

# COMPETE

by Uncle Walt

Competition is often extolled as a virtue in our society. A closer look at this practice, however, will reveal that it is both dehumanizing to the individual and destructive to social relationships.

Competition is first taught in school, through such systems as examinations, final grades, competitive sports, and school elections. The attitudes learned here are later carried over to public elections, job competition, competitive business practices, and that ultimate battle: war.

In the first five years of life, the home is a child's main environment. Parents often encourage competition between brothers and sisters (sibling rivalry): "Why can't you be as neat as your brother?"

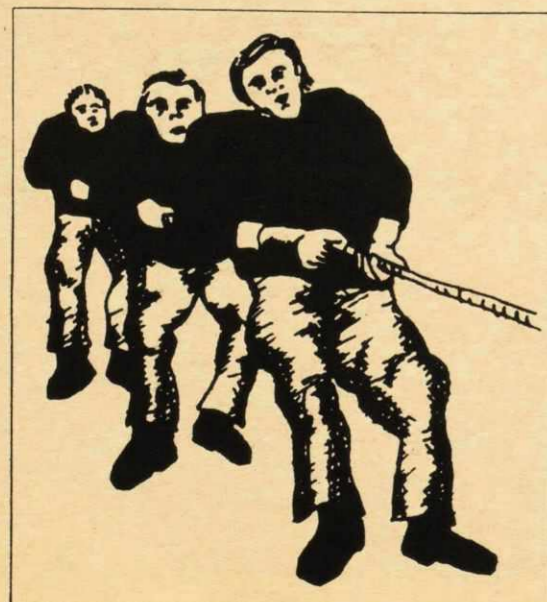
Privileges are granted or refused according to the child's performance, and punishment is inflicted for "misbehaviour". Parents own and control their children's very means of subsistence, a condition which is tantamount to owning the child. Such exclusive control is psychologically unhealthy. Nor should parents tell a child that he or she is "bad", but rather should explain the wisdom of certain kinds of behaviour.

The marking of examinations, either with letter or number grades, has definite disadvantages. The teacher unilaterally decides which questions will be asked and which answers are "correct". Students become concerned not with learning and understanding the material, but with getting good marks.

This often results in cheating, while honest students are penalized. Many unfortunate students panic in the pressure of an exam, although their understanding may be better than a classmate's who crammed the night before and has a good memory.

Relationships between students are strained. Envy, jealousy, and hostility are generated by the competitive situation. Some teachers actually rearrange the seating arrangement according to the order of exam results.

Evaluation of understanding is certainly necessary in a learning situation, but is better done by two-way communication between teacher and student. Instead, examinations are now judged quantitatively; that is, they are measured in terms of percentages. No such measurement can



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adequately describe knowledge.

Teaching is standardized, and so is learning. Creativity, curiosity, and innovation are suppressed or given only token acknowledgement, even at the graduate level.

The assigning of marks, especially the final grades which remain on permanent record, puts all power in the hands of the teacher. This turns the classroom into an authoritarian structure, an unhealthy situation for a learning process.

Along with the authoritarian family, this classroom acts as a training ground for future servile relationships with employers, clergymen, politicians, military officers, and other self-proclaimed "authorities".

The concept of "getting good marks" is later translated into "getting a good salary," with on-the-job activities becoming as meaningless and unsatisfying as schoolwork. The myth of "deferred gratification" is built up, in which it is considered virtuous to sacrifice present enjoyment for future satisfaction.

This behaviour is encouraged; that is, intrinsic values (doing something because it is worthwhile in and of itself) are replaced by extrinsic values (values external to the activity itself, such as grades, salary, votes, etc.). Goals which are not reached provide constant frustration, while those victories which are achieved turn out to be empty indeed.

Another area where competition is actively encouraged, first in school and later in public exhibitions, is sports. Almost all the recreational activity which schools encourage are on the competitive model, with opposing players or teams. In spite of the common statement that "It's not whether you win or lose but how you play the game," the real idea is to win. Excepting the case of a draw, there is always a losing side.

