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Pleasure and the pain cave: sport, kink, and jouissance

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Abstract This paper explores the complex relationship between pleasure and pain in both sport and BDSM, challenging the common perception that seeking pain is irrational or pathological. Drawing on psychoanalytic theories, the authors argue that the pursuit of ‘pleasurable pain’ in these contexts reflects a deeper psychic drive, specifically Lacan’s concept of the ‘death drive’. The paper critiques dominant narratives that rationalize pain in sports as a means to an end while stigmatizing the desire for pain in BDSM as deviant. By analyzing athletes’ and BDSM practitioners’ experiences, the authors suggest that both groups engage with pain as a form of jouissance- the pursuit of an intense, potentially overwhelming experience that goes beyond what is pleasurable. This interdisciplinary discussion aims to demystify the enjoyment of pain, proposing that the pain experienced in sport can be understood through the same lens as the pain in BDSM, thus revealing potential for mutual understanding.

Keywords Pain · Pleasure · Sport · Exercise · BDSM · Jouissance

Why do people seek out pain? Common answers to this question often resort to pathologising or reductive explanations: mental illness, childhood trauma, masochism. Indeed, in popular understandings of human subjectivity, the pursuit of pleasure is taken as a rational goal that does not require further explanation or justification, while the pursuit of pain is considered to be, in some form or another, ‘irrational’—evidence of some deeper, underlying pathology. As feminist scholars from different fields (philosophy, and the sociology of sport), we want to challenge

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and complicate this assumption from the vantage points offered by the different empirical contexts we study: sport and exercise, and BDSM. Our aim is to facilitate an interdisciplinary conversation on the enjoyment of pain in sport and BDSM contexts; one that does not treat the pursuit of ‘pleasurable pain’ as a deviation from an implicit norm, but as a drive that is constitutive of the human psyche as such.¹

Drawing on psychoanalytic conceptualisations of both sport and BDSM, we want to shed light on the psychic entanglements of two domains which occupy radically different places in the sociocultural imagination. While sport is often regarded as a productive, worthwhile endeavour, and is praised for its many benefits on physiological and psychological health (Khan et al., 2012), BDSM practitioners tend to be stigmatised for engaging in risky, decadent and socially ‘unproductive’ activities. This perpetuates a problematic and damaging exceptionalism around sport, whereby the pain that athletes experience during their training and performance is rationalised as serving a higher, praiseworthy goal, while, at the same time, the ‘pleasurable pain’ sought out in BDSM is stigmatised and pathologised as an expression of sexual ‘deviance’ or even mental illness.

Yet, as we demonstrate in this paper, the same ‘unproductive’ drive that leads people to practise BDSM is also at work in sport and exercise: what Lacan, in his reworking of Freudian concepts, has called the ‘death drive’. Once we strip away the dominant narratives rationalising pain in sport as mere means to an eminently rational end and confront these narratives with testimonies from athletes who describe their craving for the ‘pain cave’, we will see that athletes and exercisers might have something to learn from BDSM. Athletes and exercisers, we argue, can turn to BDSM practitioners for insights on creating responsible ‘pain communities’ in which the craving for pain is neither pathologised nor romanticised, but taken seriously as a psychically rewarding endeavour in its own right. These rewards do not consist of athletic accolades, or other marketable praise. Instead, as we shall see, the death drive resists capitalist imperatives that seek to classify all human activity as either productive or worthless.

Pain and sport

As a commonplace and even inevitable function of many sporting practices, sport has exceptional status with regards to pain. Pain has therefore long been a topic of study in sport and exercise sciences (Loland et al., 2006). While this literature encompasses a diverse range of sport and exercise practices, for the purposes of this paper, we are interested in any sports and exercise forms (amateur and elite) that involve a certain intensity when it comes to pain. Sports that we feel fit this description include (but are not limited to) endurance sports, which see athletes push

¹ Some defenders of BDSM have deployed the BDSM/sport analogy to argue that intervening in BDSM due to its potential to cause harm would be inconsistent, because similar harms are routinely incurred in sport. In her book *Consensual Violence* (2006), Jill Weinberg argues that, for example, strangulation is practised in both BDSM and mixed martial arts, such that to ban it in the former without also banning it in the latter would be inconsistent and unjust. For the legal dimension of this analogy, see for example Cheryl Hanna’s paper “Sex is Not a Sport: Consent and Violence in Criminal Law” (2001).



their bodies towards their natural limits, and where pain is the primary experience.² We might also include in our definition extreme sports, which symbolically play with death in their pursuit of risk (Breton, 2000), such as free solo climbing, as well as contact and combat sports (for example, rugby, boxing, wrestling)—indeed, any sport with the cardiovascular intensity to produce pain through lactic build-up (rowing, swimming, running, etc.). Broadly we are interested in sporting activities which ‘supply a jubilation that is enhanced by fatigue, the proximity of danger and the idea of being able to continue to the end’ (Breton, 2000, p. 3), as well as exercise experiences that inspire what Cailliois (1967, p. 23) refers to as a ‘voluptuous panic’.

