Toeing the Line: The Demands and Rewards of Women’s Collegiate Distance Running

by

Molly Schassberger
Class of 2017

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Anthropology

Middletown, Connecticut April 19, 2017
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments .......................................................... 3

Dedication ........................................................................ 4

Introduction ........................................................................ 5
  Approach and methodology .............................................. 7
  The women ...................................................................... 9
  Literature review ............................................................ 11
  History of women in running ........................................... 17
  Chapter outlines .............................................................. 27

Chapter One: Bodies in Running ......................................... 29
  Bodies of distance ........................................................... 32
  Running as a technique of the body .................................. 35
  Food as fuel? .................................................................. 41
  Femininity and strength embodied .................................... 50

Chapter Two: Running as Community ................................. 55
  Campus life for the runner ................................................. 57
  A typical day .................................................................... 61
  Social running .................................................................. 67

Chapter Three: Running Beyond Utility ............................... 77
  Discipline as authenticity ............................................... 78
  Runners’ code .................................................................. 80
  Self-care through devotion .............................................. 83
  Running as spiritual ........................................................ 85
  Running as consumption of the body ............................... 87

Conclusion ......................................................................... 93

Photograph ....................................................................... 94

Bibliography ..................................................................... 98
Acknowledgments

To my advisor, Professor Betsy Traube, to whom I am wholly indebted for the constant feedback and endless array of enriching ideas, thank you. This thesis would not be what it is without you.

To Professor Gina Ulysse, thank you for first inspiring my love for anthropology and for always reminding me to stay human. Your anthro-sense helped us all when we needed it most.

To the Wesleyan Anthropology Department, for funding my summer of research, thank you. You allowed me to run with this project and craft it into everything I hoped it could be. Each day I am grateful for this anthropological education you have given me.

To ANTH 400, for your wonderful direction, thank you for believing in beginnings that are now ends. To the anthro dream team, for being such a large part of what I love about this major. Your love always comes at just the right times.

To teammates and running partners, past and present, thank you for making this sport my one true love. To the foo fighters, for all of the miles and all of the giggles. To Caroline and Joie, for sweet potato quesadillas, for nights on Pearl St., for being my roommates back in Boulder, thank you for putting up with me for the long run.

To Julia, rarely in life do we find people who allow us to be such full versions of ourselves, down to our cores, to our souls. You are like home. Thank you for filling the hours with joy in a way that no one else could. Let’s play.

To Coach Crooke, for making these past four years a time that I would live over and over and over again. Thank you for making all of the miles count.

And to my deepest roots, my family, thank you. To Mom, for reminding me that it’s okay to think I’m funny. To Dad, for loving words when I need them (always). To Lauren, for being my better half. Thank you, to the three of you, for toeing the line beside me since day one.
It takes.

It takes courage to sign up for that first 5k, (how long is a 5k anyways?) It takes countless miles (that were actually all counted) across any terrain. It takes push-ups and crunches and bicep curls. It takes the early morning long runs, knowing you’ve run thirteen miles before the rest of campus is even awake. It takes loving the process. It takes jars of peanut butter. It takes losing spikes and getting spiked. It takes safety pins. It takes shouts of support from family and friends. It takes a damn good coach. It takes teammates who never leave your side, even in the shower. It takes daring greatly every time you step on the starting line. And it takes knowing you might collapse into a heap the second you cross the finish line. It takes accepting the pain. It takes anticipating the fight. It takes nowhere you’d rather be.

To WesXC, whatever it takes.

Running, you have my whole heart.
INTRODUCTION

"If one could run without getting tired I don’t think one would often want to do anything else.”

–C. S. Lewis

“That’s right, sometimes it is possible, despite your best efforts and a hundred goddamn miles a week, not to even exist.” (Parker 2009 [1978]: 62).

It’s a mid-October morning and we arrive at Westfield State, site of the Regionals course, where the most important race of the season takes place. We step out of the slew of vans and cars we’ve come in and shiver in sweatshirts and shorts. After completing our dynamic warm up on the pavement, we take a last glance at the course map, the course on which our top seven women and men will be competing in a month’s time. We’re here for our long run – a chance to preview the terrain a couple of times before the big day in November. We complete the 6k (3.7 mile) course once as a full women’s team and pause to regroup.

“Everyone all set on the course?” I ask. People nod. “Remember to pay special attention to the terrain – the hilly parts, the footing. That’s what we’re here for today.” We head out for a second loop of the course, this time splitting into our usual groups. Leslie and I head out at a pace slightly faster than the rest
of the team and are soon covering the course alone. We run together nearly every day, just the two of us. As college seniors, this is the last time we will preview the Regionals course. About halfway through our second loop of the course, we find ourselves on a perfectly groomed trail in the middle of the New England woods, surrounded by enormous trees shedding leaves of every color.

“You know,” I say, breaking the silence, “this runs reminds me of a poem by a runner I read once.”

“Yeah?” Leslie asks, urging me to recite it.

“Well, I can’t quite remember how it goes. But it’s something like ‘Years from now I will not mind The trees how tall Or the trail how wide Only that it was two across And you by my side’.”

I can feel the smile on her face before I glance over to see it. “I like that. I’m glad this is an us.”

I return the smile. “Me too.” And now it’s back to the sounds of shallow breathing and footfalls as we continue on for the long run.

△ △ △

This thesis is an ethnography of collegiate female distance runners; I explore the performative pleasures of the sport of competitive running, including its physical and mental – aesthetic, social, and ethical rewards. As a female distance runner, I am particularly interested in the gendered aspects of sports, and the tensions women feel as competitive athletes. Running can serve as a technique to craft a feminine body, yet the sport has been historically regarded as a masculine practice, as have all sports. To counter potentially
masculinizing effects, the female runner must balance strength and beauty, athleticism and femininity. Additionally, collegiate runners experience tensions between their identities as runners and as college students. As runners, they place value on discipline and self-control, while as college students, their social lives emphasize consumption, often to excess. Finally, training for competitive distance running is extremely physically demanding. Such physical demands allow running to be categorized as meditative, spiritual, or liberating. In this thesis, I explore how runners negotiate the tensions of their sport and examine how different aspects of running might work in unison. I argue that distinctive tensions make distance running both demanding and rewarding in particular ways.

Approach and methodology

Over the summer of 2016, I lived and trained in Boulder, Colorado, doing participant-observation, as well as conducting more formal interviews, with nine women who are, or were, members of their collegiate cross country and track teams. These women were predominantly white, middle to upper-middle class, ages nineteen to twenty-seven. With one exception, all of them were either undergraduate students still competing for their colleges, or had just graduated in May 2016, having completed their careers as collegiate athletes. These women primarily competed at the NCAA Division III level. Although this group in no way represents all young female distance runners, their discourses and practices
nevertheless help elucidate the experiences of collegiate distance runners in the United States.¹

In my research these women runners spoke to the rewards of distance running, which I have categorized into physical, aesthetic, social, and spiritual. I found many who acknowledged and engaged in a notion of the classic runner’s body, itself a version of the dominant feminine body ideal in contemporary society. Many referred to the ideal body type of a runner as a pressure felt within the sphere of collegiate distance running, and spoke to the positive and negative effects of this model. While many of these women began running because they were good at it, or simply as a way to stay fit and attractive, all can now cite social and spiritual rewards of the sport as reasons they have stuck with running, and continue to enjoy it. Many runners attribute their love for the sport to the atmosphere of their cross country teams. Others appreciate the discipline that running requires and cherish the sense of fulfillment they receive from their accomplishments as athletes. The women also described running as freeing or liberating in some way. These women’s experiences, coupled with my own are the focus of this ethnography, which highlights the demands and rewards that come with participation in collegiate distance running.

¹ All runners’ names have been changed in the text for anonymity.
The women

This thesis is based in my own experiences as a female collegiate distance runner at Wesleyan University, as well as in the experiences of the nine other women that comprise this ethnography. Wesleyan competes in NCAA Division III athletics, and is one of eleven schools in the New England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC), widely known as one of the most competitive Division III conferences in the country for distance running. Of the nine women with whom I spoke, seven others currently compete for, or have previously competed for NESCAC schools, as well. Emma, Lauren, Kiley, Carly, and Leslie are currently seniors on their collegiate teams, while Rachel is a sophomore, and Hadley had just graduated at the time I spoke with her. All compete, or competed in cross country, indoor, and outdoor track for their respective universities, racing in distances ranging from the half mile to the 10k. I had multiple conversations about being a distance runner with each of these women, some of them conducted while we were running.

Megan had also just graduated from her university and collegiate running, though she competed in sprint events during the track seasons only and ran for a Division I school. Given her experience, her perspective on running is somewhat different from the other women with whom I spoke, though she provided great insight into the training regimes of sprinters. Megan moved to Boulder after graduation with a couple of male distance runners. I met her

---

2 Wesleyan University is a private liberal arts college of around 3,000 students. Approximately one of five students at Wesleyan competes on a varsity sport for the university. 60% of students participate in athletics, whether varsity, club, or intermural.
through these other distance runners and throughout the summer we had many conversations about her own experiences on a track team and her perceptions of distance runners on her own team.

The last woman with whom I spoke, Sally, is a twenty-seven year old professional runner. She previously competed for a Division II university, and now trains for marathons. Sally has written articles on the troubling subject of disordered eating in running, in which she encourages young runners to contact her if they want to talk more about such issues. I took her up on this offer and contacted her, expanding the scope of this project slightly to include the perspective of a professional runner.

For the past eleven years of my life, I have considered myself a distance runner. The past four have been as a collegiate athlete. As a runner, I have often been leered at while running and many people have viewed me as a tomboy. I have seen teammates struggle with eating disorders, and have myself felt pressured towards disordered eating for the sake of performance. I have also disciplined myself and I have built true bonds of togetherness with teammates and other fellow runners. I have been labeled insane for the number of miles I run and the number of times I work out in a week. I have sometimes felt as though my whole identity revolves around running. Who am I, if not a runner?

This work has an auto-ethnographic component; I draw on my personal experiences as a female distance runner, and I engaged my “informants” as one of them, an insider rather than an outsider. This work explores and seeks to
understand the tensions we have felt as a result of our commitment, as well as the various pleasures of distance running.

Literature review

The foundation of this work rests in the social construction of the feminine body and gender performance, specifically in sport. Over the past century, the aesthetically idealized feminine body has shifted from the soft, domestic body to the thin, firm body. Through this shift in ideal, a prescriptive framework has remained for women’s bodies, as they are expected to mold their bodies according to the ideal of the hour, whatever it may be. Medical anthropologist Margaret Lock suggests that subjects have individual agency to mold themselves, though how individuals train their bodies to perform is read as either belonging to or deviating from the dominant norms of social conduct. “These dual modes of bodily expression – belonging and dissent – are conceptualized as culturally produced and in dialectical exchange with the externalized ongoing performance of social life” (Lock 1993: 141). Conformity to dominant body norms thus constitutes a pedagogy of belonging.

In Bodies that Matter (1993), philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler examines the materiality of bodies, noting that distinguishing the materiality of the body from its surroundings beyond itself is difficult, as movement beyond the boundaries of the body can be an essential part of what those bodies are. Still, she maintains that the materiality of the body affects gender performance in clear ways; these often manifest in athletics. Gender, she
argues, is performative, and such gender performances either reproduce socially constructed norms of gender (men performing culturally masculine behaviors and women performing feminine behaviors) or resist such norms. Butler argues that individuals who resist such norms gain agency in doing so. Sports have been historically male dominated and have provided a site for performances of masculinity, while women's participation has needed justification. Athletic women must embody the ideal feminine shape to maintain their identities as both women and athletes.

When we talk about the idealized feminine body, we are talking about white women's bodies. Philosopher Ann J. Cahill analyzes the structures of femininity as raced and classed modalities, which make the body into an object, separate from and weaker than the woman herself. She writes, “Faced with the fragility of her flesh, and the dangers which confront it, the woman attempts to protect her appallingly vulnerable body by restricting its spatial scope and limiting its physical endeavors” (Cahill 2000: 51). She argues that the woman is in constant struggle with the body, trying to manage and control it, while the body works against her desires, always trying to return her to her natural appearance.

Body management for women is highly focused on their weight, as they try to shape their bodies to conform to ideals of thinness. Sociologist Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber dissects what she calls the “Cult of Thinness” in America, particularly among collegiate women. She discusses how women learn to become a certain body through societal influences, namely the media and
weight-loss industry that invest bodies with moral significance. The “Cult of Thinness” becomes a powerful lure as society decides which is the ‘right’ and the ‘wrong’ body, and treats women accordingly” (Hesse-Biber 2007: 110). This suggests that the flabby, un-toned, loose body carries an immoral charge. In recent decades, elites in the U.S. have declared the country to be in an obesity epidemic, defining fat as our target against which we fight to become “proper” and fit people (Greenhalg 2012: 471). Contemporary discourse around health and fitness culture focuses on the shapes of women's bodies as their bodies are taken to be physical representations of aesthetic and moral achievements (Wright 2006, Dworkin 2009).

Not surprisingly, given such attitudes, eating disorders are increasingly prevalent among women who operate in cultural contexts that value thin bodies. Associations between eating disorders and athletics have become so prevalent that medical doctors are now diagnosing patients with anorexia athletica, or sport-related disordered eating (Sudi et al. 2004). Certain sports have traditionally favored low body fat percentages, including endurance sports, such as running and biking, and performative sports, such as ballet, gymnastics, and figure skating. This emphasis on weight and body composition can be detrimental to athletes’ perceptions of their own bodies, leading to the development of eating disorders, which can in turn negatively impact their

---

3 A study was conducted on female college athletes in 1992 to find that 32% participated in at least one form of disordered eating behavior, including vomiting, laxatives, diuretics, and diet pills. Among gymnasts, participation was 62% (Maine 2000: 242).
performances. Moreover, eating disorders can impact their overall health and well-being.

Many female runners have written personal accounts of their struggles with eating disorders. One collegiate athlete anonymously wrote about her experiences, originally in a blog, which was later published, titled *She Was Once a Runner.* The anonymous runner described her experiences on a Division I college cross country team, in which her coach weighed athletes in front of the rest of the team, praising the skinniest and sickest looking women for their race performances (Anonymous 2012). Another runner, Lize Brittin wrote a memoir about her struggle with an eating disorder that developed out of running and which she found herself justifying through the sport (Brittin 2012). The lighter she became, the faster she ran, as encouraged by her high school coach. Lize eventually suffered from stress fractures, hypothyroidism, and numerous other health issues related to anorexia. In a sport in which all elite athletes are thin, it can be hard to distinguish between thin, fit, non-anorexic runners and those who have dangerous eating practices (Scott 2006). Cultural critic Leslie Heywood wrote a personal account on her experiences on a Division I track team. Of team dinners, she writes, “Strained silence, everyone looking at everyone else’s plate, victory to she who ate the least” (Heywood 1998a: 204). Sociologist Elizabeth Ransom (1999) writes that collegiate runners’ bodies conform to the networks within which they exist. For example, skimpy uniforms can in part shape runners’ bodies, as team members will choose to make themselves better fit

---

4 This title is a parody on the famous running book *Once a Runner.*
these uniforms, so as to fit in with the collective team body image (Ransom 1999: 198).

