



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *'You can't be too vain to gain if you want to swim the Channel': Marathon swimming and the construction of heroic fatness.*

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/89568/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Throsby, K (2015) 'You can't be too vain to gain if you want to swim the Channel': Marathon swimming and the construction of heroic fatness. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 50 (7). pp. 769-784. ISSN 1461-7218

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690213494080>

---

© The Author(s) 2013. This is an author produced version of a paper published in *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

**Reuse**

Unless indicated otherwise, fulltext items are protected by copyright with all rights reserved. The copyright exception in section 29 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 allows the making of a single copy solely for the purpose of non-commercial research or private study within the limits of fair dealing. The publisher or other rights-holder may allow further reproduction and re-use of this version - refer to the White Rose Research Online record for this item. Where records identify the publisher as the copyright holder, users can verify any specific terms of use on the publisher's website.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

## **‘You can’t be too vain to gain if you want to swim the Channel’: marathon swimming and the construction of heroic fatness**

Within the dominant medical and health policy frameworks, fatness is conceptualized as a threat of epidemic proportions to health and well-being, against which action must be taken (WHO 2000; Foresight, 2007). Within this framework, fat bodies are seen as the embodied consequence of negative traits such as laziness, greed and poor self-discipline (Murray, 2005; Featherstone, 2010; Hardy, 2013). From this perspective, the fat<sup>i</sup> body cannot be a sporting body, since socially privileged traits such as the reflexive self-disciplining of bodily boundaries and appetites are strongly associated with the production of contemporary sporting bodies, but are conventionally treated as antithetical to fatness (Shogan, 1999; Zanker and Gard, 2008; Magdalinski, 2009). The exception to this lies in the embrace of sport or physical activity for the purpose of weight loss, when the performance of bodily discipline through ‘fighting fat’ facilitates access to the privileged identity of the ‘sporting body’ in anticipation of the future alignment of the disciplined self and body. Indeed, the positioning of sport and physical activity as the *solution* to the ‘obesity epidemic’ was made explicit in the legacy action plan for the London 2012 Olympics. Citing the Foresight Report’s (2007) pessimistic predictions for future obesity rates and their imagined costs, the plan concludes that the London Olympics are ‘the best chance in a generation to encourage people to be more physically active’ (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 2008: 22). What does this mean, then, for the sport of marathon swimming, which actively *demand*s the acquisition, or minimally, the maintenance of body fat as a performance advantage? How are

legitimate endurance sporting identities constructed, contested and embodied in such a seemingly paradoxical context?

Marathon swimming refers broadly to open water swims of 10km or over, but this paper focuses on what might be considered the 'ultra' domain of marathon swimming. In iconic terms, this is represented by the English Channel – 21 miles across at its narrowest point, with an average crossing time of over 13 hours – but is also commonly understood to include other long and difficult swims<sup>ii</sup>. It is a minority sport, and in the case of the English Channel, since the first successful crossing by Matthew Webb in 1875, 1341 people have completed a total of 1801 solo crossings. Following in the footsteps of Gertrude Ederle, who became the first woman to swim the Channel in 1926, approximately 35% of all solo swims have been completed by women<sup>iii</sup>. While not focusing solely on the English Channel, this paper refers specifically to those long swims governed by 'Channel rules' – that is, where swimmers wear only a regular swimming costume, latex or silicone cap and goggles – because it is in this context that the maintenance and acquisition of body fat becomes a performance necessity.

For most endurance sports, the normative mutual exclusivity of fitness and fatness is given 'common sense' reinforcement by the fact that leanness offers a performance advantage by maximizing the power to weight ratio and increasing speed and agility<sup>iv</sup>. The training process for those who want to improve their performance in endurance sporting competition, then, often involves the development and maintenance of a leaner body, often combined with sport-specific targeted muscularity (Chapman, 1997; Abbas, 2004; Robinson, 2004). In

marathon swimming, however, alongside swim-specific muscularity and appropriate technique, body fat itself, *qua fat*, is prized for its insulating properties, enabling swimmers to stay in the water for longer periods without succumbing to hypothermia. Consequently, while the ideal-type body varies significantly across all sports, and often in ways that challenge conventional norms of the 'good' body (for example, in body building), the purposeful acquisition or maintenance of body fat renders the marathon swimming body an anomaly among ideal-type endurance sporting bodies – an anomaly compounded by the prevailing opposition of 'fit' and 'fat' in the contemporary 'war on obesity' and the repeated coding of endurance sports such as distance running as both contributing to, and demanding, weight loss.

Fat acquisition is not the only strategy for coping with the cold in marathon swimming. The body's thermoregulatory systems can be prompted to adapt to exposure to cold in a variety of insulative, hypothermic and metabolic ways through regular immersion in cold water (Hong, Rennie et al., 1987; Vybiral, Lesna et al., 2000; Makinen, 2010), although Makinen notes in the conclusion to her overview of the research on cold adaptation in humans that 'human physiological responses against the adverse effects of cold are rather limited (2010: 1061). Furthermore, while the very limited research on marathon swimmers supports a positive relationship between body fat and resistance to swim-stopping levels of hypothermia (Brannigan, Rogers et al 2009; Keatinge, Khartchenko et al 2001), they are too compromised by small sample sizes, problems of measurement and their inability to reflect the effect of changes in body size and composition to offer guidance on how much body fat is enough.

