EMERALD STUDIES IN SPORT AND GENDER

RUNNING, IDENTITY AND MEANING

The Pursuit of Distinction Through Sport

NEIL BAXTER

Running, Identity and Meaning

Writing as both a runner and a scholar of running, Baxter brings a unique perspective to this engaging and insightful study of running as a classed and gendered social practice, drawing out the diverse investments and identity-producing possibilities across different categories of running. This enables him to explore running's embeddedness in, and reproduction of, middle-classness, exposing the complexity of the superficially simple and coherent leisure practice of putting one foot in front of the other. The book offers a clearly and engagingly articulated account that brings empirical data into dialogue with social theory in ways that will be of interest to those working in the fields of gender, class, sport and leisure studies, health, embodiment and social theory. And it is a must-read for anyone who has ever pulled on a pair of running shoes and hit the pavement, track or fell.

–Dr Karen Throsby,
School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds

Neil Baxter's illuminating book relates running in its different forms to contemporary self-identities, stressing the importance of hierarchies of class and gender, and highlighting what running can tell us about runners' values and individualized subjectivities, in a way that goes well beyond viewing running simply as a sport or leisure activity. Utilizing but transcending his position as an insider within the field, his book is both highly sociological in its insights, and also written in a clear, articulate and ultimately very readable way, providing food for thought for academic and running audiences alike.

–Richard Lampard,
Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Warwick

This is a theoretically sophisticated and beautifully written analysis of the field of running which, as its title suggests, takes a Bourdieuian approach to understanding the way running is implicated in the reproduction of social identities and meanings. It tackles head on the idea that sport is somehow unworthy of serious sociological attention, showing what can be learned about contemporary social life by exploring different forms of running and how they are crucially shaped by gender, race and class. The author, who, as a runner as well as a sociologist is uniquely well-qualified to write about the field, argues that running, like most sport, is a gendered field, privileging specific (usually white and middle-class) masculinities, and that this has implications for other social groups in terms of participation. He shows that some forms of running are more open than others to those who are not privileged within the field but that they hold lower status in the hierarchy of running. This book is a joy to read. It holds intrinsic interest not only for sociologists of sport but also for those concerned with the way inequalities are reproduced and how Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' can be used to understand the way running in particular, and sport more generally, shine a light on how social processes operate at the micro level to reproduce patterns of social distinction.

–Nickie Charles,
Professor and Director of the Centre for the Study of Women and Gender, University of Warwick, UK

Running, Identity and Meaning: The Pursuit of Distinction Through Sport

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Vika, Alice and Jessica

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Acknowledgements

I am sure I can remember someone telling me, when I was starting out as a PhD student a long time ago, that the process of taking my germ of an idea through the research process to submission and finally, to writing it up as a book would be 'a marathon, not a sprint'. But given that the last six years of my life have been saturated with running talk and terminology, I wonder if this is some kind of false memory – a reimagining of the standard PhD pep talk embroidered with the cliché closest to hand. However, a marathon it has been, and one that I have enjoyed every step of the way. Like many a long-distance runner, I could not have reached the finish line without the assistance of a band of patient and helpful supporters. Academic guidance and advice were ably provided by Nickie Charles and Richard Lampard at the University of Warwick, two very different sociologists whose expertise dovetailed perfectly to support this multi-strategy project. Thanks also go to the reviewers who have read my manuscripts and provided helpful and constructive suggestions. With two young children at home and many other responsibilities to juggle, the support of my wife, Vika, and my parents, Andrew and Nicola, has been invaluable in allowing me to dedicate the necessary time to my academic work. And the interest and pride shown by my young daughters, Alice and Jessica, has been both hugely rewarding and quite surprising! Finally, a huge debt of thanks also goes to the interviewees who gave their time to talk to me about the minutiae of their involvement in running and to those many hundreds of mostly anonymous benefactors who took the time to complete, share and help promote the survey. Without the help of all these people, this book could never have been written.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Why Running Matters

