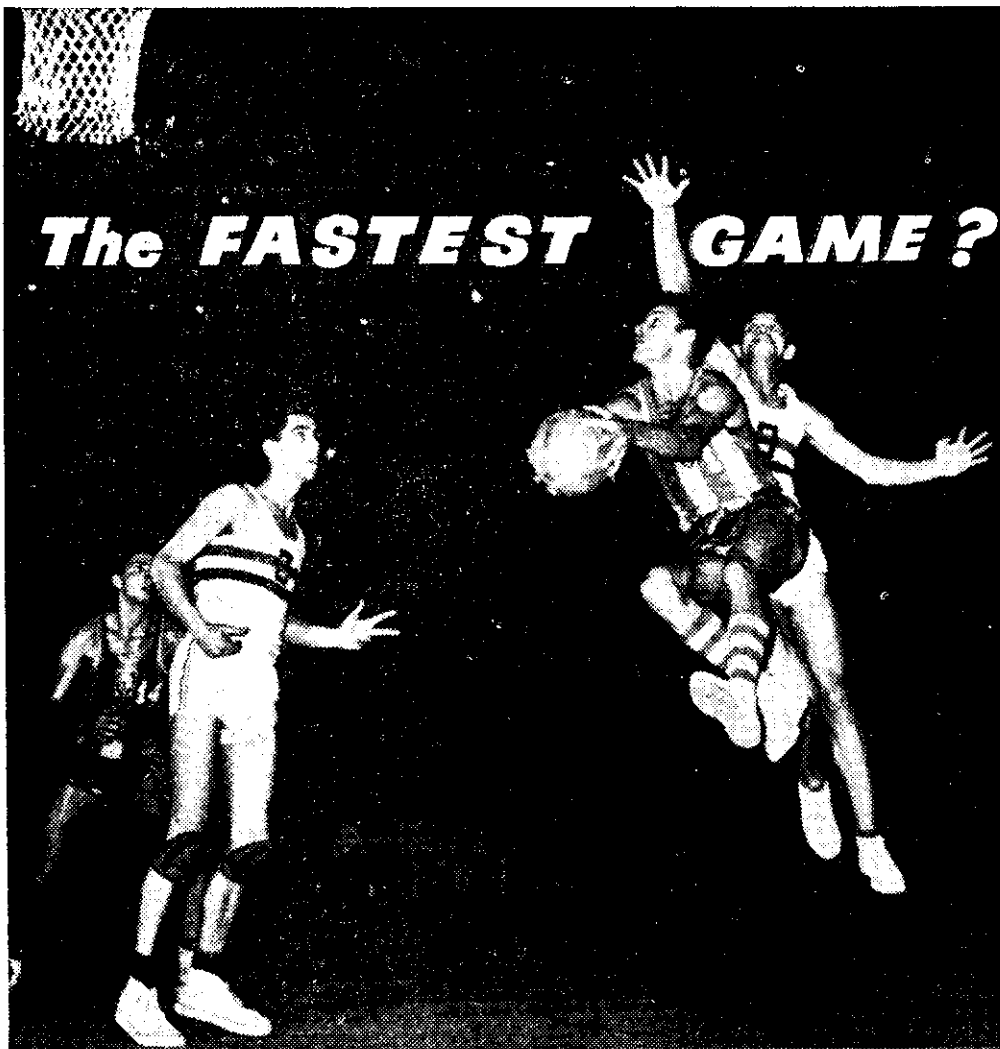


The FASTEST GAME?



THE aid extended by the United States to countries throughout the world frequently takes forms other than the conventional ones of credit and currency assistance. One of the more unusual forms of aid, for example, was lately extended to New Zealand when the U.S. State Department—in response to a request for coaching assistance from the New Zealand Men's Basketball Association—despatched to this country the head basketball coach of the University of California, Los Angeles, John R. Wooden.

In his field, John Wooden is one of the first half-dozen ranking U.S. coaches. In his nine years at U.C.L.A. his teams have won 211 games, lost only 76; last year set a new record as the first team ever to win all 16 Pacific Coast Conference games in a season. Statistics for the year—22 games won, four lost.