Conformity within athletics is influenced by the gendered politics of sports. In “Ruffles and Flounces: The Apologetic in Women's Sports” (1978), Emily Wughalter provides context for what femininity in women's sports looked like during the 1970's. She writes that women in athletics were met with opposition more often in traditionally manly sports. In general, women were discouraged from participation in sports, but should a woman choose to persevere, she was masculinized and her sexuality was often called into question. Many women responded by completely immersing themselves in the sporting world, so as to minimize conflict, and dropped the more conventionally feminine parts of their personhood. Other women responded by maintaining their feminine sides and their athletic sides, though never in unison. They played two very separate roles: masculine on the field, feminine off the field (Wughalter 1978). Today, athletic women who are perceived as feminine and heterosexual are still privileged over those who are perceived as more masculine or lesbian (Lenskyj 2003). The sporting world continues to be structured by codes of what is acceptable for men and what is acceptable for women. When individuals cross this line, they are considered anomalous (Krane 2001: 117). Hence, gender is often performed through sports in ways designed to reinforce normative “appropriate” gender roles (Garrett 2004, Lindsey 2008, Paloian n.d.). At the same time, however, sports are a site where women increasingly challenge norms of hegemonic femininity.
Women bodybuilders are an example of challenging traditional gender regime in sports, though this is often not their primary motivation for participation in the sport (Ian 2001). Still, the sport is seen as particularly masculinizing for many female bodybuilders. In bodybuilding, much attention is placed on body image and low body fat percentages, though often when we think of low body fat, we think small (Heywood 1998b, Mansfield 1993). Bodybuilding does not follow this scale in that it’s all about low body fat percentages, but large muscles. With their bulked up, muscular bodies, these women athletes provide a challenge to hegemonic femininity. The gendered politics of sports extend to the other end of the spectrum as well, in which performative sports are categorized as feminizing to their athletes. For example, male cheerleaders try to distance themselves from the feminine qualities associated with cheering and to masculinize their performance by emphasizing athleticism, so as to not be perceived as feminine or gay, according to sociologists Laura Grindstaff and Emily West (2006). They write, “The male cheerleaders in our study knew what gender appropriate reasons to offer in order to justify taking part in a feminine activity” (Grindstaff and West 2006: 511).

Running has been historically dominated by men, yet requires a body type that has associations with femininity. Many men experiencing distance running as a feminizing sport, while many women experience it as masculinizing. Women were so long excluded from the sport that their acceptance led to many self-help-styled books written specifically for women in running (Hamilton 2004, Squires 1983, Ullyot 1978, Yelling 2007). They provide tips on everything
from training plans and nutrition to clothing and safety while running. This literature is informative for tracking how suggestions towards women’s running have changed over the past few decades, especially considering that prior to this time, women were forbidden from the sport.

History of women in running

The first modern Olympic Games held in 1896 in Athens, Greece, did not permit entry to competition for women in any sport. Four years later, in 1900, women’s competitions began in select events, namely, golf and tennis. Women were originally excluded, for the founder of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Pierre de Coubertin, a French aristocrat, thought their inclusion would be “impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic, and incorrect” (Sebor n.d.).

The 1928 Olympics were the first to allow women to compete in a middle-distance running event – the 800m. This run, just short of a half mile, was judged too difficult for women, leading to its removal up until 1960. However, the shocking stories of women’s inability to finish the race or their collapses at the finish line proved to be fabricated. All nine women who actually raced in the finals completed the two-lap race (Robinson 2012, Robinson 2016). Of those nine, only one fell at the finish, due to attempting to out-lean a competitor – not

---

5 The London Olympics in 2012 were the first Olympics in which every competing country had both men and women representatives, and in which there was a men’s and a women’s competition in every sport. The addition of women’s boxing in 2012 was no less controversial, provoking its own sexist backlash, as exhibited by the Amateur International Boxing Association’s suggestion that women boxers wear skirts during competition to help spectators distinguish them from men.
out of distress. Yet, the all-male Olympic Committee determined that women’s reproductive capabilities would be impaired by distance so great. Racing longer than 200m, the Committee claimed, would age women prematurely, and was therefore banned until 1960.⁶

A common conception as late as the mid-twentieth century was that running mile after mile would cause a woman’s uterus to fall out. This reflected and reinforced the notion of the de-sexing effects on women of engaging in “non-womanly” pursuits, including sport, but also professionalism, or any other activity counter to the ideal of female domesticity. In the Victorian ideology of “the cult of true womanhood”, any non-domestic, professional commitment would supposedly undermine a woman’s reproductive capacity, thus compromising her essential function and route to true fulfillment: marriage and childbearing, a practice that allows the family name to be carried forth. Cultural historian Mary Poovey asserts that throughout the Victorian era, “Women were redemptively maternal; the female body a ‘socially undifferentiated womb’” (1998: ix). Progeny, then, were considered the ultimate sign and instrument of “true womanhood”. Women were to be economically supported by men, passing from their fathers to their husbands. Rather than acting as independent individuals, women were expected to submit to the control of men, who had ownership over their actions (Poovey 1998: 8). In Beyond the Reproductive Body, Edward Tilt, an original fellow of the Obstetrical Society of London is quoted

---

⁶ Other distance events were not added to the Olympic program until much later: 1972 for the 1500 meters, 1984 for the marathon, 1988 for the 10,000 meters, 1996 for the 5,000 meters, and 2008 for the 3,000 meter steeplechase (Burfoot 2016a).
articulating the dominant narrative of women in Victorian England: “[W]oman is so formed as to be dependent on man. This dependence is ... so clearly written... that the woman who is considered the most fortunate in life has never been independent, having been transferred from parental care and authority to that of a husband” (Levine-Clark 2004: 21).

Thus competitive sport was one of several practices to be deemed masculine, because it took a woman out of her “sphere”, the home and family, and allowed her to act as her own being. Participating in a culturally masculine practice supposedly masculinized women’s bodies and disassociated them with motherhood. Myths about reproductive impairment from running were generated by this neo-Victorian ideology. Women who competed in sports were often assumed to be lesbian, stereotyped as manly women, perpetuating the de-sexing of women by athletics, as the normative construction of a woman’s sexuality was, and still is, heterosexual. In categorizing women who participated in sport as lesbians, men were stripping them of their sexual agency as well as their femininity, categorizing them as less feminine for choosing athletics. Such hetero-sexist assumptions persisted until 1980 when a statement was released by the American College of Sports Medicine (Sebor n.d.). It stated that no conclusive medical evidence had been found that proved distance running to be harmful to healthy female athletes. The half-century it took to overturn ideas of their unfitness for athletics proved to be one of the great trials for women on the track and the roads.

7 Another practice associated with masculinity, which allowed women agency over their actions, was entering the professional workplace.
Despite the women’s 800 meters being reinstated to the Olympic Games in 1960, 1961 brought a ban from the Amateur Athletic Union on all women competing officially in any U.S. road race. Nineteen-year-old Julia Chase was the pioneer in challenging this ban, as she entered a handful of road races, causing the media to take up interest in her fight. Chase never tried to hide her femininity, clad in skirt and lipstick on the starting line. Newspapers described Chase’s efforts, suggesting she could be both feminine and athletic, though their support was given in a patronizing and objectifying manner (Burfoot 2016a: 11-21). One headline read, “She Wants to Chase the Boys.” Another article wrote of her, “Under questioning, Miss Chase said she is 5-4 ½, weighs 118 pounds and does not know her other dimensions. (Eyewitnesses report her other dimensions are very good)” (Longman 2011). Chase was turned into a spectacle by the male-dominated gaze of the media. It needs emphasis that an objectifying institutional male gaze, demonstrated here, that reduces women to their sexualized bodies does not preclude the possibility for male viewers of the sport to be admiring and respectful of women’s athletic achievements within the sport. World-renowned Olympic runner Amby Burfoot is quoted in a New York Times article as having categorized Chase as “the first true American woman road racer... She wasn’t an oddball looking for publicity. She was a dedicated, well-trained athlete looking for an outlet for her talent” (Longman 2011). While Burfoot’s comments indicate that he views her as a high-achieving individual, they also make clear that it took an already-established male athlete to legitimize
Chase’s accomplishments and highlight just how groundbreaking she was as a first woman within the sport.

Five years later, another woman broke onto the scene of distance road races, Bobbi Gibb [Bingay] in the most famous distance race of the day: the Boston Marathon. In February of 1966, Gibb wrote a request to the Boston Athletic Association (BAA) for a marathon application. Although her application was denied, Gibb decided to run anyways, sidestepping accusations of being delusional from her father. On Marathon Monday in April, Gibb hid in a bush at the start line in Hopkinton, waiting for the race to begin. She hopped in once the gun had gone off, and was quickly recognized as a woman. However, she was met with great encouragement from her fellow racers, and from a number of spectators as well. The Boston Marathon course passes Wellesley College, widely regarded as one of the best all-women’s colleges in the country. Former president of Wellesley College (1993 -2007), Diana Chapman Walsh was there to witness Gibb’s historic run and has written about it.

“...like a spark down a wire, the word spread to all of us lining the route that a woman was running the course. ... We scanned face after face in breathless anticipation until just ahead of her, through the excited crowd, a ripple of recognition shot through the lines and we cheered as we never had before. We let out a roar that day, sensing that this woman had done more than just break the gender barrier in a famous race” (Mendelsohn 1996).

Recalling the toughness required on race day, Gibb describes, “I was only thinking about getting to the finish, and looking as strong and feminine as I could when I got there” (Burfoot 2016b). She completed the race, and again the media was intrigued. Newspapers sent photographers to her house, but they had a
specific request: to photograph her in a domestic scene. She was asked to put on a dress and show off her cooking skills. Additionally, following the race, an op-ed piece about her was published in Boston’s Record American, much in the same way that Julia Chase had been treated with five years earlier, reifying sport as a masculine space. The piece read,

‘A girl in the marathon! Egad, is nothing sacred? Are there no careers and hobbies and sports reserved for gentlemen anymore? Still, if someone would guarantee that all future lady runners would be as pretty as she, we might be willing to OK them as regular entrants starting next Patriots’ Day’ (Burfoot 2016b).

Her run was received with even less enthusiasm from the BAA. Will Cloney, a BAA executive who sent her previous denial for a request to run, denounced her historic race in a press release. He wrote, “‘Mrs. Bingay did not run in yesterday’s marathon. There is no such thing as a marathon for a woman. She may have run in a road race, but she did not race in the marathon’” (Burfoot 2016a: 51). The severity with which her performance was judged suggests why her historic run did not immediately spur a greater movement of women in running.

The following year, Gibb ran Boston again, but this time, she wasn’t the only woman in the race. In fact, Katherine Switzer, who ran the Boston Marathon in 1967, is often credited with being the first woman runner of the Boston Marathon, as she completed the run officially, by registering with a bib number. Switzer endured a lot of criticism from those closest to her, namely her family and boyfriend, before earning their respect and encouragement. She trained

---

8 Katherine got away with registering by signing her initials, “K.V. Switzer” so the officials did not know that a woman had registered in their race.
with the men’s cross country team at Syracuse University unofficially, and met Arnie, the university mailman through the team. He began coaching Switzer and upon her suggestion that she run Boston, replied that a woman couldn’t run the Boston Marathon. Nevertheless, he told her that if she proved to him that she could complete the distance in practice, then he would take her to Boston. Determined as she was, she ran thirty-one miles in practice with Arnie by her side to prove that she was ready for the marathon. After this run, Arnie passed out (Burfoot 2016a: 57). The next day, he told her she simply had to sign up for Boston, and so she did. She ran the marathon with Arnie and her boyfriend, who claimed that he didn’t need to train because “if a girl can run a marathon, I can run a marathon.” Before the race on that snowy Monday in April, her boyfriend questioned her appearance and her decision to wear lipstick for the race, afraid she would be seen as a woman. She wore it anyways. They began the race, met with encouragement much like Gibb was, however about four miles in were met with historic opposition. Just a few miles into the race and right in front of the media truck, co-director Jock Semple, tried to physically pull Switzer off the course. Shouting, “Get the hell out of my race and give me that number!” he made swipes for Switzer’s bib (Burfoot 2016a: 60). Suddenly, her boyfriend ran across her to body slam Semple, allowing Switzer to break free and keep running. Ultimately, she completed the race, swarmed by the press who published photos of Switzer’s run and Semple’s attempts to stop her. These photos from 1967 are

---

9 Her boyfriend, Tom, got frustrated at her slow pace during the marathon and took off to run ahead, only to be found walking a few miles later. He finished the marathon over an hour behind Switzer and Arnie.
still known across the country for the historic weight they hold in encouraging women's place in distance running, as well as for demonstrating a woman's courage in the face of misogynistic, sexist opposition.

Following these marathons, in 1972, the AAU allowed women to compete in road races again, including marathons. However, women were not allowed the same start line as men. Women who wanted to race had to start at a different start line or with a different start time than men. In this, women were still not given equal opportunities with men in road races (Sebor n.d.).

Shortly after in 1972, Title IX of the Education Amendments was invoked by Congress and signed by President Richard Nixon. Title IX reads, “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (History.com Staff 2009). Though Title IX was not created solely for athletics, its greatest effect has been to mandate equal access to and quality of athletics for women. Dozens of amendments to Title IX have been introduced over the years, alongside court cases, which have upheld the title, yet its application to athletics has generated opposition. In 1976, the NCAA challenged the legality of Title IX (History of Title IX 2011),¹⁰ though since this time, much progress has been made within the NCAA for gender-equity in collegiate athletics. Despite this progress, it is still

¹⁰ The NCAA is the National Collegiate Athletic Association. This was originally created for ruling in football, however morphed into the ruling force for all divisions of collegiate athletics. For more on the NCAA, see their website at http://www.ncaa.org/.
often argued that Title IX hurts male athletes whose programs are allegedly cancelled due to schools’ needs to abide by the title.

In 1984, the Olympic Games added a women’s division to the quintessential running event: the marathon and on August 5, American Joan Benoit Samuelson ran through the tunnel to the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum and completed one lap around the track to become the first woman gold medalist in the Olympic marathon. She wrote about the experience as follows. “The noise was muffled and I heard my own footfalls. I thought, ‘Once you leave this tunnel, your life will be changed forever’” (Robinson 2014). Following Joanie’s success, the first wave of women began to take up distance running. She proved myths of women’s inability to compete in distance events to be false, and in the process inspired many young women to run. As all of the greats in running have noted, Joan Benoit changed running and marathoning forever (Burfoot 2016a).

The second wave of women in distance running came in conjuncture with the rise of “fitness culture” over the late eighties and nineties; in 1994 Oprah Winfrey, famous TV personality, completed a marathon with an “anyone can do it” mentality that inspired many people to get out and try to best her time of four hours and twenty-nine minutes. However this great running boom was much more about the hobby-joggers, men and women, than the elite runners. Still, it was an important push forward for women in running, as Oprah’s story was one with which so many women could relate. It showed that women didn’t have to be elite runners to participate. Oprah’s weight has always been a public
conversation, as she had previously talked about her weight gain and her subsequent weight loss journey in a very public manner on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Oprah is a black woman, yet her show’s viewership and following is predominantly white women (Peck 1994: 90), so much so that she has received criticism for not representing black women’s values, and for catering to older white women (Bonawitz 2006). This may explain why Oprah’s participation in running mainly inspired white women to take up the sport. Perhaps her most important impact was on body image in running, creating a running environment in which women could realize that they need not look like elite runners to participate in the sport.