1. In Defence of Running

Growing up in a provincial market town in East Anglia in the 1980s, my identity was bound up with the idea of being a fast runner, with winning races at school, and with the respect I gained from the older boys I competed against in our cul-de-sac's regular mini Olympics competitions. Back then, it was good to be able to run fast. It carried value and brought status in our hierarchical little world. Beyond it though, in the wider adult universe, recreational running could still seem vaguely ridiculous. We accepted that our dads might play football or squash, swim or cycle (I do not recall our mums doing any sport at all), but when the father of one of our gang emerged from his house in a brand-new running kit, made some perfunctory stretches, then jogged off past us up the street, his son was inconsolable with embarrassment. And we, of course, thought it was hilarious; this early adopter of the recently imported jogging craze looked so serious, so earnest – and so *very* slow! He was no athlete in training worthy of our admiration, just an average, slightly out of shape dad with – as we saw it – delusions of sporting grandeur. At that time, the 'running boom' was only just igniting in the United Kingdom, and alongside – or in response to – the hype, poking fun at joggers had become popular sport on both sides of the Atlantic. They were 'grim-faced… self-worshippers' (Fotheringham, 1980) and 'unattractive… mindless followers of… a futile effort to avoid death' (Barnard, 1983). Even the Homer Simpson of his day, Fred Flintstone, took up jogging in a 1981 TV special, becoming dangerously obsessed and rather too enamoured of the attention he was getting for having registered to run in the local marathon. The supposed obsessiveness of joggers was also the butt of a famous Benny Hill sketch in 1988, in which Benny absconds on his wedding night to fit in his daily run. It seems likely that my friend's father was the undeserving victim of us having absorbed these teasing media stereotypes. But if what he was doing seemed odd and silly, or at least novel enough to laugh at to our eyes back then, jogging would soon be transformed into the most mainstream and ubiquitous of sports.

Today, almost 40 years on, wherever you go in Britain, from the busiest cities to the remotest of upland trails, runners are a familiar, almost unavoidable presence. Every day, the country is criss-crossed by joggers, marathoners-in-training and

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amateur athletes, with close to seven million adults[1] taking part in some form of the sport at least twice per month (Sport England, 2020a). Far from a novelty or eccentricity, recreational running has evolved into something quite ordinary, quite conventional. Indeed, the cumulative time, energy and money expended on running, the charity fundraising it supports, the networks of clubs and groups it sustains, and the global industries that have sprung up around it have made the sport a substantial and attention-worthy economic and social phenomenon. The fact that its huge popularity and broad appeal today contrast so starkly with its status just a few decades ago only adds to its interest as a sociological subject, its transformation and rapid rise in popularity suggesting clues to broader changes in society and individuals' priorities and tastes over the same time frame.

However, despite all these good reasons to take running seriously and despite my long-term interest and involvement in the sport, I initially had misgivings about dedicating years of study to what might reasonably, if uncharitably, be described as a mere pastime. Indeed, before taking up the subject, the sociology of sport as a whole seemed to me to lack the gravitas attached to other major sociological sub-disciplines. Sport felt somehow ornamental rather than central to society, a sideshow to the big, meaningful issues around race and identity, poverty and power that my peers were then studying. But, this was a mistake. As I hope this book will show, running matters deeply, not just in itself as a source of personal meaning and satisfaction to its adherents but also for what it can tell us about other 'weightier' subjects, about the character of our culture, and about life, values and identity in 21st century Britain.

Looking back, I have no doubt my initial reticence to take up running as a research subject reflected my own insecurities and ignorance, but it also needs to be understood in the context of lingering academic prejudices surrounding the study of sport in sociology (see Carrington, 2010). The seeds of this chauvinism were sown early in our discipline's history, when classical sociologists worked hard to demarcate their own distinct zone of expertise in contrast to more established sciences (see Carter & Charles, 2010). Part of this process was to prise apart the study of 'social' and 'natural' realms, leaving nature – including the human body – to the biologists and establishing sociology's authority over a social world hacked off at its biological roots. This division, underpinned by Descartes' ontological dichotomy of mind and body (Tulle, 2015), shaped the development of sociology for many decades, with the result that body-centric topics like sport were largely neglected. And even today, following the 'somatic turn' in sociology (Turner, 1984), sport as a research topic retains a slightly frivolous image. According to Carrington (2010, p. 6), 'sport both hyper-accentuates and finds itself on the wrong side of a supposedly insurmountable (and deeply "classed") dualism between useless physicality and purposeful intellectualism'. As a result, according to Bourdieu (1990a, p. 156) 'there are, on the one hand, those who know sport very well on a physical level but do not know how to talk about it and, on the other hand, those who know sport very

[1]In England, but the UK-wide figure is unlikely to be significantly different.

poorly on a practical level and who could talk about it, but disdain doing so, or do so without rhyme or reason'.