Nevertheless, the basic principle adheres and weight gain, however arbitrary in degree, is a common part of the training process for many swimmers<sup>v</sup>. But as this paper explores, the social potency of fat means that this weight gain can never only be experienced in instrumental terms, however reflexively framed via the body's vulnerabilities to cold.

When I first started thinking about swimming fat, as a swimmer, a fat woman and via my allegiance to the broader field of Fat Studies (see, for example, Gard and Wright, 2005; Rothblum and Solovay, 2009; Tomrley and Kaloski Naylor, 2009), I approached the topic in a mood of political optimism, excited by my discovery of a sporting site which appeared to directly repudiate the conventionally competing values of fitness and fatness that I found so problematic in other aspects of my academic and personal life. However, closer inspection revealed a much more complicated relationship with fat that simultaneously comprises a profound allegiance to the rhetorics of bodily discipline and control, and antipathy towards fat *and* the (contingent) valuing and celebration of fat. This apparently contradictory embrace and repudiation of fat is held together for many of the swimmers, and especially those with a formerly lean, 'athletic' embodied identity, through what I have called 'heroic fatness', through which fatness is framed as an undesirable but necessary act of bodily discipline and sacrifice in the service of the swimming endeavor. This renders purposeful swimming fat a transformative bodily sacrifice that aligns easily with a sport like marathon swimming which is already strongly self-defined in terms of suffering, enduring and overcoming (author 2013); fat becomes another form of suffering, nobly borne. But my use of 'heroic' is ironic

here, since the construction of purposeful fatness as courageously self-sacrificial obscures the necessary 'not-me-ness' of the fat which immunizes the heroically fat swimmer against the negative stigma of 'real' fatness. In essence, like medical fat suits designed for training or health education (Hardy, 2013), dramatic fat suits or fat gained by an actor for a specific role (LeBesco, 2005; Mendoza, 2009), I argue that heroic swimming fat is rendered safely inauthentic by its presumed provisionality and incongruity; in short, the fat is fake.

The 'not-me-ness' of heroic fatness, then, reveals little of the reflexive critique of the 'war on obesity' that I was naively hoping for, but it does still have much to say, however inadvertently, about the 'world of *constitutive affective relations* with fat/ness' (Hardy, 2013: 6). Like the lump of fake fat that is at the centre of Kristen Hardy's analysis, heroic fatness is articulated through explicit narratives of neither health nor physiological function (p. 8), and nor is it constituted through straightforwardly form-as-function rationalizations in relation to cold tolerance. Instead, it operates in a primarily affective register; that is, through the 'non-verbal, non-conscious dimensions of experience' (Blackman and Venn, 2010: 8). I argue that these affective dimensions of swimming fat elucidate both the profoundly entrenched and embodied nature of learned responses to fat *and* the uncontainability of fat within the narrow constraints of the prevailing rhetorics of the 'war on obesity' and its utilitarian appropriations of and by sport.

The following section sets out the methodology for the project upon which this paper draws. The main body of the paper is then divided into two sections. The

first sets out the ideal-type of heroic fatness, and the ways in which the constructed fakeness of the fat is used to distance the self from the negative character traits that fatness is commonly assumed to embody. The second section explores the much more ambivalent modes of fatness that occur alongside, and in response to, this heroic ideal, exposing the disjunctures and ambiguities that constitute the prevailing knowledges and lived experiences of both fatness and sport. These more ambivalent embodied relations reveal a less adversarial encounter with swimming fat, and the (always constrained) possibility of what Hardy describes as ‘new tissues of affective experience’ (2013: 21) that feel cautiously ‘against the grain’ (p. 19).

## **Methodology**

This paper comes out of a research project entitled ‘Becoming a Channel swimmer: identity and embodiment in an extreme sporting subculture’ (BACS)<sup>vi</sup>. The advent of the project was preceded by my own decision (in October 2008) to train for an English Channel swim, which I booked for the summer of 2010. BACS grew out of that first year of gradually intensifying training as I began to reflect upon the process of ‘becoming’ that I was engaged in, and the social and (sub)cultural context within which that process was being enacted. The grant marked the beginning of my career as what the Guardian pleasingly described as an ‘aquatic sociologist’ (Arnot, 2010).

The project is what I have chosen to call an (auto)ethnography – a combination of conventional ethnographic observation and interview methods, combined with the autoethnographic recording of my own embodied experiences of the

training and swimming process (or what Loic Wacquant described in his account of his boxing apprenticeship as 'observant participation' (Wacquant, 2004: 6)).

The parenthetical division between the two interrelated elements of the methodology represents my own desire to be able to foreground my own sensory and embodied experience (see, for example, author 2013), or move it into the background (as with this paper) in order to focus on the wider community and its values and practices, depending on the writing context.