Since these two waves of women’s participation in distance running, women have completed several other historic runs. In both 2002 and 2003 Pam Reed, American ultramarathoner\(^{11}\) won the world’s toughest footrace, the Badwater Ultramarathon\(^{12}\), a 135 mile race across Death Valley, California besting all men and women in the field by over four and a half hours. In 2010, Paula Radcliffe, Olympic British marathoner and world record holder in the marathon, won the NYC marathon just ten months after giving birth. She maintained a tough training regimen while pregnant, receiving much public censure, but was determined to show she could do both (“New Mom’s NYC Marathon Win Stirs Debate” 2007). In 2014, Alysia Montaño, American Olympic

\(^{11}\) An ultramarathon is any race longer than the marathon distance of 26.2 miles. The most common distances are 50 and 100 miles and 50 and 100 kilometers. Ultramarathon running has its own subculture, as it requires extreme amounts of training and much more attention and thought to nutrition than shorter races do.

\(^{12}\) The race describes itself as such. More information on the Badwater 135 can be found on their website. [http://www.badwater.com/](http://www.badwater.com/)
middle distance runner competed in the 800 meters at the USA Track and Field Outdoor Championships while being eight months pregnant. Like Radcliffe, Montaño received backlash about running so late into pregnancy, insinuating that she was risking her child’s safety by running while pregnant. But Montaño was both cleared and encouraged by her doctor to continue running (Hetzel 2014a). Their stories exemplify how women are changing perceptions of femaleness and femininity in sports.13

Chapter outlines

In chapter one, I explore women’s bodies in running. Runners mold their bodies into swift machines through their training regimes, shaping themselves into lean, toned figures. These bodies must be both strong and light, seemingly opposing ideals, as strength is historically associated with masculinity, while lightness and thinness are associated with femininity. For many female distance runners, this creates tensions, as they must navigate the process of shaping a body that is highly functional for their sport. Some runners take the ideal of thinness to an extreme such that they develop detrimental relationships with food and their weight. Running teams serve as environments in which bodies are constantly topics of conversation. The bodies that runners craft for themselves are to some degree consistent with the socially idealized feminine body, though runners’ bodies are not just aesthetically pleasing; they must be functional as

13 I distinguish between femaleness and femininity here by using femaleness to be representative of biological factors of womanhood, and femininity to be representative of performative factors of womanhood.
well for efficiency in running. In general, female distance runners’ bodies are a
particular manifestation of a more fluid gendered body ideal, in which women’s
claims to independence and autonomy are embodied in slimness combined with
strength.

In chapter two, I examine experiences of distance runners on a college
campus, exploring tensions between both athletes and non-athletes, and runners
and non-runners. The specificity of the runner’s lifestyle allows runners to form
community. While these communities can lead to harmful comparisons amongst
women, they also create support and are sites for shared experiences amongst
runners. Here, I use Victor Turner’s model of communitas to show how running
communities foster particularly deep connections because of the unique,
collective experiences that legitimize one as a runner.

In chapter three, I turn to the spiritual aspects of running and reflect on
running as a virtuous practice. Competitive running is dependent on discipline,
as an athlete must complete her training routine and all that this encompasses
for extended periods of time in order to be most successful. An athlete may train
immoderate amounts, living a life of extremes rather than of balance. It is the
extreme nature of her commitment that legitimizes her as a true runner. Here, I
examine the athlete’s inordinate training schedule as a form of self-care for the
athlete, as running provides a break from the calculations of everyday life.
Running assumes a meditative or spiritual association for many individuals, and
through the immense physical strain it places on the body, can serve as a
practice of liberation.
CHAPTER ONE: BODIES IN RUNNING

“I don’t hide my weight. It’s still spring, but we’ve had a week of summer hot weather. I sat downtown yesterday in tiny spandex sports and a bra top, scribbling in my journal, knowing somehow that I would be offensive – that or sexy. The two are confused in my mind, not knowing which is my intention, which I want.” (Friedman 2009: 38).

To wear them or not to wear them? I pull my runderwear out of my drawer; you know, the bikini bottom-styled shorts, if you could even call them shorts that are my racing uniform. They resemble underwear or a diaper more than anything. And they look bad. Badass, perhaps, but also bad. As in, they aren’t really flattering on anyone but the leanest of the lean, the elite runners, who carry solid muscle and single digit body fat percentages. For the average person, even the average thin person, such as myself, they look bad, meaning they accentuate every ounce of fat they can find. But they’re also so cool. I slide them up over my legs and instantly feel faster. Something about them psychs me up for running. Perhaps it’s the association with elite runners, as most female professional runners race in runderwear, for as soon as I put them on, I’m faster. I take two steps sideways from my dresser so that I can see my full body in the mirror on my wall. I look like a runner, clad in only sports bra, tall socks, and
runderwear. I look exposed. Little of my body is hidden as I attempt to flex my stomach and squint to see some definition in my abs. *Do I look fast enough to run in this in public? Do I look fit enough to run in this in public? Do I care?*

I pull a tank top on over my sports bra – my sister’s alma mater now sprawled across my chest and watch as the three inches of skin around my hips disappear underneath the grey fabric. *This looks better.* I open the weather app on my phone to discover it’s going to be 87° by nine o’clock this morning. I sigh, pulling the tank top back off, knowing I won’t make it through ten miles while keeping a shirt on. I touch my body, scrutinizing the muscles, fat, and skin that form my thighs – thighs that take me places, allow me to run, let me jump and bike and live life, and I decide I’d rather wear shorts today. I haphazardly pull off my runderwear and step into a pair of shorts instead, pulling them up just below my bellybutton so that they cover both my hips and upper thighs. *There. Even if they aren’t as cool as runderwear, at least I’m comfortable looking at myself in this.*

I slide my feet into Birkenstocks, throw on a sweatshirt, and head out the door, backpack slung over my shoulder, running shoes clipped to the side. I take a final swig of water and thrust my car in reverse, simultaneously finding a suitable radio station for this early in the morning. It’s Sunday: long run day. Our usual group of runners is headed up into the canyon, a few towns over to higher altitude for better training. I volunteered to drive today, and soon hand over radio responsibility to the passenger seat.
“I thought you were wearing the rundies today,” my friend remarks as she squeezes into the middle seat in the back of the car, her usual spot when our other three companions are boys.

“I chickened out,” I tell her with a sheepish grin.

She shrugs. “We’ll all wear them together one run. That way, if we look dumb, we’ll all look dumb.”

“Deal,” I say, smiling. Her willingness to join me eases my anxieties.

After forty minutes of windy driving, we step out of the car on the main dirt road and begin to shake out our legs. A few jog to the porta-potty while the rest of us take a minute to stretch and size up the runners around us who have also driven up the canyon for their long runs. It is impossible not to notice the elite Division I university team: the University of Colorado Buffaloes. They surround their coach to hear last minute words about what their run is supposed to look like for the day. My friends and I exchange glances, both excited by the idea of running in the same place as such top runners, and intimidated by their speed. We decide to take off for our run before them, knowing they’ll catch us, but giving ourselves a bit of a head start. A few miles into the run, as the majority of the men’s team rolls by us, we spy a long braid swaying to the rhythm of the stride of the legs beneath it. Near the back of their pack is a woman keeping pace—Jenny Simpson. Jenny Simpson, multi-winner of NCAA championships, multi-winner of USA National Championships, and most recently bronze medalist in the 1500m run in the Olympics. My head swivels right as I make bug eyes at my running companion and we unconsciously quicken our strides. Just
one week earlier, we had watched her win the 1500m in the U.S. Olympic trials, screaming cheers for her at our laptops as we streamed the live event. When enough distance is between us, we begin a frantic whisper and remind ourselves to stay relaxed with our pace, rather than speed up in our unconscious efforts to emulate her. Minutes later, another elite female distance runner, Emma Coburn, passes us. She too earned a bronze medal at the most recent Olympics in her specialty event, the 3000m steeplechase. We have another private moment of celebration at being in such close proximity to our running icons. We admire their form and their forms—their running strides, the way their bodies glide so organically, the slight curve of their arms that pump along to their legs, and their bodies, ultra-toned, gently muscular, a tangible definition of lean.

“Thank god we didn't wear our runderwear today,” my friend opines as we trot along. I couldn't agree more.

Delta

Delta

Delta

**Bodies of distance**

While distance running has many rewards, the aesthetic ones are perhaps the most obvious to the non-runner. As a distance runner myself, I am often asked such things as, “Why do you run so much?” or “Do you actually like running?” Runners often receive comments from passersby, but my least favorite is “Why are you running? You're already skinny!” as though I would only (could only, should only) be running as a means to lose weight. In actuality, runners have an array of reasons for running, and the sport brings numerous rewards, but the body of a distance runner cannot be overlooked as a potential
motivation for participation in the sport. Even if many runners choose to run for other reasons, that they obtain a socially idealized body is no accident, and as a runner, having this body is a reward. However, the body that is so idealized by both the sport of running and society (read: mass media) can become a prescriptive and restrictive standard for the runner. The classic distance runners’ body, by which I mean the thin, toned, white body, is the ideal embodied by the most successful distance runners in the United States.

Within the United States, white people have historically dominated distance running, and continue to today. This is true across all levels of competition, from high school to professional. However, at the international level, people of color, primarily from East African countries, now dominate distance running. In the most recent Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro in 2016, the United States sent almost exclusively white men and women to compete in the distance running events, with the exception of the men’s 5k. However, black men and women collected the most medals from the distance events of the most recent Olympics. People from East African countries have excelled in distance running for decades, yet within the United States, white men and women still tend to dominate the sport.

However, this is not true in the sprint events, which remain dominated by black men and women in both the United States and abroad. Sprinting favors a much stronger and larger body than distance running does, as do countless other historically masculinized sports. Sprinters’ training regimes are designed to achieve bodies that will suit their specific goals. Their training consists of more
and heavier lifting than that of the distance runner, as well as quicker, shorter interval training, in which practicing bursts of incredible speed is favored over endurance. Many other sports include similar training plans within their regimes. For example, a basketball player might practice her ball handling skills, shooting, and defense, but will also lift and practice sprinting as a part of her workouts. Distance runners’ workouts are very different from the majority of sports, in that endurance is favored over strength, and tone is favored over bulk. These differences in the demands entailed in particular sports lead to the cultivation of different body types.

The sport of distance running imposes a specific body ideal, showing each runner that she too must achieve and maintain this body if she wants to excel. This ideal regulates the ways a runner must manage the body. The low body fat percentages prescribed are hard to attain through mileage alone, leading many runners to turn to nutrition as a means of controlling their weight. Dancing, gymnastics, and cycling require similar bodies for success. These are all viewed as more feminine activities within the current culture of sports, a classification reflected in the type of body each demands. The bodies of such elite athletes contribute to the more than century-long move towards a modern ideal of the slender body. For many, being a runner becomes such a prevalent part of her identity that she feels the pressure to conform to the ideal, so as to be considered an authentic runner. Crafting and maintaining her figure is a key technique of the body, one that influences her overall training as she molds her body to fit the form.
Running as a technique of the body

I have adapted the notion of running as a technique of the body from an essay by Marcel Mauss. In “The notion of body techniques” (1979 [1935]), he puts forward the notion that bodily techniques are learned practices, acquired through imitation of those already successful in said techniques. Mauss describes this process as follows:

What takes place is a prestigious imitation. The child, the adult, imitates actions which have succeeded and which he has seen successfully performed by people in whom he has confidence and who have authority over him. The action is imposed from without, from above, even if it is an exclusively biological action, involving his body. The individual borrows the series of movements which constitute it from the action executed in front of him or with him by others, (Mauss, 1979 [1935]: 101-102).

Applying Mauss’ concept of learned body techniques to running, we can suppose that runners learn how to craft their bodies in part by turning to and emulating the performances of successful runners. Whether this is professional runners or team captains, runners who hold positions as exemplary figures have a certain ability to influence.

A runner’s training practices can be broken down into several elements, quantitative as well as qualitative. A primary concern is her mileage: the actual distance she runs per week. For collegiate athletes, this can vary, as it did for the women with whom I ran and spoke. Most of these women, competing at the Division III level within the NCAA, were running between 40 and 65 miles per week. Regular running is what gets the women’s cardiovascular systems in

---

14 The exception to this is the professional runner, Sally, with whom I spoke. She is currently training for marathons and running around 135 miles per week.
peak shape, as well as strengthens their legs for when it comes time to race.

While precise training plans vary, across the board they follow a similar schedule: one to two days of hard workouts,\(^{15}\) which may or may not include a race, one long run, three to five easy to moderate run days, and sometimes one day off per week. In general, training is the balance of alternating more with less rigorous workouts. Running is a high calorie-burning exercise, and training is even more so. Here, I argue for the distinction between running and training. To the competitive runner, the activity of running does not require any mental energy or attention to the sport. The athlete’s pace is not relevant; she is simply running to run, as a non-runner might. While training, however, an athlete is focused on her performance and her goals, often thinking about the next race she will compete in as a way to remind herself that she must perfect not only the physical aspects of running, but cultivate mental habits, of self-discipline and control as well. In training consistently, the runner is burning hundreds of calories every time she runs, while simultaneously making her body stronger by doing so. She is crafting the lean body, a body that both reflects and depends upon a disciplined self.

Most collegiate distance runners have a place in the gym as well among the weight machines and core mats. Arm and core strength are essential for distance runners. As they come down the final stretch of their races, it is their

\(^{15}\) When a runner refers to a workout, she is most often talking about interval repeats or a tempo run. Interval repeats can be any distance and the athlete is supposed to run that distance in a specific time given by the coach. For example, one might be given six times 800 meters in three minutes with one-minute rest in between each repeat. Tempo runs are usually longer and given at a slower pace than intervals, but faster than an easy to moderate run would be. For example, one might be given three miles at 6:30 pace.
strength that will give them the speed to outkick a competitor. But the type of lifting runners do is specific to the sport. The bulkier muscles cultivated in heavy-lifting routines would only slow down a runner. She must strike the perfect balance of just enough muscle, but not “too much”. Thus lifting for the distance runner is all about tone, usually achieved by lifting lighter weights and doing more repetitions. This is typical of how most women do weight training. Female bodybuilders who aim to bulk up are the exception rather than the norm, their bodies deviating from the hegemonic discourse of femininity. Runners, and most women who work out, aim to make their bodies more firm and tight. Runners engage in core routines as well, as a means to gain strength, though again, many non-runners perform similar core routines as a path to flat stomachs.

