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# Fell Running and Voluptuous Panic

## On Caillois and Post-Sport Physical Culture



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As many cultural groups in Western societies have become disaffected with mainstream sports cultures and their logics of practice, sociologists of sport and physical culture have turned their attention to the existential benefits of play and games. There is growing interest in revisiting and exploring the classic theories of play in society, including those of Roger Caillois. The author considers the increasingly popular practice of fell running among a group of enthusiasts in the United Kingdom as an activity that playfully embraces and celebrates the voluptuous panic of *ilinx* activities. He argues that fell running is not a pure form of *ilinx* as defined by Caillois but that the sport's willful—and highly pleasurable—disruption of the mind and body through vertigo and panic fits Caillois's description of the benefits of play and games. Using ethnographic data about fell runners collected during two years in the United Kingdom, the author suggests that they make existential connections with time, space, and the elements through the voluptuous panic and animal mimicry described by Caillois and others. **Key words:** Roger Caillois; fell running; *ilinx*; physical-cultural studies; post-sport physical culture; voluptuous panic

### Getting [Theoretically] Stuck in the Fells

**T**O THINK, LET ALONE WRITE, about the connection between so-called high-performance athletics and existential pleasure is almost antithetical in academic work. I speak quite regularly with colleagues in sport and exercise-science programs who unabashedly admit that elite-level or “serious-leisure” (Stebbins 2006) sports bear little resemblance to the pursuit of physical health or to the experience of emotional pleasures (besides those, perhaps, stirred by the vanquishing of an opponent). High-performance sports and athletic cultures are typically characterized by a small range of human emotions and experiences (Kerr 2004). But many people engage in the willful abandonment of personal control through intense, sports-like physicality and by placing themselves in athletic contexts that stir doubt, uncertainty, thrills, and anxiety. The literature

of so-called risk or “edge” sports clearly attests to the psychological benefits of adventure-based athletic practices—to the experience of physical pleasure and of emotional release provided by dangerous sports. But few inside or outside of the academy examine common sports or athletic pastimes as potential zones of self-discovery through edge experiences. I am puzzled that theorists of physical cultures so rarely refer to authors like Roger Caillois (1967), who long ago articulated the benefits of experiencing a “voluptuous panic” in sports, leisure, and play.

Recently, I studied the physical culture of British fell running, an activity partly aimed at the playful pursuit of vertigo, dizziness, uncertainty, and personal disruption (Atkinson 2010a). To get a notion of fell running, picture yourself a typical running enthusiast, then imagine running over the roughest ground and in the worst weather possible. Taking to expansive, rugged, inclement highlands or mountains, fell runners typically come from Britain’s upper working classes or middle classes, and they range in age from thirteen to well over sixty years old. The term *fell* derives from the Norse *fall*, meaning mountain. Whether recreation or a competitive race, a fell run traverses meadows, crosses rivers and waterfalls, shoots up and down steep hills, staggers across rocky terrain, lumbers through thickets, meanders over bogs, and sometimes dodges animal herds. Fell runs range from two to forty or fifty miles—and occasionally more. Fell runners make up only a small group in the burgeoning global running community, and in Britain they tend to keep rather close subcultural ties within counties.

I came to study fell running after being introduced to it by a road-running club mate of mine in Loughborough (Leicestershire, UK), and I approached it at first as a training supplement (and then an absolute alternative) to road running. After a few months in the fell-running culture—and, on reflection, because of my dissatisfaction with long-distance road racing—I radically changed my orientation to running. Like others who have become smitten with the practice, I found that fell running fits nicely my interest in exploring physical activity along existential lines. Between 2007 and 2009, I spent several hundred hours running fells with other enthusiasts, participating in local races, speaking with fell runners during runs, and socializing with them afterwards. Sometimes I simply sat with them around a table in a pub after a run and talked at length about the virtues of the practice.

The ancient Scottish physical culture of fell running has an incredibly rich and interesting (if poorly documented) origin and cultural significance. Fell-running enthusiasts believe the earliest fell race took place in Braemar, Scotland,

between 1040 and 1060 CE with the staging of the Braemar Gathering hill races, though they sometimes argue over the actual date (Askwith 2004). After that, nothing happened in fell-running history in the United Kingdom, that we know of, until the mid-nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century, villages and towns across the Scottish highlands regularly staged fell races during festivals along with sprints and other sport competitions such as wrestling or hammer tossing. Villagers raced for both prize money and social accolades in rural communities that highly prized the ability to navigate treacherous terrain.

Fell running had developed both professional and amateur wings in Scotland, England, and Wales by the mid-nineteenth century. The amateur wing adopted an ethos quite similar to the codes of mountaineering embraced by the British Youth Hostel Association. The sport increasingly emphasized runs outside the spectacle of a competition at a fair or public event, runs that were more like private sojourns into the wilderness. Amateur racecourses, located in hard-to-reach wilderness areas, grew longer, and amateur fell runners developed into a small, esoteric subculture of adventure runners. The Fell Runners Association (FRA) emerged in April 1970 to help organize the sport of amateur fell running in the United Kingdom and to promote its adventurous spirit. During the late 1970s and 1980s, clusters of hardcore fell runners assembled in Scotland and in England—especially in the Peak and Lake districts of England—and participated in only infrequently held, decidedly rigorous runs.

