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Beyond the Marathon: (De)Construction of Female Ultrarunning Bodies

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This article examines the ways in which high-performance female ultrarunning bodies are created by and understood through the discourses of the normative running body, the ideal female body and pain. Using a Foucauldian framework, this paper shows how the ultrarunning body becomes a desired body beyond the marathon and how these same desires produce multiple and complex subjectivities for female ultrarunners. In-depth interviews were conducted with 8 high performance female ultrarunners. Findings suggest that ultrarunning is a sporting space which gives rise to more diverse subjectivities than previously found in distance running literature. Simultaneously, this discourse produces disciplined bodies through the mode of desire and "unquestioned" social norms, paralleling the constructs of extreme sports and (re)producing middle-classness.

Cet article examine comment, par le biais de discours sur la douleur, le corps féminin et le corps normatif du coureur, sont créés et compris les corps féminins de haute performance en marathon. En utilisant une approche foucaldienne, l'auteur démontre comment le corps de course ultra devient un corps désiré au-delà du contexte du marathon et comment les désirs produisent des subjectivités complexes et multiples pour les coureuses. Des entrevues en profondeur ont été réalisées auprès de huit coureuses de haute performance. Les résultats suggèrent que la course ultra constitue un espace sportif qui permet des subjectivités plus diversifiées que ne l'ont laissé entendre les écrits sur la course à distance. Simultanément, le discours ci-haut mentionné produit des corps disciplinés par le biais du désir et des normes sociales qui ne sont pas remises en question, ce qui fait écho aux construits sur les sports extrêmes et ce qui reproduit l'appartenance à la classes moyenne.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s the marathon became highly commercialized and popularized (Chase, 2008), becoming a sporting site not only for performance, but also "fitness" oriented participation. Chase (2008) states that

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marathons became a heavily sponsored sporting activity constructed for anyone wanting to improve their physical well-being. Thus, the "entrenchment of running in the American sporting scene and in American life" (Chase, 2008, pp. 131–132) was solidified by the popularization and visibility of the marathon. One outgrowth of this development is that running in the United States has been positioned primarily as a middle-class activity through which "middle-classness"[1] is normalized (Abbas, 2004). Yet, just when the marathon was moving to urban areas, another type of running event, ultrarunning (any distance longer than a marathon), moved away from the roads and onto remote trails (Brannen, 2006; Massa, 2006). While not equaling the overall participation numbers of marathons, the number of ultra races has tripled and the participation rate of women has increased sixfold since the 1980s (Medinger, 2009; Milroy, 2001). Notably, ultrarunning situates itself differently from the marathon in that it constructs itself as having less focus on a competitive ethos (Allison, 2001; Brannen, 2006; Massa, 2006; Medinger, 2009; Milroy, 2001) and, as is taken up in this article, "in no area does ultrarunning differentiate itself from other sports, even endurance sports, than in the excellence of women" (Allison, 2001, p. 7). Despite significant growth over the past two decades, ultrarunning has received little theoretical attention (see Sknobe, 2009; Terjesen, 2008; Tulle, 2007, 2008) and specific research into female ultrarunners is nonexistent.

My aim in this article is to examine the ways in which high-performance female ultrarunning bodies are created by and understood through the discourses of the normative running body, gender/femininity and pain. My intent is not necessarily to determine what constitutes a female ultrarunning body *per se,* but rather to interrogate *how* the ultrarunning body becomes a desired body and *how* these same desires produce multiple and complex subjectivities for female ultrarunners. My empirical investigation utilizes a Foucauldian framework to broaden our understanding of female distance running bodies and answers a call for Foucauldian informed inquiry into sporting practices "in the wake of neo-liberalism" (Cole et al., 2004, p. 222). Thus, it provides insights into the various ways individuals create identities within this context to illustrate how ultrarunning contributes to the popularization of running as a sport, "entrenching" it further into American life and (re)producing middle-classness.

I begin with a brief overview of ultrarunning followed by a discussion of the previous literature on the social construction of the female distance running body. Before presenting my findings, I detail the theoretical underpinnings and methods used in this study. I conclude by suggesting that, for women, ultrarunning gives rise to discursive constructions of female distance running bodies that allow for diverse and complex constructions of female distance runners while simultaneously serving to support values of the middle-class through neo-liberal notions of success and self-empowerment.

Contextualizing High Performance Female Ultrarunning Bodies

Although ultrarunning is officially any race longer than a marathon, the most common distances are 50k, 50 miles, 100k, and 100 miles. Races can be longer multiday or timed events such as the 12-hour and 24-hour races in which competitors

see how far they can run in 12 or 24 hour. Ultras take place on varied terrain, but by far the most common setting for an ultra is on unpaved roads or trails through forests and up and over mountain passes (Brannen, 2006; Massa, 2006). With the onset of more trail ultras, which take place in extreme conditions over vastly varied terrain, comparisons over distances are much more difficult (Brannen, 2006; Massa, 2006) and pace per mile becomes a variable rather than an immutable measure of success, which is in stark contrast to the marathon and other road running races. Due to the extreme distances and the less defined pace per mile, ultrarunning emphasizes the idea that being tough, pushing the limits of the body and finishing, not necessarily winning or being among the fastest, is a signifier of success, which in turn leads to a better sense of self (Bradbury & Lott, 2007; A. Krupicka, 2007a; T. Krupicka, 2007b; Theusch, 2007).