Historically, the ideal feminine body has evolved under the influence of pressures from wider society. As the slender body became the cultural ideal over the last century, many extremely thin women perceive themselves as larger than they are. Today, in discussing feminine body ideals, it is impossible to ignore thinness. However, this ideal body is not defined by thinness alone. In “Fitness is a Feminist Issue”, Tara Brabazon, an Australian Cultural Studies scholar, argues that since the eighties and the aerobics boom, “thinness [is] no longer sufficient. The body [has] to be toned, muscular, lean, and hard” (2006: 68). This speaks to avoidance of excess, in which fat is an excess of body, and fashioning the body is an endless process in which the individual is always attempting to become leaner, as well as more disciplined through diverse practices of the body. The
opposition between the taut and the loose is a key element of the aesthetic in
distance running. An existential connection is implicitly posited between a loose,
flabby, “excessive” body and a lack of self-restraint. The body is read as the
outward (bodily) sign of an internal (moral) condition. The language of dieting
emphasizes the ‘absence of’ or the violent ‘removal of’ bodily substance, as Susan
Bordo argues in *Unbearable Weight* (1993). Advertisements for dieting and
exercise often point out approvingly that a woman has “no tummy”, as though
the complete elimination of a body protuberance is a source of pride. Other ads
promise that their product or method will “burn” or “destroy” your fat.1617 Fat is
indicative of a body out of control, one that is loose and expanding rather than
taut and contracting. The ideal body has become about having a “tighter,
smoother, more contained body profile” (1993: 188). In ridding a body of fat,
one must either lose flesh, add muscle, or both. In this sense, muscle-building has
also become a part of the feminine body regime. This focus on muscle is two-
dimensional: as muscle is admired for its aesthetic appearance,18 and also burns
calories more quickly than fat making it functional for weight-management.

Lauren, another runner with whom I spoke, described strength in
running as follows:

I love lifting! There are times when I’m finishing a race and can really feel
myself being powered through the finish line by my arms. When I’m tired

---

17 In other words, the goal is the consumption of the body, where the consumed body is a reward
in itself. This suggests an instance of Bataille’s notion of excessive expenditure, in which the
consumption of excess does not serve as a means to an end, but rather is itself the end. I return to
this in chapter three to discuss how the body is consumed through running.
18 Washboard abs and cut arms are regarded as desirable for their physical appearance, likely in
part because of their association with self-control, signifying moral high ground.
I really turn to my arms to keep my legs moving. But still, I have to be careful not to get too strong.

She perceives strength in running to be empowering, and help in racing well, yet it must be managed, modified, and kept within particular limits. Shari L. Dworkin describes a similar notion in “‘Holding Back’: Negotiating a Glass Ceiling on Women’s Muscular Strength” (2001). She finds that women who seek fitness through muscular strength limit themselves through an emphasis on femininity rather than through biology. When women enter the male-dominated space of the weight room, they break down a previously defined barrier, while simultaneously creating a new gendered barrier by maintaining an emphasis on the lean body. These women view bulking up as masculinizing, so they use lifting to tone their bodies, a widespread pattern that I have already noted. Dworkin argues that women feel an imposed ceiling on their muscular size, which leads to them holding themselves back in muscular weight training, though where exactly to draw the line is a point of contention, and is continually changing. This idea of limiting muscle gain is reinforced to athletes, as coaches echo it, too. Emma explains, “Our coach encourages us to lift, but in a specific way. She stresses light weights and more reps, reassuring us that this won’t make us bulk up”. Again, the female runner’s weight room motivations are both pragmatic – muscle in itself helps with weight control and is valued aesthetically.

The tendency to avoid bulking up also has a class dimension, as most middle and upper-middle class women and men avoid getting too much muscle. This is perhaps due to an incompatibility between their identities as mental
workers with the association of muscle with manual labor. There is a certain association between bulked-up muscles and more physical working-class jobs. As noted by Bennett, Emmison, and Frow in *Care of the Body, Care of the Self* (1999), “Class and education are the major variables governing the choices people make about the care and pleasures of the body” (1999: 116). Through their findings they posit that particularly masculinizing sports and practices (namely football and non-weight controlling diets) have higher prevalence among men of lower socioeconomic status (1999: 123, 131). The muscular body is both functionally required in some jobs, and idealized by men who perform these jobs. Still, there is a cross-class appreciation of the muscled masculine body, as exhibited by audiences of sports like football, as well as viewership of action-movie stars, both of which heavily favor muscular bodies.\(^{19}\) For mental workers however, muscle building is largely non-utilitarian. Time is spent on appearance, and hence could be considered culturally feminine. Where working out was not so long ago considered unfeminine, it has recently been absorbed into a technique of femininity, whereas men who devote “too much” time to their bodies could be potentially feminized by the apparent over investment in their bodily appearance.

As I have noted, many of the activities of runners are similar to those of non-runners who work out to attain attractive bodies, their motivations based in aesthetics. The main difference with runners is that their motivation to attain

\(^{19}\) At Wesleyan, a muscular body is a signifier of jock-dom, and of a specific type. Bulkier bodies at this university tend to be an indication of a football or hockey player, and thus are admired for their functionality in athletics.
these bodies is based in functionality. This doesn’t mean that a woman’s motivations to maintain an attractive body disappear if she is a runner, but that in creating this body, she is additionally motivated by her interest in maximizing her body’s ability to perform.

**Food as fuel?**

As runners become more elite, their training becomes more complex. Elite runners do all of the little things necessary to make their bodies into faster machines, while trying to ward off any injuries. Despite their dedication to their training, their ambition is often so strong that they search for another component of their lives to control as a means to get even faster. For some athletes, this can become an obsession with caloric intake, manifested in rigorous monitoring of what she is and is not allowed to eat. Such an obsession is termed orthorexia. One woman, with whom I spoke, Sally, is a professional runner. Sally described the prevalence of orthorexia in the world of professional running across genders.

Orthorexia is big among professional runners. They’re hydrating well, sleeping enough, and they think ‘What else can I do to get better?’ This causes a lot of them to turn to nutrition and restriction. There is a temptation to view food as the enemy. You start to associate guilt with indulgence. Suddenly there is a voice in your head saying ‘This will make you slower.’ Runners need to drown out this voice.

---

20 *Orthorexia* is an eating disorder in which the individual affected develops a pathological obsession with eating food deemed "good" or "pure" and avoiding those that are not. A psychological mental health article categorizes orthorexia as follows: “This obsession leads to loss of social relationships and affective dissatisfactions which, in turn, favors obsessive concern about food... [he/she] initially wants to improve his/her health, treat a disease or lose weight... the diet becomes the most important part of their lives” (Zamora 2005: 66).
In other words, indulgence is moral laxity, which becomes bodily looseness, a loss of the fit and firm body. Many runners with whom I spoke described food restriction from this performance-motivated, yet implicitly moralized perspective. At the end of the summer of 2016, I worked as a counselor at a running camp and overheard a conversation between two fifteen-year-old boys. One asked the other if he was going to get dessert, to which the other replied, “Every bite of ice cream is five seconds added to your 5k time”. This is a dangerous perspective for young athletes to have. Nevertheless, collegiate runners often have similar mentalities regarding food. Many with whom I spoke talked about how their perspectives on eating healthy changed once they realized nutrition as a source for speed. Kiley was one such runner.

When I first became a real runner and started getting better then I started caring about my performance. I thought what I needed to do to get faster was to eat healthy. This became an obsession for me and I quickly became really sick with full-blown anorexia. I’ve since recovered, and now I try to view food as fuel more, but I still have certain feelings of ‘I shouldn’t do this’ when I eat badly.

As described by Kiley, there is a persistent moralizing of healthy eating. This seems to point to a particular instability in what constitutes as “healthy”. Kiley serves as an example of someone who made herself sick in the name of “health”. This is prevalent in running, which, like a few other sports, can legitimize practices of disordered eating. The practice of eating (or not) becomes a step in the process of achieving good health through restriction. Hence, the concept of health takes on a highly ascetic definition, as it is achieved through abstinence (of food). In a more general sense, running can be viewed as an ascetic practice
as well; one in which exercises on the self are about self-formation. Such practices allow an individual to mold herself into a particular product and employ a certain set of rules (Foucault 1997: 282). Through training and nutrition, the competitive runner employs an ascetic practice characterized by speed and health, as described by Kiley.

One of Kiley’s teammates, Carly, likewise felt a pull towards nutrition once her running became more competitive. In discussing body image in running, she spoke of being self-conscious about her weight due to societal pressures to have the ideal body type, and also “as a runner to fit a certain body image”. Carly went on to discuss how these pressures increased as her running became even more competitive.

   In high school I wasn’t necessarily concerned with body image as a runner, but more as a female. As soon as I came to college though, I was immediately immersed in a running culture and team environment where everyone was extremely and overly aware of their body shape and many went to extremes to control their body size in order to run faster and look ‘better’.21

There is a common (mis)conception among runners that a runner’s body is supposed to look a certain way. Carly’s comments and my own personal experiences have pointed to the idea that if one’s body doesn’t conform to this ideal, then one cannot be a serious runner. There have been dozens of times when I’ve stood on the starting line of a race and glanced side to side to size up the competition, as though by looking at the thinness of their legs and the toned-ness of their arms, I can calculate what they will run for a 5k. There have been

21 The emphasis here is Carly’s, as she made finger quotes while saying the word better.
even more times that I've finished a race and had a conversation with a
teammate in which she expressed surprise at how good someone was in the race
who “doesn’t look like a runner”. Such conversations show that those who don’t
“look like runners” are often successful in the sport, yet highlight how ubiquitous
bodily stereotypes are in runners’ discourse. Kiley, reinforced this idea:

Runners are a population that is not struggling with being overweight,
but we’re still exposed to weight loss. We see our skinny teammates, and
we see times that professional runners run with legs like sticks, and we
are reminded that our weight affects our performance. What we aren’t
reminded of is that we still need to eat.

Which messages runners receive results in a special runners’ code. If every
runner gets the message that she must look a certain way in order to run a
certain speed, and that she must achieve a certain level of performance to earn
the right to emulate the style of dress of professional runners, she will
understand that she can only wear the runderwear if she has achieved some
arbitrary level of speed. In this, running in runderwear or otherwise minimal
clothing has become a sort of badge of authenticity. A runner must earn the right
to wear so few clothes, which she does by crafting a body that not only looks fast
but actually is fast.

Another runner, twenty-year-old Emma, spoke of issues with body image
and disordered eating on her collegiate team:

Recently some of my teammates have dealt with eating issues. One was
hospitalized a year ago and [has been asked] to take two semesters off
from school ... Another teammate recently has developed an issue,
however [the university athletic department] says in this scenario she can
compete and train on the team as long as she does not lose any more
weight. Both of my teammates’ motives for losing weight were running.
They believed that to be faster they had to be minimal weight.
She went on to discuss her perception of runners as perfectionists and included herself in that category. She noted that runners tend to try to perfect the little things, and nutrition often becomes one of the big things that runners try to control in order to optimize running performances. For these runners, their bodies become physical instantiations of attempts at their perceptions of perfection. The ideal body type of a runner is viewed as an attainable and desirable mold for each of their own bodies.

Sally, the professional runner with whom I spoke, likes to tell people that she’s a professional athlete and make them guess her sport. In talking with me, she recalled that the responses she gets are often gymnastics, soccer, or dance, and when she reveals herself as a runner, people tell her that she looks too strong for a runner, masculinizing her body for her strength. On the one hand, that she is mistaken for one of these other athletes is no surprise, considering that these sports require similar body types. On the other hand, it suggests that runners are imagined as thin rather than strong. Sally feels that disordered eating in running is not talked about enough, and that runners, such as herself have the power to change the idea of what a runner is “supposed” to look like.

Sally’s thoughts are consistent within “The Body Beautiful” (2004), an article by Erica Reischer and Kathryn S. Koo in which they describe the agency of the body: “Indeed, the two theoretical views of the body in society – as ‘artifact’ and ‘agent’ – are essentially complementary because the capacity of the body to signify the social also entails the power of the body to transform social reality.”
They maintain that bodies do portray the social pressures that they experience, while also being able to affect the social situations of which they are a part. Runners’ bodies both portray the body ideals of a runner, in that they are thin and strong, while being able to influence what the ideal body of a runner is and should be. Membership in the identity-group of ‘runner’ allows that runners both have influence over other members and input as to what defines membership to the group.

Yet, running discourse has worked to create a sport that excludes large bodies. Not only does running create thin bodies, but it may both promote and cover up various forms of disordered eating ranging from excessive self-regulation to clinically recognized eating disorders. People with certain eating disorders often over-exercise to combat their fear of gaining weight. Collegiate runners are exercising constantly by the nature of their training, and in this sense the behaviors of competitive runners and runners with anorexia can look the same. Another runner’s, Leslie’s, thoughts on the topic validate these concerns.

It’s scary how easily people can use running as a cover up for an ED, claiming to be so skinny because they run a lot. I’ve worried about teammates before and not really known what to do or when is the right time to talk to someone, like my coach, about it. I think a lot of it comes from a runner’s obsession with getting faster.

---

22 In talking about eating disorders, the problematic nature of the language must be recognized. To use the term “eating disorder” implies that there is an “order” – a standard, a norm, to which the body is supposed to adhere and from which people with eating disorders are deviating. I will continue to use the term eating disorder, as this is the language used by people within literature to describe their own behaviors with regards to food. Still, it is important to recognize that this language reinforces normative behavior.
As this remark suggests, many runners develop patterns of disordered eating that stem from the sport itself. So strong is the connection between running and eating disorders that the term *anorexia athletica* has been coined to put particular spotlight on the combination of food restriction and compulsive exercise (Heywood: 2011). Many eating disorder foundations have specific sections on their websites discussing the relationship between one’s weight and running.²³ Heywood (2011) posits that the narrative of experiencing struggle and endurance cited by many women with anorexia is even more germane to anorexic athletes. She writes: “Anorexics might experience heroism in their food refusal, but anorexic athletes do so through the totality of their bodily practices, and, unlike anorexics, who are “heroes” only to themselves and are culturally sanctioned as pathological, athletes are lauded as heroes” (2011: 126). Many anorexics experience their control of food intake as a triumph, while anorexic athletes experience triumph through both control of food and control over the totality of their training. In talking with female distance runners, I have examined the relationship between running and weight, trying to understand what it is about running that lends itself to eating disorders. I would distinguish between people with eating disorders who run and people who identify as runners who also have eating disorders. While many people with eating disorders use running as a means to become thinner, they are doing so specifically to lose weight. Competitive runners who restrict food intake generally begin to do so for the purpose of being fast. Whether the need to be

---

²³ Many websites have sections specifically geared towards athletes. One example is *Eating Disorder Hope.*
fast is felt as a personal desire or more as a societal pressure from other people, this goal continually pushes runners towards thinness. Lauren explained her own relationship to weight:

I definitely feel the need to manage my weight for running and often feel like I’m micromanaging it and thinking about my weight way more than the average person does. I do weigh myself, but not that often, maybe once a week. I just think about it way more than that and always hope that I’ll weigh a little less when I weigh myself.

While she may not have unhealthy eating practices, she focuses intensely on her weight for the sake of her running. She feels she maintains a healthy relationship with food, but recognizes how the nature of the sport provokes anxiety about eating related to the importance of being fast. Eating disorders have been historically medicalized and pathologized. Many scholars have criticized medicalization as a problematic framework for viewing bodies.

Anthropologists Richard A. O’Connor and Penny Van Esterik explore this in *Demedicalizing Anorexia* (2008). They argue that in medicalizing anorexia, its causes become uncertain. Viewing people with anorexia as deviant from the norm takes them out of their social and cultural contexts. This isolation of their actions makes them seem irrational. O’Connor and Van Esterik argue that the medicalization of anorexia has come to this: “in dividing mind from body and individual from society, modern thought fights any realistic social and cultural understanding of disease,” (2008: 7). Socially contextualizing anorexia can be

---

24 In many cases, such as intense focus on food intake does lead to “unhealthy” eating practices. This is not surprising given the associations between health and self-restrain, control of appetite, etc. There is no distinct definition of moderation or what is considered healthy or unhealthy.
useful for understanding the perspective of someone with the disorder by bringing it outside of a medical gaze.