Contemporary fell running is physically intense and most often structured like a typical road-running race. Races, or even leisure runs, require participants to venture from point X to point Y as fast as possible. For some races, there is an official route runners must follow between points X and Y, while for others, participants are told to run from X to Y using any route they choose (which, normally, involves first orienting the runners to the local terrain). Races can involve only a handful of local residents, a small number of officials and spectators, and a pittance to enter; or they can be national in scope—and even include international “championships”—attracting participants and spectators from around the world. The FRA classifies races, including leisure runs, A, B, or C events, determining these classifications according to the course terrain (mountains, lower hills, meadows, and road) and to the amount of uphill running the course requires. The FRA further classifies races or runs by their length—short (up to six miles), medium (up to twelve miles), or long (more than twelve miles). Further still, some race organizers strictly enforce FRA rules and regulations regarding participant safety, which include minimum age requirements and

distance restrictions for juniors, food requirements, and equipment mandates for rainproof pants, jackets, changes of clothes, compasses, whistles, and the like. In the United Kingdom, the FRA publishes a yearly booklet of sanctioned races—called “the Bible” by runners—and distributes it to all registered FRA members at the beginning of running season, normally in early April.

Aside from their participation in formal fell-running races, many seasoned runners in the United Kingdom frequently, individually or in small teams, complete legendary fell “rounds,” or running routes. Rounds are grueling highland courses—or mountain courses, depending on the number of peaks—that take from a few dozen hours to several days to complete. For a fell runner, completing a round is a rite of passage, a sojourn to win kudos from fell peers, and a test of will. Perhaps the most famous round in Britain is the Bob Graham Round, a circuit of forty-two peaks in the English Lake District, including the daunting three-thousand-foot peaks of Skiddaw, Helvellyn Scafell, and Scafell Pike. The round is named after Bob Graham, a Keswick lodge owner and avid fell runner, who in 1932 set the record for the number of Lakeland fells traversed in twenty-four hours—a record he then held for twenty-eight years. Any fell enthusiast who traverses the fells of this round within twenty-four hours is eligible for membership in the highly respected Bob Graham Round Club. Although Graham claimed anyone of average fitness could make the round, many fell runners consider it one of the more demanding tests of endurance for an amateur.

Although these leisure runs, races, and rounds may look like modernist adventure races, fell runners insist their sport does not share the same ethos or play logic. Fell runs and rounds—even organized fell races (which boast only minimal administrative apparatuses)—are not like adventure races staged against the backdrop of a city, or a newly constructed estate or subdivision, or along some urban-area faux forest or green space. Instead, fell-running events place people in the “raw” contexts of culturally undetermined terrain—what Lyotard (1987) calls a *scapeland*, where the dominant or preferred cultural maps of meaning offer no understanding of what a runner might “do” there.

Fell runs, unlike most road-running events, are not usually sponsored by corporate investors. There are no bleachers, grandstands, or concessions surrounding the running fields. One does not need timing chips or any high-tech gadgetry other than maybe a compass. The ethos of fell runners does not call for the achievement of dominance over others in order to enjoy the events. Here, participants relish—one might suggest almost atavistically—simply getting stuck in the mud. To them, part of the exciting significance of this veritably

premodern sport stems from the sweaty camaraderie its players enjoy through their collective communion with nature.

Before, during, and after the runs, there is a palpable feeling of *communitas* within fell-running groups; here mirth mixes with encouragement. Runners support one another and help each other complete a run. They often run in packs rather than as individuals. The local communities and villages where the races take place treat the runs like small festival or grand fetes, and the after parties often last late into the night. And by their very movement across fields, streams, hills, mud, rocks, valleys, and plains, the runs remind participants of the pleasures of moving freely and wildly, like children sunk in the joy of play. While the experience of fell-running *communitas* reaches its peak at the end of the race when the runners retire to a local pub (where they release their fell-running energies most vigorously), it has built slowly over time through their routine fell-running activities, their common reading of fell-running periodicals such as *Fell Runner*, and their socialization—totally unrelated to fell running—with fellow enthusiasts.

The adjective *scrambling* perhaps best captures the feel of a fell run, its true ethos. Given the terrain one normally traverses in a run, a runner's body gets taken up, down, and even sideways at different times. The runner's speed changes almost meter by meter as he struggles up almost impossible ascents, gets pulled down equally daunting descents, slogs through mud, and shuffles through rolling terrain. The range of the runner's limb motion expands and contracts throughout the course; she fears falling, getting lacerated, losing direction, straying off course, and becoming physical exhausted. Obdurate, sometimes seemingly unforgiving, elements—like the sun, the wind, the rain, the earth, big rocks—everywhere confront the runner. Indeed, a "good" fell run assaults the runner's body with a constant disorientation, and her normal perceptions of space, time, mind, and body get thrown into disarray. This, to a fell runner, is fun; it is "gritty" play; it is pleasure.

