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"You Always Wanna Be Sore, Because Then You Are Seeing Results": Exploring Positive Pain in Competitive Swimming

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‘You always wanna be sore, because then you are seeing results’: Novel insights into lived experiences of ‘positive pain’ in competitive swimming

Abstract

Pain has long been associated with sports participation, being analyzed variously as a physical phenomenon, as well as a socio-cultural construct in sport sociological literature. In this article, we employ a sociological-phenomenological approach to generate novel insights into the under-researched domain of ‘lived’ pain in competitive swimming. Analytic attention is paid to specific aspects of pain, including ‘discomfort’ and ‘good pain,’ and how these sensations can be positively experienced and understood by the swimmers, as well as forming an integral part of the everyday routines of competitive swimming. Here, training is seen as ‘work’ in the pursuit of athletic improvement. Discomfort and 'good pain' thus become perceived as by-products of training, providing swimmers with important embodied information on pace, energy levels, and other bodily indicators of performance.

Introduction

The ability to endure, ignore, or play through pain is commonplace in many sports (Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Young, 2004), where participants are subjected to, and in certain instances inflict, bodily pain that in other social milieux simply would not be tolerated (Bridel, 2010). Indeed, not only is pain tolerated, but certain forms of pain have come to be highly valorized in some sports and physical cultures where athletes are encouraged and often rewarded for their abilities to endure pain (Smith, 2016; Young, 2004). For example, the notion of 'endurance' in sports like competitive swimming highlights that participants have to endure significant levels of pain and discomfort in their efforts to achieve both personal goals and, for some, financial gain. In other sports not usually deemed 'endurance' sports, such as mixed martial arts (MMA), for example, 'amateur' enthusiasts oft-times subject themselves to lacerations, bone fractures and torn ligaments during training, all within the normative order of the MMA community (Smith, 2016).

Despite a growing body of research on pain and suffering in the sociology of sport, pain has typically been conceptualized within a bio-medical framework (Smith, 2019), which, according to Bendelow (2000), reduces pain to an elaborate broadcasting system of signals from nerves and neurotransmitters. Furthermore, this simplification of pain is exacerbated by its frequent definition as an unpleasant sensation held in contradistinction to pleasure (Strawson, 1994). This negative, bio-medical conceptualization of pain is problematic, however, as it both infers and emphasizes a pleasure/pain dichotomy, whilst failing to take into account wide variance in perceptions of pain and the many ways in which the concept of pain is deployed (Spencer, 2012). As Brady (2019) notes, there is no single feeling that all forms of pain have in common. Indeed, pain can be described as a sensory quality (sharp, burning), an affective quality, (merciless, punishing) or as a relative quality

(uncomfortable), all of which are felt subjectively (Roessler, 2006). The pain of a stubbed toe, a migraine, or the loss of a loved one are different experiences of pain. Additionally, as Bourke (2014) argues, pain can be considered as not purely physical, but also a dynamic experience that can be interpreted differently in differing socio-cultural and historical contexts (see Paterson, 2019).

Drawing upon the work of Merleau-Ponty, Bendelow and Williams (1995, p. 147) offer a more encompassing notion of pain that is not simply sensory or somatic. Instead, they describe pain as something 'both physical and emotional, biological and phenomenologically embodied [and] is mediated by culture and thus transcends the mind-body divide' (Bendelow & Williams, 1995, p. 147). Emphasis is therefore placed upon the socially and culturally constructed aspects of pain, which is viewed as a lived, embodied, physical and emotion experience. In the phenomenological approach, being *in* pain is thus one way of being-in-the-world (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). Pain terminology can be used to describe not only physical agony but emotional turmoil and spiritual suffering (Leder, 1984-5, 1990). These multiple forms of pain are often experienced simultaneously, shaping experience, social action, and configurations of practice (Spencer, 2012). For example, when injury strikes, athletes have not only to manage the physical pain of the injury, but also to contend with the emotional pain and relative cognitive strain that injury can engender (Allen-Collinson, 2005). As Petrie notes:

> …injury is one of the most emotionally and psychologically traumatic things that can happen to an athlete… because athletes are so dependent upon their physical skills and because their identities are so wrapped up in their sport, injury can be tremendously threatening to them (Petrie, 1993, pp. 18-19).