Running is a particular sociocultural context for exploring body image. As we have seen, the sport idealizes the lean body, the toned body, but not the anorexic body. But what is the line between a healthy toned body and one that is too thin to perform to its athletic potential? Often the decline of a runner’s performance is read as marking that a line has been crossed. If she begins to run slower and her weight is extremely low, then her teammates, coaches, etc. may think she has a problem. Still, does this mean that as long as an athlete is continuing to perform well, any practice she applies to her body is acceptable? The greater running community allows for the idealization of these thin, yet strong bodies, as nearly all elite runners maintain extremely low body fat percentages, boasting muscle – but not too much, staying thin – but not too skinny. Carly offered an explanation. “We look up to athletes like Jordan Hasay and others who are so small.” She believes that the body image of elite female runners has a large influence on the running community as a whole:

These ideologies definitely trickle down into college and high school aged runners as we train and attempt to run fast and be great athletes. We know that professional athletes are skinny and lean, and often times we feel pressured to go to great lengths and limit our own eating habits or exercise excessively to attain those body types.

Carly thinks more runners struggle with weight issues because they are surrounded by a cohort of people concerned with their weight. “I’d be willing to bet that a large percentage of college runners struggle with food, body image, and eating on a daily basis, more so than the average female does because of the
hyperaware and competitive nature required of a runner.” She maintains that the issue of body image and disordered eating that stems from it is “a broader societal issue steeped in our patriarchal institutions,” but adds that within the sphere of running, these influences are ever-present.

Additionally, parallels can be drawn between running and disordered eating by examining both as tools of micromanagement. Running often creates an environment of control, in which athletes seek to manage their practices. Runners often enjoy having control over aspects of their training such as mileage, pace, and workouts. This control often extends to practices of eating, and notions of perfectionism as previously mentioned by Emma.

*Femininity and strength embodied*

While many competitive runners feel the pressure towards thinness, most are able to distinguish between which practices will help them train their bodies for performing long term, and which will not. For both the anorectic runner and the non-runner with anorexia, their practices of eating (or not) are often done in the name of health, though runners legitimize their way of eating in terms of performance. Runners can legitimize their practices as a need to eat “healthy”, though their practices may often look the same as the non-runner with anorexia. Still, a distinction can be made between bodies of runners, generally, and bodies of people with anorexia, in that runners’ bodies must meet criteria of function as well as form; it is not enough just to be thin. They must also be able to run fast. For most runners, the trials to achieve and maintain this body can be
empowering. The classic distance runner’s body is thin, but firm, a non-anorexic body, which is capable of great athletic feats in addition to being a reward in itself. This body serves as a particular instantiation of increasingly fluid gendered body ideals, in which slimness combined with strength indexes women’s claims to independence and autonomy. It is reflective of the less polarized gender norms that are emerging, particularly among middle-class youth. This body that is so idealized in the world of distance running is key in relation to shifting gender ideals, where women can take pride in embodying autonomy and achievement through their running. They can be seen as both feminine and athletic. While tensions may still exist between the beauty and strength of a young woman, both are foundational to the distance runner’s body.

One runner with whom I spoke, Hadley, loved showing her feminine side while racing. She felt that embracing both her athletics and her femininity allowed her to race better, and helped to break down the gender divide within the sport and society.

Cross country boys are known for being pretty scrawny, just knees and elbows, while the girls are usually seen as super muscly and almost more masculine in their physique than their male counterparts. Conversely, I would sometimes wear a bit of mascara during a big race because looking good certainly makes me more confident as a runner. The funny thing is that I probably wear mascara more frequently in races than when I’m out and about at school, perhaps to enhance my feminine side while I’m being an athlete.

Hadley’s comments suggest that distance running is a place where traditionally gendered body ideals begin to fall to the wayside. Men’s bodies are feminized
while women’s are masculinized, as previously indicated by comments made to Sally about looking “too strong”. Yet Hadley feels she can embody both beauty and strength through running. Many of the first great women’s distance runners expressed similar sentiments when setting out to accomplish historical feats within the sport. They maintained the notion that a woman could express her femininity while competing at an elite level of athletics.

Such women as Julia Chase: “I just wanted to finish looking good and to show that women could run the race” (Burfoot 2016a: 19), Bobbi Gibb: “I told them that I simply loved to run,’ she remembers, ‘and that I didn’t run the marathon to threaten anyone. I did it because I wanted to change the perception that women couldn’t do it. I said I thought women could be feminine and strong and athletic at the same time” (Burfoot 2016a: 50), and Gayle Barron: “They considered me a role model because I started from nothing and showed that a woman runner could be athletic and feminine” (Burfoot 2016a: 182).

Historically, women had to prove that they were as tough as the men they were running alongside, and that they needn’t participate in only performance-based, feminized sports, such as figure skating. Though it may require certain

25 Though I don’t indulge in the specifics of running as a potentially feminizing sport for men, it often is. Men, too, must craft thin bodies for performance, which has, within the last century, been categorized as a feminine body type. Men on my team often receive denouncing comments from non-runners about their sexuality, being called “fairies”, and the like. Despite the fact that all sports, including running, have been historically male-dominated, as Tara Brabazon puts it, “The simplest definition of a sport is that which involves men and balls. When one or both of these variables are removed, the determination of a sport becomes more tenuous” (2006: 66).

26 Julia Chase, as mentioned in the introduction, was the first woman road racer. She was also a participant in the 1960 U.S. Olympic Track Trials for the 800 meters.

27 Bobbi Gibb, also mentioned in the introduction, was the first woman to unofficially complete the Boston Marathon.

28 Gayle Barron was the 1978 winner of the Boston Marathon and the first woman to win the Peachtree Road Race 10k, a large and prestigious race in Atlanta.
techniques to counter the masculinizing effects, as many women do still experience the sport as at least potentially masculinizing, these three women, along with countless others, fought to show that femininity and athleticism are not antagonistic. A woman could maintain her femininity, her girlish figure, a ribbon in hair, and still run as tough as any man out on the course. A woman can show her grit and sweat, entirely exhausting herself, pushing her body to the absolute edges of its limits, and still maintain her identity as feminine. Hadley expressed similar thoughts to those that these groundbreaking women had: “Being in shape and staying strong is important to me. Knowing what my body is capable of gives me the biggest sense of accomplishment.” This returns to the distance runners’ body as a more fluid gendered ideal, in which women’s strength and capacity to achieve are admired. Hadley is empowered by her physical embodiment of achievement. She both looks fast, with a slim and toned body and is fast, gaining pride through success in her competitions.

My own experiences navigating my femininity in running have been similar. I run well and my male friend is shocked that I could possibly be faster than him, despite the fact that he is not a runner, and so I am masculinized simply for being successful in athletics. I complete laps on the track, clad in sports bra and shorts. A member of the football team comes up to me at a party to comment on how he sees me running without a shirt on the track all the time during his practice, making sure to note that I was running in only a sports bra. So, I am sexualized and feminized for my attire. I have been made to feel too masculine, for my speed, for my abs, for my competitive spirit; too feminine, for
the ribbons in my hair, for my tiny racing spikes, for the mascara I apply before I step on the starting line. For me, it takes both. It takes my abs and my ribbons to get me on that starting line in peak physical and mental shape. Both are essential to my identity as a runner, and I do embody both femininity and athletics. My body as a distance runner is personally empowering, as it reflects the work I do daily to maintain my performance. For women distance runners, our bodies are a reward, both for their aesthetic value and for their reflection of a less divided gender order in which achievement is the province of women as much as men; they exist as a physical instantiation of their immense investment in the sport.

∆ ∆ ∆

It’s race morning. I use the restroom for what I hope will be the final time before I step on the track. As I wash my hands, I check out my reflection in the mirror. I lean forward slightly to get a better look at my face: mascara applied, earrings straight, braids fine and long and swinging. I smile and flip the braids behind my shoulders. I’m ready to race.
CHAPTER TWO: RUNNING AS COMMUNITY

“For the strength of the pack is the wolf, and the strength of the wolf is the pack.”
-Rudyard Kipling, “The Law for the Wolves”

“Done!” I call out, signaling the end of static stretches. I roll over onto my stomach, hands on the ground, and walk my feet up to my hands, stretching my hamstrings as I stand up. “All set?” I ask Coach. He nods, “Yep. Core and stretching when you get back.” A couple of teammates and I jog down the indoor track, swinging left out of the door that reads EMERGENCY EXIT ONLY ALARM WILL SOUND. It doesn’t sound. It never does. We make our way over to the gym and hop on ellipticals or stationary bikes or whatever open cardio machines we can find. It’s Monday, which means two things. One: a handful of my teammates and I who have been deemed susceptible to stress-injuries have to cross train instead of running today. Two: it seems as if everyone at Wesleyan hits the gym at 4:45 after classes, making it incredibly crowded. Luckily, I manage to grab an old elliptical, pulling my shirt off to reveal only a sports bra beneath as I hit QUICKSTART and begin my workout. I look to my left and then my right. 95% of my fellow-ellipticalcallers are women. My teammates and I are all in shorts, while most of the other women are in leggings and work-out tank tops. I am one of

---

29 For us, cross training is a cardio alternative to running. This is most often ellipticaling or biking, but could also include activities such as swimming or aqua jogging. Cross training has a much lower impact on an athlete’s legs than running does making it a great training alternative or supplement for people who tend to be injury prone.
four in a row, one of four in the entire gym, wearing only a sports bra; the other three are my teammates.

△ △ △

It’s Saturday night and I just got back on campus two hours ago. I’ve been gone all day for a race up in Boston and I can feel the difference in my body posture from earlier. I’ve been in race-mode all day and am relieved to now be sitting in Nora’s room, beer in hand, hanging out. Nora suggests we go to a party some of our friends are giving, so we head down the street and make our rounds through the scene, catching up with people. A handful of us end up in the bedroom of one the hosts, sitting around, talking, drinking. Everyone asks me how the race went. “Did you win?” they all want to know. I tell them that no, I did not win, but I report my mile time to them. They’re all in awe, all talking about how fast they think they could run a mile. More time passes. Slowly, people begin to leave, parting ways for the night, until the only ones left are my friend whose room we’re in and me. He leans in to kiss me before pulling away again. “You know, your body is really intimidating.”

△ △ △

I enter Usdan, pulling off my sunglasses and looking around. I’m meeting Mike for lunch today and find him waiting for me by the stairs. We walk up to the dining hall and swipe our IDs to enter. He turns right, while I turn left. “Oh sorry, did you want to eat on loud side?” he asks. “No, no, quiet side is perfect. I’m just not used to it,” I respond. Mike is not an athlete. We walk to the quiet side and find a table to sit at, setting our bags down before going to get our food. I look
around, realizing I know far fewer faces on this side of the dining hall. The varsity teams always sit on the other side. I don’t mind this side. I just habitually sit on the other side. We walk into the food area, browsing the day’s lunch options. A few minutes later, we meet back at the table and begin catching up. “What’s new with you?” I ask, mouth full of food. I can’t help but notice that I have far more food on my plate than Mike.

Campus life for the runner

Campus culture plays a large role in directing an athlete’s social pathways. An athlete, specifically a runner, interacts with her college campus in different ways than the non-athlete or non-runner, as her runner’s identity situates her in the space differently. Here I rely on Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton’s analysis in *Paying for the Party* (2013) to understand how universities provide different collegiate pathways for different groups of students. Pathways, they write, are institutionally structured ways of making one’s way through the university experience:

> When the university structures the interests of a constituency into its organizational edifice, we say that it has created a ‘pathway’. Pathways are simultaneously social and academic and coordinate all aspects of the university experience (2013: 15).

Different universities build distinct sets of pathways, designed to attract particular types of students, and thus vary from school to school. While I cannot speak to all college campuses across the country, I can speak to my own experiences at Wesleyan University, as a point for exploring the campus spaces
athletes and non-athletes occupy, focusing on the pathway navigated by runners at Wesleyan.

Certain spaces on campus lead to a seemingly natural divide between athletes and non-athletes. At Wesleyan, the athletic center is situated in one corner of campus, removed from the academic buildings and dining halls. It houses the indoor track, swimming pool, basketball court, squash courts, and ice rink, as well as a gym for all students. Additionally, it contains locker rooms for most of the varsity sports teams, the coaches’ offices, and the athletic injury care center, where physical trainers are available to assist with athletic-related injuries. The athletic center is open to all students, athlete or non-athlete, with the exception of certain spaces, which are restricted during team practice times (for instance, the basketball court is closed to other students when the basketball team is practicing). While the gym is used by athletes and non-athletes alike, the rest of the athletic center is often occupied only by athletes. There are further divides within the athletic center in terms of who has the authority to occupy spaces. For example, track practice starts at 4:30 during the week. Sometimes during the winter, members of other teams will come onto the track and practice in the infield or off on the sides of the track. If other people, athletes included, are on the track, they will be asked to leave when we begin our workouts, creating certain tensions over who has primary right to occupy the

---

30 Wesleyan’s gym was previously housed in 41 Wyllys Avenue: a far smaller space with a much more central location to the rest of campus. The new building, Freeman Athletic Center was built in 1990, it’s size reflective of the expansion of fitness culture. In 2005, an addition was completed on Freeman Athletic Center to add a gymnasium, fitness center, and squash courts. Following this, the athletic facilities became concentrated in one corner of campus.

31 This includes activities such as lacrosse players throwing a ball against the wall or baseball players practicing pitching or batting.
space at particular times. Within the all-student gym, varsity athletes will often have team lifts, meaning entire teams fill the weight-lifting area of the gym. This can make the gym an intimidating place for the non-athlete who is trying to exercise.\textsuperscript{32}

The dining hall can be another socially divided space. The main dining hall on campus, Usdan, has two sides. One side is referred to as the “loud side”, because music plays overhead, while the other side, where no music plays, is called the “quiet side”. These two sides are also called the “jock side” and “hipster side”, respectively,\textsuperscript{33} and which side you sit on speaks greatly to your position within campus social life. Sports teams on campus often go the dining hall together after practice, and without fail, they always sit on the loud side, snagging the longest tables to accommodate all members of their teams. As an athlete, I have sat on the quiet side only a handful of times in my four years at Wesleyan. Even if I were to enter Usdan alone, I would habitually sit on the “loud side”, as this social space aligns with my pathway as an athlete.

This divide between athletes and non-athletes extends into social scenes at Wesleyan and spaces beyond the athletic center and dining hall. The party scene on campus is shaped to a great degree by athletes. Senior houses around campus become known as “baseball house” or “soccer house” depending on who lives there any given year. While parties are never exclusively athlete-

\textsuperscript{32} Traditionally machismo jocks are not the only intimidating presences in the gym. Other small, but fit, seemingly less assuming athletes, such as myself, can be intimidating as well, especially to female non-athletes who want to work out in the gym.