My involvement in the world of fell running began in 2007. Living in Canada for most of my life, I had never been exposed to fell running. Only after I had moved to England in late summer of that year did I discover in the East Midlands this physically exhausting and mentally trying amalgam of cross-country, trail, mountain, and—at times—wilderness running. Not long into my fieldwork, I came to appreciate what all fell runners know: the unique way in which vertigo, self-exploration, and a connection to the specific time and place become focal points of the sport.

At first glance, fell running might seem a collective effort to conquer nature—to cross its boundaries and trump its apparently unforgiving essence with athletic skill. Such an interpretation owes much to colonialist, imperialist, and modernist thinking, and it reflects the way mainstream sports often value the spirit of conquest in athletics. Martin Heidegger (1954) would call this attitude the application of athletic modes of thinking and technological training to wilderness sports. But as Gavin—a forty-five year-old fell runner—told me: “When you [fell] run and think to yourself, ‘I have to get up and beat this mountain,’ you don’t know what you are doing. Embrace the mountain and its energy, don’t try to beat it.” Fell runners like Gavin relish the physicality of fell running itself because the sport places the individual in what he calls a totally natural place. If you strip a run of its modern, metropolitan trappings, when a runner gets immersed in mud and grass and rock, when he gets battered by wind and pelted by rain, when he sweats and occasionally bleeds, he experiences a completely different physical culture than that of urban sport.

My first theoretical impulse lured me to read the physical culture of fell running as a figurational sociologist might. In particular, Norbert Elias’s writing on the role of emotional experiences in sport seemed to resonate with me. Elias (1996, 2002) suggests that, as part of a long-term civilizing processes, the United Kingdom and other Western societies evolved relatively unexciting social environments in vastly interdependent zones. Their middle classes promote standards of “civilized”—that is, rational, restrained, and socially mannered—behavior as normative, collective personality structures (*habituses*), which allow high levels of affective control and inner containment. These habits of personality become “second nature” for individuals (Quilley and Loyal 2004). Elias and Dunning (1986) describe highly contained and disciplined cultures as predictable and safe but emotionally boring. They suggest that one of the primary roles of sport within complex figurations is to make the emotional and psychological drudgery of restrained, civilized social life less restrained. For participants and spectators alike, sport provide a temporary but rule-bound liberation from diffuse, conservative, middle-class codes that curtail affective outbursts. Thus competitive sport involving the symbolic balancing of tensions between participants can facilitate a “controlled decontrolling of emotional controls” among spectators (Elias and Dunning 1986, 44). Figuralists contend that over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, institutionalized sport became more systematically organized as a social theater within which participants and spectators were deliberately aroused by tensions inherent in athletic contests in order to achieve balance as

part of the game. The fear and shame associated with failing, the aggression and hostility stimulated through competition, the exhilaration of conquest and the collective anxiety produced when bodies are taxed to their limits, all generate a meaningful athletic experience in organized sport.

But I looked deeper into fell running as I completed a study of the existential pain and suffering in Canadian triathlon cultures. What startled me about both my data on triathlons and fell running was the regularity with which the participants talked about the thrills and the emotional benefits provided by immersing oneself in athletic forms of suffering—the physical and psychological impact of the experiences of speed, physical exhaustion, stark choices, and fear. Comparing the triathlon narratives to the developing fell-running narratives, I remembered Caillou's description of *ilinx* in *Man, Play, and Games* as that “based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consists of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind. In all cases, it is a question of surrendering to a kind of spasm, seizure, or shock that destroys reality with sovereign brusqueness. The disturbance that provokes vertigo is commonly sought for its own sake” (1967, 23). This quote alone significantly altered my understanding of suffering in both triathlon and fell-running cultures.

In this article, I consider the practice of fell running among a group of enthusiasts in the United Kingdom as that which embraces and celebrates the voluptuous panic of *ilinx* activities. While I admit that fell running may not be a pure type of *ilinx*, the willful and highly pleasurable way the sport's attendant vertigo and panic disrupts the runner's mind and body certainly resembles Caillou's concept. I describe how participants in *ilinx* or mimicry-blended pursuits make existential connections with time and geographical space, and I detail the elements in their exploration of voluptuous panic.

### **Panic and (Self) Discovery: Surface Connections**

There's no earthly way of knowing,  
which direction we are going.  
There's no knowing where we're rowing,  
or which way the river's flowing.  
Is it raining?  
Is it snowing?

Is a hurricane a blowing?  
Not a speck of light is showing,  
so the danger must be growing.  
Are the fires of hell a glowing?  
Is the grisly reaper mowing?  
Yes! The danger must be growing,  
for the rowers keep on rowing.  
And they're certainly not showing  
any signs that they are slowing!

—From *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*

I remember watching the “tunnel of panic” scene in the renamed 1971 film adaptation of Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) as a child, and I remember being terrified out of my mind. The whirling, dizzying, crazy, uncontrolled scene made me panic, as I am sure the director had intended. The emotional and psychological anxiety built into the scene reminds us that dizzying and discombobulating forms of suffering are, in most contexts, something to be avoided. Certainly, the literature on sport and leisure paints a portrait of physical exhaustion, mental fatigue, and anxiety as unwanted suffering in athletics (Atkinson 2010a, 2010b, 2008).