And yet, despite the predominance of negative connotations associated with pain, not all (sporting) pain is experienced as unwelcome, nor is it always associated with injury or illness. Bastian, Jetten, Hornsey, and Leknes (2014) and Leknes et al. (2013) suggest that, in certain contexts, for example, during intense exercise or while receiving a deep tissue massage, pain can actually be associated with positive feelings and consequences. These authors argue that pain should not be construed as the opposite of pleasure, but rather reflects a highly ambiguous and amorphous reference point that occasionally borders on pleasure. Research has delineated that notions of 'positive pain' (Howe, 2004) or 'good pain' (Hanold, 2010; Throsby, 2016) lie at the core of many sports and are often actively or voluntarily embraced by participants (Brady, 2019). Wacquant (2004), for example, portrays the sensory intoxication, pain and ache of the boxing gym, whilst Howe (2004) refers to 'positive pain' with respect to the structured hardships endured by athletes during training. Monaghan (2001) describes the way that bodybuilders 'learn to enjoy' non-injurious pain during training; pain he argues is constructive and contributes to the sustainability of bodybuilding as a physical culture.

Pain can also be conceptualized as a 'body pedagogic' (Shilling, 2017), as highlighted by Vaittinen (2014) in her detailed phenomenological examination of 'pain as a way of knowing' in MMA. Here, Vaittinen argues that there are different kinds of pain linked to different MMA practices, and outlines how skills in producing pain are developed during these practices. Practitioners would use pain as a signifier of the successful application of a technique, and thus pain was viewed as part of a positive learning experience. Vaittinen (2014) also notes how participants developed an appreciation of pain as something productive, even comforting, through their daily interactions with MMA. A shared knowing of pain was developed through experience, practice and social interaction. Spencer (2012),

too, notes how through intense MMA training, pain becomes normalized and often experienced at a much lower intensity, allowing fighters to 'push past' muscle soreness and manageable injuries.

More specific to aquatic pursuits, Throsby (2016) addresses the 'discomfort' and 'good pain' of performance, portraying how marathon swimmers come to understand pain as a positive part of hard training, in which they push the limits of their physical capacities, producing physiological and psychological training effects. The discomfort of tired or sore shoulders is often deemed evidence of an effective swim, with fatigued muscles equating to an embodied sign of training progression; a point also raised by the swimmers in the current study, as we discuss in later sections.

In sum, and as Roessler (2006, p. 43) notes, 'pain is accepted [in sport], as long as it does not have anything to do with injury' and is frequently regarded as a necessary, though reluctantly accepted by-product of athletic training. This point is also made by Wiese-Bjornstal, Smith, Shaffer, and Morrey (1998, p. 63) who note how sportspeople in general 'learn to define sacrifice, risk, pain, and injury as the price one must pay to be a true athlete'. Therefore, being able to tolerate, overcome and endure 'positive' or 'good pain' is often regarded not only as a necessary step towards athletic improvement, but also as a precursor to the joys of athletic success (Roessler, 2006). Four-time Tour de France winner, Chris Froome, emphasized this point in an interview with BBC Sport in June 2017:

> Slowly one muscle group will turn to cement. It's in overdrive. Other muscles try to compensate, and then they start shutting down. Muscle by muscle it gets worse as the pain sets in. You start feeling it in the back, in the shoulders…Your body is saying, this hurts, that hurts, slow down – and you just have to go

> faster. I've always loved that feeling of my body being on the limit. Feeling empty, having no more to give but still pushing your body (Fordyce, 2017).

These examples illustrate how those who engage in sport come to understand how painful sensations, such as the pain of suffering in hard training and/or competition, can be construed as positive. They might be taken as signs of athletic development, progression, and growth, and as Crossley (2004, pp. 53-54) argues, these 'sensations that would in most contexts be experienced as uncomfortable and painful, and as such would tend to terminate activity must be (within a range) welcomed'. Consequently, we adopt here a more holistic understanding of pain, which acknowledges the multitude of manifestations and meanings associated with pain as a phenomenon. We also recognize the broader socio-cultural and physical-cultural components of pain. By conceptualizing pain in this way, and adopting a sociological-phenomenological analytical approach, we examine in-depth 'grounded' experiences of positive or 'good' pain in the context of competitive swimming. We focus in particular upon the sensuous, embodied experiences that shape swimmers' lived experience, as well as their continued participation in the competitive swimming lifeworld. Before doing so, we outline first the underpinning sociological-phenomenological theoretical framework, and second, the research project.

Sociological Phenomenology

Initially developed by the German philosopher, Husserl, modern-day phenomenology focuses on the study of phenomena, or things as they appear to our consciousness. Intentionality is a key element in Husserl's (1970) phenomenology and emphasizes how consciousness is always directed towards something (or someone). Husserl sought to

identify ‘the things themselves’, devoid (as far as possible) of presuppositions and preconceptions. To do so, he proposed engaging with the phenomenological *epochē,* or bracketing, whereby researchers 'step back' from everyday understandings of the world (the ‘natural attitude’) to consider a phenomenon with fresh eyes and a deeply questioning attitude (Allen-Collinson, 2011). As sociologists, however, we fully acknowledge the impossibility of complete bracketing, for we are never able to step entirely outside of our socio-cultural framework (Allen-Collinson, 2011). Nevertheless, attempts to identify and subject to questioning our taken-for-granted assumptions about a phenomenon are considered good practice in many forms of research, not only those informed by a phenomenologically-attuned perspective.