As with grades, success in sports is quantized

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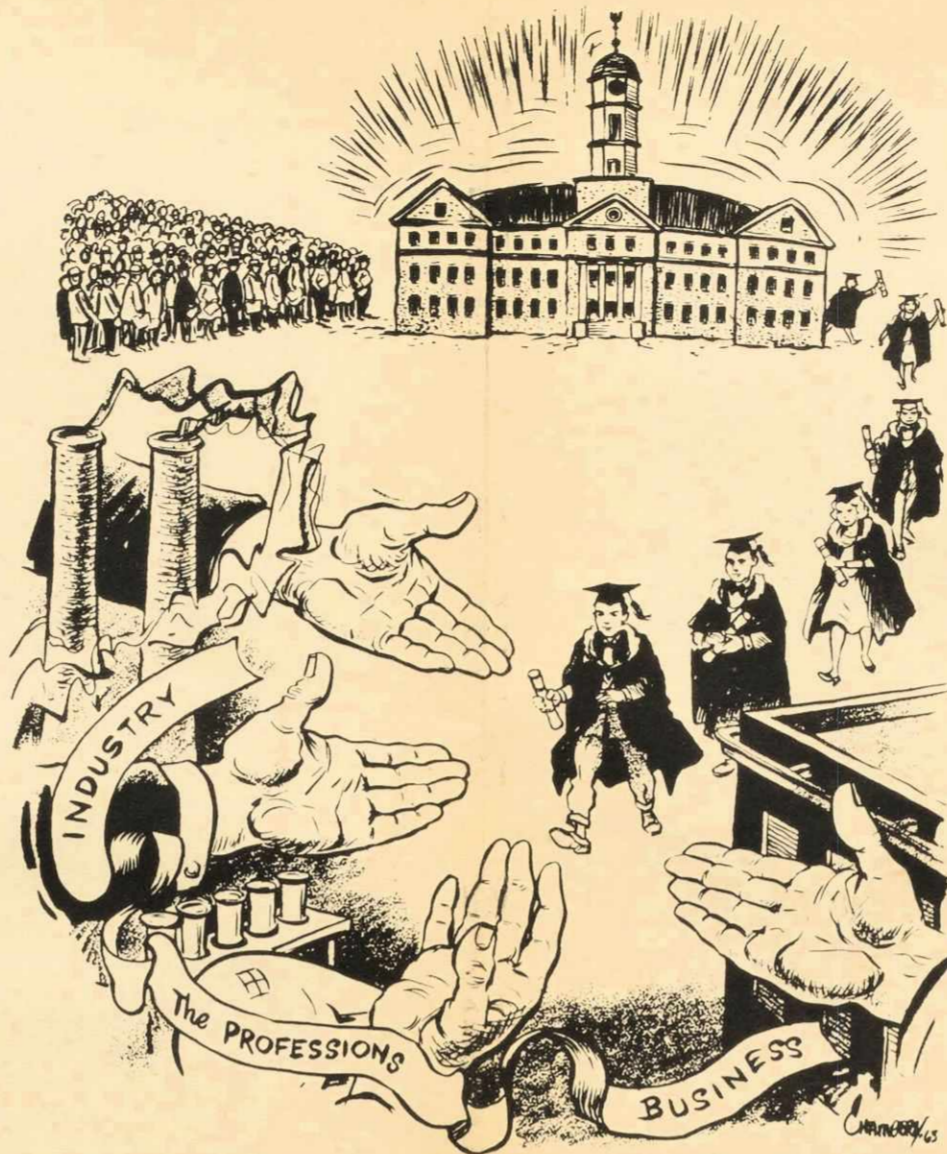
by means of points. There are many sports terms which come directly from the language of warfare: "offence", "defence", "territory", "captain", and many more. Uniforms are worn as in war, and "our side" is better than "their side," just because it happens to be our side.

The ultimate competitive sports event is the Olympic Games. Although publicized as a great builder of international understanding and co-operation, the Games actually involve intense political competition at the expense of the athletes themselves.