One cannot dodge suffering in fell running: Most fell-running courses or routes are intended to create physical suffering; Hills are steep; Rivers are cold and wet; Mud is sloppy; Trees, bracken, and fences lacerate the skin; And the wind pushes the runner’s legs backward at almost every step. But, as long-time fell runner named Darrin told me: “You’ll never like it, until you like that [the suffering]. That’s the secret. You can be a fell runner, or be comfortable, but you can’t be both.”

The sociological literature on pain and injury in sport underscores how athletes generally avoid, disavow, or personally manage the suffering of athletics (Young 2003). While we laud the ability to withstand and inflict pain as a competitive strategy in some sports settings (Atkinson and Young 2008a, 2008b, Dunning 1999), few people take up recreational sports or games intending to cause or suffer physical, emotional, or psychological pain. But fell runners often derive intense social and emotional stimulation through athletic “suffering”; and indeed, not knowing when or how one is going to hurt during a fell run is part of the allure. Even for the most seasoned fell runner, a garden-variety course involves a substantial amount of physical and psychological



stress over an hour—perhaps several hours—of continuous activity. And fell runners frequently articulate the array of positive experiences accompanying this agony.

First, within a community of participants, members embrace athletic suffering and relish the ability to withstand it as a form of group bonding. In Putnam's (1995) terms, the ability to withstand and enjoy suffering running the fells is a form of social capital that members value as a marker of their collective identity. The penchant of fell runners for self-imposed agony in the leisure sphere binds them together as a unique social conglomerate, one I refer to elsewhere as a *pain community* (Atkinson, 2008). Second, like Turner's (1969) *liminal experiences* (i.e., those in which a person enters a ritual without knowing how the body, self, or mind will be affected), fell-running sessions provide participants with ordered contexts for self-exploration through suffering. Fell runners who come to relish intense physical and cognitive agony in the sport indeed share a socially learned personality structure, or *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984; Elias 2002), which considers voluntary suffering in athletics exciting and personally significant.

Given this, Caillois's description of the importance of form over content in play-based performances relates to fell running. For many of the fell runners I know, it is the form of athletic experience and the pleasurable suffering it brings that they find alluring. They relish the hills and the rivers and the exhaustion produced by traversing them. While there are clearly ritual elements and sacred aspects associated with fell running, much like those Caillois (1967) describes in games, enthusiasts quite regularly point to the appreciation of moments of unscripted suffering during runs as a central feature of the physical culture. It is amongst the strongest ideological ties that bind them together in their pain community. Charles (aged thirty-four) told me:

I used to run road races, and that [competitive running] is charted and scheduled and robotic. Competing in a [race] series comes to be like a job. You train, you eat, you train some more, and clock the progress by numbers and PBs [personal bests]. . . . When I started fell running, I gave up that lark. Fell running is not clockwork. It's experiencing the moment, yeah. Chest heaving, legs buckling down the hill, fear of toppling and just getting stuck in for the hell of it . . . then we all have a good laugh in the car park talking about the ride [emotional thrill].

For those like Charles, the suffering and experiences associated with fell running resembles what Caillois outlines as the social and personal features of play. Caillois's definition of play includes six elements: For him, play is free—that is, nonobligatory; separate—cut off from, in degrees, the rest of social life; uncertain—in the sense that the results are unknown beforehand; unproductive—noninstrumental on a strictly material basis; not entirely rule bound; and, fictive—that is, “accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life” (1967, 9–10). All aspects of Caillois's understanding of play helps decipher the meaning of fell running.

Caillois's last criterion—play is fictive—especially interest me. Fell runners, in their mutually recognized pain community, often question core truths about the nature of existence and individual essence through playful athletics: these things seem different to them when they are fell running, almost an alternative reality to that experienced in everyday life. Clearly, not all fell runners feel this way, but running the fells can provide enthusiasts with the kind of free unreality Caillois discusses. Fell runners often describe a collective desire to tap a deeper truth about the dizzying suffering that their everyday life does not—and, indeed, cannot—contain.

“Out there,” describes Tom (aged forty-two), “I'm not a dad or a businessman. I'm just running and hurting, just trudging, carrying on, and breathing. While struggling to make it [through the race], I'm never at more peace with myself because I'm not in my head.” Fell running, from this perspective, is a form of athletic play that helps the enthusiast explore and examine physical, cultural, and emotional experiences through a psychological release not often accessible to them elsewhere in the heavily ritualized world of family, work, school, and other such institutions.

Finn (aged forty) described the process as “part of learning when not to care about how to understand or rationalize something, and just live in the moment of running. To feel like being a lad again, and not caring about anything else just then. If you just let go, hours whizz past like minutes.” Fell runners like Finn argue that in such play contexts, the social, cognitive, and rational self is temporarily abandoned, which creates a “pleasurable emptiness.” Although emptiness in other contexts of the runner's life may signal alienation, disenfranchisement, or anomie, when she deliberately seeks it out through play, it becomes a vehicle for personal release and discovery. Fell running sometimes curiously resembles a late-modern and secular brand of playful self-mortification. The painful and exhaustive ritual of fell running sometimes reminds its practitioners that physical and emotional suffering can be a vehicle for self-discovery.

