

THE SUFFERING BODY IN SPORT:  
SHIFTING THRESHOLDS OF PAIN,  
RISK AND INJURY

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT VOLUME 12

**THE SUFFERING BODY IN  
SPORT: SHIFTING  
THRESHOLDS OF PAIN,  
RISK AND INJURY**

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# INTRODUCTION

Kevin Young

In 2004, the second volume in the *Research in the Sociology of Sport* book series was published (Young, 2004). At that time, *Sporting Bodies, Damaged Selves: Sociological Studies of Sports-related Injury* broke new ground on a topic that sociologists had been relatively slow in getting to.<sup>1</sup> As I wrote at the time, noting that “[...] sociology has not been fast out of the blocks in attending to matters of injury and pain in sport” (2004, p. xviii), it was exciting to publish a volume that represented one of the first collections of studies in our subdiscipline dedicated entirely to sports-related pain, risk, and injury research. Since that time, sociological attention in this area has expanded rapidly as, importantly, has the “imagination” scholars have brought to the subject matter. The current volume – the 12<sup>th</sup> in the *Research in the Sociology of Sport* series – is the outcome of that “imagination.” Let me explain.

It is clear from what we know from the research so far that pain and injury in sport are neither homogeneous nor straightforward. Both are complex to experience and complex to explain. Athletes do not simply become injured, rehabilitate, and return to play. Because athletes are humans, there are all sorts of complicated intervening factors, as this volume will demonstrate. Time away from sport – on the sidelines, as it were – is only one such factor. Suffice it to say that pain and injury are far more *lived experiences* than *moments* per se. Some pain and some injury are easy to recover from and represent no more than a small physical inconvenience in athletic lives, while other pain and injury are far more socially, psychologically, and emotionally impacting, lasting days, weeks, months, or longer. As many of the chapters show, it is in these latter cases that pain and injury tend to coexist with other behavioral and emotional conditions. For many athletes, sports-related pain and injury can represent a challenging and often protracted process that affects how they think about themselves and their core identities.

Complicating things further still, pain and injury are not experienced in a bubble, removed from the circumstances of sport and life. Sport can lead to injurious outcomes not only because of the inherently risky nature of athletic activity and the equipment required to participate in it but also because of the way that sport activity is perceived, planned, practiced, and policed. Obviously, these varied elements point to the importance of considering off-the-field structural factors such as the contributory roles of parents, coaches, clinicians, administrators, leagues, media, sponsors, fans and peer subcultures, legal structures, as well, of course, as players themselves. As our understanding of both the intrinsic dangers of sport and the socially constructed ways of perceiving, planning, practicing, and policing sport grows, and as public concern mounts regarding participant (and especially child) safety throughout the sports world, it seems likely that sport organizations and the public will find themselves better prepared to face the very real and very serious outcomes of pain, risk, and injury in sport.

But, over the years, the questions being asked about pain, risk, and injury in sport have shifted and, in a sense, expanded the way that the subject matter is being approached and understood. This brings us to the main title of this volume and the use of a word that might, at first glance, strike the reader as odd or misplaced. Also related to pain, risk, and injury in sport, serious questions are now being asked about the kind of social environments and practices that exist in sport that might contribute to patterns of *suffering* – such as athlete anxieties, eating disorders, depression, self-harm, drug addiction, suicide, and lifelong illness and disability. While people in and out of sport are asking more questions and demanding more compelling answers as to what is going on in sport, and what can reasonably be expected of athletes, social scientists of sport have been largely silent on the subject until relatively recently. A serious and candid examination of the link between sport, pain, risk, and injury and various forms of *suffering* is long overdue. Readers of the *Research in the Sociology of Sport* book series will quickly notice the intentional conceptual and substantive overlap with Volume 11 published in 2018 (*Sport, Mental Illness, and Sociology* – Atkinson, 2018).