A concept some athletic coaches introduce is "competing against oneself." This is taught in an attempt to make the athlete strive harder and harder to excel. Such behaviour may be advantageous to the coach or the team, but it is always against the athlete, as the concept itself states.

There are, however, plenty of noncompetitive forms of recreation. Swimming, skating, and the recently-revived activity of bicycling are examples. Even better might be constructive physical work such as gardening, cleaning up, snow removal, etc. These are better than being a spectator or competitor.

In addition to sports, other kinds of games have



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come to attention recently through such books as *Games People Play*, and Buckminster Fuller's concept of World Game. Games have several properties: they can be won or lost; they are not taken completely seriously but are "played"; they are competitive; and the players are secretive or deceptive, never revealing their strategy to their opponents. This practice discourages straightforwardness and honesty in all interpersonal communication, with people becoming less open with their feelings and ideas than they were as children.

Nature itself is often competed against, as if man were separate from Nature. The results of this attitude are evident today in the pollution of our environment. The answer is not, however, to "Fight Pollution" (another competitive battle), but to simply stop polluting. When we pollute the environment, we eventually pollute ourselves as well.

In landing one's first job in industry, school grades again make the difference between success and failure, although grades are a poor indicator of on-the-job performance, and many good workers are simply never hired. The extrinsic reward is now not marks but money. The employee is in continual competition against his colleagues to



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can buy, when in fact there is little difference. At the same time, the oil companies are sitting on the patents for electric cars which could provide pollution-free transportation.

## ELECTIONS

In student elections and elections for public office, the competitive model again appears. There are election "campaigns" just as there are advertising and military campaigns. The objective is to defeat the opponent by whatever means possible, in order to obtain a position of power.

Results are again in numerical terms, this time as "votes". It is the candidate with the most money and the best "image" who succeeds in convincing the voters to give their support.

In reality, voting is an abdication of the voter's responsibility. The voter is turning over to a usually complete stranger the power to make and enforce laws over the voter. But no single candidate could possibly represent the desires of thousands of voters.

Students can protest the farce of elections by boycotting the polls both in school and out, thus withholding their symbolic support. In the case of government elections, a competitive system again yields an authoritarian structure, this time enforced by the police.

After all their competitive training, it is no wonder that adults support, glorify, and engage in warfare. As with business and sports, the leaders in war make money at the expense of the participants.

Thus we see that competition is not the wonderful and necessary thing which it is often said to be. Indeed, it would be better for everyone if it were never practiced at all. It is amazing that there still remains some co-operative, friendly, and helpful feelings after such indoctrination. Some people treat their whole lives as a game.

Recent trends toward free schools (without grading and using individualized study methods), co-operative business enterprises, communal living (urban and rural), and the growing anti-war sentiment are encouraging. Those who still believe in competition should heed the observation made in the novel and motion picture, "The Days of Wine and Roses": Even if you win the rat race, you're still a rat.

keep his job and make more money via raises and promotions.

As with the teacher, the employer holds a great deal of authority over the worker by controlling the paycheck.

Most organizations, whether public or private, have a pyramidal power structure, with a few people at the top and many employees at the bottom. The top executives make many times the salaries of workers, while workers do all the productive physical labor.

Upper and middle management also have control of hiring and firing, often treating the employees as mere commodities. Such terms as "labour market" arise, along with slogans like "People are our most important resource." Meanwhile, although it may appear that the worker is paid by the employer, it is the other way around because much of the worker's labors yield profits for management and the stockholders.

Only co-operative or communal organizations controlled by the workers themselves avoid the disadvantages of competition and the resulting authoritarian relationships.

When students graduate into the business world, they learn that here too the concept of competition is supreme. The hoax is perpetuated that this approach improves products and services, yet the quality of manufactured items has declined in recent years.

Cars, houses, and clothes are all designed to wear out faster than they used to, and foodstuffs are now overprocessed and filled with chemicals. The only thing which has become more effective is advertising, in its ability to push unnecessary and harmful products and services onto a conditioned public.

It is not unusual to see each corner of an intersection occupied by a different gas station, each one proclaiming that it has the best gasoline money