The sociology of sport's awkward academic position is neatly embodied in the person of Loïc Wacquant, who, despite having authored a highly respected study of boxing in Chicago (Wacquant, 2004), remained at pains to deny that his subject was the sport itself, but rather 'the twofold incorporation of social structures: the collective creation of proficient bodies and the ingenuous unfolding of the socially constituted powers they harbor' (Wacquant, 2005, p. 444). Elsewhere he described sport as 'a lowly object in social life' (Wacquant, 1996, p. 23) and said that following the success of his boxing study, his association with Pierre Bourdieu had saved him from 'disappearing into the oblivion of the sociology of sport' (p. 24). Given prevailing prejudices, I can empathise with Wacquant's resistance to attempts to ghettoise his work and sympathise with the idea that sport can be studied as a manifestation of universal social processes rather than simply in and of itself. However, I would also argue that sport, and running in particular, *are* important social phenomena, and that they *do* deserve study in their own right. For sociology to neglect or downgrade sport, a category of social action as ubiquitous to and specifically shaped by our times as any other seems to me a failure of sociological objectivity and a kind of wilful myopia. If sociologists aim to comprehend the deep structures that bring order and meaning to the infinite variety and singularity of human experience, it is vital that we subject all social life to serious scrutiny, not just those elements we a priori deem worthy of attention. After all, would a complete understanding of the culture of the Roman Empire be possible without knowledge of the amphitheatre and hippodrome? Or of classical Greece without reference to the gymnasium or Olympic Games?

Perhaps sport is doubly cursed as a sociological topic; not only is it an intrinsically embodied activity, it is also a form of *leisure*. Leisure time, commonly understood, is what is left over once the serious business of discharging responsibilities at work and in the home is complete. It is for relaxing (i.e. recharging in order to return to the fray) or participating in frivolous hobbies and pastimes whose role is simply to consume time – a necessity because, according to Svendsen (2005, p. 23), 'we cannot face tackling time that is "empty"'. Leisure activities then can be seen as little more than 'filler', plugging the gaps and providing a rest between bouts of engagement in serious, attention-worthy work and responsibility. Even some of the most respected sociologists who have written extensively about sport and leisure have perpetuated this 'sideshow' perspective. Elias and Dunning (1986), drawing on a Freudian psychology, conceptualised sport as an outlet for 'uncivilised' pre-social drives. Playing sport, they explained, was a way of lancing a boil that could otherwise infect the body politic and interfere with the smooth running of modern, rational society. And Veblen (2007) saw leisure as an arena for essentially decorative and wasteful status competition rather than for any kind of significant fulfilment.

Other voices, though, have argued for a quite different understanding of the centrality and meaning of leisure. Over 2,000 years ago, Aristotle (2013, p. 224) asserted that 'the first principle of all action is leisure. Both [leisure and work] are required, but leisure is better than occupation and is its end'. Johan Huizinga's (2016) *Homo Ludens*, written in 1938, argued that the roots of all human culture

lie in play. The German philosopher, Josef Pieper, called leisure 'the preserve of freedom, of education and culture, and of that undiminished humanity which views the world as a whole' (Pieper, 1963, p. 46). And some Marxists have used similar arguments, contrasting the freedom and authenticity available through leisure with the alienation and degradation of factory work (see Bambery, 1996). These perspectives, in which leisure is associated with all that is best and meaningful in human existence, suggest that access to leisure and the decisions we make about how we use it are vital to human flourishing and pursuing the good life. Thus understood, for sociologists, leisure presents an unparalleled window on the subjectivities – the fundamental values, needs, identities and aspirations – of its participants, and hence on the characteristics of the wider culture of which they are part. Needless to say, it is with the ideas propounded by these 'pro-leisure' scholars that I align myself. And I hope that over the course of this book, I will demonstrate that running is not only an important and significant social phenomenon deserving sociological attention in itself, but also a fascinating way in to exploring some of the key cultural concerns that define our age.

