“Finish… Whatever it Takes”

Considering Pain and Pleasure in the Ironman Triathlon:

A Socio-Cultural Analysis

by

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Abstract

The Ironman triathlon began in 1978, according to popular accounts the result of an argument among a group of athletes about who was the fittest. Thirty years later, participation in the Ironman has grown exponentially despite the physical and mental demands of the sport. In my dissertation I examine the ways different types of pain and pleasure function in the production of bodies and selves within this sporting practice and how these understandings of pain and pleasure intersect with neoliberal discourses. My study adds to an important body of literature in the sociology of sport that has explored pain and injury. This literature has revealed the normalization of pain and injury in sport, at the expense of athletes’ short and long-term health. Exploring pain and pleasure in a recreational sport and fitness practice and in light of neoliberal governmentality offers new insights.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 recreational Ironman triathletes and incorporated my own Ironman experiences into the project. Mediated representations of the sport helped to contextualize the interview and autobiographical materials. I subjected the information that I gathered to a critical discourse analysis informed by the theoretical perspectives of Michel Foucault.

My findings reveal that there are multiple ways that people construct their experiences of pain and pleasure in the Ironman context. Athletes strive to negotiate “positive” and “negative” kinds of pain in an effort to produce skilled, disciplined bodies, capable of finishing the event and claiming an “Ironman identity.” Pleasure in this sport seems mostly connected to ideas of challenge, achievement, rewards, and recognition. The constructions of pain and pleasure largely reify dominant sport and exercise
discourses which promote discipline, toughness, and achievement. Considering the Ironman in light of neoliberalism, it was evident that values of health, self-esteem, the use of pain, and the primary use of non-work/leisure time for training and racing were intricately connected to ideas about individual responsibility. I argue that as the “Ironman identity” becomes more normalized, our understandings of bodies and health shift in problematic way. This reinforces neoliberal ideologies of self-responsibility and makes diminished State responsibility for citizens more insidious than it is already.
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Chapter 1
Introduction


This project is about the construction of pain and pleasure in a very particular contemporary sporting practice — Ironman triathlons. I examine the ways different types of pain and pleasure function in the production of bodies and selves within the context of this practice. Working with the understanding that sport reproduces social norms, I look at the ways understandings of pain and pleasure intersect with contemporary neoliberal discourses. There are other discourses through which the idea of “finish… whatever it takes” might make sense — discourses of hegemonic masculinity, Christian ideas of self-sacrifice, and the Protestant work ethic come to mind. In this project, I frame Ironman’s “simple creed” in light of neoliberalism. I contend that through the extremes implicit in the Ironman context, we gain insights into the contemporary understandings of the relationship between pain, pleasure, health, the body, and discourses of expertise, which position health and wellness as an individual responsibility and moral imperative.

The Birth of a Dissertation

I am bent over, throwing up again. I have lost count how many times this is now even though I am only two hours into the bike ride. And then it starts, that little voice inside my head: “None of my friends and family will care if I don’t finish. The goal was to start. I have every reason to quit and no one will think the less of me.” But, I don’t quit. A couple of hours later I throw up again and the entire front of my body from just below my chest down in to my groin feels like it’s on fire. I’ve never experienced pain like this before, but I keep going because this is the Ironman and it’s supposed to hurt. (My 2007 race report)
Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons (of which the branded Ironman event is the most famous and popular)\(^1\) are one-day events that require participants to complete a 3.8 kilometer open-water swim, 180 kilometers of cycling, and then a full marathon. Most races have a cut-off time of 17 hours. The excerpt above is from a race report that I wrote following Ironman USA in 2007, an event that coincided with the summer in between the first and second year of my doctoral studies at Queen’s University. It was my third (and to this date final) triathlon of that length. In fact, it was my final triathlon of any length.

On that particular day I was struggling. Despite the significant discomfort and pain that I experienced during the event — on more than one occasion prompting serious consideration about dropping out — I forged on. Why? The final few lines of the same race report provide some insight to that question.

No matter how horrible I felt at various points during the day, and no matter how many times I wanted to quit, I know now that it was all worth it because there is no feeling similar to the one that you get when you cross the finish line. Spectators are cheering and clapping for you and the voice of the announcer screams over the loud system… YOU ARE AN IRONMAN! (My 2007 race report)

Despite the excited proclamation at the end of the race report, over the weeks and months that followed, I found myself thinking back on the day itself, on the 13 hours and 44 minutes of swimming, cycling, and running that I did before crossing the finish line. I challenged myself to be more thoughtful about the times I threw up in the water during the swim portion. I forced myself to think about the points on the bike course when my back seized up so badly that I could scarcely withstand the pain that accompanied each

\(^1\) “Ironman” is the trademarked title for triathlons of this length; Ironman events are “branded” events organized by the World Triathlon Corporation (WTC). “Iron-distance” refers to triathlons of the same length but that are non-branded events. I use both terms throughout this project mostly because my interview participants have done both kinds of events. The media analysis is primarily focussed on the branded events.
pedal stroke. And I reflected on the moments when I was forced to shuffle during the marathon, shoulders hunched, head dropped, tears in my eyes brought on not only by my physical pains but also by my frustration with my inability to go any faster. I thought about how I asked myself the question “Why am I doing this?” on more than one occasion during the race that day. And then: “Why do I feel the need to do this?” Why do the thousands of other people who participate in Ironman and Iron-distance races around the world feel the need or desire to do these kinds of events? The questions reminded me of ideas that had emerged during my master’s thesis research, which for the sake of focus and space were left unexplored. My ethnographic work with a group of non-elite male marathon runners raised the issue of non-injury-related pain in the recreational sport. Some of the runners I interviewed said that they got enjoyment not only from participating but also from the experience of the pain itself.

Many coffees (and perhaps a pint or two) with academic colleagues and with friends who remain active in Ironman and Iron-distance events led me to think more generally about ideas of pain and pleasure and their possible interconnectedness in this and other sport, fitness, and social spaces. I began to think more about the somewhat perplexing notion that the Ironman is a “lifestyle sport” (Wheaton, 2004). For many people, the Ironman is a leisure pursuit, a hobby, a fitness practice for recreational participants — regular people like me who set as a goal the completion of one or more of these events and who, ostensibly, find pleasure in one way or another through their participation.

I began to wonder how pain is understood by different people in different contexts. Why might people remain involved in something that produces painful
experiences? What did I get out of these painful experiences and why now did I seem to be questioning them? And what about pleasure? What are the sources of pleasure in such arduous fitness challenges? How do certain painful pleasures come to be celebrated while others are considered deviant (think sport practices versus S/M practices)?

Underscoring all of this was my curiosity about pain and pleasure as embodied experiences and what relation might exist between somatic sensations, discourse, and subjectivity.

I turned to existing literature within the fields of sport sociology, the sociology of the body, anthropology, and philosophy to learn what other scholars had to say about bodies, pains, and pleasures. To be certain, they have been topics of interest to a great number of scholars: bodily pains and pleasures have been on the research agendas of those in “pure” science disciplines with a view towards determining their biological “nature.” Emotional and psychic pain have gained the attention of psychologists with a view towards the treatment and prevention of pain — and pleasure — related “problems.” Philosophers have engaged in lively debates about the intrinsic or extrinsic nature of these human experiences, their meanings, and their (potential) relationship to each other.

Sociologists have entered the discussion relatively recently with a view towards explicating pain (and to a lesser extent pleasure) as an individual experience influenced by culture (Morris, 1991). The bodies of literature helped to shape my general understanding of pain and pleasure as subjective, contextually specific, politicized experiences that can’t be explained by medico-scientific or universalistic perspectives.