Husserl’s work has subsequently been developed by other phenomenological thinkers, including Merleau-Ponty (2002), whose existential phenomenology has been shown to be of particular relevance in illuminating experiences of various sporting and physical cultures (McNarry et al., 2019; Allen-Collinson et al., 2018; Clegg & Butryn, 2012; Purser, 2018). For Merleau-Ponty (2002), the corporeal dimension of the body-subject plays a much greater role in our being-in-the-world than is emphasized in Husserl’s work, as the former focuses upon the lived body (*Leib*), portraying the intertwining of mind-body-world. Subsequently, the sociology-phenomenology nexus was applied by Schütz (1967), who emphasized the need to address the lifeworlds of social actors as embedded within social structure. By adopting a more ‘sociologized’ version of phenomenology, we are able to recognize and address the considerable impact of social-structural forces upon our lived experience (See Allen-Collinson, 2009).

Also germane to our analysis here is the phenomenologically-inspired work of Leder (1990), particularly his concepts of the ‘dis-appearing‘ and ‘dys-appearing’ body. Here, Leder

describes how the body can seem largely absent from our conscious mind during normal daily routines, occupying a position in the background; the body then 'dis-appears'. In this state of being, our consciousness is focused outwards to the world. In contrast, during times of illness, pain or injury, the body shifts from its backgrounded position to figure in the foreground of our attention; a state of bodily 'dys-appearance'. Our consciousness is no longer focused outward toward the world but is fixed on the body, and, for example, the site of pain. A phenomenological perspective therefore affords the opportunity to pay in-depth attention to the pain experiences of competitive swimming, drawing on the accounts of swimmers themselves, but also seeking to reveal core structures of experience. Having outlined our theoretical position, we now turn to delineate the ethnographic project from which our data derive.

Researching competitive swimming

To generate the rich, detailed descriptions of the phenomenon of pain as understood by members of the competitive swimming lifeworld, sociological phenomenology provided a strong theoretical and methodological framework, and also allowed us to identify the core structures of pain experience in this sporting culture. We thus drew on Giorgi's (1997) **empirical** phenomenological approach, involving: (1) the collection of concrete descriptions from the swimmers' 'insider' perspective; (2) the adoption of the phenomenological attitude via epochē/bracketing (See McNarry et al., 2019); (3) initial 'impressionistic' readings of the assembled descriptions, to gain a feel for the overall data set; (4) in-depth re-reading of these descriptions as part of a process of data immersion, to identify key themes and sub-themes and; (5) the production of general statements of the essential patterns or structure(s) of the experiences described. An ethnographic approach was

adopted, combining semi-structured interviews with overt participant observation at a British university swimming program. The program included swimmers aged between 18 and 22, spanning a range of experience and expertise in different swimming strokes, events, and level of competition ranging from British Championship level through to World Championships and Commonwealth Games.

The first author, Gareth, collected data over three five-week long immersions in the field, corresponding to significant points in the competitive swimming season: early season, mid-season (point of heaviest workloads), and end of season (tapering of workload into end of season competition). During this time, via discussions with the Director of Swimming and Head Swimming coach, he adopted the role of a volunteer assistant, providing support to the resident coaches and swimmers; a role that was relatively straightforward as he had himself been both a swimmer and swimming coach. This afforded him the opportunity to work from a position that Evers (2006) and Wheaton (2002) have referred to as a 'cultured insider'. On the one hand this allowed Gareth the opportunity to build rapport quickly and engage with the coaches and swimmers, thus gaining an in-depth insight into the lived experiences of pain. On the other hand, this position did create some tensions for him in maintaining a 'critical distance' from which to conduct research as his coaching skills were increasingly called upon to provide advice on planning, session design and session delivery. He therefore engaged in sustained reflexive work (McNarry et al., 2019) in an attempt to sustain bracketing, and to regain what Dwyer and Buckle (2009, p. 60) refer to as the "space between", allowing him to continue to question the events and practices observed.

In total, over 300 hours of observations were recorded - before, during, and post-swimming training sessions. Fieldnotes were recorded via the OneNote iPhone application and written up in detail after each session. Gareth was, via these means, able to witness the

swimmers' everyday practices, including their 'being-with' discomfort and pain. On occasions, too, he was actually the instigator of this pain, having provided the coaches with ideas for sessions or sets. Gareth thus became an active agent in the participants' pain, forming an intersubjective and intercorporeal relationship with the swimmers via a form of somatic empathic connection (Allen-Collinson et al., 2016) between their swimming selves and his swimming, swim coaching and research self. In doing so, and linked via these differing embodied understandings of swimming, and co-presence in the research site, he was better able to understand and appreciate the swimmers' experiences of pain.