If the existing research in this still growing subfield has taught us anything, it is that understanding pain, risk, and injury in sport simply cannot be disassociated from the critical contextual, organizational, cultural, and even legal factors that serve to give the pain–risk–injury nexus shape in the first place and quickly kick-in as explanatory guidelines whenever sports injury happens. These factors are mirrored in the eleven chapters that follow, written by a different roster of authors than those who contributed to the aforementioned earlier volume.<sup>2</sup>

Current social scientific thinking about pain, risk, and injury is centrally concerned with (but not limited to) the following questions:

- What is it about sport that is “risky,” and what practices and beliefs characterize risk-taking in sport?
- What is the role of medicine and health care in sports-related pain, risk, and injury?
- Are pain, risk, and injury concerns attached to orthodox and traditional sports also relevant in developing sport settings, such as new lifestyle pursuits?

- To what extent are athletes in pain complicit in their own suffering, and how do they rationalize the risk-rewards of injury?
- To what extent do pain and injury coexist with athletic identity, including for those who participate with disabilities?
- What is concussion? Is concussion properly understood, and has widespread public concern with concussion and chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) led us to re-think risk in sport?
- Are there any connections between pain, risk, and injury in sport and forms of disordered eating and body dysmorphia?
- In exactly what ways might athletes – especially those injured and in pain – *suffer*, and how might sport be seen as both a cause of, and panacea for, forms of *suffering*?
- How does the law deal with sports injury, and are legal approaches to injured athletes consistent or inconsistent, objective or subjective?
- Can the existing sociological research on pain, risk and injury be complemented or even enhanced by organizational, regulatory, and victimological inquiry?
- How do athletes exiting from sport due to injury negotiate new identities in the post-athlete phase?

Answers to these and many other questions are provided in the sequence of chapters that follow. When compared side by side, both the overlap and dissonance between the readings in Volumes 2 and 12 are clear enough. Needless to say, sociological attention to pain, risk, and injury in sport (the focus of both volumes) can never *not* be centered on the athlete. However, the social circumstances and value frameworks through which we perceive, evaluate, and respond to sport's inevitably painful downside are evidently shifting, and it is these factors that lead this new volume to conceive of the subject matter as forms of *suffering*.

## NOTES

1. Until approximately the late 1980s, sociological attention to pain and injury in sport had been subsumed under the umbrella classification of *sports violence* rather than viewed as an area of study unto itself.

2. As editor of and contributor to both volumes, I am the only exception – no other author contributed to both volumes.

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# CHAPTER 1

## SPORT AND RISK CULTURE

Michael Atkinson

### ABSTRACT

*Purpose – The aim of this chapter is to examine and problematize the taken-for-granted conceptual understanding of risk practices in sport cultures. By inspecting the mainstay, and one might argue relatively stagnant, constructions of risk in the sociological study of sport, a case for attending to a wider range of risk-based ideologies and cultural practices is presented. The chapter ventures away from viewing risk as predominantly physical in sport settings and constructing athletes as oppressed agents who naively acquiesce to practices of self-injury and self-alienation in sport cultures. Emphasis is given to a broad spectrum of risks undertaken in the practice of sport, and the reflexive, personal nature by which risk may be understood by sports and physical culture participants.*

*Approach – In the first part of the chapter, the relatively simplistic or unidimensional construction of risk in sociological research in sport is reviewed. In the second part, the complexity of the concept of risk is then discussed alongside case examples that push the analytical boundaries of how risk is a multi-dimensional construct of athletes' minds, bodies, selves, beliefs, values, and identities in a host of relational contexts.*

*Findings – Risk is best understood as a set of practices and belief that exists on a continuum in sport and physical cultures. Risk-taking in sport, however, can be personally injurious and detrimental along a number of lines but is also often calculated, personally/group satisfying and existentially rewarding at times. If the concept of risk is to be applied and interrogated in sport and physical cultures, it should be done so, therefore, in radically contextual manners.*

*Implications – This chapter illustrates the need for new and exploratory theoretical understandings of what risk means to athletes and other participants in sport and physical culture. New substantive topics are proposed, as are methodological suggestions for representations of the unfolding risk in the process of “doing” sport.*