Le Breton (2000) and Lyng (2008) document how alternative-sport enthusiasts seek out symbolic death experiences in high-risk adventure as a playful form of self-annihilation. By using intense forms of physical movement (climbing, tumbling, and slogging through inhospitable terrain) which often involve risk, anxiety, pain, and injury, fell runners may temporarily destabilize the socially ascribed self to which they are attached and by which—they believe—they are limited by in everyday life. Their sense of athletic play is remarkable in this respect, allowing them to search for alternative aesthetics, pleasures, and personal truths through physical-culture activities like fell running. Again, Caillois might consider a fell runner's quest to experience this brand of *puissance* (power) (Pronger 2002) through self-mortification to be a definitive form of *ilinx*—a type of play that overloads the senses to produce a panic and a vertigo the player finds exhilarating.

How, specifically, does one achieve such a state? A fell runner often claims that when he learns to let go of external desire, of the rationalizing of sports or play as competition peppered with chance, his body actually feels different. It feels flexible, energized, relaxed, vital. Crucial to this process, the runner must allow himself to simply move with (or against) the terrain he encounters. To embrace a slow climb, to find joy in the panic of a steep descent, to long to tramp through mud rather than to wish to avoid it, to immerse himself in the water he encounters, all these require him to relish the physically uncomfortable and even to love strange sensations. Fell runners correspondingly describe tapping the feeling of *flow* during the *ilinx*-inspired ecstasies—to borrow from Martin Heidegger (1954)—of a particular run.

Flow occurs as the runner becomes immersed in a fell run to such an extent that absolutely nothing else matters, and—with no sense of self or presence of mind—he moves and reacts on free-flowing autopilot. Such is the phenomenological character of Caillois's *ilinx*. This social-psychological concept of flow comes from Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who popularized it in his landmark text *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (1975). Csikszentmihalyi describes the use of personal autopilot during athletic competition (i.e., learning to let go in order to succeed as a competitive athlete). Clearly Csikszentmihalyi owes a debt to Caillois and his notion of voluptuous panic. During a fell-running flow experience, enthusiasts relinquish self-consciousness and doubt and become one with the activity. This engenders a bio-psychological state in which the fell runner finds reward solely in movement and flight instead of the extrinsic (competitive) or will-oriented goals typical of modern, mainstream sport.

Yet, those who know fell runners, and indeed fell-running culture, might point to the competitive aspects of organized fell races and international fell-running leagues (which resemble those of most road racing) and admit that Caillois's notions of *agôn* (play involving competition) and *alea* (play involving chance) are central to them. In fact, many fell runners are keenly competitive in organized races, vying for their personal best in time, distance, or climbing and trying to finish ahead of their peers. And, to be sure, fell running is not entirely playful or always focused on honing one's existential flow. Cameron (aged thirty-four) said: "Well, in some local races here in the West [Midlands], I want to do well and win. It's my backyard, yeah. I might have a pint with the lads afterward, but it's all business when the starter shouts 'Go!'" Cameron's *agôn* ethos proves relevant for many fell runners. Without an air of competition and, indeed, of chance (of falling, say, or of suffering injury, or of losing one's way on a course) some of a run's excitement and significance disappears. Even the ethos of battling with nature—of besting a legendary hilly or beating a wet, windswept bog—becomes an important element for more competitive runners. From their perspective, although fell running may be dominated by *ilinx*, it is flavored quite liberally with *agôn* and *alea*.

To appreciate the full *gravitas* of Caillois's treatise on play and games and its connection to the ethos of fell running as defined by a cadre of its enthusiasts in the United Kingdom, we need to deconstruct the thrill of the self-encounter and self-exploration, of the suffering and competing involved in these runs over rough terrain. Precisely here, Caillois's understanding of the human drive toward acts of mimicry proves important.

In "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia" (2003), Caillois argues that humans, like other animals, often mimic things for reasons other than survival. They also mimic for self-indulgence. Caillois refers to this drive as an instinct for abandonment, for temporarily slipping out of everyday roles and identities into alternative modes of being (110). I began thinking about mimicry in the context of fell running one afternoon as I watched a group of runners navigate their way up a daunting hill. They formed a straight line, hunched over and grasping at the ground for leverage, animal-like in their movement. From that day, I came to consider the act of fell running as a form of mimicry in Caillois's (1967, 2003) conceptualization—as the temporary slippage of people into nonhuman, animal-like forms as they scurry up, over, down, through, and across rugged terrain. Fell running was the act of losing their everyday selves, a deliberate act in which they hurtled

their bodies around the course precisely in order to be, at least for a moment, like animals inhabiting those fells.