The growth of ultrarunning in general and the increase in women's participation in particular over the past 25 years is significant. The majority of the competitors are male and between the ages of 25–55 years. In the early 1980s very few women raced in ultra events primarily because women were not allowed to compete in longer distance running events internationally. In the U.S. women were allowed entrance into ultra races; however, very few women competed and the estimate of female racers during that time is 4% (Milroy, 2001). Yet, the changes that took place in long distance running during the 1980s and early 1990s helped move ultrarunning into a more recognized form of distance running. By the late 1990s the number of female ultrarunners grew to 10%. Concurrently, "the story of the 90s was the explosion in the 100 mile trail ultra" (Cantrell, 2001, p. 18). During this time the success of a few female ultrarunners relative to the men, especially in these longer trail races, "opened the door for other women to feel they could compete with men over very long distances" (Allison, 2001, p. 7). By 2008 women's participation was up to 27% (Medinger, 2009). As one high performance female ultrarunner notes, "It's easy to talk about increases in performances for women, but a development I believe that should not be overlooked is the number of women who are now running ultras after years of being the support crew" (Allison, 2001, p. 8).

Disciplined Running Bodies: Lean and Pain-full

Previous research on distance running cultures suggests that ultrarunning appeals primarily to middle-class participants due to such values as self-empowerment and nonaggressive bodily toughness (Abbas, 2004; Smith, 1998). In addition, previous findings indicate that one positive outcome of running is a better sense of self through personal success (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Chase, 2008; Hockey, 2005; Major, 2001; Smith, 1998; Tulle, 2007, 2008). Furthermore, it appears that the normative long distance running body is constructed as lean and muscular (Abbas, 2004; Greenleaf, 2002; Johns & Johns, 2000; Smith, 1998). Using various theoretical frameworks, these studies confirm the presence of the normative running body but offer little in terms of how multiple subjectivities might be produced through this discursive construction. More recently, however, two studies (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Chase, 2008) employed a Foucauldian framework, showing the disciplining effects of the normative running body and the multiple subjectivities that resulted for participants. Bridel and Rail (2007) found that male gay marathoners "did recognize a wide range of body types, [but] most pointed to an 'optimal' body shape

and size" (p. 136). For the gay marathoners, this "optimal" body shape was lean and muscular. Bridel and Rail argue that the marathoners were disciplined by the normative running body by desiring this shape, but in doing so were simultaneously "resisting" the normative athletic body of gay "buff" culture. In her investigation of Clydesdale runners[2] Chase (2008) argues that "large" or "fat" running bodies "resist" normative notions of a running body by their very presence, but that ultimately they are not accepted as running bodies by the marathon community. Despite having larger bodies and being able to run a marathon, many Clydesdale runners "strive to attain this acceptable and disciplined body" (p.137). Drawing from Foucault, she argues that the marathon is a sporting space in which "unacceptable bodies can be properly disciplined and reshaped" (p. 134). In both studies researchers show how the normative running body serves as a disciplining discourse through participants' *desires* to achieve this very specific body shape.

The dominant position of the lean and muscular normative running body also seems to position distance running as a sport through which a desired body shape can be obtained, primarily through the idea that running is an ideal activity for weight control (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Chase, 2008; Johnsgard, 1985; Major, 2001; Markula, 2000). These findings parallel other Foucauldian informed research on female athletes. For example, Chapman (1997) suggests that women in rowing felt less good about their bodies in the off-season when they had gained weight. The participants felt that being more active and engaging in a sporting activity was the best way to lose the undesired weight and achieve the desired ideal female body. In addition, Cox and Thompson (2000) show that for elite female soccer players a lean, muscled body was synonymous with a high performance soccer body. In other words, shaping a high performance body would simultaneously allow these women to achieve the desired ideal female body. Furthermore, it was noted that some players associated a "fat" body with a lack of commitment to training. Foucauldian informed studies on distance runners (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Chase, 2008; Johns & Johns, 2000) present inconsistent findings with respect to weight control. Johns and Johns (2000) note that, unlike the other athletes they studied, weight control was not a prominent discourse regarding distance runners' decisions about diet and nutrition. In contrast, Bridel and Rail (2007) and Chase (2008) observed that the recreational marathoners they interviewed pointed to weight management as a directly stated motivator with the normative running body as the desired goal. These studies offer some insights into how desire for weight control is a part of the normative running body discourse for distance runners. In addition, female distance runners have frequently been the focus of physiological and psychological research (Parker, Lambert, & Burlingame, 1994; Thompson, 2007; Weight & Noakes, 1987) concerning the intersections of weight control and eating disorders. This research indicates that there is a greater tendency for high performance female runners to display physical signifiers of eating disordered bodies (i.e., extremely thin). Nevertheless, no studies have employed a Foucauldian perspective investigating how the normative running body functions alongside the ideal feminine body for female distance runners.

