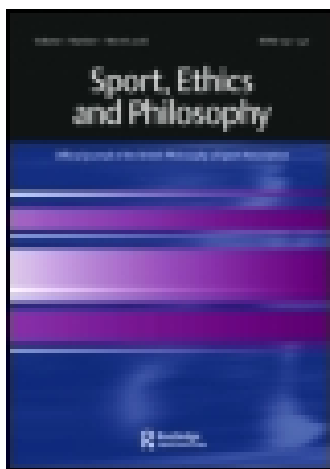


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# ON COMPETING AGAINST ONESELF, OR 'I NEED TO GET A DIFFERENT VOICE IN MY HEAD'

**Leslie A. Howe**

*In a recent paper, Kevin Krein argues that the notion of self-competition is misplaced in adventure sports and of only limited application altogether, for two main reasons: (i) the need for a consistent and repeatable measure of performance; and (ii) the requirement of multiple competitors. Moreover, where an individual is engaged in a sport in which the primary feature with which they are engaged is a natural one, Krein argues that the more accurate description of their activity is not 'competition', but an attempt at harmonious interaction. I raise a number of problems against both criteria and argue that traditional and adventure sports do both involve self-competition on at least two levels: bettering one's previous performance and resisting the desire to quit. I argue that self-reflexive competition is not so much with one's self (which is philosophically absurd), but within one's self, between conflicting motivations and desires. I explore what is involved in self-reflexive competition, particularly at a phenomenological, self-constituting level, and raise the question of whether it is appropriate for activity in wilder natural environments.*

## **Resumen**

*En un artículo reciente, Kevin Krein argumenta que la noción de la auto-competencia no resulta adecuada para los deportes de aventura, y que tiene una aplicación limitada en general por dos razones principalmente: (1) la necesidad de una medición consistente y repetible del rendimiento, y (2) el requerimiento de competidores múltiples. Además, cuando un individuo se encuentra en un deporte donde el aspecto primordial es el entorno natural, Krein alega que la descripción más acertada de su actividad no es 'competición', sino un intento de interacción armoniosa. Formulo varios problemas contra ambos criterios y argumento que los deportes tradicionales y de aventura sí que implican la auto-competición en, al menos, dos niveles: la mejora de rendimientos propios anteriores y la resistencia a la tentación de darse por vencido. Arguyo que la competición auto-reflexiva no lo es tanto con uno mismo (lo que es filosóficamente absurdo), sino que tiene lugar dentro de uno mismo, entre motivaciones y deseos contradictorios. Exploro en qué consiste la competición auto-reflexiva, particularmente en el nivel fenomenológico y auto-constitutivo, y formulo la pregunta sobre si esto es apropiado para actividades en entornos naturales silvestres.*

## **Zusammenfassung**

*In einer kürzlich veröffentlichten Publikation argumentiert Kevin Krein, dass der Begriff der Selbst-Überbietung im Abenteuersport fehl am Platze und im Allgemeinen auch nur begrenzt anwendbar*

sei. Hierfür benennt er zwei Gründe: 1. die Notwendigkeit einer konsistenten und wiederholbaren Messung von Leistung sowie 2., dass mehrere Konkurrenten erforderlich sind. Außerdem sei das Sporttreiben eines Individuums, das den Sport primär aus Gründen der Naturverbundenheit betreibt, Krein zufolge nicht als „Wettkampf“ zu charakterisieren, sondern eher als ein Versuch harmonischer Interaktion. Ich erhebe eine Reihe von Einwänden gegen diese beiden Kriterien und argumentiere, dass sowohl traditionelle Sportarten als auch der Abenteuersport Selbst-Überbietung beinhalten und dies auf mindestens zwei Ebenen: Verbesserung der eigenen früheren Leistung und der Widerstand, gegen den Wunsch aufzuhören. Ich behaupte, dass es sich bei einem selbstreflexiven Wettkampf nicht so sehr um das Mit-sich-Selbst dreht (aus philosophischer Sicht absurd), sondern vielmehr um das Innerhalb-des-eigenen-Selbst, zwischen widerstreitenden Motiven und Wünschen. Ich untersuche, inwiefern Selbstbezüge im Wettkampf eine Rolle spielen, insbesondere auf einer phänomenologischen selbst konstituierenden Ebene, und ich werfe die Frage auf, ob diese für Aktivitäten in der wilden Natur relevant sind.

