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'It has to hurt'

A phenomenological analysis of elite runners' experiences in handling non-injuring running-related pain

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'It has to hurt': A phenomenological analysis of elite runners' expertise in handling non-injuring running-related pain.

Kasper Bluhm and Susanne Ravn

Abstract

Running can be a painful endeavour. In this article, we focus on four elite middle-distance runners' experience of non-injuring running-related pain, with the aim of better understanding how their handling of pain is a part of their expertise as elite athletes competing on an international level. The article employs phenomenological clarifications of bodily self-consciousness and pain in the analysis of an ethnographic fieldwork carried out during four months in a Danish elite middle-distance training group. The first author's background in competitive running enabled him to draw on his own 'insider' experiences as a runner to perform participant-observations and facilitate rich descriptions in both formal and informal interviews. The analysis indicates that a large part of the runners' training and racing relied on three overarching ways of handling pain. The runners possess a familiarity in dealing with the 'acidic' pain experienced during short intervals and races, they 'shuffle' with pain in order to enhance their performance, and they persistently ascribe context-dependant meaning to the experienced pain of running. Importantly, the runners continuously draw on this nuanced familiarity of their pained runner's bodies while practicing and competing. We suggest that these ways of handling running-related pain can be understood as integral to their expertise as elite runners.

Keywords: Running; Pain; Phenomenology; Ethnographic fieldwork; Expertise; Bodily self-consciousness.

Introduction

Running can be an uncomfortable and laborious endeavour. Most people who have put on a pair of running shoes and headed out the door for a run can probably attest to this. This holds especially true for elite runners, who, in their search for improved performance, encounter the painful sides of running on a daily basis. When looking towards the ample body of (auto-)biographies¹, novels and training instructions², the ability to handle the non-injuring pain is given explicit attention by different writers. For example, former French record holder in the 1,500 metres Michel Jazy recalls that, during training, it would hurt ‘deep in your throat ... You feel sick, your stomach muscles knot up’ (as cited in Brohm 1978, 24). Similarly, illustrative examples can be found in the Japanese author and avid runner Haruki Murakami’s autobiographical musings *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*. Here, he concludes that his years as a ‘serious runner’ have taught him that while ‘pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional’ (2008, viii). These descriptions indicate that the runners’ ability to handle running-induced pain might be central to running expertise.

In the last two decades, we have seen an increase in studies that have moved away from the quantitative methods often employed by medical pain research when it comes to athletes’ experience of pain. The biomedical framework, in which research on pain and suffering in sport has typically been rooted (Smith 2019) and in which pain is regarded as a mere ‘matter of nerves and neurotransmitters’ (Waddington, Loland, and Skirstad 2006, 3), has thus come under increased critical scrutiny.

A link between pain and enjoyment has been emphasised by a number of studies, and the notion of positive pain (Howe 2004) or ‘good pain’ (Hanold 2010) is a well-documented phenomenon amongst experienced endurance athletes. For example, Roessler (2006) notes that elite athletes will accept pain as a necessary by-product of

training and that it is experienced as a necessary and positive means towards athletic improvement.

A large part of these pain studies has centred on the experiences of non-elite athletes (Lev 2019; Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2017) . Few recent studies have specifically focused on elite athletes' embodied experiences of endurance pain and how those athletes' almost daily encounters with their pained bodies can help us to both broaden our understanding of the 'multitude of manifestations and meanings associated with pain' (McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2020, 6). Considering the recent interest in understanding pain as a positive part of elite athlete's training (McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2020) studies in such pain(ed) experiences might challenge some of the prevailing thoughts on how pain is experienced (see. McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2020; Howe 2004; Roessler 2006). For example, it has been shown both by Assaf (2019, 2020) and Allen-Collinson and Hockey (Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2016) that learning to recognize and differentiate between bodily sensations of pain and discomfort is an important part of becoming an experienced distance runner. However, there is still more to say when we want to understand how elite runners employ such a heightened pain awareness during training and competition.

In this article, we focus on the lived experience of four elite distance runners. We aim at investigating how they experience and handle the discipline-specific non-injuring pain of middle-distance running, and further how their handling of pain relates to their expertise as runners. To pursue this aim, we combine participant observations and interviews (informal and formal) in a Danish elite middle-distance training group with contemporary phenomenological insights on 'bodily self-consciousness'. As we will specify in succeeding sections, drawing on recent methodological discussions, we

conceive of our interdisciplinary approach as an integration of phenomenology and qualitative research methodologies.

In the following, we firstly provide an expanded overview of the research discussing experience of pain and physical activity and secondly present phenomenological insights concerning the body and self-consciousness relevant for our analysis. Thirdly, we outline the interdisciplinary methodology in use. Hereafter follows the data-driven analysis of the main experiential themes characterising the runners' practices and experiences.

Pain and physical activity

Early attempts to broaden the perspectives on athletes' pain perception can be found within the extant literature on *attentional focus* in endurance activity (Brick, MacIntyre, and Campbell 2014). This subject of investigation was initiated by Morgan and Pollock's (1977) early attempts to categorise the cognitions of distance runners. The researchers described two opposing coping strategies that athletes would employ during endurance work. They noted that experienced athletes tended to *associate*, or monitor sensory information, and adjust their performance accordingly. This strategy diverged from *dissociation*, where, often non-elite, runners focused on distracting stimuli to direct their attention away from their felt pain and exertion (ibid.). This dichotomous distinction between associative and dissociative strategies has since been criticised for its apparent simplicity and its tendency to produce equivocal findings (Brick, MacIntyre, and Campbell 2014). These inconsistencies have led the authors of a recent literature review to conclude that the distinction between dissociation and association has 'outlived its usefulness' (Salmon, Hanneman, and Harwood 2010), while the domain continues to search for an alternative and conceptual framework to properly reflect athletes' cognition of pain (ibid.).