We do not believe all athletes and exercisers have this attachment to pleasurable pain – what we will later come to understand as ‘*jouissance*’. Our aim is not to reduce all experiences of sport/exercise to the pursuit of *jouissance*. There are a multitude of reasons people might continuously subject themselves to pain (as a means of doing well in sport, to earn a living, to adhere to social pressure, and to bolster a sense of identity and belonging within a sporting community, to name a few) and it is far beyond the scope of this paper to detail them all here. Our goal, instead, is to articulate and bring to the fore sport/exercise experiences which do reflect an attachment to *jouissance*, of which we believe there are many. For many athletes and exercisers, their attachment to pleasurable pain may be somewhat unconscious—a psychic drive that they do not fully recognise or have the language to express. Thus, by providing the discursive tools to name and effectively describe this experience, we hope to demystify the enjoyment of pain in sport and exercise contexts. In what follows, we consider various approaches to and justifications for pain in the sport and exercise literature, before considering the transgressive potential of pleasurable pain via the metaphor of the ‘pain cave’.

Traditionally, understandings of pain in sport have been dominated by biomedical perspectives that approach pain as ‘a matter of nerves and neurotransmitters’ (Roderick, 2006, p. 18). These accounts are not interested in pain as a phenomenological experience; they reduce the body to its physiological components in order to efficiently diagnose and solve the ‘problem’ of pain. In recent decades, however, sociological and social-psychological explorations of pain in sport have come to the fore; these are either framed in terms of risk (Young, 2019), injury (Loland et al., 2006) or coping/pain management (Lasnier & Durand-Bush, 2022). In these collected works, scholars interrogate the lengths athletes will go to mask or push through pain in order to compete in their sport, as well as the long-term consequences for the body when athletes take these risks. The underpinning assumption here is that—since pain is a sensation that people normally avoid at all costs—there must be powerful extrinsic motivators that lead athletes to accept and even seek out this physical and psychological state. As Atkinson (2008, p. 165) asserts, ‘few people enter into recreational sport with the expressed purpose to physically, emotionally and psychologically hurt’.

² It is noteworthy that the majority of literature linking sport/exercise and *jouissance* situates this relationship within the realm of endurance sports. While we acknowledge, as More (2024) indicates, that there does seem to be a particular connection between endurance sport and attachments to pleasurable pain, we explicitly seek to broaden this perspective, arguing that *jouissance* can be experienced across various sport and exercise forms at both amateur and elite levels.



To make sense of these apparent displays of masochism, in sociological literature pain is tied up in performance narratives around achievement, resilience and a competitive ‘win at all costs’ mentality (McNarry et al., 2020). Here, pain is understood as the sensation athletes must endure and overcome to receive the accolades that come with mastery over the body and dominance in their field. The idiom ‘no pain, no gain’ exists to confer this very meaning – via pain, athletes are able to achieve success and are elevated to some higher almost quasi-spiritual sense of accomplishment.

Indeed, research shows that some sports have a ‘culture of pain’ (Emeka & Meijen, 2023; Loland et al., 2006), which is sometimes also referred to as a ‘pain community’ (Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2015; Lev, 2019; Atkinson, 2008). Where these cultures exist, pain is justified and permitted according to its objectives (to win or to achieve new feats). Perhaps the most comprehensively theorised ‘culture of pain’ exists in endurance sports (Emeka & Meijen, 2023; Lev, 2019; Atkinson, 2008; More, 2024; Andreasson & Johansson, 2019). In these sports, pain is collectively defined as a virtue that signals strength, resilience and success. Here, meaning-making around pain is framed as an explicitly *relational* experience. As Hockey and Allen-Collinson contend ‘enduring, as a particular mode of being-in-the-world is not just an individual phenomenon, but is shared by and communicated between distance runners, constituting an interactional subcultural practice’ (2015, p. 227).