In addition to a desire for a thin (normative running) body, research on distance running suggests that pain and injury occupy a prominent place in runners' understandings of themselves. Research shows that running is typically constructed as demanding, arduous and injury prevalent. Furthermore, runners

generally expect pain to be a normal part of their experience (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Collinson & Hockey, 2007; Hockey, 2005; Major, 2001; Markula, 2000). Foucauldian investigations into pain have centered on the highly physical, aggressive sport of rugby (Chase, 2006; Pringle, 2001, 2009; Pringle & Markula, 2005). For instance, Pringle and Markula (2005) show how Foucauldian informed analyses of rugby pain support the idea that "sport does not consistently or unambiguously produce culturally dominant conceptions of masculinities" (p. 472). For instance, these studies suggest that the pain discourse is used to support culturally acceptable forms of masculinity while simultaneously serving as a point of questioning (Pringle, 2001) and constant negotiation (Pringle & Markula, 2005). As such, they argue that male rugby players construct and experience less stable, more diverse masculinities than the dominant cultural norm would suggest. In her study of female rugby players, Chase (2006) argues that the "bruised, battered, and bleeding bodies present a very striking contradiction to images of ideal female bodies" (p. 239). Chase shows how these women rugby players consciously use the pain and injury discourse to problematize femininity and the ideal female body discourses, allowing them to create a wider array of subjectivities as physically active women. There is, nevertheless, a notable dearth of Foucauldian informed analyses of pain beyond the highly physical and aggressive, contact sport of rugby. One example of such analysis on distance running shows that the pain discourse functioned as one of several discourses supporting the (re)production of the "marathon body." For instance, the gay marathoners' interviews "were steeped in injury-related narratives" (Bridel & Rail, 2007, p. 135). Bridel and Rail note that self-identification as a "runner" included adherence to rigorous training of which pain and injury were frequent and expected aspects.

While sociocultural and psychological investigations of distance running highlight important issues and demonstrate the presence of the normative running body, ideal female body and pain discourses, how these discourses function simultaneously as "individuation and collectivization" (Miller, 2009, p. 181) processes in distance running remains undertheorized. In other words, how might distance runners make sense of these discourses in the production of unique, individual identities while simultaneously reproducing identities that allow them to maintain collective identities such as "distance runner" or middle-classness. In this way, we still know relatively little about the discursive construction of distance running or women's ultrarunning body. My analysis builds upon the notable gaps in the literature by (1) exploring the discursive construction of the normative running body in an understudied sport context, (2) examining how the ideal body/femininity functions in the (re)production of the discursive construction of female distance runners, and (3) investigating how the discursive construction of pain supports identity constructions for athletes involved in "less aggressive bodily" sports. More generally, I seek to further our understanding of "middle-classness" prevalent in distance running. Miller (2009) reminds that "Sport is a key site of pleasure and domination. . . . and these dualities, the tensions they embody, are nowhere better analyzed than with the tools provided by … Foucault" (p. 190). I adopt a Foucauldian perspective to explore complex subjectivities of female ultrarunners along with the neo-liberal focus on self-empowerment in ultrarunning. I now turn to the key aspects of Foucauldian theorizing that inform the present inquiry.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Foucault's concept of power is arguably his most important concept (Cole et al., 2004). Foucault (1977b) argues that "power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress... If, on the contrary, power is strong this is because, as we are beginning to realize, it produces effects at the level of desire" (p. 59). For Foucault, power is productive force operating at the level of the body. Specifically, I employ Foucault's understanding that the power-knowledge nexus *produces* subjects in two ways, technology of dominance and technology of self, both of which are enacted through practices.

Technologies of dominance have been understood as ways that power and knowledge come together to produce seemingly stable sets of discursive power relations, setting up a sense of normal and often limiting ways of understanding oneself and experiencing the body (Foucault, 1970, 1977b, 1983, 1995). The literature highlighted earlier showed that the normative running and ideal female body discourses along with pain discourse function to limit how distance runners understand and experience their bodies. For example, the Clysdesdale and gay marathoners runners express a desire to attain a certain body shape according to the normative running body because it legitimizes their identities as distance runners. Technologies of power operate in two interconnected ways. First, Foucault introduced the notion of *discourse* to describe ideas or "knowledge" that "can act to constrain and *subject* people to certain ends, identities and modes of behavior" (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 8). In particular, he showed how scientific discourse, which measured or categorized people, acted as strong influences on people's identities (Foucault, 1970). The term he used for this theory was "subjectivation." In other words, individuals become subject to discourse and construct their identities based on these ideas or categories that are named. When categorizations occur, it sets in motion a sense of "normal." It is from this sense of "normal" that the individual is compelled (through desire) to self-regulate and align her identity with dominating or accepted discourses (Foucault, 1983). Notably, participants in distance running articulate that one of the reasons they participate is because they experience a better sense of self. In this way, "distance runner" becomes a normalized category and desired identity. Thus, one reason individuals desire to participate in distance running might be because it allows them to realize the value of self-empowerment, which in turn supports their middle-class identities. Second, Foucault believed that the body was the site upon which and through which the effects of discourses manifested via disciplinary practices (Foucault, 1977b). Foucault's investigations into prisons, military and schooling demonstrate how bodily movements become scrutinized to the point that individuals begin to self-regulate. He defines docility of the body in the following way: "a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault, 1977a, p. 136). Foucault notes that bodily self-regulation is the result of the relationship between docility and utility. The more the body performs correct, prescribed movements, the more useful it becomes, which in turn instills the *desire* to perform correct movements. Some sport scholars (Heikkala, 1993; Shogan, 1999) have applied these ideas to high performance sport, showing how many aspects of high performance sport such as development of technique, nutrition, the will to win and rigorous physical training operate as