However, this is with the obvious caveat that this separation refers to the *kind* of data collected, rather than the possibility of standing outside of a research setting in which I was, and remain, so thoroughly imbricated.

Over a period of almost three years, I kept detailed fieldnotes which incorporated my own experiences alongside my observations and interactions with swimmers, coaches, family members, support crews and officials across a range of settings, including around the UK, the Channel Islands, Ireland, Malta and southern California. As such, the project is a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995); an attempt to engage with the multi-directional transnational flows of the marathon swimming world. This corpus of fieldnotes has been combined with 45 recorded and transcribed interviews, as well as hastily recorded jottings of uncountable informal conversations over meals, on journeys and before, during and after swims. This core dataset was then coded thematically, and supplemented by an opportunistic collection of media reports, blog and discussion forum postings, and personal communications, as well as published biographies of the pioneers of marathon swimming (Watson, 2000; Mortimer, 2008; Stout, 2009; Bier, 2011).

## **Heroic Fatness**

There are two key elements to the construction of heroic fatness: firstly, its status as an undesirable necessity; and secondly, the presumed malleability of the body.

### *An undesirable necessity*

Amidst the uncertainties of how much body fat is enough, a singular certainty emerges within the dominant narrative of marathon swimming: that fat is an *undesirable necessity*. This is encapsulated in the commonly circulating maxim: 'You can't be too vain to gain if you want to swim the Channel'. For many swimmers coming to the sport from other endurance sports, the concept of purposeful weight gain was an anathema to their sporting identities. Simon, for example, was an experienced and accomplished endurance athlete and climber whose relatively lean 'athletic' body made him vulnerable to the cold – a problem experienced during training and then in an initial, unsuccessful English Channel swim:

...the thing is, I was fit enough to swim, but it just seemed so gloriously unfair that with swimming, it does not...well, with Channel swimming...it is almost the opposite, isn't it, because in other sports, the fitter you are, the leaner you are, the more muscular you are, you know, equals improved performance. But of course you learn in channel swimming...it is about getting your body in the right sort of shape in terms of being acclimatized, increased body fat and buoyancy and technique [...] It just seemed so alien

to me to be on the one hand just banging out as much swim time as possible, but on the other hand, you know, eating 5 doughnuts a day, getting up at 5am in the morning, having a fry-up before you go to work, eating bars of chocolate...

Simon identifies body fat as one of a number of sport-specific bodily requirements, but it is the need for weight gain that is singled out as 'gloriously unfair' and at odds with other sports. He experiences this as a tension not only between his endurance sporting past and his swimming present, but also within swim training itself. Significantly, his objections were never articulated through the conventional health-based rhetorics of the 'war on obesity', but rather, his dissatisfaction registers affectively as disgust and horror at both the process of weight gain and the fattening body. As he was talking, he gestured an exaggeratedly rounded belly and blew out his cheeks to make a 'fat face', exclaiming: 'and I could see all the weight going on....'. The suddenness of the exaggerated gestural transformation echoes the use of fat suits in films, where lean actors perform fatness 'for cheap laughs at the expense of fat people' while simultaneously affirming the inauthenticity of their own provisional fatness and distancing themselves from authentically fat others (Le Besco, 2005: 237). Simon's 'fat face', therefore, simultaneously recognizes the association between fatness and the failed self and repudiates it *in his own case*, but not in principle. This is the defining accomplishment of heroic fatness, and relies upon two key strategies of distinction: firstly, between purposeful fatness and having 'let yourself go'; and secondly, between the toughness of fat-facilitated marathon swimming and normatively 'athletic' leanness.

My fieldnotes are punctuated with commentaries from swimmers about the fat bodies of non-swimming others – as ‘disgusting’, ‘just wrong’, ‘criminal’. During a training camp in Malta, a swimmer pointed to a man whose rounded stomach hung heavily over the waist band of his shorts, remarking laughingly: ‘He’d make a good channel swimmer’. This commonly repeated ‘joke’ finds its humour in a shared recognition that the body fat of the swimmers and that of the non-swimmers on the beach may be materially similar, but is symbolically different. The non-swimmers have ‘let themselves go’ while the swimmers have purposefully made fat happen, although the porousness of the boundary between the two becomes evident in descriptions of swimming as a useful ‘alibi’ for weight gain, or as a ‘get out of jail free card’. For all the monolithic anti-fat rhetoric of the ‘war on obesity’, then, not all fat is equal, and heroic fatness is dependent on the careful, but precarious, distinction between fatnesses.

The second strategy of distinction is the comparison of marathon swimmers with open water swimmers who use wetsuits. There is considerable contestation within the marathon swimming community about whether a wetsuit swim can legitimately be categorized as a ‘marathon swim’, since neoprene provides both insulation and additional buoyancy. Among the non-wetsuit faction, the boundaries of authentic swimming are policed through the use of banter, contrasting ‘wimpsuits’ with the marathon swimmers’ reliance on ‘bioprene’ alone, or by gesturing disgust if asked to help zip up a wetsuit. This strategy of distinction also encompassed elite athletes who were repeatedly cited as unable to complete a marathon swim because of their unsuitably lean physique. As US

swimmer, Robert, noted: ‘...when I began to meet Channel swimmers I realised that most successful Channel swimmers were not svelte petite, small hips. Michael Phelps could never swim the Channel’. Endurance cyclist and triathlete, Lance Armstrong (before his recent fall from grace) was also repeatedly invoked as an example of an elite sporting body that would simply not be up to the task.