In scholarship on endurance sport, pleasure in pain is justified according to two different logics. First, research slips back into biochemical explanations involving endorphins and the body’s ‘natural’ response to stress. Here, the ‘runner’s high’ one might experience after a particularly long and gruelling session is made legible through the language of hormones and other biological mechanisms (Lev, 2019). Second, pleasure is understood as occurring only in the wake of pain and is derived from socially conforming to the social valuing of pain in endurance sport culture (Emeka & Meijen, 2023; Lev, 2019; Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2015). In this regard, pleasure is not entangled in the immediate experience of pain but only enjoyed via its effects (Lev, 2019). As Emeka and Meijen note, ‘it is feasible to interpret the experience of pain during an ultra-marathon race and training as a necessity to derive the pleasure, enhanced self-esteem, and social kudos after completion’ (2023, p. 43). Pain as a sensation that athletes *seek out* as an end in itself is alluded to but rarely explicitly stated in the sporting literature. Without the social capital that sport provides, the possible desire for pain is seen as pathological and so goes undetected in sporting narratives. In this regard, pain is only permissible as long as it is *productive*.

Under certain conditions, pain in sport and exercise can take on pathological connotations. As noted above, pain is acceptable only via its intended outcomes (to win, achieve new physical feats, etc.). This pain becomes transgressive as soon as it becomes potentially injurious, thus threatening future sporting success as well as long-held beliefs about sport as a mechanism for promoting optimal health. Athletes and exercisers therefore engage with pain and risk as a form of ‘edgework’, by attempting to stay within the limits of what is considered a normal and ‘healthy’ amount of pain to endure, without slipping into thornier and more transgressive



territory where their bodies may become irreparably damaged or altered (Kidder, 2021; Laurendeau, 2006; Roderick, 2006). A contemporary example where these boundaries are continually negotiated and contested is in the sport of rugby, where rates of concussion are high and injuries common (and often lasting), leading to constant debate regarding an acceptable level of pain and bodily risk (Liston et al., 2018; Pringle & Markula, 2005).

The debate around pain in sport is also bound up with gendered roles and expectations, such as associations between masculinity and stoicism (Emeka & Meijen, 2023). In the case of rugby, which is a male-dominated sporting practice, Liston et al. write, 'it is precisely because of the bellicosity, risk of pain and self-sacrifice which it entails, that rugby is seen as an arena par excellence for young men to demonstrate their masculinity' (2018, p. 670). Similarly, the elevation of pain in endurance sport is often connected to its macho culture. In this respect, Emeka and Meijen argue that stereotypical masculine traits 'are culturally idealised within ultra-marathon running, whereby pain is a virtue that should be accepted and tolerated' (2023, p. 49). In many ways, men are afforded permission to seek and inhabit pain due to gendered associations between masculinity and exhibiting strength in the face of adversity (Pringle & Markula, 2005).

For women, whose sporting bodies are viewed as having greater pathological potential, relationships to pain are more fraught. While much has been said on the associations between masculinity, pain and risk, less has been written on the interplay between femininity (which brings with it assumed weakness and fragility) and pain in a sport and exercise context. Hockin-Boyers, whose previous research has explored women's engagement with exercise during eating disorder recovery (Hockin-Boyers & Warin, 2021), sees these associations between pain, femininity and pathology play out in the eating disorder field. For women in recovery from eating disorders, exercising through pain is considered a symptom of dysfunctional exercise and is positioned as pathological (Calogero & Pedrotty, 2004). Conversely, 'healthy' exercise that supports eating disorder recovery is said to be movement that is performed with 'attention, purpose, self-compassion, acceptance, awareness, and joy' (Calogero & Pedrotty-Stump, 2010, p. 434). It is curious that, for these women, the presence of pain (which is so normalised elsewhere in sporting culture) should be considered pathological and only exercise performed with 'self-compassion' and 'joy' should be considered 'healthy'/normative. In other words, as Brabazon aptly counters, 'why is it that the male sporting body is validated, while the female sporting body is medicated' (2006, p. 65).