Recently, humanistic pain studies have adopted other conceptual frameworks that have shown to be a productive alternative to the field of attentional focus. Specifically, a rising numbers of researchers agree that pain is not a purely physical and objective sensation, but that it rather should be understood as a dynamic experience, which is subjective, embodied and ‘lived’ (McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2020).

One important line of argument revolves around the realisation that the social environment has a powerful impact on the body in pain. Early works by sociologists such as Katarba (1983) and Honkasalo (1998) have thus demonstrated that the experience and interpretation of pain is influenced by the social setting in which it occurs and the perceived benefits that are to be gained by its endurance. Similar findings have started to emerge in the field of endurance sports. For example, Hockey and Allen-Collinson’s (2016) auto-ethnographical work has shown that pain is an important part of the everyday mode of ‘enduring’ that they experience as seasoned runners, and, furthermore, that this particular mode is not just an individual experience, but ‘is shared by and communicated between distance runners, constituting an interactional subcultural practice’ (227). Likewise, Lev (2019) has indicated that the process of ‘becoming’ a long-distance runner can be a deeply socialised process during which novice runners will gradually learn to derive contentment in times of pain by learning relevant bodily sings from veteran runners and applying them to their own experiences.

Similarly, it has been indicated that pain is an essential element in the construction of identity amongst runners and endurance athletes. In Atkinson’s (2008) examination of triathletes’ experience of pain and mental suffering, it is shown that discussions of pain, learning to cope with pain, as well as treatment of injuries are instrumental aspects of the athletes’ personal identity work. These experiences are also shown to form the core of a

shared ‘pain community’ in which athletes often engage in public showcasing of pain and suffering as a technique to develop group charisma.

These findings are echoed in Lev’s (Lev 2020) work with recreational long-distance runners. Here, Lev notes that the runners would, at times, publicly stage their pained running bodies while running in urban environments, thereby instrumentalising their pain in order to gain social recognition and to solidify their running identity. Conversely, it has also been shown that the pain experienced in times of injury can threaten distance runner’s identity. Thus, Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2007) demonstrate that ‘identity work’, such as the continued use of running props, is crucial in sustaining a credible running identity during long-term injury.

Allen-Collinson and colleagues’ recent call for a greater analytical attention to the ‘actual and concrete practices of *doing* or *producing* sporting activity’ (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2015, 63) has produced diverse, phenomenologically informed insights into the lived experiences of running (Allen-Collinson 2008; Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2015, 2017; Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2016). Here, it is shown that the ‘enduring consciousness’ (Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2016) developed by runners is accumulated through pain experiences, and that a differentiated and contextual understanding of pain becomes integral to being a runner. Similarly, Lev (2019) indicates that novice runners develop increasingly nuanced categories of painful bodily sensations, thus becoming more experienced with their bodies while also becoming more experienced runners. That high levels of experience within an endurance sport often require a nuanced knowledge of pain is further shown by Narry et. al (2020), who demonstrate that elite swimmers, over time and with practice, learn to distinguish between and evaluate different qualities of various painful experience. Furthermore, Narry and colleagues (2020) point out that

the swimmers accept pain as an unavoidable and necessary part of their athletic pursuits, and that they seem to be able to embrace the suffering that comes with it (ibid.).

On the phenomenology of bodily self-consciousness

In his work *The Absent Body* (1990), phenomenologist Drew Leder explores the question of how bodily presence is affected by experiences of pain and discomfort. Here, he distinguishes between different modes of bodily *disappearance*. While human experience will always be embodied, our bodies are seldom the thematic object of experience in our everyday lives. Rather, it is ‘essentially characterized by its absence’ (Ibid., 1). Often, this bodily *absence* will manifest itself through the lived body’s *ecstatic* nature – its tendency to ‘project outwards from its place of standing’ (Ibid., 22). For example, a tennis player will be focused on the ball, the surroundings, the opponent, etc., but not on his own body.

In recent discussions of the phenomenological method, Gallagher and Zahavi (2008; Zahavi 2019c) advise against overlooking ‘the overarching philosophical concerns and common themes that have united and continue to unite its proponents’ (Zahavi 2019c, 2). One important such ‘uniting theme’ is the phenomenological view on the body. As evidenced in Leder’s discussions on *(dis)appearance*, phenomenologists perceive the body as an entity experienced uniquely different from any other object in the world. In many ways, Leder’s work draws on Merleau-Ponty’s (2012) notion of the lived body. Merleau-Ponty emphasises that it is only through our body that we can engage in meaningful interactions with our surroundings – it is “our anchorage in the world” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 146). At the same time, the body challenges the ontological division between subject and object, as any conscious act is characterised by both an object-directedness and a subject-relatedness. When I turn my attention to my body, it is not an object like any other object in the world. In sensuous

acts of perception, when I, for example, touch my own hand, I am both subject and object of the experience – the touching as well as the touched (94).