**Keywords:** Bodies; risk; culture; pleasure; sport; relationality

## INTRODUCTION

I have always hated the term “risk sport”. By practice, sport inherently involves a series of risks (e.g. physical, emotional, psychological) through basic participation. I can scarcely think of a sport without risk or can imagine how a non-risk sport could manifest. But the terms risk and sport are conceptually and analytically conjoined in the sociology of sport. As the standard sociological analysis goes, organized sport is physically dangerous but also culturally perilous because, as a hierarchical social institutional, it socializes young athletes to nearly blindly accept the risk of pain and injury inherent in sport participation. Nixon (1992, 1993) describes the existence of vast socializing networks in sport, which he termed “sportsnets”, that both explicitly instruct young athletes to almost tacitly accept and extol the virtues of risk-taking as an essential component of being involved in athletics. Echoing what Hughes and Coakley (1991) describe as a vital component of the “Sport Ethic”, Nixon (1992, 1993) underscores how the tolerance of physical pain and suffering is a culturally learned and venerated edict. A flood of sociological research in the early 1990s analytically pointed in the same direction – sport cultures normalize risk-taking as a means of producing high performance. Frey (1991), Curry (1993), Messner (1990), Sabo (1989), and Young (1993) are among the cast of central sociological characters pioneering the critical inspection of the social mechanisms by which athletes consent to a broad range of risk-taking in sport, and the cultural frameworks promulgated to reproduce these mechanisms over time.

The early 1990s could be heralded as the golden age of research on the “culture of risk” in sport. Though core sociological frames of socialization, enculturation, and interpersonal learning informed dissections of how and why athletes become accepting of pain, injury, and risk as a “badge of [subcultural] honour”, the most pervasive sociological account of risk-taking within research of the golden age focussed on the relationship between risk-taking and achieved masculinity. Sabo’s (1989) and Messner’s (1990, 1992) research perhaps lit the conceptual torches in the field, and the next 15 years of risk in sport research consistently illustrated how risk-taking is easily reconciled as a clever (sub)cultural tactic among male athletes for achieving and representing one’s sense of (hyper)masculinity in the cultural field (Young, 2003, 2012). To this end, the ability to dangerously take risks is a marker of one’s achieved masculine strength, dominance, fearlessness, and power. Thus, risk-taking is part of proving a particular brand of masculine character in sport zones – which also, by

definition, marginalizes other masculinities, femininities, and (non-hetero) sexualities (Messner, 1992). The culture of risk, then, becomes synonymous with the culture of an unapologetic masculinity underpinning sport ideologies. Masculinity is risk, and risk is performed masculinity or at least a highly mythical, hegemonic, patriarchal, and (in the current cultural parlance) socially “toxic” masculinity. Attaching masculinity to risk-taking has borne tremendous empirical fruit over time in the process of unpacking why athletes push themselves to a range of physical, emotional, and social extremes in the name of sport. But one might argue in the contemporary era of research on risk, such fruit is now rather low-hanging.

From the outset of any critical conversation regarding risk in sport, one must be closely attentive to, and this is often overlooked in the sociological research on risk in sport, definitional matters. In basic terms, risk is the general likelihood or propensity of a hazard (i.e. practices, relationships, objects, thoughts, ideas, representations) in sport to cause direct or indirect harm (i.e. physical, emotional, psychological, cognitive, social, material, or existential) to someone or something. Hazardous styles of play in a sport involving rough interpersonal contact, for example, wherein bodies are utilized as weapons pose a risk of injury (the hazard and associated harm) to oneself and others on the field. The aforementioned style of play might be learned through hazardous ideologies encouraging athletes to view their bodies as objects to be deployed recklessly, albeit strategically, to harm opponents. Further still, sports’ insiders (coaches, trainers) might be conceived as hazardous agents of socialization who suggest, if not demand, athletes harm themselves or others in the pursuit of winning. Coaches, by way of physical and verbal abuse, may indeed enact a variety of physical, sexual, or emotional harms on their athletes given the hazardous conditions established in many power and performance sports wherein their abilities to “totally socialize” (Goffman, 1961) may be unchallenged and unmonitored (Brown, Spiller, Stiles, & Kilgore, 2013). Sports fans, by way of overt or implicit support of risk-taking by athletes, create hazardous ideological conditions of indifference to athletes’ health and welfare in the processing of desiring more thrilling sports performances.