While pain as an end in itself is often pathologised and therefore rarely a facet of traditional sporting narratives, via sporting metaphors we are able to uncover the kinds of experiential opportunities that pain offers athletes and exercisers. One such metaphor is the 'pain cave': a sporting colloquialism that attempts to capture the mental, physical and emotional state a person enters when they begin to doubt their ability to go on—what endurance runners also refer to at times as 'the wall' (Buman et al., 2008). In other words, a sense of reaching your physical limit in terms of pain and pushing beyond this into uncharted territory. This act of continuing allows athletes and exercisers to enter 'the cave', opening up new realms of existential



intensity and opportunities for the exploration of liminal space (Breton, 2000; More, 2024).³

In many sports, reaching and becoming familiar with the pain cave is an essential part of training as well as competing. In their study of ultramarathon runners, Emeka and Meijen (2023) explore how athletes must routinely enter the pain cave in order to establish ‘a new baseline’ of pain, enabling them to go faster and endure longer. In pain cave narratives, pain is unsurprisingly the primary experience; however, pleasure does occasionally also emerge as a facet of this state. In an interview during the Tour de France, professional cyclist Wout van Aert revealed, ‘dealing with the pain is maybe one of the biggest talents you need to have as a professional cyclist ... luckily I like to hurt myself’ (Thewlis & Becket, 2023). While this idea of ‘pleasurable pain’ is not well understood in the dominant sporting literature, in the section that follows, we discuss how psychoanalytic accounts of sport can make sense of the kinds of experiences that athletes like van Aert describe.

Psychoanalytic accounts of sport

Where psychoanalytic accounts of sport and exercise differ from those surveyed above is in their view of human subjectivity as subjected to psychic drives that ‘demand to be satisfied *to the detriment* of our rational goals for pleasure’ (More, 2024, p. 286). The sporting subject as it is understood by psychoanalysis is not a rational entity weighing up the cost of pain against potential benefits (runner’s high, athletic achievement), but a subject compelled by drives it cannot fully rationalise. The drive is not under our control, but a force that constitutes us, making us pursue things we could not rationally choose: running despite being told we might die if we go any further; exercising past the point of any pain we have never known.

Taking such a psychoanalytic perspective on the sporting subject, More (2024) has argued that all sport, but endurance sport in particular, is caught up in the logic of the Lacanian death drive. Deviating from the Freudian conceptualisation, which understands the death drive as striving literally towards the stasis of death, for Lacan, the death drive is not about the destination ‘but rather the journey itself’ (More, 2024, p. 286). According to More, sport offers us a socially acceptable way to enjoy this journey—to sublimate, that is, the otherwise unmanageable death drive into a ‘manageable hobby’ (2024, p. 287).

When psychoanalytic theorists speak of ‘enjoying the death drive’, they are not referring to pleasure in the conventional sense, but to the Lacanian concept of enjoyment or *jouissance*. Although there are many working definitions of *jouissance* (see Leader, 2021), it is broadly, ‘the painful libidinal gratifications we incur when

³ Breton describes this as a kind of ‘flow state’, where ‘decisions follow one after the other with an internal drive with which nothing can interfere, time loses importance’ (2000, p. 3). Although there are experiential resonances between the idea of a ‘flow state’ and Lacanian *jouissance*, for the purposes of this paper, we want to emphasise that subjects are never fully able to make sense of their own pursuit of *jouissance*. Describing it as a ‘flow state’ is one attempt at making sense of what is perplexing, even disturbing, to the subject about *jouissance*, but, as we suggest in the second part of this paper, such attempts can never exhaustively describe the complex psychic life of *jouissance*.



persisting in an activity beyond the parameters of pleasure or self-preservation' (Hook, 2020, p. 367). To be a human subject, for psychoanalysis, is to be at the mercy of a 'self-overcoming tendency ... which we pursue beyond the boundary-lines of moderation, existing social norms and our own best life-sustaining interests' (Hook, 2020, p. 367); an 'inarticulable surplus that dismantles the subject from within' (Edelman, 2004, p. 9). From a psychoanalytic perspective, demanding of athletes and exercisers that their sport must be practised only ever in a 'self-compassionate', 'healthy' and 'joyful' manner is unhelpful and unrealistic, because it denies the excessive and self-destructive tendencies that constitute the human psyche as such. What compels some of us, in sport, to repeat the same movement over and over again, to the point of pain and exhaustion, is not pure 'joy' but rather, the painful enjoyment we get from pushing ourselves 'beyond pleasure'.