## Résumé

Dans un article récent, Kevin Krein soutient que la notion d'auto-compétition est inadaptée pour décrire les sports d'aventure et d'une applicabilité limitée pour les autres, pour deux raisons principales: (1) le besoin d'une mesure fiable et répétable de la performance et (2) la nécessité de plusieurs concurrents. De plus, Krein défend que, lorsqu'un individu pratique un sport dont la caractéristique principale est d'être naturelle, la description la plus appropriée de l'activité n'est pas la 'compétition', mais un essai harmonieux d'interaction. Je relève un certain nombre de problèmes contenus dans ces deux critères et soutiens que les sports traditionnels comme les sports d'aventure impliquent tous deux l'auto-compétition au moins à deux niveaux : en améliorant sa performance précédente et en résistant au désir de renoncer. Je soutiens que la compétition auto-réfléchie n'est pas vraiment avec son moi (ce qui est philosophiquement absurde), mais à l'intérieur de son moi, entre des motivations contradictoires et des désirs. J'explore alors ce qui est impliqué dans la compétition auto-réfléchie, notamment au niveau de son auto-construction phénoménologique, et soulève la question de savoir si elle est appropriée à une activité dans un environnement naturel.

## 摘要

在他最近的文章中，Kevin Krein 認為自我競爭(self-competition) 這個主張被誤植於冒險性的運動中，並且可以應用的情況有限。這其中有兩個主要理由：1) 對於可不斷持續且可重覆測量表現的需求，以及 2) 需要各式各樣的競爭者。除此之外，當一個人介入一項冒險運動中，首先最重要的要素為自然的要素。所以 Krein 主張更精確的活動描述不是在於‘競爭’(competition)，而是想要做一種完美的互動。我指出一些問題來反駁這兩種標準，並主張傳統及冒險運動皆具有自我競爭的情況涉入，其中最少有兩種層次：超越先前的表現，以及拒絕放棄的渴望。我主張自我反省的競爭，並不是在於與個人有多大的關係(這是哲學上的謬誤)，而是在於個人本身內部，介於動機與欲望之間的衝突。我去探索自我反省式的競爭比賽所需涉入的要素為何，特別是在現象學的角度方面、自我建構的層次方面，並提出野外自然環境中從事活動的適當性問題。

KEYWORDS self; competition; performance; adventure sport; failure

Imagine yourself in one of the following situations:

1. You are in the final quarter of a race you have trained for all year, the finish line within reach, the burning in your lungs and muscles is building to unbearable levels, and your competitors are starting to pull away.
2. (i) You are alone in an ocean kayak far from shore, and in the near distance a storm is rising that is sure to engulf you within the hour; or (ii) you are in the high mountains in a remote area, sick or injured, without hope of rescue, and with no option but to get yourself out to safety or perish.

Let us further imagine that in each of these scenarios you know exactly what needs to be done; there is no doubt in your mind as to the facts of the situation or the necessary course of action. Any internal conflict you may experience, then, is not due to uncertainty concerning instrumental questions. In reality, such doubts and confusions are common and present profound and potentially dangerous obstacles to the success of one's projects, but for the purposes of the present discussion I want to narrow our attention to a specific aspect of these hypothetical scenarios.

In *Touching the Void*,<sup>1</sup> Joe Simpson refers repeatedly to a *voice* that cuts through the jumble of chattering voices in his mind, urging him on when he wants to sink into the fatigue and numbness that accompany his slow and tortuous journey, crawling down a glacier back to camp after falling into a crevasse with an already shattered leg. In considerably less dramatic circumstances, many participants in competitive sport situations have had the experience of having to contend with the wrong kind of voices in their heads, struggling to find a *different voice*: the one, like Simpson's, that pushes one on rather than pulling one back, the positive voice that drowns out the aimless nattering and the insidious, sapping voice of defeat, the one that keeps reminding the participant that 'you know, you don't *have* to do this, you could just stop'.

A common way of characterising this situation is to say that one is 'competing against' oneself, and such a conception is further suggested by expressions such as 'she's her own worst enemy', used to describe someone we think ought to do better than she does in testing situations. But does such a characterisation really make good logical sense? Surely, one person *cannot* compete against herself, as that implies that one person is in some odd way really two people, squared off against each other. Such notions are the stuff of badly thought-out science fiction and we should not be misled by common parlance and sloppy metaphor.

