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Building Fitter Fascists: MacFadden Trains Mussolini's Navy, 1940

Italy's World War II experience was checkered at best. Domination by the Third Reich, mixed battlefield performances, and Benito Mussolini's grisly demise at the hands of his own enraged populace cloud memories of an earlier time when il Duce seemed to stand astride the wave of Europe's future. Claims of the vigor of civilization were intrinsic to Mussolini's insistence that that future belonged to fascism.

During the Great Depression, the notion that Mussolini would build a faster, higher, stronger—and richer—Italy sounded plausible to many. Fond of the art of the gesture, il Duce made constant references to virility's virtues, often posing bare-chested as testimony to his own machismo. Since fascism viewed the world as a cockpit of stimulating strife in which degraded democracies could hardly compete, such displays were laden with implications.

Yet, one episode shows that even the champions of fascism felt that decadent Americans had something to offer in the realm of physical improvement. Physical Culture guru Bernarr MacFadden trained a corps of Italian naval cadets for several weeks during 1930. This paper examines an intriguing interchange, ripe as it was with mutual public relations exploitation. The paper reviews the regimen and MacFadden's accounts of it. Finally, it reexamines an era when Italian fascism presented itself as alluring and ineluctable.