While not all athletes might describe or understand their own attachments to sport in terms of *jouissance*, it is clear that at least some do. James Lawrence, who in the summer of 2021 completed 100 Ironman-length triathlons in 100 days, has said of his experience: 'One of the biggest lessons I've learned ... is that I can tolerate a higher level of pain than I once thought. In some ways, though, I feel like the pain is divine intervention' (Nolan, 2021, para. 14). The way Lawrence describes his relationship to pain lends phenomenological texture and credence to the psychoanalytic account. For him, pain is not secondary to joy, pleasure or achievement, but an experience that defines what it means to be an athlete. It is not mere senseless pain, but 'divine intervention', allowing him to access a realm of human experience that otherwise remains foreclosed: the realm of *jouissance* and the death drive, in which the demands of self-preservation are momentarily suspended, and aliveness is felt more acutely at the very moment of courting death.

Courtney Dauwalter, one of the world's most renowned ultrarunners, has likewise described her own relationship to running in a way that resonates with Hook's rendering of the death drive as going 'beyond the thresholds of pain' (2020, p. 367). Dauwalter uses the spatial metaphor of the 'pain cave' in order to propel herself beyond the limits of her endurance: 'Each time I've raced, and hurt a little more, and dug a little deeper, I'm actually making a bigger cave with different tunnels' (Fader, 2022, para. 14). Pain is here not just a means to an end, a necessary sacrifice for athletic excellence, but a way to make subjective sense of her own attachments to ultrarunning. It is a way to articulate to herself her own craving for *jouissance*—her persistent drive to go beyond what is 'healthy' or pleasurable, and push herself to new extremes.

Although there has been some scholarly work on the concept of the 'pain cave' (Breton, 2000; More, 2024; Emeka & Meijen, 2023), for the most part, the existing literature on sport and exercise has little to say about the fact that athletes and exercisers might practice sport *because* it is painful, and not *despite* the fact that it is. Insofar as the overarching script for sport remains one which equates 'healthy' exercise with the presence of 'joy' and the absence, or containment, of pain, the explicit pursuit of *jouissance* will continue to be either pathologised or, as in the case of Dauwalter and Lawrence, celebrated as something only an exceptional—superhuman—psyche could be capable of.



While we do not wish to deny that these athletes are indeed exceptional, we also believe that experiences of *jouissance* are not limited to extreme/professional sport. *Jouissance* is present whenever sport and exercise are practised ‘beyond the thresholds of pain’ (Hook, 2020, p. 367). For an amateur exerciser, this could mean trying powerlifting for the first time and enjoying the sensation of sore muscles; or doing couch-to-5K and finding oneself exhilarated by how painful it is to breathe. Artist and amateur runner Véronique Chance writes about her attachment to sport along these lines:

Running is difficult and challenging, but it also makes me feel attuned to my senses and to the limits of my body. ... By pointing to the limitations and inefficiencies of the body, I see running as a productive mechanism that is not just aligned to achievement, but to an awareness of the vulnerability and fallibility of the human body. (Chance & Warden, 2024, para. 5)

Here, Véronique points to the libidinal pleasures associated with coming to experience the contours of her physical limits; she describes what is gratifying about practising amateur sport ‘beyond pleasure’.

However, as long as discourses around ‘joy’ and ‘self-compassion’ continue to dominate our idea of acceptable exercise, athletes and exercisers who are striving, consciously or unconsciously, for *jouissance* will find themselves unable to articulate the complex psychic range of their sporting experience. Moreover, since certain sporting bodies are always more prone to being pathologised than others (Hockin-Boyers & Warin, 2021; Harges, 2018), their *jouissance* will be subject to greater pathologisation and heightened scrutiny, while, at the same time, figures such as Lawrence and Dauwalter will continue to be fetishised and idolised for pursuing a drive that is present within all of us.

Given the limits of the extant sport and exercise literature on pain and *jouissance*, we think it is fruitful to turn to the insights developed by BDSM scholars and practitioners. BDSM, we suggest, can offer valuable hermeneutic resources for illuminating the psychic and relational complexities of seeking *jouissance* in collective contexts where others are seeking the same. This is because, unlike sport, BDSM is a practice which is explicitly geared towards transgressive practices without redeemable social value and purpose.⁴ In a BDSM space, the masochist does not have to rationalise away their desire for pain as a means to some other, socially acceptable goal. Precisely because BDSM does not enjoy the same social standing as amateur and elite sport, its practitioners have been able to carve out alternative spaces for the conscious incorporation of transgressive psychic drives into a collective ethos of mutual care and accountability. BDSM can teach athletes and exercisers what it means to articulate transgressive drives, and to care for

⁴ Some scholars of BDSM have tried to make the case that BDSM does have such a purpose—for example, that it is ‘healing’ or ‘therapeutic’ (for example, Lindemann, 2011; Thomas, 2020). For the purposes of this paper, we agree with Darren Langridge’s point that this narrative about BDSM risks further pathologising practitioners of BDSM as people who need ‘healing’ (Langridge & Barker, 2007). Moreover, we also agree with Saketopoulou’s (2023) view that the radical potential of transgressive sexual practices lies precisely in their ability to defy dominant social demands of productivity and self-preservation.



oneself and others in the collective exploration of these drives. Moreover, it can help athletes forge caring and responsible ‘pain communities’, in which the pursuit of painful *jouissance* is not disavowed or pathologised, but integrated as an explicit part of the practice.