I shall argue, on the contrary, that there is a defensible interpretation of this situation as self-competition, one that captures the sport participant's experience of struggling against his or her own self. This defence will involve pursuing the question whether competition does, in fact, require at least two people who compete against each other in some activity. While the standard agonistic model supposes that competition is only realised in the direct and objective conflict between two or more competitors, I shall argue that the competitive situation is phenomenologically more complex than this model presumes. Rather, each competitor, possibly in advance of and certainly during competition, is likely to confront the question of her commitment to compete and to continue with the

competition at hand. For some it may be the case that such introspection is either unnecessary or un compelling, but such perfect immediacy of motivation is, perhaps, comparatively uncommon. For most, I suspect, competition is at least sometimes an internal as well as an external struggle.

I have posed this problem in terms of 'voices'; a few words must be said on this. I am not supposing that multiple personality disorder is a characteristic of athletic performance. Rather, the subject under examination here is the internal struggle or 'self-talk' experienced by the participant in physically stressful or possibly dangerous sport pursuits, who must come to terms in some way with powerful and conflicting motivations concerning the activity in which he or she is engaged. Solving the physical task may require solving a psychological one and, although I shall here put this in terms of the unification versus the division of the self, I am assuming that this is a matter of unifying *one* rather than multiple more or less discrete selves.

There is considerable variation in how sportspersons experience the sort of situation I here envisage: some do claim to experience a fully verbalised internal dialogue, some do not or not always, and some pursue sport precisely because of the relief it offers from mental chatter. It has been suggested<sup>2</sup> that the verbalisation of this internal struggle is, in reality, an *ex post facto* projection, something we do in order to make intellectual sense of our experience when we reflect upon it afterwards, as when we attempt to explain to ourselves or someone else what transpired. Perhaps someone asks 'what were you thinking at the halfway point?' and in response one concocts a story about what one was feeling or 'thinking' even though at the time one was conscious of no such narrative structuring of events. While this suggestion has considerable merit, it must be said that at least some sportspersons experience at least some of their efforts as involving a contemporaneous and explicitly discursive internal 'exchange' and it will take a strong argument to explain this away. Despite these concerns, I do not take the point to be critical: the problem I wish to bring to attention by this device is not the existence of such 'voices' themselves but what they effect to express, namely, the motivational conflicts with which the individual sports participant must come to terms and, ideally, resolve.

The account of self-competition I shall give here depends heavily on a specific theory about the structure of the self.<sup>3</sup> Without going deeply into details, this theory rejects the concept of an atomistic in favour of a complex self, one that must continually be put together, constituted as a self, in activity. Selves are selves because we make them be selves. A self is a (self-)construction out of its many and various constituents, not all of which are inherently compatible. To be a self is to be engaged in some level of self-struggle: that of integrating one's heterogeneous components (desires, motivations, projects etc.) and of making sense of one's past, present and projected future. In part, this is an attempt to build a coherent self-narrative; in part, it is an attempt to negotiate or legislate a condition of manageable self-existence, which for any given individual may lie anywhere between equanimity and barely contained chaos. This attempt to integrate oneself as a self is an attempt at coherence; the unity so attained is never final or immutable, since one continues to live and act and desire. But a degree of unity or self-consolidation is necessary if our lives are to make sense to ourselves or to others.

Self-competition in the sport context is a particular instance of this more general struggle, one that is engaged in the context of practical activity, most commonly though by no means exclusively with other individuals. As such, it does not simply happen to us: it is a consequence of our having made other quite specific choices, often ones that are

central to our choice of self. The fell-runner or solo sailor who finds herself faced with the question of whether to continue or turn back does so at least in part because she has already determined to understand herself as constituted by these specific projects of sport performance. That may well be why these struggles of self-competition are often so difficult for those engaged in them (and the failure to see the centrality and integrative function of the prior self-constituting decision why the not similarly engaged observer frequently finds the dilemma mystifying). The sportsperson in this situation may well find that her self is at stake no matter which way she chooses. The one who pushes on regardless does so because she has specific plans for herself or because she understands herself in a particular way, and this is because of prior interpretive acts and decisions. Insofar as the individual has not performed such acts, has not constituted herself in a sufficiently coherent way, it would not be unreasonable to expect a relatively higher level of internal conflict. Simply, if one is unclear in one's own mind as to why one is participating in the sport in which one finds oneself, one might also find it more difficult to persevere in it when it becomes especially demanding.

Because these issues are not unique to the context of conventional urban-based sports, but also arise in remote or adventure sports, sometimes with a significantly heightened urgency, I shall approach a good part of the discussion to follow from the latter perspective, and will argue that standard interpretations of competition discount certain subtleties of sport structure and sport experience in uncontrolled or remote environments. Finally, I shall raise some tentative questions about the appropriateness of competition, both internal and external, in remote natural environments.

