

# METHODOLOGY AND CULTURAL STUDIES

## Percy Wells Cerutti: Evocations of Primitive in High-Performance Sport

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This paper discusses one tireless proponent of athleticism as an invigorating way of life consonant with humanity's evolutionary past: Percy Wells Cerutti of Australia. Cerutti gained fame as an outspoken coach of world-class runners, most notably Herb Elliott, one of the great milers in the history of track and field. From the late 1940s until his death in 1975, Cerutti espoused a "Stotan philosophy" (stoic + spartan) that presented an alternative to the unchallenging routines of modernity; the Stotan creed required hard physical training in natural settings and a wilful confrontation with pain. An odd and charismatic figure, Cerutti eagerly took up the role of prophet, crying for a return to wilderness and preaching sport as salvation. As the title of one of his books proclaimed: Be Fit! Or Be Damned! Cerutti's life and thought offer a case study of the confluence between cultural primitivism and high-performance sport.

Cerutti promulgated athleticism as an ideology, that is. as an explicit system of beliefs, a guide to action, and a conception of the worthy life. The athlete, idealized, stood as a symbol of the desire for a simpler and more strenuous mode of living, closer to nature, distant from the technocratic values dominant in urban-industrial society. As expressed in athleticism, this utopian impulse bore a number of distinguishing features: the significance of training as a series of self-imposed physical ordeals, the importance placed on a code of asceticism, on overcoming pain to achieve an heroic vitality; the cult of strength and health, the distrust of mere intellect, the brotherhood of a community of “strivers.”

Cerutti set his training methods under the aegis of nature and the primitive; by contrast, he cited the machine as an icon of a civilized way of life which had produced enfeeblement and disease by ignoring the natural needs of the body. Throughout his numerous books on sports and fitness, Cerutti insisted that the athlete should resist the “status of a machine” and reject the “scientific formula” in favor of “natural and instinctive effort.” Cerutti’s enterprise attempted to restore a sense of potency to the individual by promoting sport as an antidote to what he perceived as the dehumanizing demands of mechanistic society.

In evoking the primitive, Cerutti summoned a cultural fantasy that envisioned a prelapsarian state of radiant athletic grace. Echoes of the romantic ideal of the Noble Savage pervaded his “naturalistic approach” to athletics. Cerutti attributed his ideas on optimal running technique to the study of those he considered still in touch with instinctive patterns of movement: animals (such as race horses), children, and primitives, especially the Australian aborigine. To adopt such models would and hence lead the athlete to regain a full measure of innate health and vigour.

Beyond a means to superior performance or robust health, Cerutti’s athleticism exemplified a critique of modernity measured in terms of fitness and unfitness. Physical “unfitness” marked those who had succumbed to the deleterious unnaturalness of modern life, whereas “fitness” circumscribed the elect. the saving remnant of hardy souls.

The particular athletic practices undertaken by Cerutti and his followers became secular rituals or redemption and reinvigoration. serving to impart value and meaning as well as strength and vitality. At “Ceres,” his seaside training camp south of Melbourne, ritual lustrations, exposure to the sun. and a diet of seeds and other “live” foods all evoked intimations of rebirth. The athlete’s prodigious expenditure of energy became a kind of sacrifice that consumed old life in the purifying tire of physical exertion and gave birth to renewed life in the afterglow of accomplishment.

In examining Cerutti's theories of health and athletic performance and his arguments for adopting the strenuous life of endurance sport, this study places sportive practices in a cultural context of symbols and ideologies shared, for example, with health reform movements. Moreover, it suggests that the romantic and primitivistic imagination which has long informed travel literature may also appear in the literature of modern sport. Like adventure travel, athleticism can prove alluring as a means to regeneration through contact with "primitive" vitality. A cultural fascination with indigenous peoples as remote, exotic, and uncorrupted by modernity sees them as repositories of lost knowledge and indicates a psychological malaise among those caught up in the hurly-burly of modern life. When a feeling of spiritual emptiness and social alienation generates a persistent and powerful yearning for meaning, structure, and self-fulfilment, the consequent search for secular rituals of redemption and regeneration may lead to sport and the embrace of athleticism as a grounding practice and philosophy.