BDSM and pain

BDSM is an umbrella term describing a wide range of sexual practices and self-identifications, including but not limited to power games of dominance and submission, bondage and physical restraint, psychological humiliation, and pain play. While bondage and discipline (b/d) tend to involve physical restraint either with or without pain play, in sadomasochism (s/m) the emphasis is often on the conscious infliction and/or threat of pain. Although pain might, for some sadists and masochists, be a conduit for sexual gratification leading to orgasm, for others, the infliction and experience of pain might itself be the goal (Newmahr, 2010; Langridge, 2007). What is known as ‘subspace’—the BDSM equivalent of the ‘pain cave’—can occur for the participating submissive, masochist or bottom in any of these scenarios. Pitagora defines it as an ‘altered state of consciousness’ that ‘may include temporary feelings of depersonalization and derealization which are generally experienced as positive and pleasant in the context of a BDSM scene’ (2017, p. 46); for Williams, it is a phenomenon in which ‘endorphins produce a powerful natural high’ (2006, p. 336).

While much of the sociological literature on subspace tends to focus on brain chemistry, and the potential for BDSM to have ‘healing’ effects on its participants (see Pitagora, 2017), within psychoanalytic scholarship on kink and BDSM, the emphasis is on the potential of transgressive sexual practices to make possible a temporary ‘unbinding of the ego’ (Saketopoulou, 2023, p. 152). What is psychically appealing about altered states of consciousness, such as subspace or the ‘pain cave’, is not that they are ‘healing’ or ‘therapeutic’, but that they temporarily dissolve the boundaries of the organised, conscious ego—the locus of the fantasy that we are fully in control of, and fully transparent to, ourselves.

Saketopoulou refers to this state of ego dissolution variously, as a state of ‘overwhelm’ or, following French philosopher George Bataille, as ‘sovereign experience’: a ‘burst of self-divestment that arises in the confrontation of being with nonbeing, when everything is put on the line’ (Saketopoulou, 2023, p. 152). Contrary to conventional understandings of sovereignty in terms of autonomy or self-determination, Bataille’s concept of sovereign experience points to its opposite: ‘the loss of willed control by a homogeneous agent and submission to the heterogeneous forces that exploded its integrity’ (Jay, 1993, p. 67). In sovereign experience, the subject is subjected to an experience it cannot make sense of. It is an experience that shatters the bounds of the rational ego responsible for making sense of things.

While not all experiences of *jouissance* would likely qualify as ‘sovereign experience’, Saketopoulou’s rendering chimes with the testimonies of athletes who describe the feelings of psychical disintegration, the letting go of any rational sense



of time, that accompany their visits to the ‘pain cave’. To get through it, Lawrence says, ‘you have to have a short-term memory ... Focus and intent right now, today, will take care of the long-term goal (Mederis, 2021). For Saketopoulou, there is something freeing in this ‘jolting reorientation to the present’ (2023, p. 153), in the experience of time not as a ‘progressive onward march’, but as an ‘intensified “now”, a hyperpixilated present in which time does not pass’ (2023, p. 153). After the scene, or the race, the ego will have to put itself together again and, in so doing, it might well put itself back together anew. Atkinson writes of the triathlon in this vein: ‘in playing with endurance sport as symbolic death (i.e. to the point of complete physical exhaustion and often collapse), liminality and rebirth through survival ... triathletes relish in feeling the muscles drained, the breath laboured and the mind “cracked”’ (2008, p. 177). There is thus a certain limited freedom in visiting the ‘pain cave’, a sense of coming apart in an experience that we cannot simply ‘have’, because it already ‘has’ us.