In his article 'Nature and risk in adventure sports', Kevin Krein points to two main areas that must concern us if we are to make the case that 'competition' is a term that can reasonably be applied to remote (adventure) sport.<sup>4</sup> The first of these has to do with the necessity of standardised conditions for measurement of performance, and the second with the need for multiple competitors. It is Krein's view that both of these are lacking in remote sport and thus the term does not properly apply. I shall argue *mostly* to the contrary, but making this case requires examination of both requirements in some detail.

### The Standard Measures Criterion

One of the reasons that Krein rejects the notion of self-competition in remote sports is that such sports lack the sort of structure that would permit the objective measurement and comparison of performance. Given a constantly changing environment, instead of the in principle perfect repeatability of conventional urban sports, the concept of competing against oneself, where this is understood in terms of improving personal best performances, has no real purchase. As he says,

there is a distinction between adventure sports, in a constantly changing environment, and sports in which one faces the same, or similar, conditions repeatedly. Consider running races in which one is trying to better one's personal best. Athletes in such situations are always striving to be faster than their previous performances. This makes sense only if the distance one is measuring is constant and the environment in which one runs is sufficiently similar. Without such consistency, 'competing against oneself' is a much less felicitous description of what is occurring. Yet, in a sport such as mountaineering or skiing, while one certainly improves, and is trying to learn from

experience and practice, the conditions under which the sport takes place offer no precise measure of improvement. One might say that the athlete aims to outdo his or her prior accomplishments. Nevertheless, particularly if we keep in mind that future accomplishments will be difficult to compare to former ones, saying that an athlete is competing with himself or herself does not felicitously articulate the situation. (Krein 2007, 89)

On this view, then, if to compete against oneself is to attempt to better what one has done on a previous occasion under the same objective conditions, it would seem to follow that the 'self' against whom one competes can only be, in effect, one's past self – the self that set a specific time over a specific distance, or some similar objectively measurable achievement. Since such repeatability of conditions can only occur in conventional urban sport, it would also seem to follow that one cannot compete against oneself in remote sport. The standard measures criterion, then, has two implications: self-competition is only possible in urban sport, and between temporally distinct 'selves'.<sup>5</sup>

Leaving these implications to one side for the time being, it should be noted that there are a good many conventional competitive sports for which external measures and repeatability are lacking or imperfect and which are no less competitive for that circumstance. These are sports in which the environment is, as in remote sport, not fully or not at all controllable. For example, rowing, sailing and various skiing disciplines (including downhill, cross country, biathlon). One can attempt to compensate for unfavourable conditions up to a point, but because conditions are incompletely comparable – in rowing, for example, times, while inevitably of interest, remain indecisive (i.e., there are no defensible world record times). None of this means that a rower or skier cannot improve her performance, or compete relative to past results. But it does mean that the competitor cannot rely on such measures to improve her competitive abilities without further factors being taken into account.<sup>6</sup> These considerations would seem to imply that the possibilities for self-competition are even more restricted: only *some* urban sports can provide this opportunity. But, as it happens, many remote sports also incorporate external measures of performance, though not especially exact ones. Rock climbs are graded in respect of inherent difficulty, as is white water. Some mountain routes are acknowledged as more difficult than others, and wind and surf conditions can be measured with sufficiently meaningful precision.<sup>7</sup> It is also evident that one can improve one's skills and overall performance in remote sports, as Krein himself admits.

The significance of these circumstances should not be overstated, yet it would seem that the divide between conventional urban and remote sport is less than sharp when it comes to the relevance of standard measures. In that case, it would seem that we will either have to abandon the concept of self-competition for all but a few sports – i.e., restrict its application even further – or admit its wider, if somewhat softer, application. This will be so, however, only if we continue to insist that self-competition *means* competition *against* oneself, where this in turn implies engaging in an agonistic relation directly against oneself, and where this is interpreted as one's present self competing against the 'self' represented by one's own previous performances. Competing 'against oneself', in this case, amounts to a metaphorical expression for one's attempts at self-improvement (self-surpassing) – since I assume that competitive sport does not involve time-travel.

I shall argue that this is too narrow an understanding of the concept of self-competition and that its possibility does not hinge on the existence of externally repeatable measures, but doing so requires that we turn directly to the second of Krein's criteria.