disciplinary practices, producing narrow identities and docile bodies. For instance, Chapman's rowers were disciplined by high performance sport through the practice of weight control not only during the competitive season, but also through their feelings of discontent with their off-season bodies. In addition, it appears as though elite female distance runners desire a very specific body shape because they associate this specific shape with performance. Finally, while not outright desired in the same way as the rugby players, pain and injury are accepted as inevitable because of accepted training practices in distance running that promote pushing the body to its limits. Similarly, I was interested in how discourses were articulated in the "production" of ultrarunning bodies and how these discourses served to produce docile, disciplined bodies through *desires*.

Foucault's early concept of technology of the self can be employed for understanding how the participants actively negotiated the discourses of the normative running body, ideal female body and pain. In particular, my study is informed by Foucault's interest in critique as a precondition to a technology of the self as described in *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Volume 2* (1985). According to Foucault, critical awareness is an attitude that has practical implications (Foucault, 1984). Critique takes the form of problematizations; that is, "it is to render alien modes of thought and behavior that we accept as normal and everyday" (Lloyd, 1996, p. 244). Furthermore, Foucault alluded that the body could be a source of this questioning. He says, "once power produces this effect, there inevitably emerge the responding claims and affirmations, those of one's own body against power" (Foucault, 1977b, p. 56). Thus, my concern was to examine the ways in which the body practices of ultrarunning led to problematizations as an initial step in a technology of the self. Primarily, I used this idea to investigate how power relations might be "modified by their very exercise, entailing a strengthening of some terms and a weakening of others" (Foucault, 1978, p. 97). In other words, how might problematizations occur through the very act of the disciplining effects of ultrarunning and lead participants to exercise some relative freedom with respect to which discourses activate them according to desires within this context. Following Foucault, I assumed that the two technologies worked simultaneously. Thus, I investigated not only the ways in which discourses serve to (re)produce normalized subjectivities and docile bodies, but also considered the ways in which participants actively make sense of discourses and construct their sporting "selves" and bodies in unique ways.

The final step of the analysis is motivated by Foucault's emphasis on the "polyvalence of discourses" (Foucault, 1978, p. 100) and an attitude of critique (Foucault, 1984). Foucault reminds that individuals operate "within a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies. It is this distribution that we must reconstruct" (p.100). In addition to knowledge and practices, Foucault also thought that disciplinary discursive productions could be detected by trying "to discover how the related facts of interdiction or concealment are distributed with respect to them" (Foucault, 1978, p. 73). I employed this idea in conjunction with Foucault's attitude of critique. For Foucault, ongoing critique as a mode that leads to new ways of being and thinking is fundamentally an ethical question. With this in mind, I further interrogated the discursive construction of female ultrarunners with respect to the neo-liberal value of self-empowerment (Atencio & Wright, 2008; Cole et al., 2004). My aim in this final analysis is to move beyond showing how both dis-

ciplined and diverse, multiple subjectivities are produced through ultrarunning and problematize ultrarunning as a sport context within which these complex, multiple subjectivities take place. As such, I intend to show how these particular constructions (re)produce middle-classness and suggest that, through the values with which it is aligned, middle-classness functions as a disciplining discourse for the participants.

Methods

This article is based on in-depth interviews conducted as part of a larger qualitative study of ultrarunning. Participants were selected based on certain criteria, which included at least 3 years of consistently placing top five in nationally recognized races. After contacting a local ultrarunner who met the criteria, I used the snowball approach (Patton, 2002) to contact the remaining 7 participants. Participants ranged in age from 30 to 47 years. Their careers span the health industry, education, coaching and environmental organizations. Participants were mostly white, middle-class, and from the U.S. Rocky Mountains, south and Pacific Northwest. Using a semistructured interview guide (Patton, 2002), interviews ranged from 1 to 2 hours, were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim and sent back to the participants for review, allowing them the opportunity to make any changes. Pseudonyms were used. The interview guide was constructed purposefully around specific broad topics. First, I asked the participants about their views of the ultrarunning community, asking questions such as what constituted competition and how did they view competition with respect to the ultrarunning community. Then, I moved on to questions about what constitutes an ideal ultrarunning body and what is important in the production of ultrarunning bodies (e.g., training practices, attitudes, racing strategies). The following set of questions focused on body experiences, asking participants to articulate what it feels like when they feel bad, when they feel good, in what ways are pain and joy a part of ultrarunning, and what are their practices when they feel these different ways. Finally, I directly asked about their views toward gender and femininity and whether they felt that the ideal female body or gender shaped the way they feel about and function as ultrarunning bodies. In addition, I asked whether the participants had questioned (problematized) any aspect of being an ultrarunner, either through direct body experience or other means, and if so, how had this changed the way they participate. Thus, I investigated not only what was said, but also how these statements were used to shape the practices of ultrarunners. The semistructured interview kept the interviews "focused while allowing individual perspectives and experiences to emerge" (Patton, 2002, p. 73).