\textsuperscript{33} Which side students choose to sit on has less to do with the fact that music plays overhead and more to do with which side their friends sit on. The “hipster side” is music free, but this is not to suggest that hipsters do not consume music.
only, and non-athletes host as well as attend parties, there are often parties in
which a majority of the students present are athletes, if only because many
athletes tend to socialize with other athletes, while many non-athletes socialize
with other non-athletes. Additionally, most varsity sports have a formal at some
point during the semester, which results in a lot of athlete-centric parties.
Sporting events are often occasions to tailgate, and depending on the results of
the competition, there is often reason to celebrate after the game, creating a
social scene that is highly focused on sports.

Perhaps more than any other social group, the leisure activities of
college students encourage consumption. Though students embrace a variety of
activities during the week, living seemingly balanced lives, weekend leisure
activities often involve use of alcohol and drugs. As far as diet is concerned,
students have access to an all-you-can-eat dining hall. In these senses, college
courages extreme, often risky forms of consumption. For athletes, this can
serve as a point of tension, for the most devoted athlete is regimented with her
diet and sleep, and does not partake in alcohol consumption or drug use. As a
runner becomes more competitive, her day-to-day life becomes more restrictive.
Social situations can be sites of conflict, as her identity as a college student
depends to a great extent on her participation in various forms of festive excess,
while her identity as a competitive runner depends on abstinence from such
behaviors. Throughout my four years of competing on collegiate cross country
and track teams, I have spent hours at the athletic center every day. On a typical
day, running influences my everyday choices more than any other aspect of my identity.

A typical day

7:15: My alarm goes off, and I lie in bed for a few minutes before pulling myself together and getting up. I contemplate eating something small, but decide against it. How much fuel do I really need to get through four miles anyways?

7:45: I’ve walked the half-mile to the athletic center and made my way into the locker room. I climb the stairs to the indoor track two at a time and break into a jog immediately. I circle the 200-meter track twice just to warm up my legs and keep the jog going to the gym. I hop on an elliptical, bumping the incline down and the resistance up to closer simulate running.

8:20: Thirty minutes on the elliptical feels so much longer, but I’m finished now. I wipe the machine down, wishing I could do my doubles outside, as real runs, but knowing I have to cross train. I would be heartbroken if I got another injury, as I’ve had my fair share throughout my college career. I make my way into the weight section of the gym, devising a lifting routine on the spot. Biceps, triceps, back, chest, calves, abs – okay I’ve covered the bases.

9:00: I’ve showered and I’m home again, and it’s time for breakfast. I opt for eggs, cheese, avocado, and sweet potato in a bowl, with a smoothie on the side. Because I don’t eat meat, I force myself to add protein powder to the smoothie, even though I think it tastes like chemicals. I have to make sure I’m getting
enough protein, I think, hearing the words of my mom and my coach echoed back to me. I finish my meal and head to class.

12:30: Lunch. I find something to eat that won’t upset my stomach for the workout today. But I also don’t want to be hungry. Luckily, I’ve been at this for a while and I’ve perfected that balance. I head to the library to get some work done before practice.

16:00: I pack up my work from the library and make my way to the athletic center again. I enter the locker room to see a few teammates have already arrived, and we change into workout clothes, trying to figure out the weather so as to select the appropriate attire.

16:20: We slowly make our way down the hall to the outdoor track, pausing to check the mileage chart before heading out to congregate by the picnic table as we wait for practice to begin. Eight miles today. It’s Tuesday: workout day.

16:30: Coach makes his way outside, and banter continues among teammates and with coach for another minute before we settle into workout mode. Coach tells us to do our usual pre-workout warm up. We jog two miles at around an eight minute pace and make our way back to the track. From there, we complete our dynamic warm up routine: A-skips, carioca, side shuffles, leg swings, etc., etc. We gather for static stretches, which I time. “Switch!” I call out to the rest of the team, signifying to switch legs. Next comes strides: twice we run 100 meters starting slowly and picking up to a near-sprint to loosen up our legs. Coach asks, ready to go? We all nod and shake out our legs as we gather round. He confirms the workout, which we already knew. Three times 1600 meters with one minute
rest in between and five minutes rest after the third one. Then three times 400 meters and three times 200 meters, with one minute rest throughout. Molly, he says, your 1600s are 6:05. Okay? That’s :45.6 per 200. 400s are :83 and 200s are :38. I nod and walk away before he lists the other girls’ workout paces. :45.6, I think to myself. Grab a sip of water; pull my shirt off. I jog a few meters and break into pace as I hit the start line of the track, simultaneously clicking my watch to begin timing myself.

17:40: I finish the last 200 meters in :38.3, and it was the only split that I missed for the whole workout. Satisfied with my efforts for the day, I link up with a couple of teammates, and we begin the cool down:34 another two miles that we complete in around eight minute pace, but no one actually times it. We sit down to stretch, squinting as the combination of sun and miles causes sweat to drip down into our eyes.

18:15: Making my way to the injury care room, I grab a foam roller to roll out my hamstrings and calves, spending less time than I should, but more time that I can afford. I head off to shower, peeling my sweaty clothes off in the locker room and checking in with teammates to see how their workouts went. We all hobble to the shower and discuss what we want for dinner.

18:50: We make it to the dining hall after what feels like an eternity. Climbing the stairs feels a little harder than usual today, and I make a mental note to remember to take my iron supplements before bed. We throw our stuff down,

---

34 This is a real workout that I ran on 4/5/2016. I ran 6:01.2, 6:02.9, 6:02.1, :82.3, :81.4, :82.2, :37.5, :37.6, :38.3. My log for the day reads, “felt insane amounts better than the last 2 weeks -- She asks Is there a map of these gates?
spreading it across a table on the loud side, and head off to fill our plates. I am acutely aware of what my teammates put on their plates—what they consider the proper “fuel” to recover from the day’s efforts. Still, I don’t deny myself ice cream tonight. It was a workout day. I earned it.

19:30: I sit down to begin some schoolwork for the evening, but first I have to log my runs for the day. I log on to running2win and turn to my watch to recall the splits from the workout.

22:30: I start to think about bed, knowing I ran a workout today and my body could use a good night of sleep. Well, my body could use a good night of sleep every night, but especially tonight. At least eight hours. That’s the rule.

This lifestyle doesn’t permit excessive consumption. Athletics are a large time investment for a collegiate athlete, leaving little space for the usual leisure behaviors that shape many college students’ lives. If a runner wants to have a traditional social life while in college, running must become one piece of the puzzle. It must be one aspect of her life, albeit a major one, the track becoming one of her social spaces, rather than the totality of her identity as a student. To what extent running defines her social identity depends on the athlete, but it is clear that certain social struggles are unique to the collegiate athlete, and some are unique to collegiate runners. Lauren explained how running affected her social life.

I think the reputation of runners at [my college] is that we’re all kind of crazy. People are constantly asking me how much I run or how fast my mile is because that’s the only event they know anything about. Or if I’ve ever run a marathon because somehow to non-runners, the marathon is
some sort of point of authenticity. Like you aren’t a real runner until you’ve run a marathon. I can’t go to a party without people asking me how far I ran today. They all think I’m fast, which is nice, I guess. I think runners tend to date runners a lot because it’s such an all-encompassing lifestyle that only other runners truly understand. You don’t have to explain why you’re going to bed at 9 pm to another runner. You don’t have to explain why you’re eating so many eggs and bananas and spoonfuls of peanut butter to another runner. They just get it.

Social spaces are often fraught for runners, as they must navigate their social lives through the lens of both abstinence and excess. The social life of a runner is very much defined by this tension, and being able to share these struggles with other runners often helps to ease it. For many athletes, celebrations of race performances can serve as a site for licensed excess that helps to reduce the tensions between running and campus culture.

While athletes’ lifestyles are not particularly conducive to partying, athletes can justify their occasional excesses (bouts of heavy drinking, over-eating, eating “junk food”, doing drugs). They can be explained as earned pleasures, celebrations of their athletic achievements. Much in the same way that runners can legitimize practices of disordered eating, they can likewise legitimize excessive consumption, as long as both are done in the name of the sport. The difference between these practices, however is that disordered eating in runners is most often motivated by performance, while excessive consumption is motivated by a desire for pleasure, a release from the discipline imposed by teammates, coaches, and the athlete herself. Sometimes, however an athlete feels reluctant to deviate from her routine even in small ways, particularly in monitored environments, such as in front of her coach.
At the beginning of the fall semester, before we’ve even had our first official practice, my team opens the season with a movie night. Our coach picks out a movie, and we all watch it in a classroom together on campus. This year, however, our coach decided to change things up, and took us all out for ice cream, happily offering us an end-of-summer treat. For a few of my teammates, this wasn’t a welcome change. They felt uncomfortable eating ice cream with our coach—isn’t he the one, after all, who wants us to eat healthy? Isn’t he the one, after all, who will be scrutinizing our workouts tomorrow, trying to figure out where our fitness levels are? This simple treat became a site of tension. Certain members of the men’s team opted to not get ice cream, justifying their decision based on the fact that we had a hard workout the next day. Such restraint puts pressure on the rest of the team—if we indulge, will we seem somehow less devoted to the sport? Do we not care about tomorrow’s workout because we eat ice cream tonight? As a team captain and the fastest member of the team, I have an obligation to accept the treat, because if I don’t get ice cream, what kind of message does that send to the rest of the team? Will they think they have to follow my example to perform well in the workout tomorrow? Will they try to emulate my actions in hopes of improving their running performance? Suddenly, a fun social event creates guilt and tensions, becoming a contest as to who can prove themselves to be the most devoted runner through abstinence. Perhaps if the ice cream trip had been after a race or a long run, more members of the team would have willingly participated, viewing the trip as a reward rather than a potential source of shame. We have done full team brunch excursions post long
run, at which healthier options are available, in which everyone has happily partaken.

**Social running**

Because of such divides between identity as a runner and as a college student, runners create community among themselves. Running is often categorized as an individual sport; in competition, athletes are given individual results. Yet, it is equally a team sport, as teammates combine for a team score, where team goals often matter more than individual results. While running alone can be an intensely private, meditative practice, sharing the joy of running with others who have an equal passion for the sport can create empowering effects. It is not surprising that so many runners belong to teams, whether they are high school, collegiate, or clubs, each with varying degrees of competitiveness. Many towns have road race series, particularly in the summer, sponsored by local businesses and organized by the local running community, with prizes given to top competitors. Additionally, running stores in cities across the country often host weekly group runs as an opportunity for runners to gather and run together. Many teams keep online running logs, which serve as a form of social media to track their mileage and workouts. Team members can view one another’s logs to motivate themselves through comparison with their teammates. This is particularly useful in the summer when teammates are not physically together to train. The past summer while in Boulder, I was lucky
enough to train with a couple of my Wesleyan teammates. We stayed in touch with the rest of our team through our running logs.

In Boulder, known amongst runners across the country as a running mecca, the aforementioned ways of creating community around their sport are all means employed by runners. Boulder has several high schools, each of which produces national caliber cross country runners with frequency. The University of Colorado at Boulder, with over 30,000 students, consistently has one of the top cross country and track teams in the country. Additionally, over a dozen more structured training groups exist in Boulder, where athletes with common goals train together and are coached to help them reach these goals. The hot spot for running gear, Boulder Running Company, hosts a group run every week, many of which I attended with teammates last summer. Hosting these events is a common practice for other running stores in the city, such as Fleet Feet Sports Boulder and Flatirons Running.

As distance running has grown among women, more and more women run together. In competitive running, women often have one or more training partners, with whom they can pace hard workouts and discuss the trials of their miles. The social aspects of running allow for both the generation of community

---

35 Professional runners have trained in Boulder, Colorado for decades, in part due to its elevation at 5,500 ft. Altitude training is common amongst runners, as they attempt to force their body to produce more red blood cells to increase their oxygen carrying capacity. In addition, Boulder is known for its trails, great for running or biking, as well as its close access to more mountainous trails.

36 This past fall (2016), the CU Buffs celebrated the twenty-fifth year under coach Mark Wetmore. Wetmore has coached CU’s men’s and women’s teams with much success over the years. This past season, the women finished 3rd and the men finished 6th nationally in cross country. The men’s team’s 1998 success was documented in a book, now widely known amongst runners titled Running with the Buffaloes.
and competitive comparisons. Comparisons in running often begin with results, as in running competitively, the goal is to be the fastest, and at the end of a race, who is the fastest runner is indisputable. As previously mentioned, running is unique from many team sports in that results in running can belong to athletes individually. Within teams, then, an athlete will often compare herself to her teammates, trying to figure out what it is about faster athletes that she must emulate to improve her own performance. The most obvious comparison for an athlete to draw between herself and her teammates is the one most visible: their bodies. In running, bodies become a physical representation of training, as it is the miles run, weights lifted, and core routes completed that craft the bodies that ultimately compete in races. Carly talked with me about how body comparisons are so common among runners:

Seeing some of my teammates in the locker room proves to be a very difficult task because their bodies are extremely thin and fragile. These images deeply impact our team, as young women in a world where the ideal body image seems to be the most important indicator of success. If these girls who look so skinny are running well, it becomes natural for other teammates to unconsciously emulate their behaviors.

These comparisons can have negative consequences for runners, both mentally and physically, as everyone's body is different and needs to be treated as such. Even while chatting with teammates on runs, the conversation often turns to how we are feeling on that particular run – what our current bodily reactions are to this physical activity. While it can be great when both teammates feel good, it can be detrimental, if they are not in sync. Lauren described this to me while running one day:
When we both feel good on runs, it’s just so obvious. We have to intentionally slow our pace down so that we don’t end up running too fast and overtraining. Or even if we both feel bad it’s okay, because it probably means we’re running too fast anyways. But when you feel good and I don’t, it can be really demoralizing. It makes me feel like I’m doing something wrong by not adjusting to the training or the altitude as quickly as you are.

Clearly the social aspects of the activity of running are not always positive. Comparisons are made far too often and can be harmful to an athlete’s training, self-esteem, and overall well-being. Still, running has great social rewards.

Runners come to the sport with varying histories, but what makes them stay within the sport is often the community of people they meet. Because running elicits individual results, it is easier for runners to be happy when their competitors perform well. In most sports, one team wins and one team loses, but running is not a zero-sum game, and there is a spectrum of results that extend beyond simply being a winner or a loser. This spectrum, I argue, allows for the running community to be such a supportive group for its members and allows runners to befriend their competition in a unique way. This is how Hadley and I met. When we spoke this summer, we reminisced fondly on big high school cross country meets, at which we would spend the day catching up with friends on teams from around the state.

For me, running has always been more of a social event than something to be competitive about. Yes I feel fulfilled when I break my PR’s, but the connection with my teammates is more important to me. My favorite meets in high school were the ones that everyone in the state went to. We would spend the day hanging out with each other and our friends from schools across the state that ran. It was such a great feeling to know there were so many wonderful people who shared the same passion as we did.
Lauren similarly described her experiences:

I go to meets now in college and my teammates always joke that I know everyone there. It’s because I met so many wonderful people in high school within the running community that I’ve gotten to bring that to college with me. It’s made the transition to college running so fun because I feel like I didn’t have to leave all of my connections behind.