### The Multiple Competitors Criterion

As Krein approaches the issue, the question is primarily a matter of whether one can reasonably be said to be competing *against* a feature of the natural landscape when one is endeavouring to climb, paddle, or ski it. Krein's response is that competition requires a *human* opponent, and imagining that one is competing directly with water or rock is a folly of anthropomorphisation (Krein 2007, 88). Granted, we can admit that people do say things like 'this mountain/river is trying to kill me', but we quite sensibly take such utterances to be reports not of a sincere and literal belief but as expressions of fear, admiration or irritation in relation to what are acknowledged to be powerful but inanimate physical forces. And despite a long human tradition of attempting to *conquer* wilder places, a great deal of philosophical analysis is not required to make the point that we never in fact *defeat* mountains or rivers, but only succeed or fail in our projects concerning them. 'Conquering' wilder places only means that we have had a good day, that we were lucky, that our preparations and attentiveness were sufficient unto the task or just that we were less stupid or careless than usual. I take it that none of this is especially problematic.

In rejecting competition as an appropriate description of remote sport, however, Krein also remarks that competition 'generally requires at least two competitors' and thus that '[i]t is more correct to say that features of the natural world provide opportunities for tests' (ibid.). Thus Krein concludes that it is better to see such sports' relationship to the environment and natural features in terms of an attempt to achieve an interactive harmonisation rather than competitive conflict.

Insofar as conventional sport competition is understood in terms of a contest, it is also normally understood as involving more than one individual. Sport is *ordinarily* situated within a social environment: even if one practices a skill alone, one usually does so in order to engage in some form of competition with or against others, though it is not impossible for one to do so with no such explicit reference. The concept of a 'contest' is likewise commonly understood in social terms: the contest in question is a game, a race, or some similarly *constructed* context. Hence we *contest*, rather than simply *test*.<sup>8</sup>

It may be the most common expression of sport competition: the confrontation of two or more opponents who engage each other in an externally expressed contestation of skill and power, to some definitive sport-specific end point or result. It can normally be assumed that only one of the contestants can win and that winning involves defeating, or at least performing better than, another. Competition has winners and losers, and these are different individuals in any given contest: one cannot *both* win and lose, in a literal sense. Competition, then, is standardly understood as a dyadic contest. Under these circumstances, Krein's rejection of the notion of competition as essentially irrelevant to the remote sport experience makes eminent sense: one cannot contest with a mountain or a river in this way.

But this is not only because the standard conception is dyadic; it is also because it is intentional. Simply, only humans can compete in the sense entailed by sport.<sup>9</sup>



More precisely, competition (as it is standardly understood) requires that both or all parties have sufficiently developed consciousness and cognitive capacity to understand their respective and shared situations, to adapt to changes in them, to strategise or at least form a rudimentary or complex plan of action and to be able to reflect on their situation in a particular kind of way. It is because the competitive situation calls forth these responses from the competitors that it is compelling for them, and also for those who observe. For competition to be humanly interesting it needs to engage its participants on a level beyond the statistical. Even gambling (I suppose) is not interesting simply because *some* numbers or combinations *might* turn up, but because their doing so has significance for those who engage in the practice; that is, because those who gamble have set in motion a sequence of events and consequences such that what turns up and whether it matters or not depends to some degree on the choices and actions carried out by themselves and others.

Another way to make the point is this: competition is interesting because it is interactive. What A does depends on what B does; A moves and B responds; A doubts himself and B takes advantage; and so on.<sup>10</sup> This happens whether we are considering the kind of interaction that occurs in a game or in the sort of contest in which the participants perform separately and in sequence (e.g. pole-vault, gymnastics etc.). Sport-competition is compelling because each participant contributes his own actions, and – this is crucial – because each has to determine those actions for himself. A competitor not only has certain sport-specific physical actions to take; he also has judgements to make about when to take them, and *an attitude to taking them*.

Thus far, then, we have considered competition as a contestation, a socially defined and mutually engaged practice between multiple competitors. But not all the contestation is directed between the contestants, as the last point hints. Competition isn't only about A versus B; it is also about A versus A, or more exactly, part of A versus another part of A.

### The Possibility of Participant Failure

Sport competition occurs between humans rather than machines because this kind of competition is an intentional mode of behaviour, requiring both cognition and reflection, and in which the outcome of that intentionality is uncertain, not only in terms of the external effect of attempted actions, but internally to the participants. Sports competition involves people with skills who make decisions, and whose decisions may or may not be reflective of their skills. That is what makes it interesting: not just that one athlete may jump higher, run faster, or score more points than anyone before, or that another might execute skills or strategies flawlessly. It is because he or she might do none of these things. It is failure that makes sport compelling rather than unquestioned success; not just that someone wins, but that they might not have. It's a point often overlooked but logically inherent to sport competition, that if one can't lose, one doesn't win. But to succeed, one must do so not only against one's opponent but, *in a sense*, against oneself. In a conventionally competitive situation, then, one competes against at least one other person, the external opponent. To do so, however, also normally requires that one 'compete' 'against' an internal opponent, either in training for that external competition or during it or both.

