

Michael L. Cooper
122 North Peterson Avenue
Louisville, Kentucky 40206

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"OVER, UNDER, OR THROUGH--BUT NEVER AROUND"

"While in the White House I always tried to get a couple of hours' exercise in the afternoons--sometimes tennis, more often riding, or else a rough cross-country walk," explained Theodore Roosevelt, our most physically fit president. His walks weren't exactly walks and they were rough. The president called them "scrambles" and he had one firm rule: "Over, under, or through—but never around."

The president's companions on these scrambles included diplomats, government officials, and military officers. As Roosevelt explained, they would go on "a point to point walk, not turning aside for anything--for instance, swimming Rock Creek or even the Potomac if it came in our way." The tougher the better. "We liked Rock Creek for these walks because we could do so much scrambling and climbing along the cliffs." And they returned to the White House after dark, "so that our appearance might scandalize no one."

In addition to tennis, horseback riding and hiking, President Roosevelt enjoyed hunting, polo, and rowing. He even liked chopping wood, which most people consider a chore. And these were just the outdoor activities. Indoors, he liked boxing, wrestling, and martial arts.

He believed, "the strenuous life," as he called it, helped him to be a better person, a better president. "A mere life of ease is not in the end a very satisfactory life," he said in a speech, "and, above all, it is a life which ultimately unfits those who follow it for serious work in the world."

The president's devotion to the strenuous life began as a boy growing up in 1860s New York City. He was a nearsighted, small, and sickly child. "Nobody seemed to think I would live," Roosevelt recalled. Encouraged by his father, at age ten he began lifting weights. At age 13, after he was shoved around by two boys his age, Roosevelt's mother took him to a gym for boxing lessons. His instructor described the boy as, "a painfully slow and awkward pupil." But what he lacked in ability, young Roosevelt made up in enthusiasm.

In a letter to his father he described an afternoon boxing with a cousin. "We each warded off a right hand blow and brough[t] in a left

hander. His took effect behind my ear and for a minute I saw stars . . . johnie [sic] had had his nose and upper lip mashed together If you offered rewards for bloody noses, you would spend a fortune on me alone."

As a freshman at Harvard College, Roosevelt was only 5' 8" tall and weighed just 124 pounds. A classmate described him as, "a youth in the kindergarten stage of physical development." Yet, Roosevelt continued boxing and in his junior year he competed in the college's annual boxing championship and finished second.

After graduating Roosevelt entered politics. He first served as a legislator and then briefly as governor of New York before being elected vice president in 1900. The following year an assassin shot President William McKinley in Buffalo, New York, and Roosevelt became president. The new president was the youngest ever, only 42. And just because he was a world leader he saw no reason to give up strenuous or risky sports.

The president invited young military officers to the White House to box and wrestle. In one boxing match, Roosevelt's opponent hit him in the left eye, causing an injury that eventually blinded that eye. He kept the injury secret for many years. The president was game for

practically any sport.

Even though he couldn't play tennis well, Roosevelt built a court behind the White House (President Barack Obama has converted it to a basketball court.) and played against cabinet members and diplomats. After hitting a winning shot, the president would shriek like a child while hopping to and fro on one foot singing and laughing. Like everyone he enjoyed winning, but he didn't take sports too seriously.

"I was never a champion at anything," Roosevelt explained to one of his four sons. "I have met English officers to whom polo, racing, football and baseball were far more absorbing than their professional duties. In such case athleticism becomes a mere harmful disease."

Just being physically active, Roosevelt felt, was its own reward. And it just might have helped make him a champion in other ways.

Roosevelt, who was president from 1901 through 1908, was one of our most popular leaders and he accomplished more than most. Roosevelt built the Panama Canal, made the United States a world power, became the first American to win the Noble Peace Prize, and expanded our national parks system by saving the Grand Canyon and other scenic sites from destruction. And, don't forget, he gave the teddy bear its name.