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Embodied thought of the month (April)

James Brighton

Over the last couple of months, Ian has reflected on the corporeality of '*pleasurable suffering*' in fell running and boxing and the multiple social, cultural, and historical influences affecting how individuals may experience these sensations through their bodies. Having had a painful relationship with my own sporting body for most of my life I have developed empathy for others whose own bodies have been affected by pain and impairment and are required to re-imagine their life stories. Subsequently, I engaged in a PhD study through which I hoped to gain some understanding of the embodied experiences of disabled athletes. This month therefore, as part of a commitment I made to my participants to promote their stories, I wish to use my now privileged position as a 'communicative body' (Frank, 1995) to begin to offer some thoughts on how wheelchair basketball and rugby players make sense of the pains and pleasures experienced in disability sport and hint at the 'able' bodied discourses that police how these carnal sensations are felt.

Under medical understandings that now pervade society, the disabled body has been understood oppressively as among other things weak, defenceless, dependent and passive. Especially in the case of individuals that have experienced catastrophic injury such as those who acquire spinal cord injury (SCI), a 'wrap them up in cotton wool' attitude has become common where individuals should be cared for and protected from future harm. Although the origins of disability sport lie in physical rehabilitation, contemporary disability sport such as wheelchair rugby and to a lesser extent basketball has been described as risky, dangerous, barbaric and brutal and a 'seductive cure' for the crises of masculinity that some men may fear impairment brings (Hutchinson & Kleiber, 1999: 135). As a result, tensions exist in the way disabled athletes *should* engage in sport which in turns limits the embodied pains and pleasures that may be experienced through its participation.

The enjoyment and pleasure that may be gained from sport has often been ignored in favour of achieving wellbeing and reaching performance outcomes (Wellard, 2012). This lack of

consideration may be even more evident in disability sport where under *medical understandings*¹, focus has been on returning individuals to a sense of normalcy and as economically functioning members of society with little recognition of the fun and enjoyment that sport brings. During my time in the ethnographic field however, a central finding was that disability sport provided individuals opportunities to experience the simple *pleasures* of physical movement. Somatic sensations breathed through the body before, during and after competition were cherished, allowing individuals to “feel good”, experience “the same adrenaline rush” and “relax more contently” afterwards. These are examples of what Wellard (2012: 22) terms “body-reflexive pleasures”, the explorations of which offer potential to re-think personal accomplishment and understand the physical body in alternative ways. For many participants in my study, disability sport allowed individuals to experience the joys of moving the body again unshackled from medically informed rehabilitative discourses and obsession with empowerment in the face of disability which was deemed negative.

For many participants who acquired SCI, sport also offered the opportunity to be aggressive. This held symbolic importance for participants as it was indicated that demonstrating aggression helped to dispel stereotypes of “disabled people as weak” and restore senses of athletic and masculine identity. However, what was perhaps more interesting was that sport provided an arena through which participant’s needs to *feel* aggression, pain and pleasure *with* other bodies in the competitive yet controlled settings could be explored. This was particularly important considering so many of life’s embodied experiences had been either been restricted by impairment or taken away from disabled athletes by rules of a normative society.

For example, many wheelchair rugby players wanted **both** to be aggressive *and* feel pain from being the object of aggression. Indeed, many individuals proclaimed their love for the pain felt in their muscles after an intensive training session and from the bumps and bruises

¹ I am critical of ‘rehabilitation’ under these understandings as they position the impaired body as inherently negative and tragic

sustained in the hurly burly of competition. These corporeal experiences resulting from manoeuvring wheelchairs around court and smashing into each other were central in allowing participants to “sense life” again - similar to the boxers in DeGaris’s (2000) study who enjoyed feelings of “somatic intimacy” when sparring with others. In a way then, pain was narrated amongst wheelchair athletes as desirable and important in providing a positive sense of corporeality. Disabled athletes therefore did not solely engage in sport for ‘rehabilitation’, for its symbolic significance in re-establishing athletic or masculine identities, or for cathartic release from restrictive and regulatory discourses alone. Rather, a combination of these factors and desire to experience life’s embodied pleasures and pains again all contributed to athlete’s love for sport.

The embodied experiences of disabled athletes therefore requires further attention. As part of this analysis questions should be asked as to why non-disabled society finds aggressive disability sport in which there is potential for pain and injury so unsettling when it is normalised in ‘able’ bodied sport. As one participant asked me “Able bodied rugby is dangerous too isn’t it?” Thoughts that destabilise or ‘crip’ the way we think about the disabled sporting body and non-disabled sport in these ways will form the basis of future publications but here I finish by inviting you to reflect upon some of the bodily pleasures and the ‘*pleasures in pain*’ that you may experience in sport. I know that I have been captivated by these embodied sensations my whole sporting career from the edgy nervousness created by adrenaline flooding my body before sport, to defying the calls from aching lungs and screaming muscles during competition, and the sore calmness (helped by a hot shower and a cold beer!) that I feel afterwards. These embodied experiences have a lot to do with why in spite of how much sport has hurt me and my profession is to offer critique of it, I still love, and always will love, the way sport can make my body feel.

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