Despite physical proximity, the nature of the competitive-swimming training environment made direct conversation with the athletes challenging, as they completed meter after meter of training with their faces immersed in water. It was therefore important to supplement the periods of observation with interviews, which drew influence form Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) semi-structured lifeworld interview. This seeks to understand the lived everyday world from the participants' own perspective. Interviews were conducted in three phases. Initially, 19 interviews (with 12 males / 7 females; average length 75 minutes) were conducted during the first period of immersion, with participants being asked to recount their swimming biography (when they started swimming, how they became involved, significant achievements), their current training regime (number of sessions in the pool and gym, favored type of sessions) and their embodied experiences of swimming (e.g. the touch of the water, the sensations of swimming, their experience of different training sets). Data were recorded on a Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim over a period of 12 weeks between immersions one and two. A follow-up interview was then held with each interviewee during immersion two, in order to seek clarification of data and themes in the initial interviews. Further data analysis was undertaken after immersion two, and a final

cluster of group-interviews (10 male / 6 female in groups of five or six as selected by the swimmers to match their training groups) was conducted during immersion three. This final step aligns with Tracy's (2010) notion of 'member reflections', where researchers engage with participants to share initial findings and dialogue with them as a way of generating deeper and richer data and analysis. It should be noted that this step was not concerned with checking if interpretations of the data were 'correct' but instead was seen as an opportunity to gather deeper and richer data (Tracy, 2010). Data analysis was then conducted according to Braun and Clarke's (2013, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis approach. As Braun and Clarke (2019) note, this approach reflects 'an adventure' through the data in which the researcher moves back and forth between the data and the analysis, refining and redeveloping the generated themes and concepts. Via this process, the key pain-related themes were identified, and are discussed in detail in following sections.

Before outlining our findings, it is important to acknowledge how difficult it can be to describe embodied experiences in the spoken and written word; experiences sometimes verging on the 'unrepresentable' (Merchant, 2011). Commensurate with phenomenologists' caveats (e.g. Allen-Collinson, 2011), therefore, we emphasize that our account is necessarily partial, incomplete and approximate, representing our best efforts at portraying swimmers' experiences, feelings, and sensations of pain in competitive swimming. To do so, we have used a combination of the swimmers' own words, Gareth's fieldnotes, and his own embodied knowledge of swimming and the competitive swimming lifeworld, with the aim of engendering an intersubjective sensory resonance with the reader, if not of swimming, then of similar sensory experiences from other sporting or physical-cultural experiences. The opening fieldnote below is intended to help set the scene and provide an example of the way pain is experienced in the competitive swimming lifeworld. Pseudonyms are used

through and identifying features have been removed from the data extracts that follow. We have structured the findings into three core elements of lived experience: 1) the pain of competitive swimming; 2) discomfort; 3) good pain, with the first two elements providing a contrastive perspective alongside which to situate the third.

The pain of competitive swimming

> Eddie and Stephen have the ANP [Anaerobic Power] set that Nick wrote for the girls on Monday evening. Now the girls found this tough enough on Monday PM, so I can only imagine what the boys, who are carrying considerably more muscle mass than the girls, will make of it.
>
> It doesn't take long for me to find the answer to this question. On the 1st of the 15m under water (UW) reps Eddie comes to the surface, and literally barks the air out of his lungs and gulps for fresh oxygen. This is repeated as he does the other UW parts of what can only be described as an ugly set. As Eddie finishes the final rep of nine 50s [50m repetitions], he is quickly out onto the side, sprawled on his back, face red and screwed up in discomfort, chest heaving up and down as air rushes in and out of his lungs in an attempt to normalize his breathing. As Hank tries to get a lactate reading from Eddie, he is trying not to move around too much. As Hank takes the blood, Eddie is then free to shake out his arms and legs in an attempt to remove the lactate. Scott goes over to ask him if he is "alright hun?", but Eddie is still sprawled on the floor, just rocking and rolling his head around, gasping for air, trying to re-establish some normality.

> Once he is able to compose himself, he gets up and walks down the other end of the pool and sits down, slumped on the seats, elbows resting on knees, head hanging low with a vacant look on his face. I ask him how that was but get absolutely no response. If anything, no response is probably enough of a response for me to know that it was fairly savage. After a few minutes Eddie is back with us and is up moving around. I ask him again how this was, and he just replies with "Fucking hard". Nick comes over then and Eddie comments on how he was "absolutely on my arse after the butterfly". Nick is like "good, that's what we wanted". "I felt terrible," Eddie adds, "I could hardly make the UWs". Nick just smiles and goes to ask Hank about the two lads' results (Fieldnote).