Initially, my analysis of the transcripts was guided by Foucault's understandings of power and discourse. I first looked at the various ways the normative running body, ideal female body and pain were implicated in the desire to be an ultrarunning body. At this point, I delved more deeply into the analysis by employing Foucault's two technologies to gain an understanding of the specific ways desire comes about. First, I noticed ways in which docile bodies were produced through normalizing categorizations and/or disciplining practices based on utility, resulting in unconsciously produced desires. Then, to detect initial steps to a technology of the self, I looked for instances when the body became a site for problematizations, resulting in conscious choices made among available discourses. Finally, taking into consideration that these ultrarunners operate "within a multiplicity of discourses"

(Foucault, 1978, p.100), I went one step further to interrogate the construction of ultrarunning bodies within the larger sport context.

Beyond the Norm: (ultra)Disciplined Running Bodies

One of the more significant findings from the interviews was that participants did not point to a specific body type for ultrarunning. For instance, all participants expressed that there was no ideal ultrarunning body. Notably, according to the participants, ultrarunning is a different kind of running activity with respect to requiring/producing a specific body type. Marne alludes to this idea when she says, "a lot of people get into ultra because they think it's going to give them a certain body and it usually doesn't work out that way." Instead, they frequently talked about the ultrarunning body as being extremely varied, but primarily in contrast to marathon:

> There are so many different body types. If you show up at an ultra it's not like Ironman where everybody's lean, mean and buffed out. There are short people, tall people, people who are heavier or people who are tall and thin. Still all doing the same and doing really well. . . . I think marathoners, road marathoners, when they are winning . . . the top people all look the same, either tall and very thin. (Val)

> You could line up all the highest performing ultra runners and you would find many, many different body types. . . . It always astonishes me. If you'd ask me a few years ago, I probably would have had a definite answer. Like, you know, an ultrarunner should be someone who has some reserves, who has some strength, some musculature as opposed to a roadrunner who maybe would be more lean and honed. But I don't believe that to be true now. I mean, there are people who are just downright overweight, who end up being quite good ultrarunners and then there are anorexics and there are people in between. (Marne)

The general attitude of these female ultrarunners was that "each individual has a different body type and you are going to maximize that body type. You are not going to all look alike. I think we prove that" (Maya). As such, the ultrarunning body appears to be constructed more broadly than and frequently in opposition to the normative running body. In this instance, the normative running body is destabilized because it is only used to shape what is *not* an ultrarunning body rather than what counts as an ultrarunning body.

Notably, the discourse of competency and ultrarunning success appeared to be constructed differently than the marathon. Chase (2008) notes that marathon bodies that count are primarily the bodies that finish in faster times. While competing an ultra in a fast time is respected, finishing an ultra legitimizes a runner as an ultrarunner. Elena illustrates this sentiment well:

> I'm in line with what most of the community thinks. Again, it's because the races are so long, anybody who can finish a hundred miler. If there's a winner or loser or whatever, that's a winner—to be able to put all the pieces together and achieve the end result of finishing a hundred miler is outstanding. . . .Yes, it's cool to see the guy come across in sub-whatever time or set a new course record, but anybody who can get across the line—they've been competitive with themselves.

Another indicator of this discourse is the way the participants talked about not finishing. Incurring a DNF (did not finish) is to be avoided and becomes associated with feelings that border on "dread." For instance, they unambiguously referred to the idea that not finishing an ultra was one of the hardest experiences for them. Christine recalls that "it was a hard decision to make" when she dropped out of a prestigious race. Furthermore, Ada's description of her first 100 mile race is typical of the fear that a DNF brings. After suffering muscle cramps and being carried to the next aid station, she explains, "I decided, well, I'm just going to start walking and see what happens . . . I ran through the night and I finished. So I did not have that dreaded 'did not finish' next to my name." Thus, the performance discourse in ultrarunning is shaped by the goal of pushing the limits to finish as opposed to pushing the limits to achieve a fast time (marathon), and in turn is reinforced through the participants' attitudes and practices.

For the participants, however, who are high performance ultrarunners, success was not only finishing, but also "proving yourself to be the best amongst the people that you're in the same league with" (Dana). In addition, the participants were very aware that this competitive view was not the view of the community at large. "There are these sub-groups" (Ali) and "it's almost like a faux-pas to admit that you're there to be competitive" (Dana). In addition, training regimens were discussed as a way to "shape" the body for competition. All participants followed some sort of training plan primarily consisting of running, albeit through a wide variety of approaches. This discursive construction was *always* simultaneously mentioned with the "pushing the limits" discourse of ultrarunning. A good example is when Ali says that success involves "winning races and setting course records, but it's also really a sense of pushing myself beyond my preconceived limits." In this way, disciplinary elements are at work for these ultrarunners, who construct themselves in an unquestioned manner through both the performance discourse (finishing) prevalent in the ultrarunning community as well as the performance discourse (winning) of the larger society.