Specific to sport, I found an excellent body of literature that explored injury-related pain in various ways: pain/injury in the context of risk culture and “sportsnets”
(Nixon, 1992, 1993, 1994a, b, 1996, 1998); pain as an effect of over-conformity to, or normalization of, athletic discourses (Atkinson, 2008; Curry & Strauss, 1994; Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Noe, 1973); pain as gendered and embodied (Messner, 1990; Pike & Maguire, 2003; Pringle & Markula, 2005; Sabo, 1986; Young, McTeer, & White, 1994); pain as a means of gaining “athletic capital” (Curry, 1993; Donnelly & Young, 1988; Holmes & Frey, 1990); pain as an exigency of professional commercialized sport (Howe, 2001, 2004; Malcom & Sheard, 2002; Young & White, 1995). This literature also discusses the roles of sport medicine practitioners in treating (and sometimes helping to facilitate) sport injury (Howe, 2001; 2004; Safai, 2003, 2004; Walk, 1997; Young, 2004). These themes interconnect in many of the texts.

Based on this literature I can suggest, for example, that athletes consider pain as an inevitable outcome of their involvement in sport. In most sports, experiences of pain are dealt with in silence for fear of repercussion — decreased playing time, loss of athletic-capital, and for some men fear of being thought less masculine by peers, coaches, team personnel, the media, and spectators. The opposite might also be true, that is, expressing pain (and an athlete’s ability to play in/with pain) can work to increase a male athlete’s masculine and athletic capital. If anything, this body of literature highlights the non-monolithic nature of embodied experiences of pain in sport.

The focus of this literature has primarily been on elite male, team sport environments and the normalization of pain therein. Accordingly, it has been noted that female athletes have largely been excluded from the literature on pain/injury (Pike & Maguire, 2003; Roderick, 2006; Young, 2004). The few articles published about women’s experiences of sport and sporting-related injury are specific to team or college
sport environments (Charlesworth & Young, 2004; Nixon, 1996; Pike & Maguire, 2003; Theberge, 1997, 2000; Young & White, 1995). There has been little to no consideration of peoples’ experiences of pain in recreational sport (Pike & Maguire, 2003) or in exercise/fitness environments (White, 2004).

Of the studies that have considered sporting pleasure, there has been a significant focus on spectatorship or fandom (Andrews, 2006; Carlisle Duncan & Brummett, 1989; Denzin, 2006; Farred, 2006; Juffer, 2006; Moor, 2006; Ritzer, 2006). Pleasure through exercise has largely been theorized as associated with or attributed to outcomes (e.g., rewards, recognition, body modification). The sensuous pleasures experienced through participation in sport and/or fitness have received scant attention (Gard & Meyenn, 2000; Pringle, 2009; Wright & Dewar, 1997). Even less consideration has been given to the possibility that painful experiences may be a source of pleasure for some participants (Atkinson & Young, 2008; Bale, 2006). The scholars who have studied the overlap of pain and pleasure tended to consider the pleasure that people might take through inflicting pain on others in contact sports (Gard & Meyenn, 2000; Pringle, 2009).

Thus, a combination of my longstanding interest in the body as a personal and academic project, my own participation in Ironman triathlons, the unexplored ideas from my master’s thesis, and what I perceived as gaps in the literature on sport-related pain and pleasure have led to this project. I present my work in the spirit of Bordo’s (1999) contention that “cultural interpretation is an ongoing, always incomplete process, and no one gets the final word” (p. 29).
Plan of the Work

My project has been guided by the following research questions: (1) How are ideas of “pain” and “pleasure” constructed within the context of Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons? (2) How might constructions of pain and pleasure relate to ideas about bodies, identities, and health? and, (3) What might an interrogation of the constructions of pain and pleasure in this sporting practice reveal about the broader socio-cultural context in which it takes place? Additionally, I use this project to explore my theoretical and methodological quandaries about the relationship between the extra-discursive and subjectivity with a view towards establishing, with some authority, my own theoretical perspective about the body as a socio-cultural phenomenon.

I have explored these questions by using Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons as a heuristic device. Borrowing from the tenets of reflexive ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) I gathered the empirical materials for this project through semi-structured interviews with 19 people who are or who have been participants in Ironman and/or Iron-distance triathlons. I also used my own training journals and race reports from when I participated in these events as well as notes from my observations of other events of this nature. In order to contextualize the interviews, I analyzed: (1) television broadcasts of the Ironman World Championships from 1991 to 2009; and (2) a sample of triathlon-related magazines published between 1983 and 2010. Finally, I subjected these materials to a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992; Lupton, 1998; Mills, 2004; Wetherall, 2001) which was primarily informed by the theoretical perspectives of Michel Foucault. Existing empirical scholarship within the socio-cultural studies of sport, exercise, and physical activity also helped to shape my analysis.
A brief overview of the general findings and the arguments that follow in the remainder of this project is likely useful here. The people I interviewed about pain and pleasure both reified and resisted the dominant discursive constructions of pain and pleasure they see in Ironman-related media. While in the mediated representations of the sport, pain and suffering are valorized, the interview materials point toward the negotiation of different kinds of pain. “Positive” kinds of pain are seen as productive; “negative” pain is seen to be synonymous with injury. Incurring an injury is viewed by many people involved in Ironman as a failure to negotiate positive and negative pain successfully. Most of the study participants considered it ill-advised to ignore an injury or to maintain participation while injured. Both the mediated representations of the sport and my participants framed pleasure instrumentally — challenge, achievement, rewards, and recognition — using language that supports dominant sport, exercise, and health discourses.

The ways that pain and pleasure are constructed within the Ironman context are intricately connected to the desire people form to attain an “Ironman identity,” something that is produced as an athlete crosses the finish line (whatever it takes). The materials I gathered all contained reference to the transformative possibility of the sport associated with the finishing of one or more events. My own experiences in the sport are also very much influenced by ideas of transformation. In most respects, this idea of transformation is related to peoples’ health and peoples’ bodies. Given the emphasis on health and self-responsibility in the current neoliberal social and political context, it is not that surprising that extreme fitness practices like the Ironman — with its ideals of challenge, achievement, discipline, and toughness — are gaining in popularity. I argue that as the
“Ironman identity” becomes more normalized, our understandings of bodies and health shift in problematic ways for Ironman and non-Ironman participants alike.

**Implications of the Project**

At a broad level, in this project I seek to add to the conversation about how sport and fitness practices can shape our understandings about bodies and social identities in contemporary times. By exploring the ways that pain and pleasure are constructed in the context of the Ironman — a recreational or lifestyle sport that was borne, and has grown, in neoliberal times — I want to reveal the relationship between broader health discourses, sport and fitness practices, and the reproduction of social inequality.

My work seeks to call into question the often taken-for-granted assumption that participation in sport, exercise, and physical activity is unquestionably “good.” Here I agree with Smith-Maguire (2008b) who, in her critical analysis of the business of fitness, argues that, “when exercise is taken to be an unproblematic ‘good,’ the vested interests and unintended consequences associated with the current construction of fitness are exempt from questioning” (pp. 198-199). While many people undoubtedly participate in Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons with a goal of performing well in and perhaps winning races (at the elite or age group level), for the vast majority who complete an Ironman or Iron-distance triathlon, participation is more a form of “serious leisure” (McCarville, 2007) or a part of their “lifestyle” (Wheaton, 2004).