Running is a sport in which surviving the ordeals of training and racing create feelings of closeness among teammates and other runners. While the bonding effects of physical ordeals may be applicable to all sports, what is unique to running is its ability to be both acutely individual and constantly collective. For example, a member of a soccer team could not compete, even fully practice, on her own. Her team’s performance is dependent on their collective performance as one unit, and so each member relies at every moment on the rest of the team. In running, an individual’s performance depends solely on her own efforts, and the team’s performance is truly the sum of several distinctly individual results. Despite this difference, specific to running and a handful of other sports, it would be a mistake to think runners do not experience intense feelings of closeness with teammates. A runner can do it on her own. She can craft her body, training herself to reach high-level fitness, and perform to her peak potential on race day all on her own. It is because she is able to do it on her own that the instances of community are so special. Running is often experienced as a solitary, sometimes lonely practice, so when individuals are able to experience solidarity, the bonds created are particularly intense. These are different from sports that rely wholly on constant togetherness. Non-runners often describe cross country teams as
being cult-like, a feature that I believe can be attributed to the nature of the bonds produced by an ardent coming together without loss of individuality.

Authenticity plays a large part in connections between runners, as these connections are only formed when runners feel a closeness to others they judge to be true runners. How a true runner is defined varies by level of competition, and by individual, though most runners would agree on several basic particulars to the sport. As with many social groups that require a certain degree of authenticity for membership, the language used within the running community is specific. This language is largely derived from the particulars of race environments. The code becomes ordinary to competitive runners, but can make it difficult for non-runners to understand the same conversations.

Additionally, there are many experiences that runners share beyond just their runs that are crucial to this identity. References to “the running community” foreground the social aspects of running. A runner might refer to “the running community” when she is reflecting on her own experiences, such as after a big race in which she is surrounded by others who first identify as runners. One experience that runners often cite as specific to their sport is runner’s high. After a particularly hard effort or race, runners often feel a sort of euphoria—so named runner’s high—that comes from the ability to endure the pain of the intense effort. What distinguishes a runner’s agon from that of other sports is the specific nature of the contest. Most sports involve great variety in

---

37 I imagine feelings similar to runner’s high likely occur across sports, though the term is named specifically for runners. I don’t have personal experience with other sports in the same capacity as I do with running to speak to those other sports.
activity throughout the duration of competition. For instance, a softball player spends time focused on batting, sprinting, fielding, pitching, etc. She also spends transition time between innings during which she gets a bit of a break from the motion. Even a soccer player, in a sport that involves a significant amount of running, is not singularly the constant focus of the performance, as the ball may be at the other end of the field. In running, an athlete is performing constantly and intensely for the duration of the competition. There are no breaks or moments of inactivity. A race is all-in from start to finish. In this sense, the pain and exhaustion experienced by a runner in competition are different from what other athletes experience, and the phenomenon of runners’ high is a phenomenon reflects the singularity of her feats of exertion and endurance. The biological basis for this phenomenon has been studied by sports physiologists for decades. The question, “What is runners’ high?” often elicits references to endorphins or other bodily chemicals that the brain releases. But runners’ high has social as well as biological sources. Runners’ high is an experience, an intensity, a kind of affective force that inhabits the body. While this affect can be experienced by an individual, it is felt in greater capacities by teammates. From my own experiences, I would describe it as collective feelings of potentiality and limitlessness that follow successful, yet incredibly trying efforts of physicality and will.

This brings us back to the disciplinary aspects, and the restrictive nature of the sport. In differentiating runners from non-runners and non-athletes more generally, the discipline of training also strongly unites them with one another,
most affectively in the activity of a race, but also in its aftermath, in the context of runner’s high.

Runner’s high is an unbounded force that unconsciously overcomes the body. Having experienced runner’s high is a badge of authenticity for a runner. It is also one of the great rewards of running that sets it apart from other sports. Chris McDougall describes one runner who is exhibiting runner’s high: “Her naked delight is unmistakable; it forces a smile to her lips that’s so honest and unguarded, you feel she’s lost in the grip of artistic inspiration” (McDougall 2009: 148). In this description, McDougall’s gets at the purity of runner’s high. Though the woman in the story is experiencing this alone, it is still a social moment. The author witnessed this moment, and knew her feelings so completely, because he too has experienced them before. It is this shared experience that allows him to write about her expression and that allows me, a fellow runner, to understand the experience that she is feeling.

Many runners are drawn to the sport for its feelings of limitlessness, as described in this instance in Born to Run. One runner with whom I talked, Rachel describes how freeing running can be:

I used to run with my dad when I was little. We always just ran to run, not for a time. The one superpower that I always wanted as a kid was to be able to fly and running felt like flying to me. Being in those moments was the closest thing I ever got to that. It was all about that experience.

This experience that Rachel describes is what draws a lot of runners to the sport, and experiencing these collective affects and their potentiality keeps the athletes coming back for more.
Races can produce bodily, interstitial affective moments that evoke feelings of what anthropologists call “communitas”, a heightened sense of unity or intimate cohesion. In a race, everyone is simultaneously engaging in the same activity, much like novices in the “liminal period” of an initiation ritual, from which Victor Turner developed the model of “communitas”. Turner adapted the concept of liminality from Arnold Van Gennep’s tripartite model of rites of passage, as consisting of three phases: separation, transition, and aggregation (V. Turner 1970: 94). Turner describes the transitional or liminal period as located “betwixt and between” the structure of social positions (1967: 93). In later works, Turner argued that communitas is born from the unstructured togetherness of the transition, existing as a kind of state. “Communitas is of the now” (1970: 113), Turner writes, much in the same way that a race performance is of the now.

The feelings of togetherness that stem from such affective moments lead to runners’ love for the sport. The unstructured togetherness, experienced by a plurality, gives meaning to what they are doing. Haruki Murakami describes this feeling well in What I Talk about When I Talk about Running: A Memoir:

This world with their commonsensical viewpoint, thinks their lifestyle is peculiar. And it would be hard to argue with anyone who labeled them eccentrics and oddballs. But there's something we share, not something as exaggerated as solidarity, perhaps, but at least a sort of warm emotion, like a vague, faintly colored mist over a late-spring peak (Murakami 2008: 75).

Only runners can experience this post-race euphoria and thus understand why they run in a way inaccessible to outsiders. As in Turner's model of communitas,
being part of the runner’s community becomes like membership in a secret society, in which only those initiated can understand it. It is a unique, collective experience born of openings in liminal spaces. Foundational to the creation of communitas in running are both the relatively non-hierarchical organization of the sport as well as the simultaneity of racing. These characteristics allow for “[breaking] through the interstices of structure, in liminality” (V. Turner 1970: 128), which allow the athlete to be neither here nor there in a race and its aftermath, but fully in the fleeting moment shared with other runners, caught up in feelings of egalitarian belonging. In Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy (2012), Edith Turner describes the fleetingness of the affect that makes it so special. She describes communitas as “the sense felt by a plurality of people without boundaries” (2012: 1), which aligns with the non-hierarchical nature of racing. This experience sets runners apart from others, most strongly non-athletes, while uniting them to one another in a strongly interstitial affective community.
CHAPTER THREE: RUNNING BEYOND UTILITY

“We run, not because we think it is doing us good, but because we enjoy it and cannot help ourselves... The more restricted our society and work become, the more necessary it will be to find some outlet for this craving for freedom. No one can say, ‘You must not run faster than this, or jump higher than that.’ The human spirit is indomitable.”

–Sir Roger Bannister, first sub-4 minute miler

In this chapter, I examine running as an activity that is both controlling and liberating. While running can be a meditative, freeing exercise, distance running as a competitive sport is dependent on discipline. The competitive distance runner must be disciplined in every area of her daily life, including her consumption of food and drink, her sleep, and her training. The more competitive an athlete becomes within the sport, the more restrictive her lifestyle becomes, as she pays attention to each aspect of her life to ensure that all are working towards her goals rather than hindering. Dedication to an ascetic regime can determine her authenticity as a runner, with the truest athlete being the most disciplined. While society often preaches moderation as the basis of a “healthy” lifestyle, when it comes to their training, runners often pride themselves on a lack of moderation, running dozens of miles per week and devoting many hours each day to training. For the runner, strict adherence to a
demanding regime is a form of self-care. The unique extensive temporality of distance running allows it to be experienced as a spiritual or meditative practice, while some runners experience the sport as consumption of the body, through which sovereign experiences arise in the form of blissful moments.

*Discipline as authenticity*

“My sport is your sport’s punishment!” read the back of Hadley’s t-shirt as she jogged back to her team to begin warm ups. Cross country runners often pride themselves on such statements. Runners revel in their reputation for enduring pain and punishment. It is a sport, after all, in which an athlete is upset with herself if she doesn’t put herself through as much pain as possible during a race. Competitive distance runners are often characterized as irrational, said to be masochists or just insane. For many runners, the discipline required by the sport serves as a source of satisfaction. There is a certain moral high ground associated with choosing the hard routine time after time. This is the path of a distance runner. Collegiate distance runners must choose early morning Sunday long runs when the rest of the campus is still asleep. They must commit time to the same activity every day of the week. They must give up entire Saturdays to long meets, just to compete for a few minutes. Making these choices day after day is a hard task, which makes the physical and mental commitment to the sport that much more meaningful.

While there are millions of people across the country who participate in distance runs every year, whether 5k road races, marathons, trail runs, or just
runs through neighborhood streets, not all of these people would necessarily classify themselves as runners, and certainly not all would be considered runners by other runners. Many people who run are not runners, as it takes more than just the physical act to perform the identity persuasively. Claiming the identity of “runner” is dependent on particular experiences specific to those who choose to live the lifestyle of a runner. As Lauren describes it, the runner’s lifestyle is notably different from that of her college peers. She trains year-round, with only a few days per year in which she doesn’t work out. She often gives up nights out with friends in order to get more sleep. She is obliged to think more about her diet and general consumption than her classmates do. All of these choices are part of a disciplinary regime that contributes to her identity as a runner. While the most disciplined runner is not necessarily regarded as the most authentic runner, this is often the case. It follows that as a runner becomes more competitive, and is therefore viewed as a runner by a larger audience, she also becomes more regimented in her training and other aspects of her life. Lauren also distinguished her experience as a runner from that of people who run.

There are a lot of people who run for exercise, which is great for them that they’re working on their physical health and all, but so frustrating when they try to equate what they do to what I do. They aren’t working out seven days per week, fifty weeks of the year. You never see them getting in that 13-miler when it’s cold or wet out. They don’t sacrifice fun nights or hours of studying for the sake of the sport. And all that is totally

38 Here, I am referring to what Pierre Bourdieu (1993) would call the “restricted audience” of fellow runners. The world of runners is similar to a restricted art world, in Bourdieu’s model; in both, legitimacy can only be conferred by other practitioners, rather than by the general audience of non-runners or non-producers.
fine of course. I’m not asking them to. I’m just asking them to see the distinction between what they do and what I do. They exercise. I train.

The difference between exercising and training that Lauren is so keen to point out is important to a lot of competitive runners, for whom the term “training” encompasses all of the daily lifestyle choices they make that legitimize their claim to be ‘real’ runners. Authenticity as a runner is based in adherence to a special runners’ code, a set of ideas and values that a majority of runners share regarding the sport.

Runners’ code

Mileage: Though some elite runners maintain low mileage training plans, high mileage, as a general rule, is a marker of authenticity as a runner. While 25 miles per week may be a substantial amount to the non-runner, most runners would consider this incredibly low mileage. The women whom I interviewed ran between 40 and 65 miles per week, with the exception of Sally, the one professional runner with whom I spoke. She trains for marathons and runs 135 miles per week.

Running Log: Throughout high school, I picked a week each summer to attend running camp. This is where I first heard about a running log, and where I decided to begin my own, per my counselors’ suggestions. At the running camp where I now work, we likewise encourage young runners to begin a running log in which they can keep track of their mileage, along with any other notes on the day (weather, running companions, place of run, time of run, shoes worn, etc.)
Running logs are another indicator of a serious runner, as it takes an extra level of dedication to the sport to keep track of all of one’s training.

**Speed**: While speed is a relative concept, it is important to the classification of runners. Speed is not an inherent quality to the identity of runner; it doesn’t necessarily imply devotion to the sport. However, if someone is fast, she is almost certainly considered to be a ‘real’ runner.

**Purity**: Although elite runners do sometimes run on treadmills for safety reasons or for the sake of a specific workout, most would agree that the experience of running outdoors is what the sport is all about. There is purity in running outside that is appreciated amongst runners. It is in these runs that the sport most often becomes a meditative or spiritual experience for many runners.

**Language**: Runners use many terms and acronyms that are specific to the sport. A few commonly known ones are PR (personal record) and DNF (did not finish). These idioms are specific to runners, such that when I am talking to non-runners, I change the way that I talk. To any runner, I would say, “I PRed”, but to a non-runner, I would say, “I ran my best time ever.” While there isn’t much of a difference, I am always acutely aware of when I am shifting my code for the sake of those around me. These are just a few examples, but there are many more terms and expressions, some known to all runners, and some used specifically within teams. Instead of cross train, my teammates and I say “x-t”. Instead of out

---

39 Many runners live and train in cities. This does not imply that they are not genuine runners, but suggests they still have a great appreciation for the experience of running on trails and in the woods, more closely connected to nature.
and back, a run in which we run from point A to point B back to point A again, we say “o-b”.

**Racing Weight:** As runners become more competitive, they often pay more attention to the nutrition side of training. Their diets become stricter, particularly right before races. Many will decide upon a racing weight for themselves, which they hope to achieve by the time of their race, dropping a few pounds in the time leading up to a race so they will be faster on the day. This means being careful to eat enough protein for muscle repair, but staying away from desserts or other foods deemed “unhealthy”. There are online calculators to assist athletes in determining what their racing weight should be. As previously noted, leanness has become a critical part of authenticity as a runner – the best of the best all boast incredibly low body fat percentages.

**Attire:** What runners wear to train in can be a misleading indicator of authenticity, as non-runners often buy top-notch running gear, while runners sometimes train in cotton t-shirts. In general, there are a few key articles most runners use. Runners often wear an athletic watch all the time, so they always have it on them when they need to time their runs or workouts. For men, short running shorts are also a good indicator of a serious runner, as most of the sporting world is dominated by longer shorts for men.

**Devotion:** One of the most defining parts of the identity of runner is simply dedicating oneself to the sport in a prolonged and constant fashion. Runners’ training is often intense and extreme, yet this is what makes them good runners. Their devotion to the high mileage and difficult workouts allows them to
increase their physical fitness levels, as well as helping with the psychological aspects of performance. Runners gain confidence in knowing all of the work they have put in before stepping on the starting line. Being able to recognize and appreciate the work it takes can carry a runner through tough workouts and races. Practicing mental focus in the day-to-day training lets a runner bring that same focus to her races and allows her to trust in her training.

**Self-care through devotion**

Exercise is often done in the name of health. Yet, this isn’t the case for competitive distance runners. We, as distance runners, are not a population struggling with obesity, hence we are most often seen as highly motivated and healthy individuals. Yet there are times when I am at the peak of my training and could run personal bests, but also feel as though my body is crumbling during day-to-day activities. I have no problem running ten seconds fast per mile on my tempo, but tell me to walk up the stairs and it’ll take a few groans to get there. I’ll be tired enough to sit down in the shower, but if you tell me to run a six minute mile, I could do it just breathing through my nose. As runners, we push our bodies to their limits in attempts to get faster, and in doing so, all semblance of moderation goes out the window. Runners stretch their bodies by running more mileage in a week than they drive. They cut off desserts entirely, taking their diets to extremes. They spend hours and hours each week making sure the training beyond just the mileage gets done – the lifting, the core, the regimented sleep schedule, the stretching, the rolling, and the icing. The lifestyle of a
competitive distance runner is highly regulated. For runners, though, this extreme and highly concentrated training can serve as a relief from other stresses of everyday life. Running allows an athlete the opportunity to focus on her mental, as well as physical health. While it has productive purpose, many people often feel it can be a blissful experience. Seemingly excessive amounts of training, while physically stressful on the body, can help a runner feel as though she is transcending mundane demands. Vanessa Runs articulates these feelings: “Instead of trying to minimize our training time for the sake of balance, maybe we need to acknowledge that extreme endurance is the balance to a modern life overflowing with sedentary shortcuts” (Runs 2015: 130).