### **Running and Mimicking on Fell Edges**

Enthusiasts blend ilinx with mimicry as play forms in fell running not only by running through untamed spaces as detours from the structures and identities of their everyday lives, but also by their animal-like behavior during the race. The runners encounter the terrain physically and emotionally in a way totally dissimilar from the way they encounter their physical and emotional experiences in other material, social, and cultural environments. In other words, they permit themselves to experience movement and terrain in atypical fashion. They often describe the importance of moving up, moving down, becoming stuck, being windswept and soaked, and getting bloodied and bruised. Oliver (aged twenty-six) said: "I mean you cannot deny it. We march up hills like ants in a line, flail around in water like fish, scurry through the brush like foxes, and jump off rocks [large boulders] like rams. In that mindset, you feel almost animalistic too, and it's in that mental space where possibilities for not thinking like a proper runner [road racer] are made." The animal mimicry involved in fell running becomes important, then, in the fell runners' performance because moving "wildly" stimulates them to be irrational and uncalculating.

With this in mind, I became especially interested in Georges Bataille's (1988) notion of the *limit* as it might apply to both fell running and to Caillois's description of ilinx. Bataille's experience of limit is a demanding visceral and sensual event that dislodges the rational subject and decentralizes identity. Caillois's ilinx and mimicry were, indeed, partially refined and extended through conceptualizations of the "limit experience," which in fell running would involve suffering and animal-like movements in so-called wild spaces. These limits are critical for fell running. As Cliff (aged twenty-six) said: "Getting [to] the top of a fell or a mountain and seeing animals up there is very cool. It helps me remember how easy running and climbing is for them, and how it could be for me if I moved like them." The emotionally and physically intensely limited experience can push one's sense of subjectivity to the margins as it exposes and eclipses the cultural parameters in the runner's mind. According to Fromm (1973), the limit seekers are deeply frustrated by the highly circumscribed modalities of late-modern life, so much so that they desire to de-center their socially dominated and confined self in ways that can appear masochistic.

In *America* (1998), Jean Baudrillard—whose thinking here bears a striking resemblance to Caillois’s—describes the limit experience of the runner who hurtles forward in agony as a means of self-escape and as an emblem of post-modern isolation.

Decidedly, joggers are the true Latter Day Saints and the protagonists of an easy-does-it Apocalypse. Nothing evokes the end of the world more than a man running straight ahead on a beach, swathed in the sounds of his Walkman, cocooned in the solitary sacrifice of his energy, indifferent even to catastrophes since he expects destruction to come only as the fruit of his own efforts, from exhausting the energy of a body that has in his own eyes become useless. Primitives, when in despair, would commit suicide by swimming out to sea until they could swim no longer. The jogger commits suicide by running up and down the beach. His eyes are wild, saliva drips from his mouth. Do not stop him. He will either hit you or simply carry on dancing around in front of you like a man possessed (38).

For Baudrillard and others, the limit experience is characterized by a pleasurable immersion into a gray zone of self-identification where the runner encounters many possible selves. In this case, Caillois (2003) was incredibly perceptive with respect to his understanding of how mimicry in play facilitates liminality. Liminal events for van Genep (2004) and for Turner (1969) are socio-cultural rituals during which an individual’s body, self, or mind is either temporarily or permanently altered in unanticipated ways. In fell running, liminality exists in the space between the beginning and end of a run, or perhaps many such runs. Dean, (aged thirty-four) said to me: “I’m the very same person on the job, day in and out. I have to be, or I’m sacked. But with running, it’s a new adventure and a new set of possibilities every go. You never know what’s headed your way.”

The liminal state is characterized ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy. All of these, to me, are quintessential aspects of the ilinx play or game form. An individual’s sense of identity diminishes, bringing about a temporary disorientation. Liminality is an area of transition where the normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behavior are relaxed—a borderland that can lead to new perspectives on reality (or at least, to new experiences).

Over time, I have learned that many of the fell runners I studied routinely anchored their physical activities in the pursuit of liminality, in this ilinx-like,

mimetic brand of play. For example, during fell running, they de-emphasize or ignore all together normally accepted social boundaries between the participants, such as gender, race, and class. In training, racing, and socialization, they develop a sense of common humanity and equality rather than creating the typical hierarchy so common in modernist sports cultures, a hierarchy that exacerbates rather than dismantles the rigid stratifications of social identity. Again, although there are competitions and organized races, although these races include age and gender categories, and although there are even professional fell runners, these are what Wheaton (2004) describes as the “residual elements” of modernist sports. In fell running, the activity itself is more significant. As Ian (aged twenty-five) told me: “I suppose I don’t really give a toss how old someone is, or if they are a bloke or not. Right, like we are all [running] for the same reason, really. To get the wind in our lungs.”

Interesting, then, are the ways, albeit temporarily in many cases, in which fell-running activities may serve to erase or socially negate the achieved and ascribed roles of participants outside of fell running. Sorcha (aged twenty-nine) commented: “What I love about it [fell running] is how for the day of the run I’m not anything other than a fell runner. . . . I am free to be a just someone totally barking [mad] out running up and down some hills.” It is the physical exploration of a different kind of sports-related experience that binds fell runners together in their dizzying pursuits, even though some may never reach a liminal or personally transformative state. Gary (aged forty) confessed: “Some days are better than others . . . when I’m out there and I learn something new about who I am. Other days, it’s such a slog that the only experience I have is wanting to cross the finish line and finding the pub.”