The purposefully fat swimming body, therefore, is distinct from (and superior to) both the failed fat body *and* the lean body of even the most elite athletes.

This can be seen as both outward-looking in accounting for fat gain in a fat-phobic society, and inward-looking within the open water swimming field. As is also evident in other sporting subcultures – for example, snowboarding (Thorpe, 2011), surfing (Booth, 2003; Wheaton, 2004), skateboarding (Beal and Wilson, 2004) and climbing (Lewis 2000) – distinctions between groups within those subcultures establish (contested) hierarchies which in turn ‘command different degrees of capital conversion’ (Thorpe, 2011: 120). Swimming fat is mobilized here as evidence *par excellence* of a status-bearing willingness to suffer and endure – both in terms of exposure to the cold and in the willingness to risk the social stigma of fat. It is in this way that fatness is positioned as both enabling and causing suffering, which is heroically borne.

### *The malleable body*

The second element to the successful construction of heroic fatness is its provisionality, and by extension, the presumed malleability of the body – the assumption that weight loss (or gain) is (and should be) within the remit of the disciplined individual. As Simon, who was cited earlier noted resignedly:

I did not like putting on the weight, but by the time I really had to [...] I was just...I did not really care. I was just doing it because I had come that far. If putting on weight meant that I was going to have a better chance then it was just something I just did. You know, I'd be...it was always a means to an end, and I felt I could always lose it relatively quickly afterwards.

This assumption of the body's susceptibility to purposeful transformation is entirely in line with the contemporary 'war on obesity' and its assumptions of the predictable malleability of bodies when subject to the appropriate degree of bodily discipline (Ogilvie and Hamlet, 2005). The provisionality of the heroically fat swimming body, therefore, firmly locates the swimmer within positively valued traits of reflexive self-discipline and self-efficacy because it embodied *both* the acknowledgement of fatness as contingently necessary but fundamentally undesirable *and* the presumed ability to lose weight once the swimming challenge has been completed. This once again invokes the fat-suited actor, or the actor who gains weight for a role – a greater degree of dangerous closeness to 'real' fat, bringing 'career-making accolades' for those brave enough (LeBesco, 2005: 235). Katie LeBesco argues that in both cases, we are reassured by seeing 'lean, conventionally attractive actors unencumbered by fatness *outside* of the film's frames' (2005: 236). The inauthenticity of purposefully provisional (fake) fat offers the reassurance that the individual is 'in no danger of a slide into obesity' (p. 238). As one male US swimmer noted: '[the fat] is okay because it is not who I am'.

## **Unsettling heroic fatness**

The previous section set out the ideal-type of heroic fatness in marathon swimming, which remains simultaneously in line with contemporary anti-obesity values even while (provisionally) embracing the fat body / body fat – a circle that is squared through the rendering of purposefully acquired swimming fat as inauthentic, and as ‘not me’. This section sets out some of the disruptions inherent to the clean simplicity of heroic fatness, highlighting the exclusions that it produces (and relies upon), and the contradictions that emerge between the prevailing norms and embodied experience. In particular, this section explores exclusions firstly in relation to gender, and secondly in relation to those who are already fat at the start of the training process; it then highlights a more ambivalent framing of the fat swimming body that steps cautiously outside of the dichotomy of real / fake fat upon which heroic fatness relies.

Among (some) groups of men, increased body fat was a source of considerable humour and banter, and those who gained significant amounts of weight over relatively short periods of time were granted heroic status within the homosocial group. This recalls the Clydesdale runners described by Laura Chase (2008) who compete in weight rather than age categories (an innovation designed to level the playing field for heavier runners). Chase notes that at the pre-race weigh-in, male runners would applaud each other if they had gone up a weight category, while such public celebrations of fatness were not available to women (p. 139). My fieldnotes also recall multiple incidences of men naming their stomachs – ‘It’s time to feed Norman’ – or animating the fat stomach by grasping it with both hands to make a fold, opening and closing it like a mouth to demand food: ‘Feed

me, feed me'. While the gesture is designed to invoke disgust at the exaggerated mobility of fat and skin, the men on the beach *domesticate* their fat stomachs, rendering the fat almost pet-like. It is in this way that their fat can be understood as fake; to all intents and purposes, they are playing at being fat, whilst being protected from its negative attributions by their cultural and physical capital as athletes, prospective Channel swimmer, and as men. This can also be seen as a profoundly classed form of play, since fatness itself is a classed form of embodiment that is deemed antithetical to middle class values of self-efficacy and bodily discipline (Herndon, 2005). As Bev Skegg's notes, middle class people can 'play' at being working class – for example, by wearing grunge clothing, or through allegiances to certain kinds of music – because they already possess considerable cultural capital that is not threatened by those performances (1997: Ch. 5). This behavior was particularly evident among a relatively small group of 'laddish' young men (see also, Wheaton, 2004: 146), and it relies upon a shared understanding of the inauthenticity of fat, in much the same ways that homophobic banter (also evident among the group, along with sexism) affirms heterosexuality, and by extension, masculinity (Beal and Wilson, 2004; Bridel and Rail, 2007). As such, it can be understood both as a celebration and also as a collective defense against the shaming possibilities of weight gain.