Now, as we saw earlier, this doesn't make a lot of sense. Barring time-travel, the only way that one can compete *against* oneself is by attempting to better one's own

performance produced at an earlier time, and one can only do this with fairness and accuracy if the objective conditions of performance are repeatable. Or so it might seem. In fact, this analysis of the situation requires us to make certain assumptions that are not entirely justifiable and that are ultimately misleading.

The 'temporal selves' view of self-competition does several things. First, it distinguishes each performance into the performance of a temporally distinct 'self'. It then evaluates each self's performance from an objective and hence primarily external standpoint, as something measurable. In doing so, it effectively treats the self that is its performance as if it were a fully isolatable and essentially homogeneous unit.

The problem with this is that these 'selves' are not selves at all and that no self is ever so simple or uniform. To attempt to save the concept of self-competition in this way is to render it increasingly nonsensical. The root of the confusion to which this view leads is, I suggest, twofold. On the one hand, the conception of self-competition as something that takes place *against* oneself imports the dyadic notion of contest into the picture and leads one to ask which other it is against whom one competes. On the other hand, a relatively simplistic conception of the self as an internally self-consistent *thing* leads one to overlook the possibility that the competition is not against any (other) self but *within* the one.

While a person may well attempt to better her own previous performance, and while talk of competing against oneself in this context is ultimately indefensible, it is true that a person can find herself internally divided concerning her present performance, especially while in the midst of it. The parallel that is often drawn between such internal conflict and external competition, while seductive, is misleading. The conflict in which the individual finds herself is between her own various desires and motivations, the desire to succeed, to quit, to understand why she is competing, to decide whether the pain and fatigue are worth enduring and so on. Given the nature of the 'competitors' in such a situation, there cannot really be any question of one of them defeating another. Can one *defeat* pain and fatigue? Or does one not rather find a reconciliation, a sort of negotiated settlement, between components of oneself that are not wholly compatible? This is not victory, but a temporary compromise. At most, one might be able to shout down one's unruly elements – that is, drown out their clamouring for attention by listening only to others of the voices within.

But *defeat* is not possible except insofar as one can enact an alteration of the configuration of the self – in effect, become someone else, by undertaking a deep and thoroughgoing examination and alteration of one's values and priorities. Since this is difficult, time-consuming and of uncertain outcome (and certainly not likely to be completed during the final sprint phase of a race), a more rough-and-ready version of this process is to simply attempt to 'get a different voice in one's head' – to find some way to see one's situation differently, to change one's physical and/or mental approach to the activity to which one is otherwise committed, so that it is a different voice that speaks loudest in one's moments of effort.

This is the havoc threatening to break forth in our opening scenarios. The voices competing against each other to be heard, the ones pushing us on and those counselling surrender, are the conscious expressions of our various desires and motivations, not all of which can be realised at once.<sup>11</sup> This, in the end, is what it is to be a self: the relation we maintain between all our competing drives, sensations, affects, motivations and judgements.

If competition within oneself, between the desire to quit, to make the pain and fatigue stop, and the desire to succeed in one's chosen activity is a legitimate phenomenon of sport experience, there seems no obvious reason why it could not occur in sport activities that do not involve external agonistic competition. Individuals participating in remote sport activities are just as capable of encountering the need to find a way to silence one internal voice in favour of another as those competing in conventional urban sports environments. In fact, there may well be a greater need to do so, insofar as such sports can put the individual into potentially or actually dangerous situations. If one listens to the inner voice that tells one to quit in a race, one merely fails to win; to do so on the edge of a crevasse may lead to a more final result.