A closer look into the individual negotiations of the normative running body and performance discourses revealed that the performance discourses brought about some level of critical awareness. In addition, the destabilized position of the normative running body seems to facilitate this critical awareness. The following two narratives illustrate how this critical awareness emerges:

> It [variety of ultrarunning bodies] just shows me that really what we think of as ideal bodies or as fitness or whatever, you know, some of the women who really looked slender and really fit . . . weren't as strong. . . . I think a lot of times in races it's real tempting to look around and kind of eyeball the competition and if there are people you don't know, if they look real fit, which typically in running translates to real thin, you think they're going to be real fast and that's not always the case. (Ali)

> I have seen them all, all shapes and sizes of bodies. I have been amazed at some of the women I've looked at and think . . . oh this person does not look like she can haul up that hill, maintain that pace, be able to run a 100 mile race . . . and you just cannot judge somebody's performance based on what their body looks like. And I've been taught that lesson many times and it's been a humbling experience. . . I mean, when I first saw her [very successful

> ultrarunner], I thought she tended to be on the heavy side and she just kicked everybody's butts. She kicked all the guys' butts . . . you just can't assume that there is a perfect ultrarunning body. (Ada)

Such enunciations are in-line with previous research that has identified the strength of the normative running body in distance running communities (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Chase, 2008) because ultrarunning bodies are talked about in relation to the normative running body. The difference is that ultrarunning, as a sporting space, appears to provide an experience in which these women developed critical awareness of the normative running body because of the dissonance between what they discursively constructed as distance running bodies and what they actually experienced in the ultrarunning context.

This critical awareness resulted in practices that shaped their bodies according to what they can do rather than what their bodies look like. All the participants felt good about their running bodies and did not desire to change their bodies to fit the normative running body ideal. For example, Christine says, "sometimes I've been self conscious about it [her body], other times, I'm like, well, whatever, my body seems to work." Also, Maya explains, "my body type is more muscular and a little bit heavier than other runners. But it's who I am. I'm not going to change that." Christine and Maya are representative of how these female ultrarunners feel about their running bodies. The participants were aware of the presence of the normative running body in their thoughts, but consciously chose to create their bodies according to "what works" rather than on the "lean and muscular" shape of the normative running body. While these findings are unique to previous studies in running, they do confirm the findings of one study about women's rugby (Chase, 2006). In this study, the rugby players also remarked that there was no one ideal body type. In addition, they recognized the value of different body types, noting that some bodies were fast while other bodies were heavier and could tackle. In addition, the rugby players also liked the fact that competency was written on their bodies. Chase remarks that "because of this diversity of body types, rugby provides a sporting space where women of all sizes are welcome and this seems to have a dramatic effect on how they feel about themselves and their bodies" (p. 242).

Negotiating Femininity and Gender

As female runners, the participants problematized the feminine identity and desired to create themselves uniquely within this awareness. Such a finding is in contrast to previous research (Chapman, 1997; Cox & Thompson, 2000; Johns & Johns, 2000), which shows that female athletes remain disciplined by the ideal female body despite participating for other reasons. For instance, within a critical awareness of the ideal female body discourse, the participants created their bodies based on "what my body can do rather than what it looks like" (Dana). More importantly, all participants cited their participation in ultrarunning as bringing about such critical awareness albeit in slightly different ways. For instance, several participants talked about their running experiences before ultrarunning in which the high performance body converged with the ideal body to create an eating disordered body. When asked about how ultrarunning had influenced views of their bodies, several women

attributed their participation in ultrarunning as contributing to a critical awareness of the ideal body. The following narratives show development of this awareness:

> I think for many years I viewed my body as an adversary. . . . I think the whole body image piece has nurtured that adversarial feel in women. You see these magazines [mainstream running magazines] and you feel like that's what I'm supposed to look like and if your body doesn't look like that, then it's the enemy. You want to change it. It's a very adversarial set up. . . . what I enjoy seeing in my body has definitely changed. The most important thing was for me to be really lean and now there's something about the look of strength, strength and resiliency. (Marne)

> I know what kind of energy goes into not to have body fat, and that is not worth it. It can ruin your life . . . [ultrarunning has helped] totally and absolutely because rather than my body being something that in the past I've targeted almost with hate in a way that a lot of people with other eating disorders would, blaming all their problems on their body, my body's changed from a vehicle of something that I hate to something that helps me get to amazing places. (Ali)

While the development of critical awareness appears to disentangle the participants' practices from the ideal body, the performance discourse becomes the means through which this occurs. Dana's comment illustrates this use well:

> My body is strong and for me, you know, when you think about the ideal body, the ideal female body, which is probably skinnier but with bigger boobs, I think what good is that kind of body going to do for you? I want a body that is powerful, that can propel me up mountains.