But while many of the women in the training communities gained weight in order to swim, I never saw this kind of physical comedy in relation to women's bodies, and female weight gain is not a route to homosocial status or belonging in the way that it can be for (some) men. Indeed, swimming weight gain, like muscularity (George, 2005; Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2009) moves women further

away from normative femininity, while moving men towards masculinity. As one female interviewee noted of her significant pre-Channel swim weight gain: 'I would say that while I've been training to swim the Channel I was probably quite [...] I probably thought of myself as quite an androgynous person. I was just a machine, that's all'. There is no readily available affirmative lexicon for female swimming fatness; there is nothing heroic about it, and it's not funny. This reflects the much narrower boundaries of acceptable body size for women, as well as, more fundamentally, the ways in which men are not so readily confined to the corporeal domain (Witz 2000).

A second and related exclusion can be found in the fact that heroic fatness is the preserve of those who are not fat at the start of the training process. Instead, swimmers who already have sufficient (or more than sufficient) body fat to enable them to swim can never have heroically fat bodies, since *being* fat and *getting* fat (and then lean again) are symbolically distinct. This is another reason why heroic fatness is less available to women, since their bodies are already seen as 'naturally' endowed with fat (author, 2013). For those who are categorized by their peers as already (authentically, and therefore problematically) fat, the physical comedy and homosocial celebration of heroic swimming fatness functions not as a means of belonging, but instead as a form of symbolic violence; that is, according to Pierre Bourdieu, 'a gentle violence' (Bourdieu, 2001: 1) which naturalizes the social order through apparently innocuous, mundane practices (Brown, 2006: 167) – for example, through seemingly harmless physical comedy, or through the reiteration of aphoristic wisdoms ('you can't be too vain to gain'). As one male swimmer in Dover who self-identified as fat

commented quietly to me on the beach as we watched a group of male swimmers loudly slapping and wobbling the (recently acquired) fat stomach of one of them: 'It makes you wonder what they must think of me'. Citing Audre Lorde's realization that 'it is *her body* that is disgusting to a white woman sitting next to her on the bus', Clare Hemmings cautions that some people are 'so over-associated with affect that they themselves are the object of affective transfer' (Hemmings, 2005: 561). My friend on the beach recognizes his own status (and perhaps also mine) as the potential object of the men's affective play; for them, it is his body (or at least bodies like his) that evokes the disgust that underpins the 'fun' of (fake) fatness. The celebratory playfulness that shores up heroic fatness, as with dramatic fat suits, is always at the expense of 'real' fat people.

Particularly male swimmers, and to a much lesser extent, female swimmers, can step outside of the heroic / unheroic fat binary and achieve social inclusion within the hegemonic group of heroically fat swimmers, primarily through alignment with other aspects of masculine sporting identity which then discount the problem of 'real' fatness. For example, as has been observed among gay athletes seeking acceptance into male sporting communities (Bridel and Rail, 2007), another route to inclusion is through high performance and competitive displays (see also, Jamieson et al, 2008). These hegemonic sporting performances neutralize the 'problem' of unheroic fatness by shifting the focus onto performance instead. Significantly, though, the fatness remains 'real'. As a male UK swimmer noted about a shared acquaintance: 'I don't think of him as fat. He's just a really great swimmer'.

LeBesco argues in relation to dramatic fat suits that the 'embrace of inauthenticity is revealing for what it tells us about the stability of fat-phobic anxieties' (2005: 238). However, in spite of the entrenched nature of the understandings of fat upon which heroic fatness relies, it is also clear that what Fat Studies scholar Sam Murray calls the 'negative culture of collective 'knowingness' about fatness' (2005: 154) cannot contain the embodied experience of fatness. Writing of the multiple masculinities in the surfing subculture that she studied, Belinda Wheaton suggests that for all the displays of 'laddish' hegemonic masculinity that prevailed in the subculture, she also witnessed an 'ambivalent masculinity' that emphasized camaraderie and support (Wheaton, 2004). A similar ambivalence can be seen in relation to fatness among many of the marathon swimmers, where the dominant framing of swimming fatness as an undesirable necessity gave way to more ambivalent experiences of fat sporting embodiment that cannot be reduced to a authentic / inauthentic binary. This focus opens up what Lois McNay describes as a more 'differentiated or layered account of the entrenched dimensions of embodied experiences that might escape processes of reflexive self-monitoring' (1999: 103). As one female swimmer who identified as overweight for large parts of her life noted: 'my heart rate is really good, my resting heart rate is phenomenal. My blood pressure is low. Well, you know, you swim and swim and swim...'. 'I might be fat', noted another female swimmer, 'but my body is amazing. Just amazing. Look what it can do'. While these stories were highly contingent and often opened with confessional statements - 'I know I'm fat, but....' - these experiences mark a changed awareness of what the fat sporting body could signify beyond

constraining narratives of fatness as synonymous with ill-health and moral failure.