Krein admits that the remote sportsperson may have to push herself to continue when she has little inclination to do so, but maintains that this is not the same thing as competing against oneself. This is true; it isn't competing *against oneself* in the sense that Krein reserves for the expression, namely, external contests between multiple persons. It could be argued that Krein and I are really not talking about the same thing at all: he is employing a quite narrow technical understanding of 'competition' while I am defending a more common usage.<sup>12</sup> One might at this point, in Humean fashion, see this dispute off as a merely verbal one. I am, however, inclined to resist this solution while recognising the diagnosis, on the grounds, first, that the narrow interpretation is too narrow to be fully defensible for the reasons already adduced in the early sections of this paper and, second, even this narrow usage is plausible in large measure because we presuppose the sort of phenomenological background I here describe. In other words, the situation that the technical definition captures is dependent upon the phenomenological situation of the would-be competitor, to which the ordinary sense of the term refers; without the latter, it is not clear that the former would make any sense, that it would be of more than technical interest. In fact, it is precisely this internal competition that makes sport of any kind compelling: the struggle and the uncertainty: can I do this or not? How far can I go? When will I have to give in? Will I be able to refuse to give in? In conventional sport, of course, all the competitors face the same questions, hear their own voices, and each is counting on their own ability to withstand the negative voice, and quite possibly hoping that their competitors give in to their own. In remote sport, there are likely no competitors in a direct sense, but the challenge remains. Indeed, this is at least part of the attraction of remote sport for many of its participants.

### Voices in the Wilderness

In expressing doubt about the fit of the concept of self-competition with remote sport, Krein is only concerned with the question of whether it makes sense in the context of a variable and uncontrolled environment. His suggestion that a more felicitous attitude of engagement in such environments is that of interactive partnership, especially in preference to attitudes of conquest (Krein 2007, 90–1), does, however, prompt the following question: is self-competition, in the form that I have described and have argued as *possible* in remote sport, something that *ought* to be pursued in remote sport?

Prima facie this would appear an altogether frivolous question – if remote sport is itself an acceptable practice, then so should be competence at it and, all the more, surviving it, since these are the outcomes of a satisfactory response to the internal voices

of surrender and resolution. But there are possible objections to remote sport as a practice, or at least to certain ways of practising it. Some have objected to the transposition of competitive modes of sport practice to the remote environment, on the grounds that such egoistic, human-centred attitudes are inimical to the formation of more environment-centred ones.<sup>13</sup> It may be that a substantial body of remote sport practice is non-competitive, but not all of it is, and not all its participants pursue it in that spirit. Since my interest in this paper is with the character and coherence of self- rather than other-competition, I will leave the question of the value of competitive adventure sport for another day. However, whether our remote sport practice is anthropocentric and competitive or envirocentric and interactional, many remote sports do have a detrimental effect on the landscape they celebrate. Sometimes this damage is inherent to the particular sport practice (bolted climbing, *via ferrata*); sometimes it is a result of careless use or the popularity of a specific location: erosion, litter and pollution, the proliferation of ancillary service industries, even the destruction of the surrounding area in order to expand adventure facilities as in resort-based sports. The striving for ever more difficult, varied and exotic challenges, the desire to be first, more innovative or daring and the desire of ever greater numbers of people to have a share in such experiences – all put increasing stress on natural environments, rendering them increasingly less wild and ever more endangered.

These vexed questions aside, and concentrating on the matter of self-competition, a possible objection that is nonetheless not unrelated to the previous considerations that might be put forward is this: if one is engaging in remote sport *in order to* sort out one's personal motivational demons, and thus is using such fragile spaces as the extreme backdrop for the playing out of a purely human drama, it seems reasonable to object that one is out there for the wrong reasons. If what one wants is to 'prove oneself' one would be better advised to take up a conventional urban sport, not only because the opportunities for self-testing are more frequent, repeatable and reliable, but because one is likely to do less (direct) damage to fragile ecosystems,<sup>14</sup> is less likely to incur the considerable costs of remote search and rescue and perhaps incur a lesser social cost in terms of emotional stress and loss for family and loved ones. Simply, using remote sport *in order to* 'prove oneself' is arrogantly self-serving behaviour.

While I think that there is much truth in this objection, it also rests on an assumption concerning motivation that is highly contingent. Yes, some people do engage in remote sport for such self-serving reasons, but many do not. One might climb mountains or circumnavigate the globe in a small boat for the sake of discovering the world as it is and one's place in it, that is, for good enviro-moral reasons – or for any number of other reasons that are not inherently destructive or negligent. But one may still very well have to deal with the need to push oneself against the desire to give in. In fact, in the more physically and/or mentally demanding of situations, where conditions and risks are particularly extreme, it is perhaps inevitable that self-competition will become a reality. In such instances, one will simply have to get the right voice to speak in one's head or risk a more permanent silence.

The question then is whether self-competition is *the reason for* one's pursuit of remote or adventure sport, or whether it is something that one encounters during the course of the activities that one engages in for other reasons. If the former, I think we have the right to be sceptical about the justification of using fragile ecosystems and incurring exaggerated personal risk for such purposes when there are adequate alternatives

available. If the latter, then remote sport simply shares with urban sport a fundamental characteristic of human endeavour and, indeed, of sport as such.