Phenomenologists emphasise that there are different ways in which our body can stand forth in conscious experience – what Leder terms bodily *appearance*. Such varieties of self-consciousness are addressed by the important phenomenological distinction between *reflective* and *pre-reflective* self-consciousness (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008).

While reflective self-consciousness pertains to the instances where the body presents as an intentional object (be it when I reflect on my own intentions, actions, or bodily experiences), pre-reflective self-consciousness describes the instances in which the body is experienced or lived through as the *subject* of awareness (Colombetti 2014, 116-117).

Some phenomenologists (Legrand 2007; Legrand and Ravn 2009) have proposed that the concept of pre-reflective bodily self-consciousness needs further differentiation if it is to accurately reflect how we experience and relate to our own bodies. For example, Legrand (2007) stresses that our body can never be completely absent from our consciousness, it will always be felt as a *transparent* medium through which we experience the world.

Drawing on their work with professional dancers, Legrand and Ravn exemplify how the body can enter into the foreground of awareness without being the object of attention (Legrand and Ravn 2009). They term this mode a *performative* mode of bodily self-consciousness. In the performative mode, the body is experienced during skilful performance of an activity without being reflectively attended to. Drawing upon this work, it is suggested that a *pre-reflective performative bodily dimension* is at play when movement experts work at adjusting and enhancing their skills (Legrand and Ravn 2009).

Contrary to Leder's notion of bodily *disappearance*, this pre-reflective dimension is not to be considered a 'silent one' (Ravn and Christensen 2014, 465). As illustrated by Ravn's work on professional dancers' expertise (2009, 2010), it is paramount for expert movers

to use this kind of awareness when assessing whether their bodies *feel* right in order to, for example, perform and improve their dance. Similar points have recently been made based on the analysis of golfing and tai chi practicing (Hjortborg and Ravn 2019; Ravn and Christensen 2014).

To understand our engagement in different kinds of movement practices – not least how bodily self-consciousness shapes and is part of these – we should take care to expand the phenomenological framework beyond the tendency to operate with a dualistic division between reflective and pre-reflective dimensions of self-consciousness. Rather than thinking of the body as absent, we should think of the body as transparent to our experiences and, possibly, present to our experiences without entering into the reflective realm (Legrand 2007).

Methods

This unique case (four elite runners in the same club) offers the possibility of both petite generalisations and grand generalisations (Stake 1995) . Importantly, these types of generalisations are not to be confused with the kind of formal generalisation (Flyvbjerg 2011) exercised in relation to quantitative method. When we analyse and interpret this unique case of four runners, certain activities or problems or responses will recur. We will understand these as ‘within-case generalisations’ – or petite generalisations, i.e. ‘generalisations that regularly occur all along the way in the case study’ (Stake 1995, 7). Grand generalisations on the other hand, are commonly held anticipations, perceptions and styles in larger populations, in society in general or in research (ibid.). In accordance with discussions presented by both Stake (1995) and Flyvbjerg (2011) we understand the case study as offering possibilities to counter-example, modify or add to grand generalisations. Indeed, even a single case study may foster ‘new hypotheses and new research questions’ (Flyvbjerg 2011, 314) that invite a modification and perhaps

further development of the grand generalisations of the topic investigated. Thus, in this case study we expect the in-depth phenomenological exploration of the four runner's experiences to garner insights of recognizable and expectably transferable value to other elite endurance athletes³.

Integrating phenomenological, and qualitative research

In overall terms, philosophical phenomenological analyses aim at disclosing the invariant structures of subjective experience (Moran 2000, 153-154; Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, 19). The outcome of phenomenological analyses of experiences aims at reaching beyond the lived and particular and is, in that sense, to be understood as analyses that aim at transcendental insights into our world involvement. However, and as specifically emphasised in the introduction to Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception*, phenomenologists thereby face the impossible challenge of describing the experiential condition of our world involvement without being able to fully escape, getting behind or before the way our involvement is constituted (Merleau-Ponty 2012). Nevertheless, the engagement in disclosing transcendental aspects adds important insights into how we actively contribute to and are part of the constitution of the world – as a shared world and as a world belonging to us.

The epoché and reduction are often highlighted as central to the endeavour of becoming aware of our own constitutive accomplishment (Zahavi 2019a). Certainly, these analytical 'tools' are indicators of critical processes of thinking that underlie all good phenomenological work. However, neither the epoché nor the reduction should be understood as epistemological tools that can be applied in one sweep or as specific steps to be performed following a pre-set method (Ravn and Høffding 2017; Zahavi and Martiny 2019). As recently pointed out by Zahavi (Zahavi 2019b, 2019a), it is problematic to put them to use ignoring the transcendental relatedness of which they form

part. These kind of analytical ‘tools’ are engrained in the way the philosophical phenomenological analysis is aimed at exercising its transcendental-oriented interest in disclosing underlying structures of our experiential life (Spiegelberg 1994).