Sensuous information regarding discomfort and pain is generated by physical effort, and the preceding fieldnote demonstrates how, during training, swimmers' bodies are regularly pushed to their physical limits in the pursuit of training adaptations. Discomfort and pain, and the toleration of these sensations in their various forms, constituted an integral part of the everyday routine of competitive swimming, where training constitutes 'work' that conditions the body and mind as swimmers learn to endure. Pain and enduring are thus a fundamental state of being-in-the-world for those who 'do' competitive swimming, as with many other endurance sports (see also Allen-Collinson et al., 2018; Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2016). But this kind of pain and suffering in competitive swimming is not suffering for the sake of suffering, as Throsby (2016) similarly argues in relation to marathon swimming. For the majority of the athletes studied, suffering actually

took on a positive aspect, where the 'pain' or 'burn' of training became part of the journey and a welcomed marker of progression, as Natasha highlighted:

> ***Natasha***: So, I guess, that yeah, like we, you always wanna be like sore or be, because then you are seeing results aren't you. If you were always just feeling easy and everything was always easy then everyone would do it. But if you're feeling sore and you're seeing results, that that's the results that you are seeing, if you know what I mean.
>
> ***Gareth***: So, you quite enjoy that...
>
> ***Natasha***: Oh yeah…when you're in season the sorer the better…I think if you was to get obviously like a cut or something like that, that different kind of pain, but, like, a lactate acid type of pain is more like a burning sensation but it, like your whole body feels really heavy and when you're swimming your form goes, so your technique will end up 'going' because you literally can't pull your arms out of the water because they feel like they weigh a 100 kilos each, and like yeah, it's like a horrible feeling [laughs]. Because you're absolutely dead, but if you push yourself through that horrible feeling, you know that, like, that's one step closer to, like, a PB (Personal Best).

Pain and discomfort are perceived as inevitable elements of competitive swimming, although that does not mean that swimmers actively seek out pain *per se*. As with Throsby's (2016) marathon swimmers, competitive pool swimmers do not swim purely *for* the pain, in that they do not actively and deliberately seek out pain and suffering *per se*; that is not their ultimate aim or outcome. They do, however, accept pain as part of their embodied *doing*, and seemingly embrace the suffering that comes alongside it. Not all pain is the same,

however, and over time and with practice swimmers learn to distinguish between the different qualities and intensities of various painful experiences. This enables them to begin to understand and evaluate the type of painful sensations that are productive (see also Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2016; Hanold, 2010; Howe, 2004; Throsby, 2016), or, conversely, that could result in an injury.

In the sections that follow, we focus on the 'helpful' or positive experiences of pain, whilst also utilizing Hanold's (2010) categories of 'discomfort' and 'good pain' to bring to life these various experiences. Both 'discomfort' and 'good pain' can be understood as a positive part of the swimming experience, in terms of what Crossley (2004, pp. 53-54) refers to as 'sensations that would in most contexts be experienced as uncomfortable and painful, and as such would tend to terminate activity'. As Natasha noted in the earlier quote, within the context of this physical culture these sensations were welcomed, often signifying to participants that progress was being achieved. We emphasize, however, that although the sensations of discomfort and good pain are presented as separate categories for analytic purposes, in practice these sensations are often experienced as overlapping, fluid and amorphous, as swimmers engaged with a variety of training modalities in a short period of time, ranging from high intensity anaerobic training, through to lower intensity, recovery sessions.

Discomfort

For swimmers, discomfort can relate to sensations such as fatigue in the tired or achy body, commonly experienced post training. Here, fatigued muscles were taken to signify that training had been effective. This was emphasized by Gwen, who commented during interview that she "like[s] it when you've just got out of the pool and you're just sitting

there, and you can't get changed because you're actually so tired." Eddie built on Gwen's description further by noting how he "love[s] feeling sore" and that soreness equated to:

> …general muscle soreness, but then when you get into proper pre-season, you go from doing zero sessions to seven sessions pretty fast, and you're just achy, like it's just sore to sit down, everything's just awful. Like you're trying to swim, you literally can't pull your arm, but I just love [it]. I think I love it because there's no pressure on you then. Like, when you feel awful, there's no pressure for you to do good. And, if I do, do really well when I'm feeling awful, then it means that there's proper big things to come. If you can do something while you're feeling shit, [then] when you're feeling good, you're going to do something pretty spectacular (laughing).