However, as long as the sporting subject is understood only as a conscious ego upon whom rational demands of moderation and self-compassion may be placed, athletes who seek out this particular kind of subjective freedom will continue to be perceived in a fetishistic, even dehumanising, way. The notion that ‘there is simply no one [else] like Courtney [Dauwalter]’ (Fader 2022, para. 5) constructs Dauwalter as an outlier from humanity—a superhuman human we both admire, and are horrified by. We want to be like Dauwalter insofar as we admire her achievements, but we are also repulsed by how far removed from rational humanity she is once she is inside the ‘pain cave’. We are fascinated by her because of her craving for pain, and are horrified because we are repulsed by the idea that we might harbour a similar craving within ourselves. What we want to see when we watch athletes like Dauwalter are exceptional feats that stretch the limits of what is physically possible. Although we know that these feats cannot be achieved without exceptional pain, we are unable to acknowledge that the pain itself is part of the appeal: that, deep down, what we want to see are not just Dauwalter’s athletic achievements, but the spectacle of her pain.

This ambivalence of affect—between fascination and repulsion—is evident in Fader’s journalistic portrait of Dauwalter. Despite discussing at length her testimony of actively craving visits to the pain cave, in another paragraph, Fader reframes Dauwalter’s passion for her sport as ‘pure joy’: ‘She gets antsy if she doesn’t run for two days, not because she’s trying to follow a strict mileage plan, but because she feels unparalleled joy just *breathing* on the course’ (Fader 2022, para. 5). It is as though, in being unable to make sense of the role of *jouissance* in sport, we have to either turn athletes like Dauwalter into superhuman outliers courting death for our consumption and entertainment while the rest of us remain firmly rooted in life; or reframe their experience through an idealised narrative that denies the presence of the death drive altogether.

That we struggle to see sport as a domain for enjoying the death drive is not least because, generally speaking, we struggle to understand all human practices that ‘cannot be rationalized as productive and that offer no functional or utilitarian value’ (Saketopoulou, 2023, p. 52). In sport, it is commonplace to rationalise pain as a necessary means to the acceptable goal of athletic excellence. However, in this



rationalisation, something important about human subjectivity gets lost: that there is something in us that will always resist the capitalist imperative of productivity, an irreducible tendency towards exuberant waste and excess. What sport can learn from BDSM is how to take this part of human subjectivity on its own terms—without either romanticising transgression or simply rationalising it away. In what follows, we turn to some of the lessons and ethical frameworks that have been developed in BDSM spaces and which we believe might have utility in sport and exercise contexts.

Lessons from BDSM: creating responsible ‘pain communities’

Sport and exercise stand to learn a great deal from the ethical frameworks that exist within BDSM subcultures where, because pain-seeking is not viewed as inherently immoral or pathological, relational scripts have been developed for navigating pain responsibly and in the spirit of mutual care. While certain sporting cultures do have relatively established frameworks for consent, risk management and mutual care—combat sports being a key example (see Channon & Matthews, 2022, for a more detailed discussion)—many others remain inattentive to these concerns. In this final discussion, we explore some of the lessons sport and exercise might take from the kink community to create more responsible pain communities.

As we have detailed earlier in this paper, pain as an end in itself is often alluded to but rarely explicitly captured in sporting narratives (with some exceptions, see Atkinson, 2008, 2015). Given that *jouissance* cannot be rationalised or made comprehensible via traditional sporting language, athletes and exercisers are unable to understand their attachment to sport in terms of ‘pleasurable pain’, regardless of whether *jouissance* plays a (conscious or unconscious) role in their sporting experience. Thus, for these athletes, many of the frameworks currently used to make sense of a deep attachment to sport and exercise may feel insufficient. For example, a sporting ethic rooted in capitalist values of success, sacrifice and competitive individualism, may feel hollow to the athlete or exerciser whose phenomenological experiences of sport have a different texture and feel. Similarly, associations between sport/exercise and the pursuit of health can appear paradoxical, and even alienating, when athletes and exercisers routinely put their bodies on the line, risking injury for the thrill to continue. In a sporting landscape where performance and health narratives only go so far to explaining an athlete/exerciser’s attachment to sport, providing the hermeneutic resources to make sense of psychic drives and commitments to sport in terms of *jouissance* is a worthwhile endeavour. Beginning to construct these resources, while highlighting the damaging exceptionalism around sport that prevents these experiences from being recognised, are the key contributions of this paper.