Aligned with the second author’s work in the interdisciplinary field of integrating phenomenology and qualitative research methodologies⁴, we justify the project as phenomenological because of its engagement in relevant and specified phenomenological themes and the way these insights are put into use in the second part of the analysis. As discussed in depth in several articles, we thereby use phenomenological insights as part of a two-phase dialectically related process (Ravn and Hansen 2013; He and Ravn 2018; Ravn and Høffding 2017), a process which has also been explicated as an interdisciplinary methodological approach running in two tiers (Høffding and Martiny 2016). This means that we firstly focus on generating rich descriptions of the runners’ practices and experiences. The rigor of the processes of generating and analysing descriptions in this phase – or tier – unfold according to the demands in qualitative research concerning consistency and transparency (Cassidy 2016) in the process of generating data as well as in the process of identifying central indigenous themes (or petite generalisations) characterising these experiences (Høffding and Martiny 2016; Ravn and Christensen 2014).

Design, data generation, and analysis

In this project, participant observations and interviews were carried out over a period of four months in a Danish elite middle-distance training group. Participant observations were carried out during the fall season of 2018. The first author’s (Bluhm) background as a competitive runner associated with the studied training group, permitted him a practical and active engagement (Thorpe and Olive 2016). Thus, Bluhm actively participated in the two weekly training sessions referred to as *quality sessions* by the runners.

Furthermore, about twice a week he accompanied some of the runners on a daily training run. By the end of this participatory fieldwork, Bluhm carried out interviews that were formally set up as semi-structured interviews with four elite athletes. These interviews lasted 90-120 minutes.

Observational notes were taken immediately after Bluhm returned from the runs and training sessions and included descriptions of situations characterising the training sessions, conversations, and encountered running practices as well as his own first-person experiences of the training. All runners were made aware of Bluhm's fieldwork and had the choice to have observations regarding themselves not to be included in the study. Interviews were structured by following the implicit practical logic of the shared practice experiences as this implicit logic of practice was presented by the elite runners (Ravn 2016; Ravn and Høffding 2017). Bluhm thereby aimed at practicing a non-directive engagement in both the informal and the formal interviews (Ravn and Hansen 2013; Thorpe 2012; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). Participant observations contextualised the interviews and facilitated rich, in-depth descriptions of running and running-related pain on the premises of the athletes' lived experiences (Høffding and Martiny 2016; Ravn 2016).

Participant observation and immersion in the field are considered key strategies in ethnographic fieldwork (Woodward 2008; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019) which holds an advantage of opening up a direct contact with the phenomenon under study (Hjortborg and Ravn 2019). However, this involvement equally produces biases and limitations by virtue of the researcher's situatedness in the field and through the very engagement with embodied knowledge production (Matthews 2016). Participant observation is an oxymoron: on the premises of the researcher's immersion in the different kind of practices, the fieldwork also demands 'interrogation' of the

investigator's situatedness (Matthews 2016, 136). In the present study, Bluhm's continuous critical reflections on his own bodily and biographical embeddedness in the practices of elite running, set alongside critical discussions with the second author, served as important tools to being constantly aware not to blindly transfer his own preconceptions and understandings of the running practices.

Following the two-tier approach, the first phase of the analysis of notes and transcriptions was performed as line-by-line reading in which the transcriptions were organised according to significant indigenous themes. In this first phase, we thus retained the terms, images, and ideas expressed by the runners in the analysis. This part of the analysis (still part of the first tier) unfolded as an iterative process in which the dataset was continuously revisited until central indigenous (or 'emic') themes of running-related pain experiences could be identified (see also He and Ravn 2018). In the consecutive part of the analysis, representing the second tier, we actively used phenomenological descriptions concerning bodily self-consciousness in the further phases of analysis and as presented in the three subsequent sections following after the brief introduction to the runners and their practices. The three sections focus on the runners' lived experiences of 'going cold', 'shuffling with pain', and 'accepting pain'.

Introduction to the runners

During the last couple of years, the training group had established itself as one of the leading middle-distance groups in Denmark, and some of its members had just won the Danish team cross-country championships. At the outset of this study, the group included some of the best current Danish middle-distance runners, and it also presented itself as one of the few Danish training environments where more than a handful of elite runners trained together on a regular basis. All participants at the field site were aware that Bluhm was engaged in a research project on the lived experience of running pain and the four

runners interviewed signed an informed consent form before onset of the interview. No one declined to be interviewed and the interviewees' names, as well as the names of other mentioned persons, are fictionalised for the sake of anonymity.

The training group is open for other members of the club, and therefore it is not solely comprised of national-level runners. The whole group consists of around 30 athletes who differ in age and experience. Usually, the runners meet at the local athletic track three times a week and carry out various forms of interval sessions, either on the track or in the surrounding area. The four chosen interviewees included: *Palle*, who competes on a European level – mostly in cross-country and 1,500 metres – and has 7 years of experience as an elite runner; *Robert*, a national-level 800-metre runner who has been running at an elite level for 4 years; *Anton*, who competes on a European and has 10 years of experience as an elite runner; *Lara*, a national level runner at 5,000 and 10,000 metres with 6 years of experience as an elite runner.

The general structure of the runners' training week is outlined to them by their personal coaches. Depending on the place in the training cycle, they will run between 7 and 12 times a week. Bluhm's fieldwork was carried out during the fall and winter months, which is a period when the runners usually 'build the base' for the coming track season. During this phase, they often run twice a day supplemented with one or two weekly sessions of weight training. Each of their running sessions is broadly categorised as either *middle-runs* or *quality sessions*, both of which hold different focus points for the runners.

Middle-runs make up the majority of the athletes' training sessions. These runs are mostly approached as a way of 'getting kilometres in the legs'. The length varies between 8 and 15 kilometres.

