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

**Neil Baxter**

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Running isn’t just a sport. While it can be a competitive activity, it can also be a social one, a fitness method, a beauty practice, a way to experience the outdoors, a weight-loss strategy, a form of transportation, a mechanism for raising money for charity, and the list goes on.

This is the premise of why running is fascinating in Neil Baxter’s *Running, Identity and Meaning: The Pursuit of Distinction Through Sport* (Emerald 2021). Baxter ambitiously attempts to encapsulate all the nooks and crannies of this multiplicitous pastime. This is both a strength and weakness of the text. While giving a compelling overview of running, the text sometimes falls into the danger of somewhat unavoidable overgeneralization.

Baxter’s research questions include: What do different forms of running “mean?” How do the different ways of practicing running relate to one another? And what identities do various iterations of running help support? Drawing primarily from Bourdieu and Foucault as theoretical interlocutors, Baxter argues that running’s contemporary popularity can be understood through its relationship to key social norms and ideals of our era. It is a “gendered, classed and ‘raced’ field, structured by values and principles and specific local forms of physical capital that reflect and reinforce these categories” (170).

Utilizing data from Sport England’s 2018 Active Lives Survey (ALS), his own “Big Running Survey” (BRS) and interviews with twenty-one runners, Baxter combines quantitative and qualitative analyses.

The chapter, “Researching Running: Embodiment, Lifestyle and Identity,” provides the text’s theoretical scaffold regarding how running uses, shapes and trains the body. Baxter conceptualizes running as a “field” in the Bourdieusian sense—that it is not just a leisure, social, competitive activity, but a “semi-autonomous field of consumption in its own right” (21). This premise is key to understanding how runners “exhibit a clear set of positions or distinctive ways of participating, with varying meanings and measurable, structured social differences” (22).

In “The Evolution of a Field: A Brief History of Running as Sport in Britain,” Baxter provides a historical overview of British running, paying particular attention to two important transitions over the last two centuries. The first transition was the “‘civilizing spurt’ of the Victorian era,” during which running became a way to enact social position through codified games and contests. The second, and likely more familiar transition, was the “Jogging Boom” of the 60s/70s as it played out in Britain.[[1]](#footnote-1) Baxter carefully situates the first Jogging Boom within the emergence of neoliberalism as the governing ideology of the West— “install[ing] the individual, competition and economic success as the overriding values of mainstream society” (52). Running’s second boom (~2000), while generally increasing participation in women and non-white populations, remained entrenched in embodied neoliberalism.

In “Running the Numbers: Quantitative Insights and a Map of the Field,” Baxter undertakes analysis of the ALS and BRS quantitative data. Findings affirm previous assertions that gender is the primary factor influencing sporting practice today. Though running as a broad category has a fairly balanced gender ratio, the *way* running is practiced (i.e. socially, competitively, as a fitness practice) is gendered. Similarly, though running as a whole seems to have ethnic diversity proportional to the overall demographics of the English population, non-white participants are concentrated in track and underrepresented in iterations such as fell running (similar to trail/mountain running) and obstacle course racing. Overall, runners are consistently highly educated and middle/upper class.

“Disciplining the Body and Mind: Running as a Technique of the Self” examines how the ways in which the body is disciplined/cared for contribute to the reproduction of class and gender identities and their “moral hierarchicalization” in a world increasingly obsessed with the entangled discourse of “health and fitness” (and those as codes for thinness). Baxter’s interviewees made frequent references to the ideal “runner’s body” or “running body” as thin, toned, lean, etc. While Baxter’s analysis begins to examine the history/context for contemporary idealization of thin/toned bodies, this is one of the areas in which taking on all of running (versus just recreational or just competitive) may have been too much. Baxter relates the frequency with which weight loss and the “runner’s body” was framed as an aesthetic concern by women runners, while weight loss and the “runner’s body was framed as a competitive/performance concern for men. The scope of his study results in statements such as the following:

[...] it is possible to describe running that prioritizes the *aesthetic* correlates of health and fitness as essentially feminised and running focused on competition and the *performance* of fitness as essentially masculinised. Both orientations revolve around imbuing the body with forms of physical capital that are a source of distinction in a society that places a high value on the slim, fit body. The key difference though is that feminised running can be understood as organized around the accrual of aesthetic capital, whereas masculinised running centres more on the achievement and display of specifically sporting, athletic capital. These two forms of physical capital are strongly correlated, but are conceptually distinct and have very different values within and outside the field. 107

I worry that the broadness of addressing running in its entirety leads to an oversimplification of gender pressures. Broadly, women face more cultural pressure to enact thinness than do men, however the explicitly gendered nature of these pressures is not fulsomely addressed (see, for example Bordo 2003). It also elides the harm potentially inflicted by the use of the term “runner’s body” and its connection to rampant disordered eating cultures within competitive running.

“The Price and the Meaning of Success: Training, Competition and Performance” does account more specifically for the competitive iteration of running. Of particular note is Baxter’s finding that all of the competitive women runners he spoke with shared similar experiences of being exposed to the sport at a young age, having strong parental support and opportunities to compete at the school or club level. This demonstrates that rather than an inherent preference of women to run ‘for fun!’ and men to ‘race,’ early exposure to competitive sporting environments (which tends to be more common for men) is key.

“Running Places: How the Sites of Running Matter” explores the social and cultural differences correlated with the main settings of running—the roads, the track, rural settings and obstacle courses.

Focused exclusively on Britain, readers who approach the text from other national perspectives will need to remind themselves of contextual differences (ex: this is why collegiate athletics is not emphasized), as well as terminological ones (ex: the term “fell running”). This text is recommended for sport researchers of running and those interested in embodied neoliberalism and the meanings of fit bodies.

1. For more on the Jogging Boom from an American context, see Alan Latham’s “The history of a habit: Jogging as a palliative for sedentariness in 1960s America” in *cultural geographies*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)