In summary, we began with the puzzle of who exactly one competes against when one struggles with conflicting voices during periods of high physical stress, and considered the question of whether this common notion of competing against oneself can be made to make sense. As we saw, Krein argues that self-competition is not possible in remote sport for two reasons: it requires standard repeatable conditions; and competition in general requires multiple competitors. Both of these are lacking in remote sport, in which the only candidate for opponent is a feature of the natural landscape. Thus, he rules out competition in remote sport, both in terms of an external relationship to another and as a self-referential phenomenon.

I have argued in response that the first criterion fails because it treats the self as a simple atomistic unit and can therefore only interpret self-competition in terms of temporally distinct and separate selves, whereas we need to recognise that selves are not homogeneous atoms, but relational at a fundamental constitutive level – a self is the activity of putting potentially conflicting elements into relation. With respect to the second criterion, that competition requires multiple persons to compete against each other, it follows from this that one cannot compete against oneself because there is only the one. While this is true so far as it goes, it likewise overlooks the internal complexity of the self. What permits self-competition of the sort suggested by Joe Simpson's experience with the voices in his head and the similar struggles of many competitive athletes is a multiplicity of self, not externally nor of number but internally: *within* rather than *without*. It is with respect to this internal sense of competition that we can say that there is indeed a contest of self in remote sport, just as there is both this and the contest of selves in conventional urban sport.

## NOTES

1. Simpson 1997, 141 and *passim*.
2. An earlier version of this paper was presented as a keynote address to the annual meeting of the British Philosophy of Sport Association at Aarhus University, Århus, Denmark, April 2008; this version has profited considerably from the ensuing discussion, with this particular point raised by Stephen Mumford. The subtitle of the present paper derives from a post-race conversation between coach and athletes in Calgary, June 2007.
3. I will not present a full account here; the kind of view I am inclined to espouse is detailed in 'Self and pretence: Playing with identity' (Howe 2008), and to a lesser extent in 'Queer revelations: Desire, identity, and self-deceit' (Howe 2005). Both papers rely on a narrative constructivist view, exemplified by authors such as Herbert Fingarette, Marya Schechtman and others.
4. Krein 2007, 80–93. I shall make frequent reference in the following to Krein's paper, but the reader should note both that the comments I refer to make up a very minor part of it and that these are the only parts of it with which I take issue.
5. Of course, temporally distinct selves are never identical selves, and so this criterion, in a sense, requires conditions that can never be met. The athlete who tests at time  $t^2$  is never the 'same' as at time  $t^1$ , if only because he has already had the experience of having tested in this way before. Thus the concept of competing against oneself, where this requires a multiplication of temporally distinct selves, is not strictly defensible although it

is admittedly a strategy of performance improvement commonly deployed. In such a case, the athlete's *performances* at standard tests improve (are faster, higher etc.), but they are not distinguishable from the athlete: the performances are different because the athlete is different in respect of the characteristics that contribute to a change in performance which, in any given case, might be oxygenation levels, muscle mass, adequate rest or attitude, among others. Consequently, the athlete attempting to improve performance can be said to be competing against his or her self only in the sense that he or she is looking to oppose one (temporally localised version of) self against another. Finally, while the notion of competing against a *future*, as opposed to a past, self seems *prima facie* incoherent, one might be able to do so in the limited respect implied in the case where one sets a performance standard for oneself knowing that one will be contesting and looking to exceed that standard in a later test – thus looking to control now 'who' one's later self will compete against.

6. Loland (2001, 128) also points out that many sports, despite having 'well-defined frameworks' 'do not measure performances in exact ways'; in these sports and those in which performance is dependent upon interaction with others (games), performance measurement is imprecise and they are thus not record sports.
7. See, for example, Beedie 2007, 35–9.
8. Thus we might test ourselves against a feature of the natural environment, such as a mountain or river, or an artificial one (a brick wall), or even ourselves (how long can I stay awake, fast or go without caffeine). See also Kretchmar 1975.
9. That is, in the hypothetical space defined by the convention of sport-play.
10. Krein (2007, 90) makes much the same point.
11. It should be noted that these 'voices' may well be constituted at various times by those of others, thus being not so much our own as our internalised responses to the demands and entreaties of others, such as parents, children, coaches, loved ones and opponents.
12. I owe this point to Leon Culbertson, Århus, 2008.
13. Nils Faarlund, quoted in Naess 1989, 178–9.
14. It is an empirical question that I cannot settle here whether urban sports, with their considerable infrastructure, do more or less environmental damage overall than remote sports.

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