The quest for better health and fitness seems to be one of the primary motivations amongst the growing number of recreational Ironman participants. Of course, the training regimes required for these events well exceed the recommended amount of physical
activity necessary to maintain or improve one’s health, at least according to activity guidelines established by the Public Health Agency of Canada (2007). Exercise scientists have argued that the longer and more intense the activity, the greater the chances of injury (White, 2004). This might result in a scenario in which the costs of participation outweigh the benefits. It seems, however, that within the context of the Ironman the risk of injury does not deter people from participating in one, two, or even multiple Ironman and/or Iron-distance events in their lifetimes. My work here adds to the literature on lifestyle sports (see Wheaton, 2004) by exploring the relationship between pain and pleasure and health and identity in our neoliberal social and political context.

Through this project I seek to broaden our ideas of what we might think of as sport or fitness-related pain, moving beyond the equation of pain to injury which is prevalent in the existing literature (Roderick, 2006; Young, 2004) by using the constructions of pain put forth by female and male recreational Ironman participants. Though gender was not a specific focus of my project from the outset, there did emerge a need to comment on the ways that, for instance, notions of pain intersect with discourses of gender, primarily because there was not a significant difference between the responses given by women and by men to the interview questions.

My work here also addresses what I perceive as a gap in the literature related to sporting pleasures. As noted previously pleasure, unlike pain, has largely been overlooked within socio-cultural studies of the sporting/physically active body and within the academy more generally. Given the common-sense understanding that people participate in sport or fitness activities because of the way these activities make them feel, the lack of discussion of pleasure is something I had not expected. Little research has
been done to understand kinaesthetic pleasure in particular. Socio-cultural explorations of
sport-related pleasure have instead tended to focus on the pleasures related to
spectatorship and/or team allegiance, or on pleasures related to the external rewards that
are often linked to sport and physical activity (i.e., body modification, social capital,
consumer goods, etc.). Given the value placed on pleasure as a way to (ostensibly) keep
people participating in activities that are seen as healthy and socially beneficial, the lack
of attention to pleasure is surprising.

At the root of this project is my academic curiosity about the body. From the
outset, it was my intention to use the bodily experiences of pain and pleasure that emerge
in the context of the Ironman to think about the place of the extra-discursive in our
theorizing of the body as a socio-cultural phenomenon. I recognize that the extra-
discursive is a contested term. Throughout this project I work with the understanding that
“extra-discursive” is a term meant to represent the materiality of the body and peoples’
sensuous or kinaesthetic experiences that escape language or, to put it another way, are
pre-discursive. I follow Malson (1997) in the suggestion that the “discursive
production(s) of bodies lean on the extra-discursive, material physicality of bodies. Just
as discourses constitute and regulate the body, so they also lean on the physical body to
support their ‘truths’” (p. 231). That said, by incorporating some of the tenets of
phenomenology into my interviews and into my discourse analyses, I have been able to
include a discussion about the methodological complications of getting people to talk
about their bodies, bodily experiences, and the non-tangibles that seem to result from
their participation in physical activity.
Why Ironman/Iron-distance Triathlons?

In *Understanding Lifestyle Sports: Consumption, Identity, and Difference* (2004), Belinda Wheaton and an array of scholars explore the relatively recent phenomenon of lifestyle sports. The book includes articles that focus on adventure racing, skate boarding, climbing, windsurfing, and ultimate Frisbee. Each chapter works to contribute to our understanding of the relationships between these “non-mainstream” sporting practices, popular culture, consumption, and identity. The essays also provide us with insights into the uniqueness of these lifestyle sports: “Each has its own specificity; its own history, (politics of) identities and development patterns” (Wheaton, 2004, p. 11). That said, these sports share certain features including the fact that most of them have developed relatively recently (climbing is a notable exception to this). Lifestyle sports tend to promote recreational, grass roots participation and to have significant ties to consumption (products related to the practice). The pleasures of these sports are often framed by ideas of risk, thrill seeking, and adventure (Fletcher, 2008; Wheaton, 2004). Participants often commit a significant amount of money and time to their chosen activities and, as such, Wheaton (2004) says that a particular social identity develops in and around the activity. Participants tend to be white and middle-class and many (but not all) of them are men. The characteristics Wheaton and other scholars who have written about different kinds of lifestyle sports note are definitely evident in the sport of triathlon generally (Atkinson, 2008) and Ironman and Iron-distance events specifically.

The sport of triathlon (encompassing all distances from Try-a-Tri to Ultraman) is often positioned as one of the fastest growing adult sports in the world (Drummond, 2002, 2010; Hadzipetros, 2009). It has been estimated that six million people take part in
organized triathlons around the world annually. This growth in popularity has not escaped the attention of academics. The sport has piqued the curiosity of physiologists, kinesiologists, biomechanists, nutritionists, and psychologists with myriad studies in these disciplines published since as early as 1978. Different lines of inquiry related to the sport have been published over the past 25 years in various socio-cultural journals (Atkinson, 2008; Atkinson & Young, 2008; Cronan & Scott, 2008; Drummond, 2002, 2010; Granskog, 1991, 1992, 1993, 2003; Hilliard, 1988; Jones & Carmichael Aitchison, 2007; McCarville, 2007). In his ethnographic research on the sport of triathlon, Atkinson (2008) states that the sharp increase in triathlon participation rates in recent years begs sociological analysis, since there is “practically an endless list of sport and leisure activities from which to select” (p. 168). Why do people choose to do this one? More importantly for my purposes, why are Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons the choice of many as their sport and leisure activity?

Longer triathlon events provide a unique and useful cultural site through which we can explore ideas about pain and pleasure, health, and fitness. Their usefulness is not related only to the amount of time participants spend undertaking the training required to be able to finish an event (relatively) safely, but also to the taxing physical and mental demands of the day itself. Here I follow Ron McCarville’s (2007) assertion that Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons “offer a striking example of the compelling nature of leisure events intended to test the limits of their participants” (p. 160).

While once considered an oddity in the world of sport, Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons have seen the numbers of events and of participants increase dramatically since the inaugural Iron Man (sic) event in 1978. From the 15 people who participated in that
first event, there are now 24 official Ironman events held globally on an annual basis, each with approximately 2000 entries. There are also numerous Iron-distance events organized each year that fall outside of the scope of the official Ironman brand. Not that long ago, a sport so extreme would have been seen as unthinkable. Now it’s something that (very particular types of) people do for recreation, for fitness, and as part of their lifestyle. The World Triathlon Corporation (WTC) positions the Ironman as the world’s most prestigious one-day endurance event.

The Ironman brand has become big business. Between the registration fees for the events themselves, television rights, merchandise, and brand licensing, Ironman is a wildly successful fitness business. Its influence can be seen beyond the triathlon milieu. Ironman imagery and ideology proliferate in popular culture. There are Facebook applications that cater specifically to Ironman athletes, Ironman hopefuls, and people just interested in the sport. People who have finished the Ironman have been guests on Oprah Winfrey’s wildly successful talk show. NFL quarter-back Brett Favre and former MLB player Cal Ripken are both frequently referred to as the “ironman” of their respective sports. In these cases, the term is applied to Favre’s and Ripken’s own forms of endurance. Both athletes hold records for the most consecutive games started. And as just one example of the commodification of Ironman, in 2008 Avon launched an Ironman fragrance collection for men, promoted as capturing “the global spirit of the race and the ‘anything is possible’ mentality that accompanies it” (Bird, Cosmetics: design-europe.com, October, 2008).

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2 Of these 24 official Ironman events, eight are held in North America. Each event serves as a qualifier for the Hawaii Ironman which, since 1983, has been considered the Ironman World Championship. Ironman Canada (Penticton, BC), first run in 1983 as an independent ultra-distance triathlon, became an official Ironman event in 1986 and as such serves as a qualifier for the Ironman World Championships.