Discomfort therefore was considered not only to have positive connotations, but also a strong temporal dimension. The swimmers learnt to recognize the discomfort associated with repeated training, so that discomfort 'accumulated' in their bodies and often carried over into subsequent sessions. The following fieldnote highlights this point, and was recorded during a low-intensity morning session after a particularly tough session the evening before:

> The first block of the session after [warm-up] sees them [the swimmers] going 24x50m. They can do these as butterfly or backstroke. The backstroke ones require increasing the stroke rate for three [strokes] and then holding that stroke rate for three [strokes]. As Remy and Wade finish the first of the 'holding' rate ones, Remy comments "oh my shoulders" and Wade says, "fatigue was *real* then". They both blow out their cheeks, sigh and shake their

> heads as well. Remy is straight into rubbing his traps [trapezius muscles] trying to massage them out a little bit. They might have made these comments, but they are straight back on it for the next rep (Fieldnote).

To manage such discomfort, the swimmers would actively engage with a range of pre- and post-pool exercises, adding to the already considerable number of body techniques (Mauss, 1979) and reflexive body techniques (Crossley, 2004) used within this particular physical culture. Discomfort-relieving techniques included soft tissue massage from the physiotherapy team, individual foam-rolling (self-massaging tool often made from foam), or using tennis or hockey balls to get at deeper muscles (with the ball acting as a focused contact point), as well as a gamut of stretching and activation exercises.

In addition to this muscular discomfort, swimmers also described other more welcome 'discomforts', such as gargantuan appetites, and the overwhelming desire to nap after sessions in order to refuel and recover. Such findings echo Throsby's (2016) observations in relation to marathon swimmers. These 'positive discomforts' were taken by the swimmers to signal effective training performance, and the consumption of huge quantities of food, along with napping as required, were considered not only essential to survival as a competitive swimmer, but also as a positive 'side effect' of being a member of this particular sporting lifeworld.

'Good Pain'

'Good pain', whilst similar to discomfort in terms of its construction as a positive sensation, was found to differ in several respects. Primarily, this was because 'good pain' was aligned with the more intense, acute, temporally-limited effects of a specific training session or set

(see also Vaittinen, 2014; Smith, 2016), as opposed to the longer-lasting sensations associated with discomfort. This point was emphasized by Wade, who described how good pain built up during moments of intense effort, but then dissipated quickly during rest or recovery periods:

> Well, it's when, towards the end of a rep, like say a rep of a 100 [meters] like the last 25 it'll, it'll really start to hurt and then you'll come to the wall, you'll hurt for about 10/15 seconds and then your muscles will start coming back and you'll start to be able to feel your arms again; but then you'll go again and it will come back straight away. Like yeah, if you're doing back to back reps anyway sometimes it will come back straight away and you'll, it gets worse and worse, as the session goes on, yeah.

This type of numbing, acute and sharp pain is particularly related to the pushing of the body towards its limits. It is pain with a *meaningful purpose* and would often be recorded in sessions designed to mimic, or go beyond, the demands of racing, when the swimmers would have to endure duress over an extended period of time. In these situations, where sensations included the 'burn of lactic acid' as experienced in a lactate tolerance set, or the 'grinding fatigue and ache of repeated reps' in an aerobic endurance or threshold set, the swimmers would be acutely aware of the specificities of the pain. These different types of pain were thus specific to different types of session or set, and yet all came to be perceived 'positively' because they were taken as evidence that a session was going well, with progress towards a goal being achieved, as Frank noted:

> …if it's a good session and I'm swimming well, then you kind of want this pain and embrace it. It's a discomfort but when it's matched to hearing times that

> are quick then it becomes a good pain, a good sensation, because I know it's benefitting me.

Frank and the other swimmers thus came to interpret and understand specific painful sensations, when related to a particular type of set or goal, as something positive, via the development of somatic and experiential knowledge. This resonates with research findings from other endurance physical cultures such as mountaineering (Allen-Collinson et al., 2018), and contact sports such as MMA (Vaittinen, 2014; Smith, 2016) where participants learn somatically, experientially and over time how to interpret a variety of (often highly nuanced) sensations, in order to render these meaningful and to act upon them accordingly.

Furthermore, the swimmers also reported how these many, specific forms of 'pain will only go so far [i.e. reach a certain level] and then it can't hurt anymore' (Gwen); a point supported by Jessica, who commented:

> I think you just reach a certain level of pain, good pain, and it just can't get any worse, so you just continue to stay at that level of pain. And then obviously you can choose to ease off and there will be less pain but then it's like, well I've already reached my max so what's the point in giving up.

To cope with the range of sensations associated with good pain, and to push their bodies to their limits, the swimmers would attempt to make the pain 'actively absent' (Aalten, 2007). Their bodies might be telling them to cease, but they would choose not to 'listen'. They would "learn to just shut it out" (Logan). Pain was also contextually-situated, for, as Jean attested, if the session was going particularly well, swimmers might 'forget' the pain, both in-the-moment and in post-swim recollection:

> … so when you're having a really good session, physically you forget how much pain you're in, you don't realize how much it is hurting and how much you may be physically fatigued because you are swimming so well, you go into a different, you turn into a different person really, you just go into overdrive and I think the adrenaline that gets released, well it would be endorphins I think, because you're happy with how you are swimming so you just keep going and you start swimming on adrenaline. Erm, physically they feel, physically your best sessions I think feel great. Erm, when you look back on them you don't actually remember how much they hurt.