Quality-sessions are carried out as various forms of interval sessions that vary in length and intensity and generally aim to increase the runners' aerobic and anaerobic, or lactic, capacity.

Phenomenological analysis of running-related pain experience

Going cold – phenomenological analysis of bodily (dis)appearance

In order to analyse the runners' experiences of running-related pain, it can be of value to start by scrutinising that which all describe as being amongst the most painful experiences of their running lives – the phenomenon that they concordantly refer to as 'going cold'. Generally, the runners use the expression when describing the instances in which they are forced to lower their pace significantly due to overwhelming pain – an occurrence that they mostly experience at the end of short races and quality sessions.

Bluhm witnessed an illustrative example of this during one of the group's short quality sessions on the track. After the completion of a joint warm-up run and the execution of some coordination exercises, the runners disperse into smaller groups of similar ability and commence to run a succession of intervals. Due to the relative shortness of such intervals, as well as the long in-between breaks, spirits are often high at the start of such sessions, and the runners banter and generally enjoy the feeling of running fast wearing their spiked track shoes. The experienced middle-distance runners possess a talent for accurately hitting their desired interval times, often running well within a second of the goal time. As the session progresses, however, the runners fall progressively more silent, and communication is restricted to grunts and hand gestures. Nevertheless, most runners still hit their interval times. It is only towards the end of the session, that some runners falter and miss the desired time by a significant margin – stumbling onto their knees after crossing the line, often having been reduced to a near walking pace on the last metres.

Following Leder's clarifications, it can be seen how the runners, at the start of the session, experience an *ecstatic* bodily self-consciousness. They are intentionally focused away from themselves, towards friendly banter, towards the feeling of spiked shoes gripping the track, towards their watches and time splits. Their body presents the 'centre from which the rays of intentionality radiate outward' (Leder 1990, 73). As witnessed by the increasing silence and the pained grunts, this ecstatic engagement seems to be slowly reversed throughout the session. It is only on the last interval that some of the runners – the ones that 'go cold' – experience the full extent of the 'affective call' that Leder associates with pain. Up until now, they were able to ecstatically engage with their surroundings, when going cold, however, this engagement is clearly broken.

The strength of this affective call can be witnessed in the runners' descriptions of the experience of the phenomenon. For example, when Patrick relays his experience of the last 400 metres of a 1,500-metre race in which he 'went cold':

It is just so much more pronounced on the track [...] there, you have to, at some point, get way out into the territory where you almost crawl home. Where you are completely acidic. It can be from all the way up here [points at shoulders] and to your knees. Just one big acid bath.

He further underlines the painful nature of this 'acidic' quality by pointing out that:

It is so acidic that it actually hurts. Well, it really, really hurts. So much that I cannot take it anymore [...] like a real acid pain.

As described by Patrick, the 'acidic' pain that accompanies the experience of going cold necessitates a strong shift in bodily self-consciousness. Now, the body presents an explicit object that stands in the way of completing the interval or race. It becomes visible how the pain of going cold has forced Patrick to attend to his body in a 'thinglike' manner – it has become reduced to a limiting and painful object that stretches from his acidic shoulders to his acidic knees.

Another important experiential factor of going cold is the immediacy and force with which it sets in. This is best exemplified by the runners' descriptions of race situations. Here, they describe how going cold will sometimes take them by surprise – not because they do not expect it to happen, but rather because they are astounded the moment in which it happens. For example, Patrick emphasises that he knows that he must be cautious when racing, because:

During races, it is as if you can run and think to yourself 'this is not that hard', and then you just hit a wall, 'bam' [...] and then you just die completely and have to crawl home.

Here, going cold and the subsequent 'crawling home' are yet other examples of the strong bodily attention that such pain demands. The situation also invites the question of whether Patrick really does not undergo any significant experience of pain before he ends up suddenly 'dying'. It appears somewhat unlikely that, up until abruptly going cold, pain is completely absent from his experience. Rather, it can be asked whether Patrick's immersion in the race situation has distracted him from the pain that he is experiencing. In this way, Patrick might have spent most of the race focusing on the competition – fighting for a good position, observing his competitors, etc. – and not focusing on his increasingly pained body. It is only when the pain reaches a certain threshold that the pained body emerges into Patrick's reflective consciousness. Then, however, it is too late. Now, the body draws attention to itself with a strong *telic demand* (Leder 1990, 78) – a demand to rid itself from the felt pain. This can only be achieved by slowing down to a 'crawl'. Such an analysis seems strengthened by Patrick's own explanation as to why he is particularly prone to going cold when racing:

I think that because you are just high on adrenaline, and [focus on] all sorts of things. That you just don't feel how hard it is, until it is too late.

Here, it becomes evident that Patrick is somewhat aware of his pained body when racing. However, it also illustrates that he knows that he will often be too occupied by the excitement of the race to reflect upon the felt pain.

Summing up, the runners' experiences of 'going cold' illustrate the strong affective call that Leder associates with pain. They do, however, also indicate that the runners will not always be forced to attend to running-related pain in the way that is described by Leder. Rather, there are instances in which they will be intentionally focused on their surroundings while, at the same time, also experiencing the pain of a hard session or race.

Shuffling with pain

In this analytical theme, we unfold the ways in which the runners, as Palle so eloquently puts it, 'continually shuffle' with pain when running. To do so, we have divided their descriptions in relation to two emic sub-themes – namely by differentiating between the processes in which the runners will *distract from* and *assess* the felt pain.