3 This statement has appeared in different WTC promotional campaigns.
My concern here is not the constitution, history, or commercial success of the Ironman; rather I am using the Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons more as a point of inquiry from which to think about the relationship between pain, pleasure, health, and identity. My own experiences, the experiences of others, and mediated representations of Ironman events suggest that there are diverse bodily experiences in this particular social space and, further, that representations of these experiences seem to have interesting similarities and contradictions.

A General (and Brief) Introduction to My Understandings of Neoliberalism

This is a project interested in the ways that discourses operate as modes of subjection in which “people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations” (Foucault, as cited in Miller, 2009, p. 181). This relationship between discourse and subjection, Miller (2009) contends, “constitutes a simultaneous internalization and externalization, individuation and collectivization” (p. 181) with troubling outcomes for those who fail to “measure” up in neoliberal forms of government.

At risk of oversimplifying, the goal of neoliberal agendas is to organize the whole of society as if it were a free market (Foucault, 2004; Giroux, 2004; Lemke, 2001; Rabinow & Rose, 2006; Rose, 1999). Within this way of thinking/being, there is a primary focus on the individual and individual responsibility — the individual conceptualized as (and expected to be) autonomous, moral, and self-governing. It is anticipated that individuals will desire to and will act in rational ways, and that this desire will be determined by capitalist agendas (Foucault, 2004; Lemke, 2001; McDermott, 2007). Foucauldian scholar Thomas Lemke (2001) writes that
Neoliberalism encourages individuals to give their lives a specific entrepreneurial form. It responds to stronger “demand” for individual scope for self-determination and desired autonomy by “supplying” individuals and collectives with the possibility of actively participating in the solution of specific matters and problems which had hitherto been the domain of state agencies specifically empowered to undertake such tasks. (p. 202)

Neoliberalism shifts responsibility from the state to the individual; the core strategy of neoliberalism is self-responsibility. What were once seen as responsibilities of the state has gradually shifted to individuals such as health, illness, poverty, and unemployment (Foucault, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Lemke, 2001; Rose, 1999). This shift began in the 1970s and continues through today. This includes the rolling back of welfare or income assistance programs and cutting budgets for health care and education (Ingham, 1985; King, 2006; Lemke, 2001; Petersen, 1997).

Neoliberal discourses promote a very particular type of citizen through ideologies of self-empowerment, self-actualization, discipline, and consumerism (King, 2006; Lemke, 2001; McDermott, 2007; Rose, 1999). In this project, using the Ironman triathlon as my focal point, I explore the different ways that I see pain and pleasure functioning in the production of neoliberal subjects particularly as related to health, self-esteem, and “leisure.”

Some Caveats

Pain and pleasure are subjective experiences. David Howe (2004) writes that “since pain by its nature is invisible, whether it has the ability to shape individual and cultural world-views is difficult to determine” (Howe, 2004, pp. 88-89). I thought I appreciated that fact prior to undertaking this particular project; I know differently now! Exploring constructions of pain and pleasure was not an easy task. In a way, the qualitative materials I gathered (which included over 500 pages of interview transcripts,
all of the notes from my analysis of the mediated representations, and my various records of personal experiences) were almost overwhelming. And they were overwhelming not so much for the volume of material (though that in and of itself caused several sleepless nights) but for the diversity of ideas expressed, especially in the interviews. At the end of the day, however, it is the diversity among the participants’ narratives, the non-monolithic ways in which they conceptualized pain and pleasure, and their experiences in this sport that have made working on this project so compelling. Nevertheless, I must acknowledge the difficulty of researching such subjective ideas. As Jeffrey Fry (2006) comments, “experiences of pain and suffering present an ambiguous picture” (p. 246). The same can also be said about pleasure.

It was not my intention in this project to position the constructions of pain (or its variants) within this lifestyle sport as “bad” nor was it my intention to suggest that these same conceptualizations are unequivocally “good” as is so often the case in dominant constructions of sport and physical activity. In the same way, I sought not to consider sources of pleasure, especially those synonymous with pain, simply as “perverse” (Bale, 2006) or “bizarre” (Pringle, 2009). Rather, I sought to work with the understanding that these terms and the experiences associated with them have multiple meanings (Bale, 2006; Fry, 2006; Howe, 2004). I recognized that there are certain practices through which some people may experience pain and/or find pleasure that I may not see in the same way. As much as possible I sought to take notice of the assumptions and prejudices which might have made me think about things in certain ways (Heathwood, 2007). I strived to maintain this reflexive stance as I worked on all aspects of the project.
Finally, this chapter includes a great deal of personal reference, something which carries through the rest of this project. This is not only because my own experiences serve as the impetus for this project but my training journals and race reports are among the materials that I collected and analyzed. Undoubtedly, my experiences shaped my perspective of the sport and painful and pleasurable experiences in it. My experiences shaped the interview questions, the conversations with participants, and influenced the ways in which I took up the mediated representations and observations of the sport. While there may be some objections to including what might be considered “narratives of the self” (Sparks, 2002) in my doctoral project, I am a staunch believer that the lived experiences of the researcher are no less valid than those of other people. I discuss this idea further in chapter four.

The Chapters

In chapter two I provide a review of the existing literature that helped inform my project. It is not simply a presentation of work but a conversation with the various bodies of literature regarding pain and pleasure in sport and physical activity. Studies focused on the sport of triathlon and/or Ironman specifically are integrated throughout the review.

In chapter three I present an overview of the different ways that pain and pleasure have been theorized within sociology and philosophy as well as general theoretical perspectives of the body. I focus especially on constructionist and phenomenological perspectives, explaining the strengths and weaknesses of each in terms of theorizing the body, pain, and pleasure. In the final section of the chapter, I outline the ways that I have applied these different perspectives to my project.
The focus of chapter four is the methodological approach that I adopted for this project. I outline and explicate my decision to use a reflexive ethnographic framework (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), which follows from previous work I have undertaken (Bridel, 2006; Bridel & Rail, 2007). I conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 recreational Ironman triathletes and incorporated my own Ironman experiences into the project. Mediated representations of the sport helped to contextualize the interview and autobiographical materials. I subjected the information that I gathered to a critical discourse analysis informed by the theoretical perspectives of Michel Foucault.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters represent the crux of the “results and discussion” of my project. In chapter five, I focus on constructions of pain and their relationship to discourses of high performance sport, sport science, and toughness. I report my findings related to pleasure in chapter six. I focus especially on the prevalence of instrumental forms of pleasure both independent of and in concert with ideas about sensuous pleasure. I theorize this relationship in relation to the dominant narratives of challenge and achievement within the Ironman and broader sport and exercise context, while also providing comment on the limits of language in undertaking this kind of research. In chapter seven I present an analysis of Ironman-related pains in pleasure in light of neoliberal governmentality. My discussion focuses on self-responsibility as a core strategy of neoliberalism and the ways that this is reproduced in the Ironman context.

In the final chapter I sum up the main arguments that I make in the project and what I see as their importance. I also outline some of the limitations of my work and suggest some ideas for future research agendas. I conclude with a commentary on my own experiences in undertaking and completing this doctoral dissertation.
Chapter 2

Sporting Pains and Sporting Pleasures: A Review of the Literature

Pain is temporary. It may last a minute, or an hour, or a day, or a year, but eventually it will subside and something else will take its place. If I quit, however, it lasts forever.