2. Exploring and Explaining the Diversity of Running

As a runner – and a certain *type* of runner – myself, stepping back from my preconceived ideas of what running is and means was a vital first step in this research project. So, in the broadest terms, how would I characterise running as a social practice? Ostensibly, as I have suggested, it would seem to fall within the ambit of leisure activities, broadly defined as un-coerced activity engaged in during free time that is either satisfying or fulfilling (see Stebbins, 2012). More specifically, it could also be described as a sport. But, both of these definitions feel partial and inadequate. Certainly, running can be a competitive sport with races, medals and championships, but is a gentle jog with a friend on a Sunday morning or a session on the treadmill really a sport or something else? For some, running might be better understood as a part of a project of healthy living, a beauty practice, a weight loss tool, a social activity, a way to experience the outdoors or the limits of human endurance; for others, it could be best understood as a charity fundraising device or simply as a way of getting from A to B. Running then does not necessarily bear all the traditional hallmarks of competitive sport. More broadly, it is also possible to contest the extent to which running fits standard definitions of leisure as 'un-coerced' activity. Those overweight patients who are denied potentially life-saving NHS treatments until they lose weight could argue with some justification that they have been forced to take up running on pain of death. And in other, subtler ways, the motivation to run could be seen as 'coerced' by social pressures restricting deviation from certain narrow bodily norms.

This kind of ambiguity and flexibility characterises the sport in other important ways. Not least, it manifests in the wide variety of types of running open to practitioners, ranging from sprinting to ultramarathon and from treadmill to fell running, each of which is associated with a characteristic set of institutions,

histories and infrastructures. In fact, so distinctive are these different ways of running – both practically and motivationally – that it seems reasonable to consider them as separate practices, each associated with different needs, values and sporting identities. Indeed, it is the heterogeneity of running – the way it appears able to flex to fulfil different needs for different groups of people – that is a central theme of this book. My overarching goal is to map out the diverse and dynamic universe of running, identifying the different ways it is practiced, how they relate to each other, what they mean and what forms of identity – both within and beyond the sport – they help to support. I also seek to explain how these patterns and associations emerge, both from a historical perspective and from the point of view of the lived experience of individual runners, and, more broadly, how the sport's popularity today can be understood through its relationship to important contemporary norms and ideals.

So, in this book, I present a view of running as a site where a wide range of identities find expression, and within which runners are active in structured processes of self-definition that shed important light on both the concerns and dispositions of particular groups and those of wider contemporary British society. I characterise running as an evolving social field, calibrated by systems of value that have arisen – and continue to arise – from historical processes that have shaped the sport and wider society over many years. Within this field, I argue different ways of running reflect and reproduce individuals' access to resources, levels of privilege and their beliefs and values, as derived from the conditions of their socialisation. Position inside the field, in other words, often reflects position outside of the field, albeit translated into a practical sporting language that can help to essentialise and legitimise wider social inequalities and differences. Over the chapters that follow, I explore how running's popularity today can be understood as a result of its diversity, of the many ways the sport has flexed to accommodate different needs and priorities. The theoretical and methodological framework on which this view is based, and that provides the key analytical perspective of this book, is grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (2005). As explained in detail in the next chapter, Bourdieu's approach is compatible with a conceptualisation of running as a diverse set of related social practices, a world within a world in which wider social resources are refracted and social position is reproduced. It also places a strong emphasis on the role of leisure and lifestyle as a foundation of identity, and on the body as an important repository of value and meaning. Empirically, Bourdieu's sociology provides a way of engaging with quantitative and qualitative data to integrate the 'big picture' of social structure with lived experience and personal meaning. To this end, the evidence I draw on includes data from two surveys, numerous interviews with runners, as well as a wide range of historical material and contemporary running related media.

3. Organisation of This Book

This book is spread across eight chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 sets out the theoretical ideas that underpin the methodological and analytical

approach I have chosen to take, describes relevant empirical research, and lays out this study's methods and research process. I describe how leisure, lifestyle and the body have moved to the centre of discussions of how identity and personal value are asserted and maintained in contemporary society and outline Bourdieu's Theory of Practice and thinking tools. I also explore some of the existing research and writing around running. In the latter part of the chapter, I describe the survey and interview methods used, including how they are integrated, and review details of the data collection and analysis processes.