This concept of self-care encompasses the physical as well as the spiritual. Meditation happens naturally for many individuals through distance running, as the temporal extension of the sport lends itself to particularly contemplative moments. James Fixx, runner and author of The Complete Book of Running, writes, “Unless we make a particular effort to set aside periods of time, our lives seldom allow quiet intervals for thought. ... Running changes that” (1978: 26). Running allows people to listen to their own thoughts, and practice mindfulness. People often return from runs feeling relaxed, despite having just put their bodies through considerable physical stress. Lauren echoed these feelings. “Every day, the best part of my day is my run. A day doesn’t feel complete without it. Running is my thinking time.”

On July 22, 2013, I ran 7.9 miles. My running log entry for the day reads, “i’ve decided i’m a better person when i’m a runner”. When I’m not at a great
fitness level, if I head out for a run, I spend most of the run thinking about how hard it is. If I am at a good fitness, however, I could almost forget that I’m running. In these times, I am able to think about whatever else is going on in my life. Running carves out a section of my day in which I can take the time to think about my life and can work on becoming a better version of myself.

*Running as spiritual*

The opportunity running provides for contemplation allows the activity to take on a spiritual meaning. It allows people a chunk of time out of their days in which they are left with only their training partners, or with themselves, if running alone. This serves as a way for people to slow down everything else that is going on in their lives, and focus on their inner beings. In other words, it allows them to practice mindfulness. The podcast series On Being released an episode in August of 2016, right around the time of the summer Olympics, titled “Running as Spiritual Practice”. Several runners gave their perspectives on running as a spiritual or quasi-religious experience. One woman, Christina Torres, spoke to the idea of running as a practice of care of self.

Sometimes, as runners, we’re not all feeling great about ourselves. And I woke up one morning — you know, you just have those mornings, and you look in the mirror, you’re like, “I hate this.” ... you wake up, and it’s almost like my body isn’t mine, which makes me sad because all of my body is mine. Like, if anything, it’s the only thing that is truly mine. So for me, though, once I started running it was really hard to be angry at my body in the same way. I would get out on the road and, all of a sudden, step by step, it was like running myself back to myself in a lot of ways. So it’s nice to know that there’s always going to be this place I can go where it’s just me and the road. And there’s something really beautiful about that.
For Torres, running is a means to love herself, as she can take pride in her capabilities. Not only is she capable of great physical feats, but she also has the mental strength to motivate herself towards physical tasks that she once thought to be impossible, and for her this is a spiritual practice.

Professional runner, Shalane Flanagan, daughter to two elite distance runners, once said in an interview “I thought everyone’s parents ran. I thought everyone got and went to the Church of the Sunday Long Run. That’s what my dad would call it” (Hetzel 2014). For many runners, including the Flanagan family, Sunday morning long runs are equated with going to church. I always say that if a problem in your life can’t be solved by a ten-mile run, it’s not going to be solved. By saying this, and in equating long runs with a religious or spiritual experience, runners allude to the fact that the sport allows them to think deeply about their lives and teaches them to be better people.

Similarly for professional ultramarathoner Scott Jurek, running takes on greater meaning. It is a spiritual and liberating practice that has become the focus of his life. In his autobiography, Eat and Run: My Unlikely Journey to Ultramarathon Greatness, he tells how he came to the worlds of elite running and veganism. He writes:

“I’m convinced that a lot of people run ultramarathons for the same reason they take mood-altering drugs. I don’t mean to minimize the gifts of friendship, achievement, and closeness to nature that I’ve received in my running career. But the longer and farther I ran, the more I realized that what I was often chasing was a state of mind – a place where worries that seemed monumental melted away, where the beauty and timelessness of the universe, of the present moment, came into sharp focus” (Jurek 2012: 181).
Jurek sees running as a practice of freedom that allows him to enter a different state of mind.

Another runner from the podcast, Mallary Tenore, talked about how her mother was the one who first introduced her to running. Her mother died at a young age, causing Tenore to feel as though her life was spiraling out of control. She turned to food as a means for control, developing unhealthy eating practices. She has since learned to love herself again though running, and now uses it as a means to freedom instead.

I used to think a lot that my mom really wanted me to be perfect. And I think a lot of people who have struggled with eating issues tend to be Type A, tend to be perfectionists. And in some ways, while I was running, it was sort of liberating and freeing because I was trying to let go of that perfectionism and that tendency that I have to say, “Oh, you have to get the best time, and you have to run the best,” and was really holding onto this gift of running that my mother gave me.

The act of running is a liberating practice for Tenore that gives her an outlet of physical release and a distraction from other aspects of her life. For many people, the introspective aspects of distance running make it into a spiritual experience.

**Running as consumption of the body**

While distance running is potentially a spiritual practice, it is still physically stressful on the body. A runner’s bodily energy is expended and consumed through running as the athlete runs mile after mile. Through this consumption of the body, distance runners often have experiences of limitlessness. In these moments, there is no work involved in running, and it isn’t
done to any productive end; in these moments people are simply running to run. The present moment is all that the runner is concerned with, as though nothing exists beyond this experience. Such descriptions of running are reminiscent of Georges Bataille’s concept of sovereignty: “Life beyond utility is the domain of sovereignty,” (1997: 302).

In *The Accursed Share III* (1991 [1949]), Bataille defines sovereignty as that which is not servile or productive. He argues that sovereignty is consumption or expenditure, in opposition to labor. Utility does not and cannot justify that which is sovereign. “Let us say that the sovereign (or the sovereign life) begins when, with the necessities ensured, the possibility of life opens up without limit” (1991 [1949]: 198). This concept of limitlessness is essential for sovereignty to be achieved. Additionally, the sovereign is about being in the present. Bataille describes the sovereign as an intermediary between laborers (1991 [1949]: 240). It is limitless expenditure and a focus on the present moment that define sovereignty. Certain experiences of distance running approximate this model.

True endurance runners are a rare breed, training for months or even years to compete in an activity where if they don’t put their bodies through enough pain, they’re upset with themselves afterwards. When a runner is at a low fitness level, she will force herself to endure pain in order to get back to a higher fitness level. She will have countless runs where pain is the predominant affect over pleasure. There will be no bliss at all for time on end, until eventually the runner experiences euphoria, or what is described as “runner’s high”. While
such experiences, as we have seen, can be engendered by communality, they may also emerge from solitary experiences. More precisely, euphoria comes out of specific instances in which a runner isn’t laboring through the activity, but simply consuming (her own body) towards no productive end. That runners have a surplus of energy with which they willingly decide to put themselves through pain makes running an experience of expenditure. While these runners could list ways that running is goal-oriented or results-oriented, all could also describe moments where running is not about the results, but about the experience. Many of the women with whom I spoke shared thoughts about how running can be liberating and the feelings of play that they associate with this.

The key aspect for Bataille regarding sovereignty is that it is to no productive end. The sovereign moment is done for the sake of doing it, for the sake of expenditure itself. It isn’t motivated by a greater goal or result; it aims at nothing beyond itself. Bataille uses potlatch as an example of the sovereign (Bataille 1991 [1949]), drawing on Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift* (2000 [1925]). Potlatch, as Bataille describes it, is a large expenditure in the form of competitive gift-giving practiced by indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest coast of North America. Their year is divided into two time periods: one during which they hunt, produce, accumulate, etc., which Mauss defined as profane, and one during which they feast and celebrate, which he equated with the sacred. Bataille uses the destruction of wealth in potlatch as an example of the sovereign – through consumption, a focus on the present, and reckless expenditure, sovereignty is achieved.
“What distinguishes sovereignty is the consumption of wealth, as against labor and servitude, which produce wealth without consuming it. The sovereign individual consumes and doesn’t labor, whereas the antipodes of sovereignty the slave and the man without means labor and reduce their consumption to the necessities, to the products without which they could neither subsist nor labor,” (1991: 198).

This model of consumption as a means to no greater end than itself can be applied to running. The runner consumes her bodily energy through running, expending herself to no end beyond the activity itself. One runner, Leslie described it as follows, “I most enjoy running when I’m just running to run and doing it for me. I love when I don’t have to worry about my pace or mileage, but can just move.” This gets at the heart of what Bataille describes sovereignty to be: an activity experienced without regards to a future and without consideration of the past. Another runner describes the unproductive nature of running by relating it to play in his blog.

“Running brings us joy. Watch small children when they are excited, at play, and mostly they can’t stop running. Back and forth, up and down, in little, pointless circles. I remember, even as an older child, I’d often break into a run when walking along the street, for no reason … But while as children, and even adolescents, we can respond to this natural urge to run and break into a trot whenever the feeling takes us, as adults it’s not the done thing to just start running at any moment, without any reason. So we formalise [sic] it. We become runners,” (Finn 2013).

We try to rationalize our every action, yet sometimes we act in sovereign, limitless moments, and to try to assign productivity to these moments is futile. The unbounded urge to run described above is an exemplary manifestation of sovereignty and its unproductive forms.

Perhaps the way in which running most epitomizes the sovereign
experience is the way in which it becomes an out of body experience. Leslie recalled her favorite thing about running as feelings that she embraced during a good race.

“I love that running is such a primal thing. It feels like something I was designed for. Sometimes when I’m having a good race, I have these primal feelings, like my stride is eating up the ground in front of me and the people in front of me. There is this natural thrill that comes with it that’s really empowering. It’s almost as if I’m watching myself run from some other place. I’m leaving my earthly body behind. For me, running is all about these moments. They make all the miles worth it”.

Leslie described running as, “the rawest form of moving forward. It feels transcendent, like embracing some greater power”. The body becomes limitless in these instances, as it forgets its biological limits and simply moves. This is the essence of sovereignty: limitless, unbounded, bliss.

In unpacking Bataille’s notion of sovereignty, the elements of sovereignty align with those of experiences that can be felt during distance running. The feelings of liberating play and limitless power of the body that running can bring are some of the true motivations behind why people run. These blissful feelings are empowering and liberating for a runner.

In essence, through adherence to disciplinary regimes, individuals begin to claim authenticity as runners. Such strict training is a classic form of care of self, the practices an individual exercises on herself, her body, her conduct, her thoughts, to modify herself (Foucault 1988). In distance running, physical exertion can have spiritual ramifications. The temporal nature of the sport of distance running creates an opportunity for meditative or spiritual experiences for many runners. Through the extreme demands distance running imposes, it
can approach a consumption of the body and bodily energies, reminiscent of Bataille's model of sovereignty. At such moment, running becomes an experience of pure bliss.
CONCLUSION

"At the end of the day all we ever need is something that helped pass the time and something that keeps time from passing."

–Sanober Khan

“Want to take Flappy for a walk?” I ask Megan, straining to clip a leash onto the crazy black lab who is our responsibility for the summer. We slip on shoes and sunglasses, and head out the door, down Arapahoe, Flappy in the lead, the two of us in tow.

Although Megan is a sprinter, she often comes along on runs with our crew. She’ll run a couple of miles, then do core and stretching until we get back. While she was never a part of the cross country team at her university, she has many friends who are longer distance runners there as well.

Flappy pulls us along, panting as he goes. “I’m getting hungry for dinner. Maybe we could go to the farmer’s market tonight,” I suggest.

“Yes, that sounds so good! Ugh, I’m so glad I can eat like a normal person around you. The distance girls on my team are all sticks, and they eat like it. But it’s not really their fault. I mean, the coach is crazy.” Megan begins to talk about the seemingly disordered eating practices of many of her former teammates, pointing to performance as the main motivation behind their fixation on maintaining thin bodies. Then she begins to talk about her coach. “He has what
he calls a ‘chub club’,” she says, making air quotes with her fingers, “in which he places girls who he deems to be over racing weight. Then he tells them that straight to their faces”. She shrugs, “Yeah, he was horrible. But if the girls ran fast, they didn’t care.”

This ethnography deals extensively with performances of identity. The identity here is the same: runner. How people choose to perform this identity, though, can vary. For Megan’s teammates, a large part of that performance lies in their weight and their eating practices. Megan recalled such interactions with her coach with a somewhat blasé attitude. It wasn’t as though she didn’t know how detrimental such comments could be for women, but in her experience, body-shaming was common practice in competitive distance running. But it isn’t for all women. Many experience distance running as physically empowering. The typical runner’s build – lean, toned, and strong – is a way of placing value on alternatives to highly gendered body ideals. The runner’s body is a tangible representation of historically feminine and masculine ideals coming together, embodying strength and thinness. Women claim femininity and athleticism, toeing the line between the two rather than choosing just one.

The women whose experiences comprise this ethnography spoke additionally on the rewards of distance running beyond the aesthetics of the body. While their identities as runners can separate them from other college students, this allows for the formation of community through running in a unique way. In the process of becoming socially recognized as distance runners,
women form bonds of intensive togetherness, or communitas. Further, through the extreme nature of runners’ training, the mental discipline such practices entail, and the physical stress they put their bodies through, these women use running as a practice of self-care. For many, the experience demands a concentration that is meditative or spiritual in nature, as it serves as a break from the more fragmented rhythms of mundane life.

To grasp the multi-dimensional nature of the sport of distance running, I have drawn on a variety of theoretical models, each of which elucidates a particular aspect of the sport. While there are certain tensions for runners between their identities as runners and their identities as college students, running has great social rewards as well. Turner’s model of communitas highlights these elements of the sport. Bataille’s model of sovereignty shows how through running, women perform a kind of consumption of the body, which allows them to gain a blissful experience from their exertions. Examining bodies in running allows us to see the sport as prescriptive and disciplinary for the body as well as empowering, a distinctive performance of gender, in Judith Butler’s terms. It is a sport through which women craft a less conventionally gendered body ideal, by subverting polarities that have traditionally differentiated femininity from masculinity. Distance running is a sport of discipline, of individual, of consumption, of euphoria, of community, of performative agency. Lucky for me, there are always more miles to run.

∆  ∆  ∆
A couple of weeks later, we return to the same trail up the canyon for our long run, the final Sunday in a summer full of Sundays. Windows down, we enjoy the drive, savoring every wind of the canyon. We arrive, shake out our legs, and head out on the dirt drive. Today, we wear runderwear. Side by side by side, three of us traverse ten miles in bits of cloth and revel in the run. We embrace our bodies as running bodies and expose them to anyone who cares to pass us, our sense of ourselves as agents eclipsing concerns of objectification. At the end of the run, we ask a friend to take a photograph of us, wanting to eternalize the blissful experience of this final Sunday, runderwear-clad bodies and all.
Bibliography


Accessed [December 2016].


Myers, Lily. 2013. “Shrinking Women.”


Sobal, Jeffery, and Donna Maurer, eds. 2012. Weighty Issues: Fatness and Thinness