In a recent review of Caillois’s contribution to play, games, and leisure theory, Thomas Henricks describes how the pursuit of amalgams of *ilinx* and mimetic play is relatively rare in late-market capitalist societies. According to Henricks:

Modernizing societies organize play impulses differently. If earlier ages dramatized chaos (through combinations of *ilinx* and mimicry), in “the transition to civilization” these categories fall by the wayside. Competition and chance take their place. Much of Caillois’s chapter on the *agôn* and *alea* combination treats the historical transition toward the increasingly “methodical control” of human expression. Rationality (as a publicly supported process of thinking and administering) becomes

dominant. Wild, orgiastic, experiences and masking are seen only as remnants of ecstatic communalism. More pertinently, they are considered to be dangers to a new urban style of life that emphasizes self-regulation and commitment to distant, abstract forms of authority.

In a world where individuals have the opportunity to alter their social standing, a new tension rises. Against the ascriptive, or birth-assigned, practices of traditional, hierarchical societies, modernizing societies offer the prospects for personal mobility based on perseverance, luck, and, especially, merit. In such societies, play dramatized the opposition between chance and merit. Societies with egalitarian mythologies, in particular, continue to make much of the relative equality that exists on the field of play; and luck is celebrated as a factor that enables the less able to have some prospect of victory. (2010, 175)

According to Caillois, games and play involving *ilinx* and mimicry exist in stark opposition to rationalist or modernist modes of living and their associated identities. Considering when Caillois wrote *Man, Play, and Games*, this observation makes empirical sense. But much has changed since its first publication. The rise of alternative-lifestyle or otherwise resistant forms of play and games suggests a late-modern desire among participants to explore a kind of existential *ilinx* found nowhere else in everyday life (Atkinson and Young 2008a; Rinehart and Sydnor 2003; Wheaton 2004). Again, while we cannot discount the evident aspects of *agôn* and *alea* in fell races, their strong and fundamental mix of *ilinx* and mimicry is striking. Indeed, the growing interest in alternative forms of athletics that embody a distinct play ethos hints at a growing disaffection with the sorts of meritocratic and competitive games so commonly valued in the West's high modernism. Many of the fell runners I studied have come to see the shortcomings of the experience provided by sports, games, and leisure activities saturated with a middle-class work ethic. In ever greater numbers, they experiment with physical cultures allowing for *ilinx*, flow, voluptuous panic, and a peppering of competition. According to Sian (aged twenty-eight), "I reckon [fell running] adds a sort of stimulation in my life I don't get anywhere else. I don't come up to [fell running] like work or like the footy [soccer] I played as a lad. The courses, the other blokes in the races aren't there for me to beat them. We're a bunch of lads out there trying to feel alive . . . and the hills are there to challenge us to be strong people."



I was particularly struck by the extent to which some enthusiasts saw fell running differently from other outdoor adventure games, play, and sports. To be sure, when considering the gamut of alternative, whiz, extreme, or edge sports, one must ask how resistant many of these subcultures are to modernist, rationalizing, middle-class ideas about competition. Le Breton (2000) and Atkinson and Young (2008a, 2008b) describe the full panorama of alternative, adventure, or physical-culture sports from the 1970s onward as not so resistant to dominant social constructions of identity (or play, emotions, or bodies) inside or outside of sports. In fact, since as far back as the mid-1800s, wilderness and adventure sports (the North American precursors to contemporary subcultural risk sports) were places where modernist ideologies and identities proved the unspoken norm and existed largely without opposition (Erickson 2005).

Sarah Ray (2009) illustrates how the very essence of most adventure, risk, or otherwise alternative physical cultures deeply extol long-standing, middle-class constructions of sport, physical activity, and leisure as only a pseudo-time-out from work—or even as a place of tightly controlled and rationalized adventurism, an opportunity to build social capital among others “like us,” a site of moral character development, or a context for testing one’s ability to take risks (in the wilderness, on water, in the sky, and in urban spaces) in the pursuit of honing one’s skills in personal and social mastery. Ray argues, as does Nash (1967) in his study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American wilderness cultures, that outdoor, alternative, physical-culture sports retain an early-1900s Progressive Era sentiment for the need to develop personal character through risk-based athletic pursuits. As such, alternative- and lifestyle-sport subcultures have long been associated with the need for people to test themselves and to demonstrate social character—what Caillois (1967) describes as blended *agôn* and *alea* forms of play and games. Indeed, fell runners at times replicate this model of nature-self-sport identification when they hold competitive races. Simply put, the pursuit of “edgework” (Lyng 2008) has long been a boundary for members of the middle class to evidence their ability to be social leaders. But again, while there are scores of fell runners in the United Kingdom and elsewhere who use the practice as a means of reproducing social identities with very modernist ideas about sports, play, and games, others represent an entirely different faction of the larger physical culture.