(Lance Armstrong)\(^4\)

Pain — and more pointedly the ability to tolerate it, endure it, inflict and absorb it, ignore it, play through it, negotiate it — has long been associated with participation in sport. Sport participants are subjected to and impart bodily pain that would be tolerated in few social milieus in which people find themselves by choice. Pain has also come to be valued in the fitness field. The example that likely has had the most long-lasting impact is the philosophy of “no pain, no gain.” It was a headband touting, leg-warmer wearing, thong-clad Jane Fonda who first popularized the “no pain, no gain” philosophy in her line of 1980s fitness videos. Both Armstrong and Fonda (and countless other sport and fitness “celebrities”) reproduce what is often a taken-for-granted assumption in popular culture that it is necessary to survive or overcome painful experiences to gain success in sport and fitness practices and in life more generally. In some cases, we are told that to endure painful experiences is a way to build character. In his review of the various ways that we might study sport-related pain, Sigmund Loland (2006) says that “in performance sport coping with pain is seen as a test of the spirit of an athlete. Pain has to be fought and

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\(^4\) Retrieved from http://thinkexist.com/quotation/pain_is_temporary-it_may_last_a_minute-or_an_hour/346310.html.
conquered…. injury and pain should be turned into success stories of human growth” (p. 54).

The curious connection of pain to success (and maybe even to pleasure) and the rather odd way that sport and fitness discourses promote pain as part of the experience has not escaped the critical lens of scholars in the humanities and social sciences. It was this literature to which I turned when I first started to become more critical about my own participation in Ironman triathlons. The scholarly literature provided me with some insights as to why I might perceive pain and pleasure in certain ways, but it also served to raise many questions, thus providing impetus for my inquiry here.

I will begin this conversation by turning to those projects that have interrogated pain and injury in the context of sport. I then look at the ways that pleasure has been taken up in academic inquiries about sport and fitness. Throughout the chapter I will address the few scholarly studies that have explored the Ironman and/or the sport of triathlon in a more general sense.

**Pain and Sport: Key Themes and Insights**

Since the early 1990s scholars have turned their focus more and more to considerations of the socio-cultural dimensions of pain. At the root of these interrogations is an attempt to wrest ideas about pain from explicitly biomedical understandings, an approach which had dominated both academic and popular literature to that point in time (Burkitt, 1999; Bendelow & Williams, 1995; Morris, 1991; Williams & Bendelow, 1998). I would add that despite increased socio-cultural interpretations of pain, the biomedical model — which defines pain as a biological/physiological phenomenon and
thus a bodily experience to be prevented or treated through some sort of biomedical intervention — continues to dominate understandings of pain within the academy and beyond. By challenging biomedical discourses, the social science literature has contributed much to our understanding of pain and its relation to socio-cultural processes through both empirical research projects and theoretical considerations. The latter is the focus of chapter three.

As pain was taken up by sociologists generally, sport scholars also turned their attention to pain (Roderick, 2006; Young, 2004). Theoretically, sport scholars have relied on the influences of Bourdieu, Elias, Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, and Turner to inform their work. From a methodological standpoint, most studies of pain in sport have relied on interview materials; however, some scholars such as David Howe (2001, 2004) and Parissa Safai (2003, 2004) have also used other ethnographic methods. The literature covers a somewhat varied selection of sporting spaces, though men’s rugby seems an especially favourite focus of sport sociology scholars. The various studies that have been undertaken have discussed the relationship between the rules of sport, team dynamics, gender, health discourses, commercial interests and athletes’ experiences of pain. The work published to date has challenged the taken-for-grantedness of pain as a “normal” and accepted part of involvement in sport. It has also worked to call into question (at least within the academy) the popular assumption that sport participation is a way to improve one’s health.

Sociological work on sporting pain and injury brings awareness to the problematic ways in which sport as typically practiced in western cultures — paradoxically — damages the bodies of participants at the same time that it is said to be
contributing to improved health and fitness. Safai (2003) sums up the importance of socio-cultural inquiries about sporting pain and injury suggesting that such investigations are necessary “not only because of the social processes that normalize pain and injury in sport, but also because of the damaging, potentially devastating, consequences to the health and well-being of many people” (p. 127). I concur with Safai’s sentiments, especially given the ways athletes’ abilities to endure pain and injury are celebrated and normalized. But, I believe that we also need to understand better the types of pains in sport, exercise, fitness, and physical activity and their relationship to the broader socio-cultural context. Most of the work published to date has equated sporting pain with injury. I follow other scholars who have begun to consider pain that is not a consequence of or directly related to injury.

Martin Roderick (2006) and Kevin Young (2004) have both summarized the existing socio-cultural work on pain related to sport and physical activity. Here I present four specific aspects of the pain literature: sport cultures; gender; sports medicine; and, non-injury related pain. Although I present them each separately, there are connections between them all.

*Sport Cultures, Risk, Pain, and Injury*

Of all the academic literature that has focused on sport-related pain and injury, a large part of it has been interested in what Young (2004) refers to as the “causes and contexts” (p. 2) of pain and injury in sport or “pain cultures.” To perhaps oversimplify, the work focusing on cause and/or context calls into question what is seen as a “natural” part of sport. Scholars have examined the ways that sports in general, and teams or clubs more specifically, are governed, controlled, and/or coached and with what primary focus
(e.g., winning, profits). This body of work also interrogates the ways sport and athletes are perceived by the general (i.e., paying) public. Scholars have talked about the effects of sporting cultures on athletes and the ways in which they experience pain and injury (Nixon, 1992, 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1996). They also talk about pain as an effect of over-conformity to, or normalization of, athletic discourses (Atkinson, 2008; Curry & Jiobu, 1984; Curry & Strauss, 1994; Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Noe, 1973). Some scholars have commented on pain as an exigency of sport as a paid occupation (Howe, 2001, 2004; Malcom & Sheard, 2002; Young & White, 1995).

One of the most prevalent ideas in the sport-related pain and injury literature is one first introduced in 1992 by Howard L. Nixon II, arguably one of the most prolific writers in this field. In his multiple investigations of collegiate sports in the United States he was interested in the relationships between athletes and the various team personnel, relationships that he refers to as “sportsnets” (1992, 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1996). Nixon argues that sports operate as a “culture of risk.” Contributing to this risk culture was what he suggested to be the conspiratorial ways in which coaches, sport medicine practitioners, and administrators worked to ensure athletes would continue to play despite being in pain or suffering from an acute or chronic injury. Importantly, risk, pain, and injury were seen as such a normal part of sport participation that athletes came to accept it more or less without question. Nixon came to describe this relationship as the risk-pain-injury nexus.

Nixon’s oeuvre seems to be in bringing to light the paradox through which athletes continue to play injured or in pain in effort to gain or achieve success. The paradox is, of course, that the chances of performing to a level where success can be achieved is lessened because they are playing in pain or injured. Roderick (1998) sums up
Nixon’s work: “For Nixon, the idea of participating in sport in which taking risks is expected and which may lead to chronic pain and long-term injury conflicts with what he holds to be “common sense” notions” (p. 65).

Nixon’s work has made important contributions to our understandings of the ways that social networks in sport may function to promote problematic notions about pain, injury, and sporting bodies (Roderick, 1998; Safai, 2003; Walk & Wiersma, 2005). His work has also led to many different considerations of risk and sport. In fact, most of the published research about pain and sport references the idea of “risk” in one way or another. But Nixon’s work has been the focus of some critique, mainly for his failure to acknowledge socio-cultural influences on athletes from outside of the specific “sportsnets” he describes (Roderick, 1998; Walk & Wiersma, 2005). Nixon’s work seems to represent elite-level athletes as “passive dupes” or “empty vessels” upon which so-called conspiratorial networks of coaches, trainers, sport medicine clinicians, and other team personnel lay problematic values and beliefs about risk, pain, injury, and achievement (Roderick, 1998; Safai, 2003). Roderick (1998) notes that “the capacity for coaches, trainers, and significant others to affect athletes is not a one-way process” (p. 76). Other scholars have demonstrated the complexity of sporting cultures, noting, amongst other things, the ways that athletes might be active in reproducing so-called “cultures of risk” and related ideas about pain and injury (Albert, 2004; Donnelly, 2004; Howe, 2001, 2004; Kotarba, 2004; Safai, 2003; 2004; Young, McTeer, &White, 1994; Young & White, 1995).