Distracting from pain

When experiencing running-related pain, the runners frequently describe that they will direct their intentional focus away from themselves and towards different aspects of their environment. One such example is given by Robert, who describes a particularly painful training period during which he attempted to keep up with a faster training partner throughout most of his long quality sessions:

I can remember, from January to March ... the only thing I remember. I can't remember the surroundings, I have no idea of how fast I ran or anything. The only thing that I can remember is Anton's right foot [...] and I keep his rhythm [...] and I only focus on his foot.

Here, Robert's description indicates that his experience of running-related pain does not fully comply with Leder's notion of the *dysfunctional* pained body. Specifically, Robert does not appear to give in to the strong inward reorganisation of the experiential field that

Leder describes. Rather, by directing his intentional focus towards his training partner's foot, Robert appears to prevent his pained body from entering into the centre of his consciousness. Fittingly, Robert describes how his training partner 'pulled' him through the painful sessions. This argument is also supported by Patrick's description of how the mere presence of other runners, be it training partners or competitors, shapes his experience of running-related pain:

When you run with others. Then there is just something about their presence. That aspect. And already there, you sort of forget how much it hurts.

This is but one example that illustrates how the runner's experiences of running-related pain are not described as purely private incidents, but also as intersubjectively shaped interactions. Merleau-Ponty stresses that the other person presents a familiar way of dealing with the world. The body is to be thought of as a body that transcends itself and that the body of the other person is to be understood as a miraculous prolongation of one's intention. The social world is in this sense to be thought of as a permanent dimension of our existence (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 362) Such interpersonal processes can help the runners to distract themselves from the pains of hard training and racing.

However, their descriptions also indicate that pain is not kept fully out of their consciousness during such processes of distraction. For example, Robert emphasises that he is only able to distract himself from the pain to a 'certain degree' and likens the experience of his pained body during a long quality-session to a slowly filling cup of water of which he is only partly aware. He knows, though, that it is crucial to keep this proverbial cup from overflowing:

There is just a limit to how often I can say to myself, 'no, one more, one more'. Especially when it's that long [...] It is like a cup, into which you pour water. And the water is all the way up to the brim. It's so full that there's this bubble of water over the brim. And then, well maybe you just have to run over a little bump or something. Or you have to keep it going for 10 seconds too long. And then it's just like 'plop', and there's just water all over the place.

Such a description illustrates that Robert's pained body, despite not being at the centre of his reflective consciousness, certainly occupies a space at the margins of his awareness.

Assessing pain

The runners also describe situations in which they will reverse this attentional process by actively checking and assessing the pain that they are feeling. Their descriptions of race situations are illustrative examples of processes of pain assessment. For example, when Palle recalls the latter stages of a 5,000-metre track race:

You count laps. How far have I run? And based on that, you assess your body. Is it too early to hurt? Or is it OK that it hurts this much now? So you try to find the balance of 'how much am I allowed to hurt right now'? [...] I find that to be really important, because it can be of significance when you decide to make a move, or to move up through the field.

Here, it is visible how Palle is not distracting from the pain and discomfort of the race, but rather is directing his reflective consciousness towards his pained body. This awareness of his pained body does not seem to entail the same kind of alienation and loss of agency experienced when 'going cold' but can rather be interpreted as a voluntary and subject-related assessment of his pained body on the conditions of the race situation.

Such processes of active pain assessment become especially prevalent when the runners describe the situations where someone, either themselves or a competitor, makes 'a move'. Here, they will often need to make a near-instantaneous decision that can be of crucial importance for their performance in the race. Therefore, the runners will actively relate to their pained body and assess it in order to make crucial decisions. This process is illustrated by Anton's description of a 5,000-metre race. Here, he recalls that he 'did not struggle' but rather felt 'in control', 'strong', and able to observe his competitors throughout most of the race. When a competitor attacks on the last lap, however, it can be seen how Anton has to make a split-second decision and assess whether his pained body allows him to follow the 'move':

There were still 250 metres left. So I had to, if I didn't want to walk the last 100 metres, I had to take off maybe one or two percent [...] But as there were 250 to go, I knew, I could feel that this wouldn't hold. I had to take the edge of if I didn't just want to hand over the silver medal.

This description illustrates how Anton will actively check his pained body in order to make important race decisions. Furthermore, he underlines how his decision to take of 'one or two percent' rests on years of experience:

It's something that comes with experience. It's not something that you can just do. That you know by default. It is something [that you know] because you have raced the five kilometres so often [...] So it's a kind of skill that you have.

Such descriptions strengthen the notion that the runners' perception of running-related pain is shaped both by interpersonal interactions as well as by their past experiences of pain. It is indeed a lived kind of pain that, at the same time, demands attention and bodily awareness. In this way, these processes of pain assessments concur with Legrand and Ravn's (2009) notion of the *performative* mode of bodily self-consciousness in which the body enters the foreground of awareness without being the object of attention. It thus appears that Anton possesses a nuanced knowledge about running-related pain that here acts as a crucial skill that he can draw on to perform at his best.

