

Book Review for Sport in Society

Baxter, N. (2021) *Running, Identity and Meaning: The Pursuit of Distinction Through Sport*. Emerald Studies in Sport and Gender. Emerald Publishing, United Kingdom. £60.99 Hbk. Pp.272. ISBN: 9781800 433663

Neil Baxter's ambitious book 'Running, Identity and Meaning' is comprehensive, rigorous, and meticulously researched. It provides an account of the comparatively recent development of running from a niche sport practiced by small numbers of people, into one of the world's most popular activities, characterised by major events such as big city marathons. Baxter aims to demonstrate how running in all its forms can demonstrate the complexities of society through presenting running as a social phenomenon. The author begins the book with a brief personal description of their own involvement in running as a young athlete, and the then 'ridiculous' participation of adults (such as his father) in the current 'jogging craze'. Through exploration of the role of running in contributing to identity and notions of the self, and the historical development of the sport and quantitative analysis of the field, Baxter charts the development of the sport from its humble beginnings. The second half of the book examines the ways in which running may be viewed as a self-development technique allowing individuals to take some measure of control over their own health, and contrasts this with the price individuals may potentially pay in pursuit of athletic or competitive success. The work concludes with discussion of the importance of physical location in terms of shaping the running experience and the key implications of their research on the themes of physical capital, class, and gender.

The theoretical framework which provided the lens for Baxter's methodological considerations is grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (2005). As a result, Baxter was able to engage with both quantitative and qualitative data through the self-created *Big Running Survey*, Sport England's longitudinal *Active Lives Survey* data and in-depth interviews to really emphasise the sporting landscape of running. This mixed method approach ensured that they collected evidence of the values and attitudes of 'voices from the field'. The interviews conducted were central to the study of running and although there is detail in Table 2.1. (page 31) about who the participants were, there was detail lacking as to how the participants were found. It is also unclear as to what field of running the participants were from such as road, fell or obstacle running. That said, a highlight of the book is Chapter 7 '*Running Places: How the Sites of Running Matter*' as the focus is more on the four most recognisable forms of running on road, track, rural and obstacle. The inclusion of obstacle running may be a contentious one for many runners given its comparatively recent advent but has certainly come to the fore in recent years and focuses on a market of new or inexperienced participants. The excerpts contained within Chapter 7 are from the in-depth interviews undertaken by Baxter to attempt to advance our understanding of the lived experience of those who participate in different forms of running. It also demonstrates the enormity of what Baxter was trying to achieve within the research. Those individuals' sense of identity, Baxter asserts, is reflected in their form of running and there are clear distinctions between road runners, track runners, fell runners and obstacle course runners and often there are no apparent overlaps between them.

Ultimately, Baxter is both trying to emphasise differences but also trying to address running as a field of activity, and this is where the difficulties with this book lie. Although it is refreshing to see various types of 'runner' and their motivations addressed, rather than viewing the sport as comprising a single homogenous activity it is not the sport *per se* that is being emphasised within the conclusions. Instead, the emphasis draws again on Bourdieu to deconstruct the meaning behind such a varied sport. The nature of the content does make it more attractive to academics and social scientists rather than readers interested in reading about running. It does not necessarily constitute an 'easy' read for those not already well versed in sociological theory and terminology, perhaps

making it a more appropriate text for upper level undergraduate or postgraduate students. To a certain extent, the book suffers in certain areas because of the sheer scale of what was being attempted in a single volume. For example, the concept of 'mental toughness' (a key component of the running experience) was covered in just under two pages and within this, the controversial sports science topic of the Central Governor Model (page 34) was also covered in just three lines. Without further explanation of this model, it is difficult to see how a reader unfamiliar with the term could interpret some of the extracts from interviews provided. Furthermore, important aspects of the sport of running that are important such as community, organisational structure, and governance (especially in the UK) and the potentially exclusionary nature of much running practice over the decades are not discussed. The impact of these structural constraints will have influenced how all participants (including the author) involved in this research engage, understand, and identify with their sport.

Running as a sport has certainly broadened in its scope and meaning over the last 40 years resulting in a truly diverse multicultural population of people who run for a variety of different reasons such as health, weight loss, mental health to social, community club participation to performance and podium success. The complexity of tackling running as an entire field has resulted in this ambitious book which is comprehensive in scope covering a breadth of issues related to the experience of running in all forms. It will likely be of great interest to academic runners and academics with a keen interest in the historical development of running and the experiences of runners specifically.

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