Importantly, this is not simply a reflexive re-evaluation of the 'facts' of anti-obesity campaigns, but also reflects an affective transformation that in turn opens up a less adversarial relationship with the body, often after years of 'fighting fat' (see also, Hanold, 2010). For example, a female UK swimmer told me that she had weighed herself every day throughout her adult life – a practice which she had stopped while gaining weight for a swim because she couldn't face seeing the rising numbers after years of close self-monitoring. Post-swim, however, she looked back on this habitual weighing as 'a bit psycho' and didn't return to her daily weigh-in. Another female swimmer spoke of the unexpected pleasure she found in the solidity of her heavier body, its occupation of space, and the unanticipated freedoms of no longer 'obsessing over food'. There is a strong gender dimension to these transformations, since it is women who are the primary targets and consumers of the weight loss industry, and for whom the practices of close self-surveillance, guilt and obsession are a normalized aspect of femininity (Bordo, 1993; Heyes, 2006). Even among those swimmers who were planning to lose weight after the swim season was over, the interviews and fieldnotes are full of examples of new-found pleasures in the freedoms of being able to eat without guilt or self-recrimination that cannot simply be understood as playful transgression. As one female swimmer commented with some surprise: 'It felt so good to be able to eat'. After long training swims on the beach in Dover, hot drinks and easily digestible snacks such as sweets, cakes and biscuits circulate freely. This post-swim sharing of food is also a time of mutual

support; an opportunity to celebrate a good day in the water or commiserate with those who had a difficult session. In my fieldnotes, I record how liberating it is to see, and be among, especially women who are eating heartily and in public without the customary talk of necessary restraint – ‘Oh, I really shouldn’t’ – or confessions of guilt and promises to ‘be good’ tomorrow. This pleasure in eating is undoubtedly facilitated by a trade-off with grueling training; as one male UK swimmer joked at the end of a swim that had to be cut short by an hour, ‘I won’t be able to eat all my cake now’. But nevertheless, it signals a more ambivalent, and less instrumental, relationship with the fattening swimming body that is distinct from both the determined inauthenticity of heroic fatness and the (ostensibly) health-oriented anti-obesity rhetorics.

## **Conclusion**

Speculating on the possibilities of reading anatomical fat replicas ‘against the grain’, Hardy cites the work of fat activists Marilyn Wann and Charlotte Cooper and their alternative mobilisations of fake fat (Wann, 1998; Cooper, 2010; Hardy, 2013). Wann uses her ‘little lost pound o’ fat’ (cited in Hardy, 2013: 19) to comic effect, recasting it as a vacationing traveller, playfully invoking the inevitable return of lost weight. Cooper, on the other hand, uses her ‘fat mountain’ (cited in Hardy, 2013: 20) to invoke ‘anger and frustration over the pervasive medicalization of fat bodies and subjects’. Throughout the course of my research project in the swimming community, I never encountered renderings of swimming fat that were so directly resistant to the dominant anti-obesity discourse. However, even though I failed to find the reflexive critique of the ‘war on obesity’ that I had naively hoped was embedded in this site of fat sporting

embodiment, the research both exposed the stark limitations to the 'fat kills' rhetoric of the contemporary attack on fat, and unsettled those same values. When fat bodies are so habitually made the 'object of affective transfer' rather than its subjects (Hemmings, 2005), the unexpected freedoms of guilt-free consumption, the pleasures of bodily solidity and the liberation from shame-filled daily encounters with scales all signal a re-orientation, however ambivalent, towards fat, constituting what Hardy describes as 'new tissues of affective experience' (2013: 21). In short, the materiality of a fat body that is experienced as 'amazing', is very differently constituted to both the playfully wobbled body of the heroically (fake) fat swimmer and the abjectly (real) fat body that is the target of the 'war on obesity'. An analytical focus on the affective dimensions of embodied experiences of swimming fatness highlights the moral and ideological assumptions about fatness that seep out in the emerging spaces between the entrenched certainties of the contemporary hatred of fat.