When he returned to Wellington the other day after an instructional tour of the South Island, *The Listener* found him impressed with the state of basketball in New Zealand. With the enthusiasm of the Dominion's 14,000-odd players and the facilities becoming available, the sport showed promise of rapid progress, he thought, but it had not yet reached the stage where the spectator could see the game as it could be played.

"I've heard it said that you associate basketball with girls in gym frocks," he told *The Listener*. "It's anything but a girls' game. It's a rugged male game, full of fast moves and constant action.

"The biggest weakness here is that your players take it up too late—after

they have left post-primary school. Because it is a game where exacting skills are required, it would be better to start at a much earlier age."

"Is basketball then your favourite game?"

"Well, at one time or another I have coached all sorts of sports: baseball, track and field, and basketball, so you might say I like all sports. But I think basketball is one of the greatest spectator sports there is—besides being a great players' game. And because it is the fastest of games, a good basketball player can often be good at other sports, too."

Though it might be a rash statement to make in such a stronghold of Rugby as New Zealand, Mr Wooden felt that that game was too exclusively followed by many people. The same criticism could be made of the American form of the game in the United States. He felt, too, that New Zealand Rugby players made the game tougher for themselves than it should be.

"A lot of New Zealanders say proudly, 'We don't use substitutes,' but is this good? If a man is injured, is it sensible for him to stay in the game? If we have someone injured we get him out, because he may hurt himself more severely, because he is no good to the team in most instances, and doesn't improve the game from the spectators' point of view.

"I like Rugby, but it seems to me that some of the things done are wrong. Take the Bush v. Wellington Ranfurly Shield game that I went to. It was a dismal day and all the players came out cold to play. Surely they should warm up first. If they pull muscles it's per-

haps because they don't warm up and stretch them first."

Because injured men do not play as well, it was not fair to the spectators to leave such players in. John Wooden maintained, and it wasn't fair to players, either. Having more substitutes allowed more men to play and enjoy the game. Of course, it was easy to err in the opposite direction. American professional football, for example, which had 33 men to the team, split substitutes into groups, each of which was trained to play a specific kind of offensive or defensive action. The consequence was that there were very few players left now who could play both offensively and defensively.

Mr Wooden had also some points to make about the American attitude to sport at the college or university level.

"The general tendency over there," he said, "is to place more emphasis on competition as part of the educational process than you do here. Americans feel—rightly or wrongly—that competition is in the natural order of things, and that the idea of competition should thus be inculcated as a part of education.

"If you are in a university and studying for some profession, there will be a carry-over from sports competitions that will be helpful in the competitive field of the profession outside. More, because of the emotional stresses that you experience in sport, a better adjustment can be made socially. You can get along

better with the community and, better still, with your neighbour."

Competition, however, was not thought of as applying so much to women. For women the schools provided much in the way of physical education, and there was competition for them within the school, but inter-university competition did not play as large a part in their lives as it did in the lives of the male students. "There's just a feeling that competitive sport should be more for men."

Of the part played by athletics in American university life, Mr Wooden said there appeared to be some misunderstanding. Sport in itself could not lead to a degree.

"Any athlete, to get into a university, must have the normal background of scholastic ability, and at the university must continue his normal progress as a scholar. He must, in fact, work harder if he is to have the time to devote to sport, for if he doesn't achieve the normal number of units he cannot represent his university. In the four years required for a degree course, the athlete can participate in sport for only three.

"I have been reading in your papers that only 18 per cent of your high school students go on to university, compared with our 40 per cent. And many articles say that 18 per cent is too many. With our athletic scholarships we provide many needy students with the opportunity to attend university—is this bad?"

The American was often criticised for his desire to excel, for (it was said) placing too much emphasis on winning. This was not quite a fair charge. The goal was certainly excellence, but the emphasis was on the striving. And, after all, it was harder to be a success than to be a failure—that was true both for individuals and for nations.

(A series of talks by John Wooden on "The American University," now being heard from 2YA, will be broadcast later from other National and Commercial stations.)

JOHN R. WOODEN: "I like Rugby, but it seems to me that some of the things done are wrong"



N.P.S. photograph