BDSM and kink communities, while often pathologised and marginalised, are not hampered by the same overarching frameworks that come to dominate sport and exercise narratives. BDSM is not framed in terms of a productive capitalist ethic, nor is it particularly linked to health and wellbeing. People who engage in BDSM are therefore less subject to discourses that obscure or downplay their attachment



and appetite for practices that supply access to *jouissance*. By being afforded the language and discursive resources to more effectively name and make sense of their relationship to pain, people who engage in BDSM are able to articulate, not only the phenomenological texture of these experiences, but their needs, boundaries and desires. The term ‘aftercare’ is an exemplar case of how the development of adequate hermeneutic resources can lead to more caring and responsible pain communities.

Within the BDSM community, aftercare is key to all responsible encounters. Even for ‘pick-up play’, where play partners do not know each other prior to playing together, aftercare is explicitly scripted into the encounter. Unlike in sport, where ‘aftercare’ is primarily concerned with the treatment and prevention of injury, BDSM aftercare encompasses both physical aspects, such as caring for bruises, eating a snack or wrapping oneself up in a blanket, and the emotional processing of the scene. For subs, or bottoms, in particular, subspace can lead, after the conclusion of a scene, to what is known as ‘sub drop’: an emotional state which looks different for everyone, but tends to encompass feelings of exhaustion, depression, irritability, anxiety and shame, often at high intensity. Terminology such as ‘aftercare’ and ‘sub drop’ allows those practising BDSM to more easily communicate expectations and needs following an interaction or scene, leading to more responsible and mutually satisfying encounters.

Conversely, this emphasis on emotional safety in the wake of an intense physical and emotional experience is less commonly practised in sport and exercise. Hockin-Boyers’ anecdotal experience as a spectator at a competitive rowing event illustrates this point. The race in question was between two top crews for whom this was the pinnacle of their rowing career and something they had been training towards for eight brutal months of ergs, icy 5 a.m. outings on the river, and gruelling weightlifting sessions. In the lead up to the race, the home crew were predicted to win, however the race itself was neck and neck from start to finish, with both teams pushed to their physical limits. In the final 100 metres the home crew pulled away just enough to secure the win. Exhausted beyond recognition they docked the boat. However, it became apparent that for one crew member in particular, the intensity of this experience was still being felt and the rower sobbed uncontrollably on the dock. This scene caused a great deal of concern among onlookers and the paramedic was called to medically attend to the rower.

On reflection, it is curious that a display of extreme emotion of this kind was met with a medical response. It is in scenarios like this that aftercare as a concept and an ethical practice might provide a framework for understanding and attending to an athlete’s or exerciser’s emotional and psychological needs in the spirit of mutual care, rather than in a purely medical capacity. Recognising the psychic risks and complexities of pursuing *jouissance* is pivotal to thinking about sport and exercise outside of ‘health’ or performance-oriented frameworks. In the case of the rower, who was overcome with emotion following a particularly intense sporting experience, these frameworks have proven insufficient. He presented no physical injury that paramedics or physios could attend to and, as his crew had won the race, his reaction could not be attributed to an outpouring of emotion following a bad performance. Instead, we might think about how, in this particular instance, the



rower's visit to the pain cave during the race psychically overwhelmed him. What Bataille describes as 'sovereign experience' and Saketopoulou as 'overwhelm' (2023) is a possible outcome of both BDSM and sporting practices. It describes a state in which the ego is confronted with an experience that shatters its sense of control and autonomy: 'an experience that presses into the unbearable' (Saketopoulou, 2023, p. 53). Although 'overwhelm' might be a difficult, even 'unbearable' experience, the example of the overwhelmed rower shows that, for athletes and BDSM practitioners alike, the possibility of overwhelm is not an accidental byproduct, or harm that must be rationalised away, but constitutive of what makes sport/BDSM rewarding in the first place: the sense of being able to push at our limits in such a way that we can escape, even if only ever momentarily, the rationalising grip of the ego.

As we have argued in this paper, making sense of the paradoxical appeal of 'overwhelm'—an unbearable experience that some of us nevertheless seek out—requires recognising pain-seeking in sport and exercise as an end in itself rather than as an unfortunate consequence or requirement of pursuing sporting achievements. Understanding sport and exercise in these terms calls for decoupling pain from narratives around risk or injury and the creation of new normative scripts for mutual care during sporting encounters. The macho culture around sport, whereby enduring pain is either grounds for bragging rights or justification for medical attention (Pringle & Markula, 2005), will need to give way to emotional sensitivity and (after)care as organising principles. While what we have outlined here goes some way in articulating how this might look, we feel that further encounters between differently situated pain communities are needed to understand how to support, without idealising or romanticising, the pursuit of pleasurable pain.

Data availability Not applicable.

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