In line with Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) assertion that an analysis of how a field has reached its present state over time is vital to understanding its current structure and meaning, Chapter 3 provides a historical analysis of the development of the field of running in Britain from the Middle Ages until today. The context this provides is vital for interpreting the meanings ascribed to running by participants in this study, as well as for understanding the dynamics and relationships between the different forms of the sport accessible to runners today. I begin with running contests at village fairs and festivals, move through seventeenth to nineteenth century pedestrianism and the emergence of athletics, and explore the rise of jogging and mass participation races in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I also consider more recent developments, including the expansion and diversification of recreational running and the influence of the internet and other technologies on the sport. In parallel, I also describe historical debates over the role of running in education as well as population and reproductive health. This history is framed by Bourdieu's thinking tools – field, habitus and capital – which help to highlight the tensions around class, gender and ethnicity that have marked running's history and aid the integration of this account with the findings presented later regarding the nature of the field today. As well as Bourdieu, I also draw on the work of Elias around the 'civilizing process' and the writings of Foucault and others on healthism.

In Chapter 4, I present an analysis of quantitative data on running, including both a secondary analysis of data from Sport England's Active Lives Survey and an exploration of key features of the primary data from my own Big Running Survey. I compare the social profile of running to a range of other popular sports and present statistically generated 'maps' of the field of running, which allow patterns in a wide range of survey responses to be interpreted intuitively. In the remainder of the chapter, I describe evidence of social structuring within running, comparing and contrasting different forms of the sport in terms of a range of social variables. The statistics presented in this chapter provide the robust, generalisable evidence to support my characterisation of running as a field, as well as for the socially structured nature of engagement in different forms of the sport.

Using the maps of the field presented in Chapter 4 as a guide, in chapters 5, 6 and 7, I explore a range of themes relating to how different position-takings in running are implicated in the reproduction of different forms of social identity. In Chapter 5, 'disciplining body and mind', my focus is on positions associated with running's role as a 'technique of the self' used to discipline the body and the mind according to contemporary social norms. Here, I also discuss the sport as a component of the 'healthy lifestyle', with its important ethical, aesthetic, classed

and gendered dimensions. Foucault's work looms large here, helping to link the popularity of running today with the rise of certain values associated with neoliberalism in the West over the last 40 years or so. In Chapter 6, 'the price and the meaning of success', attention turns to positions in the field that engage with running's competitive aspects. I explore the ways gender and class interact to shape competitive engagement, as well as how male and female runners tend to follow different trajectories through the sport. In this chapter, I consider the demands placed on runners' wider lives and relationships by their commitment to running, with special reference to the role of control – over time, people and resources – in shaping the ability to compete successfully and hence to occupy profitable positions in the field. I also describe the nature and transposability of the symbolic and cultural capital attached to such positions. In Chapter 7, 'running places', I address the important role of place in generating the field's structure and the social and semiotic differences between positions that characterise it. Taking each of four environments in turn (road, running track, countryside and obstacle course), I explore how the physical and cultural features of each influence the meaning and status of the running that takes part within them. Here, I also consider the ways the different sites of running present different sets of symbolic and practical barriers that help to reinforce social inequalities in participation rates. Overall, in this chapter, I argue that the physical location where a form of running takes place is central to shaping the degree of social distinction it affords and its appeal to different groups.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I present the book's conclusions. Across four key themes, I draw together the evidence surveyed over the course of the preceding chapters to characterise the field of running and its relationship to wider social space and the reproduction of various social identities. In the first theme, I describe the value of using Bourdieu's field analysis tools to understand running. I also discuss the important role of physical capital that this approach reveals. In the next two themes, I focus on key social variables, first class and then gender, in shaping engagement in running and the profits accrued from the field. And in the fourth and final theme, I draw attention to the dynamism of the field over time, illustrating this through the example of fell running's[2] evolution from an obscure working-class tradition into a bastion of privilege within a democratising field. I conclude the chapter and the book with some final thoughts on the character of running as a field, and on the relationship between running, identity and meaning in Britain today.

[2]A form of trail running popular in the hilly and mountainous areas of Britain. Traditionally, it takes place on unmarked courses and can involve navigational skills.

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