In his ethnographic project on a professional men’s rugby team in Wales, David Howe (2001, 2004), offers rich insights about the ways in which pain and injury are
experienced and taken up by athletes and the way the culture of a sport club or team shapes these experiences. Spending two years in the role of participant observer with a Welsh rugby union team (called Pontypridd RFC), Howe acted at various times as water boy, massage therapist, and general “gofer” (2001, p. 293). This allowed him unfettered access to the culture of the rugby union club, to be there in the moments when pain and injury were experienced, and to note how such experiences were handled by the various team members. Howe was able to investigate the relationship between the culture (or habitus) of the club and experiences of pain and injury at the individual level.

Howe says that the players’ relationship to pain seemed to shift as the club went through the process of professionalization, a shift that occurred while he was with it. Howe noted that prior to the professionalization of the team, pain might have been readily vocalized mostly for purposes of excuse-making if a team member was playing poorly. Players also used pain to elevate their status within the team — they were tough enough to play well despite being injured. With the move to professional status and the related commercialization of the team, however, “the player’s body became a commodity to be employed…. Players appeared to be placed under more pressure to deal with pain when their position within the squad was under threat” (Howe, 2001, p. 295). Whereas prior to professionalization players’ vocalized their pains and injuries to other team members and staff, following the shift players kept quiet about their pains and injuries for fear of not being played (and, thus, not paid). Individual experiences of pain seemed very much influenced by the habitus of the rugby club.

In another example of the way sporting cultures function in reproducing certain notions about pain and injury, Michael Atkinson (2008) looked at triathlon. In his
ethnographic study of triathlon clubs in Ontario, Canada, Atkinson draws on Elias’
notions of habitus and civilized bodies. He argues that the sport of triathlon can be seen
as a contemporary civilizing process, a process through which participants, who tend to
be middle to upper-class, redefine their social identities. He suggests that such
redefinition is necessary primarily because of an unhappiness or disgruntled-ness with the
banality of North American middle-class existence. Atkinson argues that participation in
triathlon is a “signifier of anxiety, loneliness, boredom, and frustration among certain
members of the middle classes” (2008, p. 171). He sees connections between
participation, painful physical experiences, individual identities, and the formulation of
meaningful social relationships:

Triathlon bodies are set into suffering contexts for emotional stimulation at a time
of perceived cultural disconnect, apathy, and risk; as such, the sports activities,
ideologies and relationships constituting their pain community may be read as a
homological criticism of a perceived morally and physically uncivilized mass of

In this compelling article, Atkinson presents triathlon involvement as an escape
from “middle-class banality” and suggests that the ability to endure pain and suffering
results in a class-related hierarchy of body regulation. But, his is an interpretation that
does not entirely resonate with me. A nice glass of merlot seems like a much simpler and
far less arduous way to escape from this so-called banal existence so why the need to
experience pain and suffering? What is it about Iron-distance triathlons and the almost
assured experience of pain that attracts and maintains participants? While one can
undoubtedly experience pain and suffering in shorter distance triathlons and duathlons\(^5\) it
is also quite conceivable that athletes can complete them with minimal to no discomfort,
depending on the intensity with which they approach them. This is not so much the case

\(^5\) Events in which participants run, bike, and then run again.
for Ironman and Iron-distance events which may last anywhere from eight to 17 hours on
the day itself, not to mention the months and months of training beforehand. In short,
there is much greater time, physical, and mental commitments related to participation in
the more extreme forms of the sport. Based on my own experiences, there are multiple
ways in which pain is present. And so what pleasure might participants get from their
involvement? While Atkinson does touch on certain types of pleasures in his study (e.g.,
building social networks, gaining recognition from peers) I feel that there is much more
to explore in terms of pain, pleasure, and the possibility that pain may be a type of
pleasure within this particular sporting practice.

*Sport, Pain and Injury, and Gender*

Gender has been a significant point of interest for sport scholars interested in
athletes’ experiences of pain and the meaning they assign to it. The majority of this work
focuses on men’s elite sporting spaces and the production of sporting masculinities. A
small but growing body of literature considers the notions of pain and injury in women’s
sporting spaces.

*Pain, Injury, and Men’s Sport*

The idea that sports operate as “cultures of risk” has been connected to the
production of masculine identity in discussions of pain and injury. Scholars have argued
that the ability to not only endure or tolerate pain but to continue to play while in pain or
while inflicted with an injury is an important — and problematic — part of the
construction of sporting masculinity (e.g., Howe, 2001, 2004; Messner, 1990, 1992; Pike
& Maguire, 2003; Pringle, 2001, 2005; Sabo, 1986; Young, McTeer, & White, 1994) that
might have impact beyond sporting spaces (Anderson, 2010; Young, 2004).
Within most male sport environments, athletes who are able to play through pain and/or injury and who continue to contribute to the success (i.e., winning-ness) of their club or team gain “athletic capital,” a form of social capital intricately connected to constructions of masculinity (Curry, 1993; Donnelly & Young, 1988). The literature also suggests that some male athletes deal with their injuries in silence for fear of being thought less masculine by peers, coaches, team personnel, the media, and spectators. This tendency helps to engrain the culture of risk within sporting spaces while at the same time having significant short and long-term consequences on athletes’ bodies. However, some research has suggested that the opposite might also be true: rather than remaining silent, expressing pain (and one’s ability to play in/with pain) can work to increase an athlete’s athletic and, thus, masculine capital. Undoubtedly, the relationship of pain and injury to masculinizing processes is complex and varied, much in the same way that experiences of pain in the broader socio-cultural context are multiple and varied. Not everyone will take up pain in the same way. That all said, more often than not, certain sporting spaces do seem to promote a dominant version of sporting masculinity in which one’s ability to tolerate and/or inflict pain factors heavily.

In their oft-referenced research, Young, McTeer, and White (1994) explored the ways that young, male athletes thought about pain, injury, and their bodies in relation to participation in elite sport. These scholars conducted 16 in-depth interviews with male athletes who were participating in sport or who had retired from high level sport (often the result of a career-ending injury). The primary objective of the study was to explore the relationship between masculinity and normalized notions of risk, pain, and injury. The researchers contended that
through the way that males expose their bodies to physical risk, play while
injured, and rehabilitate in order to be potentially injured again, it is clear that
while males may not actually enjoy physical violence and pain, the rewards of
hegemonic masculinity remain meaningful enough. (p. 192)

It seemed that for athletes in the study, serious pain and injuries, and the ability to endure
or tolerate them, were significant markers of masculinity. This has problematic outcomes
for male athletes, their ability to play and, perhaps more importantly, their short and long-
term health. It would seem that the tenet of competitive sport — “win at any cost” —
means that athletes are expected to sacrifice their bodies, use their bodies as weapons,
and accept that pain and injury are normal (Sabo, 2004; Young, 2004). Such views have
been suggested to produce very limited ideas about being a man in sport, marginalizing
men who may not subscribe to the notion that playing this way is okay.