As a further coping mechanism, the swimmers would actively shift their focus away from that which they couldn't control (the levels and type of pain) to factors that they could (such as breathing patterns), in an attempt to make the feelings of fatigue and pain less discernible, as objects of intentionality, but without any loss of training intensity, as Jessica noted:

> Like you get to 25[meters] and it just burns, like everything's burning, you start to get out of breath… when my muscles start to ache and I, and I feel like stopping I just focus on my breathing because it helps me forget about the pain I'm going through. So, I'm just, with breaststroke I go under and I just breath everything out, come up take a big, big breath and then, cos obviously I'm lucky with breaststroke, we can breathe every stroke, it's not like front-crawl you can't breathe [as often], cos I'd be rubbish at that [laughs]. So, I take these big breaths and then just blow out everything and then just try and focus on being long and strong [in terms of stroke length].

This again emphasizes the cognitive-corporeal dimension in sports and physical cultures, where 'good pain' is physical-culturally framed (e.g. Allen-Collinson, 2017). In similar fashion to the rowers examined by Pike (2005), body-builders investigated by Shilling and Bunsell (2009), and distance runners studied by Allen-Collinson (2003), positive pain was considered a necessary aspect of the sport, a positive experience in the pursuit of athletic advancement. In such a formulation, Leder's (1990) notion of 'dys-appearance' is stripped of its negative connotations, and pain and discomfort can be seen as positive or even pleasurable (see also Pringle, 2016) and thus as Zeiler (2010) would term as generative of 'eu-appearance'. Such an observation also goes some way to challenging any pleasure/pain dichotomy, and reflects the insights of Bastian et al. (2014) and Leknes et al. (2013) in regard to the conceptualization of pain in certain contexts as being associated with positive experiences during and after participation. However, as Throsby (2016) notes, this is not the same as simply trading pain for pleasure. Instead, such association reflects a much more complex phenomenon centered upon the recalibration of painful experiences as 'normal' (see also Spencer, 2012). Swimmers, like the distance runners studied by Pringle (2016) and Hockey & Allen-Collinson (2016), had learned how to understand the painful experiences of training as welcomed and valorized, rather than a cause for concern. Discomfort and good pain thus became by-products of training, and could provide embodied information on pace, energy levels, and other bodily indicators of performance. For example, Natasha noted how she utilized the sensations of discomfort, soreness, and good pain as pedagogical aids to heighten her somatic and technical awareness in the water:

…if you're sore and you've been to the gym and then you swim, you're already numb before you get in. So, never mind that you feel good at 'white' [code for low intensity aerobic pace], and then you feel a bit grim at the end, you feel grim from the beginning. So, for the sprinters it's very much like that. We get in feeling grim, the warm-up you start to feel a little bit better, cos like … gets rid of the lactate acid a little bit and then you start it [main set] pretty much fucked, and you're just like gone from the beginning. But it feels amazing because you get the numbness, but you feel fast, so for me if I'm sore, I feel faster. Cos even though I have DOMS [Delayed Onset of Muscle Soreness] and I might be a bit tight and need to do a bit of pre-pool, when I get in and I'm swimming fast, I feel stronger because I feel the muscles working. So, for me today my arms are sore and … when I'm like pulling, like doing the first part of the catch, I can feel it in these muscles [shoulder/latissimus dorsi] cos they are all sore, you feel when they are working because you're like, 'oh', 'ah', and you can feel it working but that's kind of nicer because you actually get proper feel for the water and what you're doing in the water, rather than when you are completely fresh, and everything feels good, but you don't actually know what you're doing and where you might not be catching the water. So if your lats [latissimus dorsi] don't hurt at the end of the stroke then you know that you're not finishing the end of your stroke off, if you know what I mean. I do enjoy being sore because then it makes me feel stronger and makes me feel like I'm actually doing something.

Despite the role of good pain in problematizing any notion of a dichotomy between pleasure and pain, the bodily areas in which 'eu-painful' sensations were felt were still often reified and objectified. Good pain, especially within the legs during kick sets, often brought forth exasperated or pleading comments like 'fucking hell, me legs!' or 'come on legs!' from the swimmers as they directed their intentionality back on to their reified bodies; a process that, as Leder (1990, p. 170) describes, could leave a 'kernel of truth' in notions of the mind-body divide. Such observations were exemplified by Matthew:

> I think that in kick sets in particular you, they [legs] are kind of the other end of your brain, where you are sending the signals and sometimes it can be frustrating because you want them to go at a certain pace or up and down in a certain way, but when it hits a certain pain level, they just don't listen, and so yeah, you can objectify them in those circumstances, but they don't have ears so they don't listen.