Finally, several participants alluded to a blurring of gender in rather ambiguous ways such as feeling "feminine" *and* "masculine" at races because of being female but doing well relative to the men, especially since "all of the top men have been beaten by all of the top women at some point in their racing careers" (Christine). For some participants the high performance body appears to create enough dissonance between the "athletic self" and the "female self" that the gender binary is questioned. While their comments reinforce the binary from the perspective that performance appears to be tied to being male, it is the simultaneous feeling of being both genders for some of these women that seems to create an alternative space for gender. Christine articulates the general feeling that, as women, they have more opportunities than the men to experience this "simultaneous sense" of gender, which leads to feelings of empowerment. Christine articulates this idea in the following comment:

> There are certainly more than two genders. There is sort of an athletic feminine, there's a model heroine chic feminine. There's all these different concepts of gender and they are linked to someone's sex, but not necessarily. You don't have to be masculine if you are male. . . . we can be as feminine as we want . . . and also go out there and run and fall and be covered in mud and blood. I just think that's a really neat juxtaposition . . . It's sort of creating another. . . there's a cool gender play we get to experience.

In this instance, the performance discourse helps produce bodies that experience gender in complex ways, giving rise to some level of comfort with ambiguity around the concept of gender.

Pushing the Limits: Discomfort, Good Pain and Bad Pain

Within the goals of either finishing or competing, the experience of pushing your body to preconceived limits and going beyond them constitutes the primary way that the ultrarunning body gets talked about. Marne's comment reflects this prominent attitude in ultrarunning when she says "a lot of it has to do with breaking down barriers… seeing your limitlessness…and it's extraordinary what can happen when you do break through barriers." While many body experiences are associated with pushing the body to the limits, pain is a prominent way of describing the experience and one that shapes practices. Participants describe three distinct levels of pain, of which discomfort and good pain are normalized, but bad pain is not. As Ali notes, "to become a better ultrarunner, you've got to be in discomfort. . . but that's good. Discomfort is not going to hurt me." All participants described good pain as being an inevitable part of the experience and normalized since they all talked about continuing in races despite feeling bad or hurting. For example, it's "part of what you signed up for" (Dana) and it "feels like though you are working hard and things ache, feel tired, and burn, I know that I can continue for hours" (Ada). Yet, bad pain was described as "pain that is injury" (Christine) or when "you're on the verge of hurting yourself" (Elena). It is viewed as problematic because it jeopardizes finishing a race (DNF) or being able to run as a daily activity. The practices that result are slowing down in a race, taking care of nutritional needs or dropping out. What is evident from the findings is that the negotiation of pain is directly related to performance. Specifically, toughness is normalized in situations in which the pain would not be debilitating, but rejected in situations that could be debilitating because "success" would be precluded since one would not be able to run.

Upon further questioning about how they negotiate painful moments in ultrarunning, participants referred to getting "second and third and fourth winds" (Dana). They described specific experiences of moving from feeling horrible to feeling fabulous. The intensity of these moments is illustrated well in the following comment:

> They never feel exactly the same one time to another. I mean, it can feel like dying—like this sort of disintegration—like the body's shutting down and it's usually followed by some sort of resurrection, literally, like something outside of yourself, something bigger than yourself comes in and gives support. (Marne)

More importantly, these shifts of feeling bad to good influence how these women negotiate discomfort and good pain, notably through a patient attitude versus a willful attitude. For example, in dealing with painful moments Dana says it is "a matter of surviving those lows and knowing they would pass." Christine tells herself during those painful moments, "It's no big deal, you always live. You always come back from it, so don't worry about it." Another form of a nonwillful attitude is revealed in Elena's approach to transitional moments between bad and good in that she tries "being conscious but being free with it [transitions] rather than fighting

it—not being caught up in one specific moment." As such, these findings extend the previous research on distance runners which show that pain plays a prominent place in runners' narratives (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Major, 2001; Markula, 2000) and that negotiating injury plays an important role in their identities (Collinson & Hockey, 2007; Hockey, 2005). In the current study we see that pain has degrees and different practices result from the experience of different types of pain.

Discussion and Conclusion

Reading these findings through Foucault illuminates how experiencing success and physical competency produces desires that position ultrarunning as a site of "pleasure and domination" (Miller, 2009, p.190) for these high performance female ultrarunners. Foucault's docility-utility framework helps highlight how this paradoxical position arises. For these women, the "ultrarunning success" discourse of "pushing the limits and finishing" extreme running distances was empowering. These women felt good about their bodies that can "do", that "seem to work" and that "can propel them up mountains." They also felt good about their bodies that do well with respect to others, especially in relation to the men. In this way, the participants appear to self-regulate according to the docility-utility relationship; that is, the more their bodies are successful at ultrarunning on both these levels, the more they enjoy the experience and desire to shape their bodies according to this particular discourse. In this way, pushing the limits operates as a disciplining discourse because it goes unquestioned and is produced through desire.

One key effect of "pushing the limits and finishing" discourse is that ultrarunning becomes a distinct category of distance running. For example, previous research into distance running revealed that fast bodies are the ones that count. Smith (1998) notes that "joggers" are given less status in the distance running community while Chase (2008) notes that only fast runners count as marathoners. With the emphasis on pushing the limits and finishing in ultrarunning, a different category of what counts as a distance running body emerges. Setting this category in motion has two influences upon the practices of the participants, which can be understood through the lenses of technologies of dominance and of the self.