There are two key implications from this analysis for thinking about anti-obesity and sport policy more generally. Firstly, in spite of the prevailing and unifying certainties of the 'war on obesity' that 'fat kills', not all fat is equal. This is not simply to suggest a hierarchy of more or less forgiveable fatness, but rather, that there are different *kinds* of fatness. The experience of fatness has been shown here to be uneven and unpredictable, produced in interaction with and always in relation to dominant values, but not determined by them. This endorses the insistence within Fat Studies that rather than simply debating 'truths' about the relationship between fat and health, the moral dimensions of the 'war on obesity' need to be kept clearly in sight. This is especially true in a social and cultural

context where (some) fatness is increasingly seen as warranting coercive state, social and medical intervention and has become a site of punitive public expenditure cuts. Indeed, the Local Government Information Unit (LGiU) released a report at the beginning of 2013 including proposals to dock benefits from fat people who fail to participate in exercise regimes prescribed by their GP (Thraves, 2013). The fatness of the bodies targeted in the proposal is about as 'real' as fat can be; it is as unforgiveable as the ventriloquized 'fake' belly of the heroically fat swimmer is forgivable fun.

This points to the second implication of this analysis, this time in relation to sports policy. This is significant in a social and cultural moment where sporting participation is being heavily promoted as a social good. However, the terms of that physical activity remain closely prescribed by the 'war on obesity'; as with the LGiU proposal, for those who are fat, physical activity is conceptualized primarily as a path to weight loss, and for all the rhetoric of health and well-being, the only plausible measure of exercise success for fat people in the dominant climate is weight loss. Conversely, the analysis offered here opens up insights not only into how that impoverished vision for sport is achieved and maintained, but also, how fat embodiment is experienced in the cracks between the prevailing rhetorics and practices of both anti-obesity and sports policy and practice. From the perspective of the sociology of sport, then, it is impossible to respond meaningfully to those interventions that connect sport and weight loss instrumentally without a contextualized understanding of the material and affective experience of the (fat) body in excess of instrumentalist logics.

---

<sup>i</sup> I use the term ‘fat’ throughout the paper without any derogatory intent, using ‘obesity’ only in specific relation to BMI-based public health policy and practice (‘the war on obesity’). In addition, I have chosen not to give individual weights, since the key point here is *relative* weight gain and the participants’ self-perceptions of fatness, rather than *absolute* weight.

<sup>ii</sup> This would include, for example, the Catalina Channel (southern California), the Manhattan Island Marathon Swim (New York), the North Channel (Ireland to Scotland) and the Cook Straits (New Zealand), among many others.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.dover.uk.com/channelswimming/stats.php> (accessed 19.3.13)

<sup>iv</sup> This is categorically not to argue that those with higher levels of body fat cannot practice those sports to a high standard; nor is it to deny the many other positive reasons why people of all shapes and sizes engage in sports and physical activity.

<sup>v</sup> Weight gain among the study’s participants ranged from just a few pounds to over 40 pounds. Most of the swimmers I interviewed gained between 10-25 pounds, although these were only estimates and many purposefully avoided recording specific weights during this period of their training.

<sup>vi</sup> Economic and Social Research Council, RES-000-22-4055 (May 2010-September 2012). See: <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/channelswimmer>

## **Bibliography**

Abbas A (2004) The embodiment of class, gender and age through leisure: a realist analysis of long distance running. *Leisure Studies* 23(2): 159-175.

Arnot C (2010) Blue seas thinking. *Guardian*, Monday 19<sup>th</sup> July, 2010

Beal B and Wilson C (2004) ‘Chicks dig scars’: commercialisation and the transformations of skateboarders' identities. In: Wheaton B (ed.) *Understanding Lifestyle Sports: Consumption, Identity and Difference*. London: Routledge, pp. 31-54

Bier L (2011) *Fighting the Current: the Rise of American Women's Swimming, 1870-1926*. McFarland & Company Inc.: London.

Blackman L and Venn C (2010) Affect. *Body & Society* 16(1): 7-28.

- Booth D (2004) Surfing: from one (cultural) extreme to another. In: Wheaton B (ed.) *Understanding Lifestyle Sports: Consumption, Identity and Difference*. London: Routledge, pp. 94-109
- Bordo S (1993) *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bourdieu P (2001) *Masculine Domination*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Branningan D, Rogers I R. et al (2009) Hypothermia is a significant medical risk of mass participation long-distance open water swimming. *Wilderness and Environmental Medicine* 20: 14-18.
- Bridel W and Rail G (2007) Sport, sexuality and the production of (resistant) bodies: de-/re-constructing the meanings of gay male marathon corporeality. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 24: 127-144.
- Brown D (2006) Pierre Bourdieu's 'Masculine Domination' thesis and the gendered body in sport and physical culture. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 23: 162-188.
- Chapman G E (1997) Making weight: lightweight rowing, technologies of power, and technologies of the self. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 14: 205-223
- Chase L F (2008) Running bid: Clydesdale runners and technologies of the body. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 25(1): 130-147.
- Cooper C (2010) Anti-obesity marketing junk: the Xenical fat mountain. Available at: <http://obesitytimebomb.blogspot.com/2010/01/anti-obesity-marketing-junk-xenical-fat.html> (accessed 11 January, 2013)
- Department of Culture Media and Sport (2008) *Before, During and After: Making the Most of the 2012 Games*. London: Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