Further underscoring such reification and objectification, the coaches' comments could be heard throughout various training sessions, encouraging swimmers to focus on specific body parts. These included exhortations such as: 'don't leave your legs behind' or 'work to keep hips high!'. Such comments indicated coaches' intention to help swimmers shift their intentionality inward to specific body parts such as the legs, temporarily changing their 'from-to' relationship with the world to a more proprioceptive focus.

Notably, whilst not all the swimmers actively sought out pain, there were indications that painful sensations were such an integral part of the mundane experience of competitive swimming that some participants reported missing them when they were not a part of everyday training. This was particularly evident in swimmers' recollections at the end

of season break, where after a week or so out of the water they began to miss training and the sensations of pushing their bodies' capabilities. This was further highlighted when Nick (the Director of Swimming) started to shift his training modality in a different direction, bringing in different terminology as well as new session design and weekly planning ideas. At this point, several of the swimmers began complaining about how they felt they were feeling 'too fresh, too often', as they weren't 'ragging themselves to death' (Fieldnote). The absence of pain, then, could be perceptually more troubling than the suffering.

Conclusion

The structure of a typical week in competitive swimming training exposes swimmers to various types of 'work' at various intensities. As described in the preceding sections, within these different training modalities, sensations of pain, predominantly characterized by the swimmers as positive, are a normalized occurrence. Such pain allows swimmers the opportunity to explore and push the boundaries of their own 'corpo-reality' (Allen-Collinson & Another, 2014) as they actively and willingly embrace these pain sensations in order to build muscles, strength, and endurance, pushing their body-minds in the pursuit of increased athletic performance. Competitive swimmers thus come to understand pain in a gamut of different ways, including pragmatically and pedagogically as a marker of athlete improvement and a way of understanding technique. In doing so, over time they develop a bodily knowledge that allows them to recognize the good pain of performance from the bad pain of injury. These positive experiences of pain therefore lie at the very heart of the competitive swimming lifeworld, and swimmers' willingness and capacity to engage with these sensations becomes a key feature of their embodied swimming knowledge. This experiential knowledge is gradually developed over time as swimmers formulate an

understanding of what good pain is and how they can recognize, accept and also 'push through' it. This pain is also understood by the coaches, who design training programs that maximize this form of pain, in order to raise an athlete's 'pain threshold' (Carmichael, 1988). Somewhat akin to the vaccination process, the body is subjected to a level of 'dys-ease' that is designed to render it stronger and healthier in the longer-term.

Although our data are based on a relatively small sample of competitive swimmers in a UK university performance program, and are framed through a particular theoretical framework of sociological phenomenology, the findings surrounding the conceptualization of pain as positive reverberate with research on other sports and physical cultures. Our research therefore contributes to a sport sociological literature on pain in a range of sports, such as running, ultra-running and triathlon (Allen-Collinson et al., 2018; Hanold, 2010; Pringle, 2016), marathon swimming (Throsby, 2016), and contact sports such as rugby (Howe, 2004), boxing (Wacquant, 2004), and MMA (Smith, 2016; Spencer, 2012; Vaittinen, 2014). In this body of literature, practitioners were found to view certain types of pain as positive, and in some cases even 'comforting'. This understanding of pain has been socialized into sports participants through their embodied practices and is shared and communicated via social interaction. The current findings therefore add fresh sociological-phenomenological insights to a research corpus portraying that not all pain in sport is necessarily associated with injury or other negative aspects, and that certain forms of pain can be experienced as 'good', and utilized as a way of challenging corporeal limits and developing bodily knowledge (see also Downey, 2007). From a phenomenological perspective, good pain does not therefore necessarily disrupt the mind-body-world relationship, as Leder's notion of the 'dys-appearing' body might suggest. It can in some

cases actually enhance this relationship, highlighting the very nature of the lived-body as an emplaced body that is constantly in flux as it is produced through meaning-making interaction with its environment. Sensations of good pain therefore go beyond a basic sensory comprehension, taking on a broader meaning and understanding of their role in developing athletic performance. Good pain becomes a core structure of lived**,** sporting experience and participation for many sportspeople, accepted not only as an expression of physical development and signifier of performance, but, as our sociological phenomenological framework emphasizes, as a way of 'being-in-the-world' of sport, and as a valorized element in self-actualization. As World and Olympic Champion and World Record holder in the 50m and 100m breaststroke events, Adam Peaty, recently expressed: 'Hard work is hard grained in me. I enjoy the pain. It sounds very strange, but I love training and I wouldn't change it for the world. The more pain I can go through, the better I feel' (Telegraph Sport, 2019).

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