To sum up, the runners handle running-related pain both by distracting from it and by actively assessing it. In processes of distraction, the pained body is not completely out of their awareness, but is rather referenced in a marginal way. In processes of active pain assessment, however, the runners will actively check their pained body in order to make crucial decisions. These attentional processes in which the runners will both reflectively check and distract from running-related pain indicate that they experience their pained running body in a more nuanced way than Leder's interpretation seems to account for. Furthermore, this illustrates how the runners will actively draw on their differentiated

knowledge of running-related pain when enhancing their skills as endurance athletes in training and racing.

Accepting pain

During experiences of running-related pain, the runners normally attempt to accept it as an unavoidable and necessary part of their practice. This holds true for all forms of non-injuring pain and thus also encompasses the above-mentioned experiences.

Yet, as will become evident, sometimes experiences of pain are rendered *meaningful* while others are experienced as *meaningless*.

When undergoing experiences of running-related pain, the runners will often judge the pain in light of their greater running goals. In such situations, the pained running body is not necessarily at the centre of their reflective consciousness. This is illustrated by Anton, who reflects on his thought processes during painful sessions and races:

It hurts, and it is uncomfortable. But it is just about convincing yourself that it is intended to...[you] focus on the things that are more important. Because it is not important that it hurts. You get nothing out of thinking ‘this is so hard’.

Here, it becomes evident that Anton accepts the felt pain as an ‘intended’ part of his running practice. This does not mean, that he is unaware of the felt pain. Rather, Anton is quite aware of the fact that it ‘hurts’ and it ‘is uncomfortable’. This knowledge seems to hold a somewhat peripheral position in his reflective consciousness, as his main focus rests on the things that are ‘more important’ – namely his goal to finish the session or to perform well during a race.

Another, somewhat marginal, way in which the pained running body influences the runners’ experiences is by figuring as an important experiential backdrop that contributes to how high-intensity running is supposed to ‘feel’. This is illustrated by Anton, who describes how he relates to pain during a short quality session:

Well, it’s intended to [hurt]. If it wouldn’t feel like this, then it would be wrong. Today I’m doing an ‘acid session’, well, then I’m supposed to become acidic. It’s supposed

to hurt. If it wouldn't hurt, well then it's because I'm doing something wrong [...] so I try to accept it...to let it be.

The way in which Anton attends to his pained body during this session illustrates how the practice experiences of bodily experts do not always neatly concur with the outlined theoretical concepts about pre-reflective bodily self-consciousness. One potential way of analysing Anton's above experience is by drawing on the concept of pre-reflective *performative* bodily self-consciousness as described by Legrand and Ravn (2009). Not unlike a dancer describing the need to 'feel weighted' in his body to be able to direct his reflective consciousness as intended to participate in the improvised setting (Ravn 2009, 2010), Anton expresses the need to feel 'acidic' when doing a short quality session. One important difference between the dancers and the runners is that the runners will often experience this 'bodily feel' *during* a race or session. For the dancers, the specific kind of 'bodily feel' is paramount to being ready to dance the best way. Thus, Anton states that he knows that it is 'intended' to hurt in an acidic way, if he did not experience this certain kind of pain, it would feel 'wrong'. Anton's experience of how his pained body is supposed to feel during the session remains peripheral to his experience, however, as he attempts to 'accept it' and 'let it be' and focuses on completing the session. The ability to, at the same time, employ an awareness of how the body is supposed to feel is paramount, for the successful completion of the training session, as the above analysis of going cold has illustrated the devastating effects that it can have when 'acidic' pain is left unattended. This deliberate heightened sense of bodily sensitivity shows resemblance to Hjortborg & Ravn's (2019) findings regarding tai chi practitioners' cultivation of bodily awareness and further illustrate the intricate ways in which athletes can be attentive of their moving bodies.⁵ Furthermore, do these descriptions of the runners way of accepting pain indicate that the transparency of the body is handled by experts – specifically relying

on a bodily sensations present to their awareness in pre-reflective performative ways – as explicated in Legrand’s work (Legrand 2007).

This aptly indicates how a deep knowledge of running-related pain is a crucial part of the runners’ experience of being elite middle-distance athletes. It also exemplifies how Anton uses his familiarity with his pained body as an important technique to optimise his training effort and to avoid being surprised by suddenly ‘going cold’.

The above example represents an instance in which running-related pain contributes to experience in a way that is perceived as meaningful. It also points towards an important factor that enabled Anton to experience the pain in such a way – namely that it was the *right* kind of pain in the given context. In this instance, the ‘acidic’ pain that Anton describes correlated with the kind of pain that he expected to feel during the session. It seems that this is the reason why his body is present at the margins of his consciousness, where it is ‘let be’ and can act as a peripheral backdrop to his experience. Had he experienced this kind of pain in another context, for example during a long quality session where the runners expect a different kind of pain that is often described in terms of being ‘burning’ or ‘heavy’, it is far from certain that his pained body would appear in a similar way.

It is often when the experiences of running-related pain do *not* match the expected ‘feel’ of the context that the runners will find it meaningless. This can be illustrated by their descriptions of the instances in which they decide to drop out of a race or training session. For example, Patrick describes a long quality session in which he wanted to sustain a certain pace during the intervals:

When it went over 3:30 [minutes pr. kilometre], I got the feeling that I might as well stop. It was just going too slow. [...] it shouldn’t be this painful.