Fell running, then, is perhaps best categorized as a burgeoning “post-sport” physical play or game culture in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

Brian Pronger (2002) first outlined the promise of a utopian post-sport physical culture where the traditional boundary maintaining sports is replaced by athletic practices underpinned by aesthetic, moral, and play-based values. Pronger's call for post-sport became attached to his critique of mainstream power and performance sports. Pronger argues the modern player's body, mind, and self is colonized by the rationalist, technological, dominating and socially stratifying discourses prevalent in most games, which then negate the vital energies, desires, and pleasures that sports are meant to provide. He further contends that modern (*agôn*) sport is an exogenously determined social terrain, contoured more by educational logics, market-capitalist discourses, military doctrines, scientific philosophies and state health agendas than by organic and humanistic uses. There seem to me incredible similarities between the pursuit of *ilinx* and mimicry in play and games and Pronger's analysis of post-sport physical cultures.

A post-sport physical culture like fell running is one in which modernist ideologies and practices are not celebrated outright. In fell running, corporeal dichotomies between the sacred and profane, the raw and the cooked, the athletic and the uncontrolled body are challenged through various forms of athletic suffering. Whereas traditional sports tend to contain, discipline, and enframe physical bodies as resources to be deployed toward the attainment of external goals and the fulfilment of cultural and institutional discourses, post-sport play eschews the strict body-as-resource schematic (Heidegger 1954). Moments of dizziness, panic, suffering, and letting go through athletics can become the primary focus of fell running for its participants—in a way Caillois described some time ago. Post-sport physical cultures like fell running may sometimes assume the guise of mainstream sports and competitive play—running and running collectively in organized races, what, as already mentioned, Wheaton refers to as residual elements. But the experience of fell running at times bears little resemblance to this mainstream individual or collective activity. A post-sport physical culture like fell running basically values human spiritual, physical, and emotional experiences (or, rather, their realization) “in the round” through play-based (if at times competitive) forms of athleticism, beyond medical-technical or power and performance norms. Few have written about or explored what an existential post-sport sociology of play might look like or how it might be theorized. In this spirit, I suggest we return to authors like Caillois and examine the theoretical possibilities for conceptualizing their practice.

## Concluding Remarks

Through the application of central themes from Caillois' arguments regarding play and games, this case study of fell running suggests the potential personal and cultural importance of so-called alternative physical cultures in late-modern societies. Given the young's growing dissatisfaction with mainstream sport practices, the West's burgeoning rate of obesity, and the entrenched patterns of sedentary living in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, it makes sense to understand how and why advocates of fell running see it as a pleasurable pastime for all. To this end, a shift in the academic literature toward a broader examination of the social importance of play, games, and leisure-based physical cultures is warranted.

Physical-culture studies [PCS]—an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach to the analysis of human movement, embodiment, and corporeal representation within and across social institutions and cultural groups—takes as its mandate the analysis of both mainstream and alternative body, sport, play, and leisure activities. PCS research is theoretically driven, empirically grounded, and sensitive to the prospects of working with diverse groups of people to improve the social organization, cultural prominence, impact, and collective experience of exercise, play, and physical activity and education in the round. Among other emphases, PCS research needs also to focus on complex pleasure-body-play linkages in diverse cultural settings. PCS researchers (Silk and Andrews 2011) see considerable merit in destabilizing the dominant Western construction of sport and athletics as sites where pleasure is narrowly defined and rationalized. Still, PCS researchers, like others in the academy preoccupied with embodiment and pleasure, often display a marked sociological amnesia regarding some of the more classic statements about the coupling of play and pleasure. Caillois' thinking has the potential to help direct the growing PCS movement. PCS researchers often strive to produce local, national, and international analyses of how sport, exercise, and physical activity may be contexts where the promotion of social inclusion, health, safety, and human rights is evident and where physical, intellectual, emotional, and artistic potentials find support without fear or prejudice. This pursuit clearly requires theoretical deciphering of the form and content of play and games. As sport pedagogists and educators around the world are calling for a return to pleasurable play and games for children, there is considerable merit in revisiting the contributions of Caillois and others who underlined the complexity, value, and benefits of play in society.

Through a “back to the future” analytical turn, then, this case study of fell running underlines the importance of considering ilinx-like and mimetic play and games among the growing number of post-sport physical cultures in the United Kingdom and abroad. Further still, the study illustrates that the ethics of agôn and alea sports may also be present in ilinx-like and mimetic play. Panic, fear of the unknown, and visceral encounters of the wild are not unfortunate or unintended consequences of the playful (and even serious) competition of fell running, but rather some of the benefits its participants relish. Intersections between panic, play, and gritty aspects of athletic movement are today heavily undertheorized. In moving PCS research forward, authors like Caillois hail us to attend to the possibilities and promises of athleticism beyond the boxed cultural confines of so-called high-performance sport or even entirely playful games. As Caillois (1967) argued and as Elias and Dunning (1986) confirmed, playful forms of panic, vertigo, and mimicry matter in social figurations contoured and striated by heavily modernistic ideologies and codes of practice. In experiencing a joyful (albeit temporary) abandonment of the modern self through traversing the fells, people in competitive play are afforded an exciting and significant opportunity to experience the thrill of “letting go” through athletics.

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