Some scholars have argued that the relationship between pain, injury, and
masculinity is not monolithic. Pringle and Markula (2005), as an example, suggest that
involvement in sport might provide opportunity for a negotiation of masculinity that
moves beyond a simple reproduction of dominant discursive constructions of
masculinity. Through semi-structured interviews with 14 New Zealand men who had
varied backgrounds in rugby, Pringle and Markula sought to examine the ways that men’s
rugby union and experiences of pain (as well as fear and pleasure) articulated with
notions about masculinity. They found that though there seemed to be general acceptance
of pain and injury as part of the game, such acceptance was not necessarily without
critique:

Although the players appeared to accept pain and injury as relatively normal, they
were not necessarily naïve or uncritical about corporeal damage. In fact, the men
simultaneously normalized and problematized injury…. The interview participants in this study were clearly concerned with bodily well-being and the threat of future injury. These concerns influenced their withdrawal from rugby. (pp. 488—489)

Submitting the interview materials to a Foucauldian analysis, Pringle and Markula go on to argue that such critical reflection about pain and injury demonstrates the potential of negotiating masculinity beyond dominant constructions. By using Foucault’s later concept of the technologies of the self, these scholars provide a reading of men’s rugby and bodily experiences therein that is perhaps more “optimistic” than previous studies published on pain, injury, contact sport, and constructions of masculinity. In so doing, they question “whether popular heavy-contact sports played predominantly by males… should be primarily represented as producers of dominant and problematic masculinities” (p. 491). Put another way, certain taken-for-granted ideas of sport, such as the unquestioned acceptance of pain and injury as a natural part of the game, might be taken up in different ways, even by male participants in a violent, heavy-contact sport like rugby.

Pain, Injury, and Women’s Sport

Though women athletes’ experiences of pain and injury have been relatively marginalized in the sociology of sport (Roderick, 2006; Young, 2004) a handful of studies suggest that there does not seem to be that much difference between male and female athletes and their conceptualizations of pain (Charlesworth & Young, 2004; Nixon, 1996; Pike & Maguire, 2003; Theberge, 1997, 2000; Young & White, 1995). It would seem that the normalization of pain and injury within sporting cultures also extends to female athletes. This speaks to the way that sporting practices are often governed by discourses of toughness, discipline, pain-tolerance, and achievement/success.
regardless of who is playing. Based on their investigation of female collegiate athletes’ attitudes about pain and injury, Charlesworth and Young (2004) suggest that “while pain and injury are likely to be linked to gender socialization processes, they may also be a product of socialization into sport culture per se” (Charlesworth & Young, 2004, p. 178).

Pike and Maguire (2003) look at recreational participation in rowing to investigate the ways that female athletes in that sport think about pain and injury. Pike and Maguire’s work supports several other research projects that show that there is some similarity between the trends found in men’s sport as related to risk-taking, pain, injury, and success. However, they also note that

women in [their] study should not be reduced to the terms of taking on masculine norms. Instead, it appears that there are other elements at work, including the taking of risks as an attempt to achieve sporting success in order to symbolically compensate for any perceived failure to comply with feminine norms. (Pike & Maguire, 2003, pp. 243—244)

Nevertheless, such risk taking, regardless of what it might symbolize, could still have a detrimental impact on the health and well-being of the people taking the risk. The authors themselves note that this seemed to be the case. They write that the athletes in their project “adopted compensatory behaviour, including taking further risks and participating while injured” (Pike & Maguire, 2003, p. 245).

Beyond having the same short and long-term outcomes on female sporting bodies as discussed with respect to men’s sporting bodies, this reproduction of “masculine” norms within women’s sport diminishes the resistant potential of women’s sport. Nancy Theberge (1997) argues that “the transformative possibilities of women’s sport are seriously compromised by the uncritical adoption of a ‘sports ethic’ that celebrates toughness in the face of physical violence” (p. 84). Theberge’s work, and the work of
others who have explored female athletes’ experiences of pain and injury, offer critical insights into how dominant constructions of pain and injury function at both a collective and individual level in sport. At the same time, most studies of women, similar to those studies of men’s sport, pain, and injury, tend to present sporting pain and injury as universal experiences while not taking into account how discourses circulating in the broader socio-cultural context influence these experiences. While there is a significant body of work that interrogates the ways that constructions of heterosexual femininity seem to shape the sporting experiences and performances of female athletes (e.g., Chapman, 1997; Markula, 2000, 2001; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Wright & Clarke, 1999), as far as I can tell only one study has considered the very specific way that pain within the sporting context reproduces dominant discursive constructions of femininity.

Rebecca Lock (2006) does not disagree with the idea that the culture of sport encourages participants to take up pain and injury in a certain way. However, using women’s ice hockey as her field of inquiry, her main contention is that we cannot think about sport, its practices, and the constitution of gendered subjectivities, isolated from the broader social context. She writes:

It is my contention that discussion about sport should consider other aspects of the social world because sport is always woven into a broader social fabric. Sport is permeated by values and discourses that at a cursory glance appear to have very little to do with sport, but are the means by which normative practices are intelligible to us. (Lock, 2006, p. 160)

Lock explores these ideas by interrogating the ways that pain and injury in the context of women’s ice hockey produce a very particular type of subjectivity — heterosexual femininity. This is achieved, she contends, through (1) the ways in which female ice hockey players’ potential experiences of pain are regulated (through rules about body
checking and full face masks) and (2) through the threat of loss of place on a team if one is perceived to be a lesbian. It is her contention that “both of these strategies are painful processes of subjection, and both of these subject-constituting pains are obscured by the notion that pain is universal and that tolerating pain is a masculine behaviour” (Lock, 2006, p. 169). Experiences of pain, however, are shaped by broader understandings of masculinity and femininity: “Males and females differentially experience pain, because they are produced and policed to experience different kinds of pain, and because their expressions of pain are read differently” (p. 169). Lock’s article reminds us not only that there are always other social factors or understandings shaping sporting experiences and their meanings but also that while sport culture may seem to encourage a dominant conceptualization of pain and injury by which many are interpellated, it does not necessarily have the same outcome for all individuals.

It is interesting to note that in socio-cultural research about triathlon, there has been an extensive focus on gender, with a particular focus given to the ways that participation in triathlon may be empowering for women by allowing different performances of athletic femininity (Cronan & Scott, 2008; Granskog, 1991, 1992, 1993, 2003; Jones & Carmichael Aitchison, 2007). As far as I can tell, however, experiences of pain and injury have not been focal points of this work. While pain and suffering were a significant topic of Atkinson’s (2008) work on triathlon, he neglects to comment on gender despite having included both women and men in his research. There may be good reason for this, in so much as there were likely not differences evident between the materials gathered from male and female participants. That said, we are left to assume
that painful bodily experiences are taken up and have the same meaning for both female and male participants. There seems room for further work here.

*Sport, Pain and Injury, and Medical Treatment*

Another distinct but interconnected category of research on sport, pain, and injury, includes texts produced by scholars investigating the roles of sport medicine practitioners in treating — and sometimes helping to facilitate — sport injury (Howe, 2001; 2004; Safai, 2003, 2004; Waddington, 2006; Waddington & Roderick, 2002; Waddington, Roderick, & Naik, 2001; Walk, 1997, 2004; Young, 2004). It is perhaps ironic that only recently has attention been given to sport medicine practitioners or clinicians despite their heavy involvement and investment in the pain and injuries experienced by the athletes with whom they work (Roderick, 2006; Safai, 2003).