A tragic case from the world of elite amateur sport clearly illustrates the embedded conceptual links between hazards, risks, and devastating outcomes in the world of elite sport. On 12 February 2010, the morning of Opening Ceremonies day at the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver, Georgian luge athlete Nodar Kumaritashvili died in a crash during his final training run at the Whistler Sliding Centre. Kumaritashvili, after losing control in the penultimate turn of the course, was thrown off his sled and over the sidewall of the track, striking an unprotected steel support pole at the end of the run. He travelled 89 mph at the moment of impact. Luge, itself a high-risk sport, centrally involves the management of an extreme hazard of personal injury given the surface upon which the luge travels, the physical design of the luge itself, the task of pushing the athletic envelope to achieve faster times and records, and the relative lack of protection athletes wear during competition. An investigation into Kumaritashvili’s death revealed, in addition, that the track at Whistler had

indeed been designed (perhaps recklessly so by its engineers) to achieve high speeds, and Canadian Olympic Committee officials were warned about the track and its design (Branch & Abrams, 2010; Magnay, 2010). Further still, the Whistler site (deemed perhaps too steep for the luge track) had been identified for its post-Olympic commercial value as a tourist destination, not for its suitability as a terrain for constructing an appropriate track. Others pointed to potential ruts and cracks in the ice as the cause of Kumaritashvili's death, new sled technology that had not been tested in race conditions, and even Kumaritashvili's own potential lack of competency as a luger (Borden, 2014). The case of Kumaritashvili's death points to the range of hazards associated with high-risk, power and performance sport: the dangerous nature of the event itself, the acceptance of athletes to such dangers, the encouragement of coaches and sport federations' complicity in prompting athletes to perform in potentially life-threatening conditions, and the relative denial of any need for changing sport cultures predicated on high-risk activities.

Performing a sociological autopsy on Nodar Kumaritashvili's fate as a consequence of *risk culture* in sport would well represent the focus, interest, direction, and analytic themes of the bulk of the sociological literature on risk in sport. The increased attention granted to the study of risk in sport commencing in the late 1980s dovetailed with not only political-economic, cultural studies, subcultural, and victimological critiques of athletes as persons positioned to be risk-takers but also core theoretical dissections of the genesis of a "risk society" outside of sport (Atkinson & Young, 2008). More specifically, Giddens' (1991) construction of a risk society as "a society increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety), which generates the notion of risk" carried an important message. Giddens' (1991) emphasis on the reflexive project of modern self-examination and scrutiny in order to recognize, categorize, and obsessively control risk matches a generational push in the late 1980s and 1990s for the sociology of sport to pull back the cultural veils of sport and evocatively scrutinize and suggest solutions to the risks athletes are often uncritically encouraged to accept as part of participation; these risks are inherently associated with the reproduction of dominant cultural identities and structural power in sport, and the ostensible risks of turning a blind social eye to the capitalist framing of (global) sports. The sociology of sport morphed into a hyperpolitically sensitive and ideologically engaged discipline, becoming part of a diffuse social risk awareness *oeuvre* in segments of society that Beck (1992) classifies as preoccupied with "the systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself" (Beck, 1992, p. 21). In the sociology of sport and physical culture, there is an almost never-ending list of risks posed to participants close to and away from sporting fields of one variety or another. In this chapter, I highlight preferred substantive foci of risk inquiry in the sociology of sport and physical culture and draw attention to subjects existing outside of the "risk culture" canon.

For the remainder of the chapter, my goal is not only to provoke thinking about the range of physical risks accompanying sport participation and the cultural frameworks normalizing them but also to inspect the risks of self-loss,