First, while the success discourse of ultrarunning produces the desire to be an ultrarunning body, acting as a disciplining discourse, a closer examination reveals that this discourse has profound effects on how they shape their bodies with respect to the normative running body and the ideal body. Namely that the "ultrarunning success" discourse "modified by their [its] very exercise" (Foucault, 1978, p. 97) the strength of the normative running and ideal female body discourses, "weakening" them in the process. In other words, through the process of being disciplined by the "ultrarunning success" discourse, participants developed a critical awareness of the normative running and ideal female body discourses, lessening their effects. Through the participants' direct (body) experiences of seeing so many "ultrarunning successful" body types, a critical awareness developed and the desire for a normative running body weakened. As a result, a broader view of what counts as a legitimate running body emerged in contrast to what has previously been found in distance running literature. In other words, the particular shape of the normative running body is no longer seen as singularly necessary or useful to the process

of being a "successful" ultrarunner. In addition, for several of the participants, a critical awareness of the ideal female body developed. This awareness results in conscious choices about what they desire, shaping their practices such that they no longer create an extremely thin, "eating disordered" body. In addition, participants were generally comfortable with some degree of gender ambiguity. In this way, these women actively made sense of these discourses, resulting in a "continuous redefinition of one's [their] subject position[s] though an awareness of discursive practices" (Markula, 2000, p. 103). As a result, they expressed that they were able to construct more diverse and meaningful sport identities compared with their past "selves."

Second, the "ultrarunning success" discourse has implications in how these women understand and negotiate pain in the "less aggressive bodily style." Certainly, the fact that they are willing to endure some degree of pain is an indicator of the disciplining nature of the pain discourse. Yet, the desire to remain a body in motion and finish these extreme running distances also produces multiple understandings of pain, resulting in specific practices. More specifically, the constructions of discomfort, good pain and bad pain have implications for what they do in each of these situations. Good pain and bad pain become sources for problematizations, through which they make conscious choices about what practices ensue. In the instance that pain might jeopardize their ability to achieve "ultrarunning success," they stop. While needing more examination, it is also worth noting that, for some participants, the practices in response to discomfort and good pain appear to be "embodied" rather than depersonalized. While disciplined by the pain, these multiple constructions of pain simultaneously allow these women to experience a broad range of subjectivities with respect to the pain discourse as they actively negotiate these nuances.

Finally, inspired by Foucault's ongoing attitude of critique, I set out to problematize (briefly) ultrarunning within the larger society. The participants' profiles and what they did not say situates ultrarunning as a sporting site through which whiteness and middle-class values are normalized (along with sexuality). Arguably, ultrarunning could be considered an "extreme" form of distance running. Kusz (2007) notes that extreme sports provide "a cultural space where whiteness was [is] the unquestioned social norm" (p. 361). Similarly, ultrarunning appears to be a comfortable sporting space for these predominantly white women where whiteness is the "unquestioned social norm." Another component of extreme sport participation is that participants discursively construct their participation as a way to feel good about themselves (Wheaton, 2004). These women's narratives show that ultrarunning reproduces the neo-liberal notion of self-empowerment (Atencio & Wright, 2008; Cole et al., 2004). For these female participants, being an ultrarunning body brings about a sense of accomplishment and feeling good about themselves. In turn, the self-empowerment they feel creates the desire to be an ultrarunning body. Furthermore, the sense of accomplishment clearly comes from a nonaggressive bodily style. Given that these values are associated with the middle-class, I argue that ultrarunning is a sporting activity that (re)produces middle-classness. Furthermore, I suggest that the participants' unquestioned participation in ultrarunning shows that middle-classness operates as a construct, a category, that sets in motion not only a "desire" to participate, but also as a disciplining discourse that shapes their identities and "constrains" how they understand themselves as ultrarunners.

The above findings do not represent all the intricate ways in which female ultrarunning bodies are constructed. Indeed, future research examining other discourses that may be at work could add significantly to the literature. In addition, further examinations into the constructions of pain and injury, "feeling good" and the relationship between them could yield deeper understandings about these subjectivities. In addition, an investigation of the experiences of male, "middle of the pack" runners, and the DNF could provide more insight into this middle-class sport activity. Certainly more can be explored in terms of how ultrarunning as a practice supports classed, raced and hetronormative identities. Given the rate at which women and men are moving into this particular running activity (Medinger, 2009; Milroy, 2001), perhaps such investigations are timely.

Notes

1. Building on Smith's (1998) empirical analysis of running culture showing it to be primarily middle class, Abbas utilizes realist theory to reveal how running culture reproduces middle-classness through the normalization of young, male, strong bodies as well as engagement in a "less aggressive bodily style" (Abbas, 2004, p. 165) as opposed to working class toughness as found in highly physical, contact sports. Both researchers suggest that running culture supports the notion of self-empowerment (i.e., exercising for reasons such as personal success and self-betterment), a value associated with the middle class in a variety of sport settings (Atencio & Wright, 2008; Cole, 1996; Cole, Giardina, & Andrews, 2004; Wheaton, 2004).

2. Chase (2008) explains that the Clydesdale movement, beginning officially in 1986, provides a means for distance running participants to compete according to weight-class divisions in lieu of age divisions. Being over a certain weight qualifies a runner as Clydesdale (other names are sometimes used for female categories).

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