- Featherstone M (2010) Body, Image and Affect in Consumer Culture. *Body & Society* 16(1): 193-221.
- Foresight (2007) *Tackling Obesity: Future Choices - Project Report*. London: Government Office for Science.
- Gard M and Wright J (2005) *The Obesity Epidemic: Science, Morality and Ideology*. London: Routledge.
- George M (2005) Making sense of muscle: the body experiences of collegiate women athletes. *Sociological Inquiry* 75(3): 317-345.
- Hanold M T (2010) Beyond the marathon: (de)construction of female ultrarunning bodies. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 27: 1601-1177.
- Hardy K A (2013) The Education of Affect: Anatomical Replicas and 'Feeling Fat'. *Body & Society* 19(1): 1-24.
- Hemmings C (2005) Invoking Affect. *Cultural Studies* 19(5): 548-567.
- Herndon A M (2005) Collateral damage from friendly fire?: race, nation, class and the 'war against obesity'. *Social Semiotics* 15(2): 127-141.
- Heyes C J (2006) Foucault goes to Weight Watchers. *Hypatia* 21(2): 126-149.
- Hong S, Rennie D et al (1987) Humans can acclimatize to cold: a lesson from Korean women divers. *Physiology* 2(3): 79-82.
- Keatinge W R, Khartchenko M et al (2001) Hypothermia during sports swimming in water below 11 degrees C. *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 35: 352-253.
- LeBesco K (2005) Situating fat suits: blackface, drag and the politics of performance. *Women & Performance: A journal of Feminist Theory* 15(2): 231-242.

- Lewis N (2004) Sustainable adventure: embodied experiences and ecological practices within British climbing. In: Wheaton B (ed.) *Understanding Lifestyle Sports: Consumption, Identity and Difference*. London: Routledge, pp. 70-93.
- Magdalinski T (2009) *Sport, Technology and the Body: the Nature of Performance*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- McNay L (1999) Gender, habitus and the field: Pierre Bourdieu and the limits of reflexivity. *Theory, Culture and Society* 16(1): 95-117
- Makinen T M (2010) Different types of cold adaptation in humans. *Frontiers in Bioscience S2*: 1047-1067.
- Marcus G E (1995) Ethnography in / of the world system: the emergence of multi-sited ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 95-117.
- Mendoza K R (2009) Seeing through the layers: fat suits and thin bodies. *The Nutty Professor and Shallow Hal*. In: Rothblum E and Solovay S (eds) *The Fat Studies Reader*. New York: New York University Press, pp. 280-288
- Mortimer G (2008) *The Great Swim*. London: Short Books.
- Murray S (2005) (Un/be)coming out? Rethinking fat politics. *Social Semiotics* 15: 153-163
- Ogilvie D and Hamlet N (2005) Obesity: the elephant in the corner. *British Medical Journal* 331: 1545-1548.
- Robinson V (2004) Taking risks: identity, masculinities and rock climbing. In: Wheaton B (ed.) *Understanding Lifestyle Sports: Consumption, Identity and Difference*. London: Routledge, pp. 113-130.
- Rothblum E and Solovay S (eds) (2009) *The Fat Studies Reader*. New York: New York University Press.

- Shogan D (1999) *The Making of High-Performance Athletes: Discipline, Diversity and Ethics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Sisjord M K and Kristiansen E (2009) Elite women wrestlers' muscles: physical strength and a social burden. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 44(2-3): 231-246.
- Stout G (2009) *Young Woman and the Sea: How Trudy Ederle Conquered the English Channel*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Thorpe H (2011) *Snowboarding Bodies in Theory and Practice*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Thraves L (2013) *A Dose of Localism: the role of Councils in Public Health* London: Local Government Information Unit. Available at: <http://www.lgiu.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/A-Dose-of-Localism-The-Role-of-Councils-in-Publi.pdf> (accessed 11 January, 2013)
- Author (2013) 'If I go in like a cranky sealion, I come out like a smiling dolphin': marathon swimming and the unexpected pleasures of being a body in water. *Feminist Review* 103: 5-22
- Tomrley C and Kaloski Naylor A (eds.) (2009) *Fat Studies in the UK*. York: Raw Nerve Books.
- Vybiral S, Lesna I et al (2000) Thermoregulation in winter swimmers and physiological significance of human catecholamine thermogenesis. *Experimental Physiology* 85(3): 321-326.
- Wacquant L (2004) *Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wann M (1998) *Fat!So? Because You Don't Have to Apologise for your Size*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.

- Watson K (2000) *The Crossing: The Curious Story of the First Man to Swim the English Channel*. London: Headline.
- Wheaton B (2004) 'New lads'? Competing masculinities in the windsurfing culture. In: Wheaton B (ed.) *Understanding Lifestyle Sports: Consumption, Identity and Difference*. London: Routledge, pp. 131-153.
- WHO (2000) *Obesity: Preventing and Managing the Global Epidemic: Report of a WHO Consultation*. Geneva: World Health Organisation.
- Witz A (2000) Whose body matters? Feminist sociology and the corporeal turn in sociology and feminism. *Body & Society* 6(2): 1-24.
- Zanker C and Gard M (2008) Fatness, fitness and the moral universe of sport and physical activity. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 25(1): 48-65.