Eventually, Patrick ended up stopping the session, not because he could no longer tolerate the pain, but rather because the pain did not match the ‘feel’ of the slower pace. Unlike the experience of going cold, which forces the runners to a halt, Patrick’s experience of pain prompted him to voluntarily abandon the training session. As such, it becomes evident that Patrick’s reflective consciousness does not lie with the experienced running-related pain, but rather with his bodily feel *in relation* to the expected pace of the current session. Or, as he points out, ‘it shouldn’t be this painful’ to run slower than 3:30. It is because this feel is experienced as being wrong that he decides that he ‘might as well stop’. Here, it becomes evident how the runners will judge running-related pain as meaningless when it does not match the expected ‘feel’ of the context in which it is experienced. When this is the case, as Patrick puts it, one ‘might as well turn around and run home’.

Broadly speaking, it seems that while the acidic pain that Anton experienced ‘coloured’ his experience in a meaningful way, Patrick’s pain experience coloured it in a way that made the session appear meaningless. With this in mind, we might add an important caveat to the title of this article, namely that while it is commonly accepted that elite middle-distance runners expect that, as Anton puts it, ‘it has to hurt’, it is important to recognise that it also has to hurt in the *right* way.

Summing up, the runners perceive running-related pain to be meaningful when it is experienced as a means through which they can achieve their running goals. Similarly, running-related pain can contribute with a certain ‘feel’ that is experienced as meaningful. When this ‘feel’ does not match the context, however, the pain is perceived as meaningless.

Conclusion

We have described three ways in which the pained running body stands forth to the four athletes during training and competition. We have indicated how a large part of the runners' training and racing – be it in the planning, calibration, or execution of their running – rests on their perception and handling of pain. As such, these runners possess a familiarity with dealing with the 'acidic' pain experienced when going cold, they are able to continuously 'shuffle' with pain in order to enhance their performance, and they will persistently ascribe meaning to the experienced pains of running. By showing how the runners continuously draw on this nuanced familiarity of their pained runners' bodies, we suggest that such embodied knowledge of running-related pain is seen as an integral technique that the runners employ when working on refining their skills.

Such a suggestion concurs with recent calls for an expansion of Leder's concept of bodily dys-appearance (Zeiler 2010; Lev 2020) – a mode in which the pained body 'appears to explicit awareness' (Leder, 86). As such, our findings echo Lev, who points out that we need a more nuanced pain epistemology if we are to properly reflect the pain experiences of athletes (Lev 20, pp. 8-9). From a phenomenological standpoint, the current study, along with similar analyses of dancers (Legrand and Ravn 2009), tai chi practitioners (Hjortborg and Ravn 2019), and runners (Lev 2020), acknowledges that we must transcend a dualistic view on the body – and recognize the body as an transparent, but not absent, entity.

In practical terms, the present findings strengthen recent critiques of endurance athletes' use of coping strategies when faced with endurance-pain. We contribute with an elite-athletes' based perspective to the conclusions that deem the concepts of association and dissociation to be to dichotomous and simplistic (Brick, MacIntyre, and Campbell 2014). The results also add some novel perspectives to discussions about what it entails

to be an experienced distance runner and the ways in which such experience is acquired. For example, Lev (2019) describe three coherent stages of becoming an experienced distance runner, which revolve around learning, recognizing, and enjoying the effects of running-related pain. Our descriptions indicate that elite runners can experience a fourth stage of running experience – one in which they can contextualize the felt pain and act according to the felt pain and discomfort. The ways in which the runners use pain as crucial tool to improve performance seems to be an important factor that differentiates experienced from elite runners.

By recognizing running-related pain as an integral and practical part of elite-runners' performance, we also contribute with some new perspectives on the concept of 'good' or 'positive' endurance related pain. As such, we reaffirm some of McNarry and colleagues' recent socio-phenomenological insights surrounding competitive swimmers conceptualization of positive pain (McNarry, Allen-Collinson, and Evans 2020). Like the portrayed competitive swimmers, the elite-runners perceive much of their experienced pain as 'good' by-products of training that provide them with meaningful information about bodily indicators of performance such as pace and exhaustion. It is striking that both these highly trained groups of athletes utilize pain "as a way of challenging corporeal limits and developing bodily knowledge (ibid. 22). Large parts of these nuanced ways of knowing pain remain a tacit part of the studied training environment. Neither runners nor coaches addressed the specific way in which pain shapes the lives of elite runners. The runners' extensive embodied pain information tended to remain private and was not verbalised. Our investigation suggest that pain experiences do not remain a silent 'way of knowing' (Vaittinen, 2014) but are more explicitly described and shared in elite athlete and, not least, talent development environments.

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¹ For some classic examples, see e.g. Bannister (1955), Peters (1955), Pirie (1961), Hill (1981).

² Classic examples include e.g. Lydiard & Gilmour (1962), Cerutti (1964). For some more recent examples see e.g. Noakes (2003), Daniels (2014), Livingstone (2009).

³ For further discussion of how a case study can be used for phenomenological analysis. See the discussion in Ravn and Christensen (2013).

⁴ Across investigations that combine qualitative research and phenomenology the terminology is not constant – for example ‘integration’ or ‘combination’ are often used interchangeably. We use the term ‘integration’ when describing the interdisciplinary framework. We here specifically follow the framework and logic of interdisciplinarity as presented and argued for by Høffding and Martiny (2016).

⁵ See Hjortborg & Ravn (2019) for an in-depth differentiation of the concepts of bodily attention and bodily awareness.