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Pleasurable suffering: thinking about pleasure and pain

Ian Wellard

Debates about pain within the context of traditional sport are not altogether new. There has been a lot written about physical pain or, indeed, the way in which pain is understood as 'part and parcel' of taking part in sport. 'Taking the knocks' as it were is pretty much considered an everyday aspect of sporting participation. However, in most of these accounts pain is an unwanted aspect of sport, to be endured or tolerated and recognised so that it can be avoided. In this way, pain is more often related with injury as a result of sporting performance or as a result of aggression and violence that again are considered part of traditional sporting participation.

More recently, qualitative research in sport, and in particular research that takes a more embodied approach, has been able to explore and reveal the more complex aspects of experiencing and understanding pain. So, where pain is often understood in terms of a binary opposite to pleasure it is through more detailed scrutinising of this relationship that we can see how the distinctions between the two are much more blurred than we realise. For it is the case that further scrutiny can allow us to think about these experiences or those times when we can understand pain as something that could equally be considered as pleasurable and alternatively where pleasurable aspects can equally be experienced as painful. What this then reveals is a much more complex analysis whereby social, cultural, physiological, psychological and environmental factors influence the experience of an activity in a range of ways. For instance, a good place to start is Michael Atkinson's description of 'pleasurable suffering' as a way of explaining his experiences of fell running. Here his engagement is understood as physical pleasure through an existential awareness that is dealing with the environment, albeit an often harsh one, where the physical activity in itself can be challenging and brutal but at the same time can be experienced as satisfying and pleasurable. Consequently, this raises important questions about how people engage with sport. So, how do we understand Michael Atkinson's explanation that his experiences are a form of suffering whilst at the same time they are also pleasurable

and compel him to do it again? How do we equate his experiences with those of a marathon runner? Particularly the recreational or amateur marathon runner who attempts to run 26 miles for 'fun' and will readily tell us that the actual experience of the run was agony but they enjoyed the experience nevertheless? Why is it that the experiences that Michael talks about seem so different to those of the Marathon runner?

Michael helps us understand about his experiences of running by using an embodied narrative that graphically depicts what it is that he finds pleasurable, such as his engagement with the terrain and the feel of his body within the environment. The marathon runners, on the other hand often present their suffering as something that they endured during the run but then describe their enjoyment in terms of events *after the run* usually in relation to completing their goal of finishing the race. Although this view offers an explanation of suffering as pleasurable, it is in a much more social way in that pleasure is gained after the event from being able to focus upon the achievement and what they have just done. Thus, their sporting hard work or graft can be demonstrated to others and the sponsor form at the end of the race provides a means of proof of their achievement and allows subsequent heroic stories that can be regaled afterwards to provide a source of pleasurable presentation of the self.

Consequently, by asking questions about pleasure which is often considered at face value as a relatively innocuous aspect of sport, we are able to start to uncover the complex ways in which individuals participate in and experience sport. The questions presented here may only touch the surface but they open up a variety of pathways that we could take to further explore the significance of pleasure and pain in sporting participation. For instance, issues relating to how we understand risk and extreme sports, the various forms of physical pleasure to be gained in sport and how we understand pain and how that pain can sometimes be reconstructed by the individual in a way that might seem counter-productive to pleasure for another.

Notes:

1. Michael Atkinson's discussion on 'pleasurable suffering' can be seen in his chapter in *Researching Embodied Sport: exploring movement cultures* published by Routledge.

2. Ian Wellard discusses further aspects of pleasure (and pain) in sport, in his book *Sport, Fun and Enjoyment: an embodied approach* published in 2013 by Routledge.