One of the interesting outcomes when considering these texts is the position that the sport medicine practitioners take in the treatment of injured athletes. For some clinicians it is all about managing an athlete’s pain and getting her/him “fit” enough to get back on the field of play (Waddington & Roderick, 2002). For others, for instance the clinicians included in Safai’s (2003) work, the focus of treatment is more likely to be towards healing an athlete’s injury. Here there is significant interconnection between the culture of a sport, team, or club, and the ways in which sport medicine practitioners are implicated in the treatment of athletes.

In an important text, Safai (2003) contends that sport medical clinicians both influence and are influenced by the culture of risk that seems to be prevalent in many sports. In her argument, Safai challenges Nixon’s idea of “conspiratorial networks” in which sport medical clinicians were implicated in the encouragement of athletes to play
in pain and/or while injured without real empirical evidence. At the same time Safai argues that there is evidence of a “culture of precaution” and the adoption of an ideology of “sensible risk.” Safai’s work, based on the athletic environment at a large Canadian university, is primarily focused on the relationship between sport medicine clinicians and athletes. The research adds important context to the discussion of pain and injury by complicating the idea that sport operates in/as a culture of risk. Safai herself notes, however, her interest (not unlike the majority of researchers who write on sport, pain, and injury) is focused on the negative consequences of risk and risk-taking in sports that may lead to pain and/or injury. This is not unimportant and should remain a point of inquiry for scholars interested in interrogating sport and physical activity through a socio-cultural lens. Pain and injury, however, are not the same things; they are “physically and conceptually distinct” (Howe, 2001, p. 290). One can experience pain without being injured. In fact, how one defines pain will vary depending on many individual and social factors. Don Sabo (1986) articulated this idea when he wrote about his own personal experiences of sporting pain: “My pain — each individual’s pain — reflects an outer world of people, events, and forces. The origins of our pain are rooted outside, not inside, our skins” (p. 84). Pain is a highly subjective phenomenon. Injury is somewhat more objective:

Injury can be understood as a breakdown in the structure of the body, which may affect its function. Pain is the marker of an injury and is an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, which may be divided into acute and chronic components. (Howe, 2001, p. 290)
Howe alludes to the fact that injury has likely received greater academic attention because of its more objective nature. I do take issue with his wording: “pain is the marker of injury.” Pain may be the marker of injury. There remain other types of painful experiences in the context of sport and physical activity, which are important to consider.

Moving Beyond the Pain/Injury Nexus: When Pain Might Be “Positive”

Only recently have scholars within the humanities and social sciences begun to consider “other” non-injury types of pain related to sport participation. Sport historian John Bale (2004) writes that there are “other contexts in which pain in sports is worthy of study. There is the pain experienced by athletes that is unrelated to injury. Such pain may be the result of fatigue or exhaustion during a competition… (Bale, 2004, p. 65). Howe (2004) refers to such bodily experiences variably as “positive pain” and “Zatopekian pain” (after the great Finnish runner Emil Zatopek who was legendary for completing incredibly demanding training regimes). Howe (2004) suggests that this type of painful physical experience might be defined as “the fatigue that an elite sporting participant goes through in the course of trying to enhance performance” (p. 85). Medico-scientific explanations of this type of pain refer to the concept of “adaptation”:

Exercise training is an adaptive process. The body will adapt to the stress of exercise with increased fitness if the stress is above a minimum threshold intensity…. The purpose of physical training is to stress systematically the body so it improves its capacity to exercise. Physical training is beneficial only as long as it forces the body to adapt to the stress of physical effort. If the stress is not sufficient to overload the body, then no adaptation occurs. If a stress cannot be tolerated, then injury or over-training results. (Fahey, 1998, paras i and iii)

The idea of adaptation or positive pain is built into most athletes’ training plans as a way to improve their fitness and performance.
Both Bale (2006) and Howe (2004) use middle distance running as their point of entry into the discussion about this type of pain and both arrive at the conclusion that this non-injury related pain is central to ideas about achievement. The ability to push one’s self to such levels of pain without getting injured makes one a better performer in one’s chosen sport or physical activity. Howe (2004) described one version of it as “a burning ache all over the body during and after the [training] session” (Howe, 2004, p. 86).

Drawing from the work of Chris Shilling, Bale (2006) contends that athletes might view this type of pain as “the deposit, the investment, through which speed is extracted. Pain is a form of bodily or physical capital, a bearer of symbolic value” (p. 66). It is quite possible that some people participate in sport because of the painful experiences provided through involvement. But as Atkinson and Young (2008) rightfully point out, research has yet to consider such motivation.

Bale (2006) lists a range of types of pain that are present in sport. He includes in this list the type of physical and emotional pain imposed on an athlete by coaches or trainers, other types of emotional pain that may be related to sport, and the consumption of pain by spectators of sport, noting that little has been done to investigate the ways in which audiences take up the painful experiences of athletes whom they are watching. To a certain extent, I address this last point in chapter five when I consider the ways that “painful” images of Ironman athletes factor into mediated representations of the sport and the narratives of Ironman participants. These types of sport-related pain are no less valid than any other as a focus for future research agendas. It is, however, the connection of pain to pleasure that Bale (2006) makes, which has been particularly influential on my

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6 Howe (2004) also considers the presence and use of positive pain in the experiences of players on an elite men’s rugby team with whom he spent two years conducting an ethnographic study meant to investigate connectedness of commercialism, risk, pain, injury, sport medicine, and sporting bodies.
work here. He asks: “Can the pain endured by athletes be a perverse source of pleasure?” (p. 67). While I take some exception to his use of the judgment-laden term “perverse,” the question is an important one and it is one that Bale contends we know very little about. By thinking about pain beyond the risk-pain-injury nexus we can, I contend, find out more about the pervasiveness of other kinds of pain and suffering in sport. The research I have done for this project suggests that it is important to consider the multiple and complex ways in which sport and physical activity-related pain is constructed. Such an inquiry will help us gain a greater understanding of the potential consequences this type of pain may have on the constitution of bodies and identities in contemporary times, particularly in relation to more recreational participation where experiences of pain, however constructed, can be seen to be more voluntary.

**On Pleasure and Sport/Physical Activity**

The body as a source of pleasure is something that has received scant attention within the sociology of sport and physical activity (Atkinson, 2008; Gard & Meyenn, 2000; Pringle, 2009; Pronger, 2000; Wright & Dewar, 1997). Of those studies that have considered pleasure, there has been a significant focus on the types of pleasure experienced through spectatorship or fandom (Andrews, 2006; Carlisle Duncan & Brummett, 1989; Denzin, 2006; Farred, 2006; Juffer, 2006; Moor, 2006; Ritzer, 2006). There have also been philosophical considerations of the connections between sport and pleasure (Bale, 2006; Fry, 2006; Wisnewski, 2007). However, “empirical analyses that focus specifically on lived experiences of sporting pleasures are comparatively rare within sociology” (Pringle, 2009, p. 214, emphasis in original).
In one of the few empirical explorations of pleasure and physical activity with a socio-cultural focus, Wright and Dewar (1997) investigate the experiences of older women and the pleasure they receive from physical activity. This pleasure comes in the form of competence in performing practical activities as well as kinaesthetic/sensual pleasure from diverse activities such as belly dancing, walking, and skating. Many of the women interviewed commented on their participation that they just “liked the way it made (them) feel” (p. 88). Along with the pleasure attained through movement came a sense of empowerment, most often related not to the achievement of a new body shape but to a new relationship to the body and the mastery of (new) skills. In an autoethnographic account of her foray into karate, Paul (2006) raises similar themes to those of the participants in Wright and Dewar’s study. Paul notes the pleasure or joy attained through: skill mastery, receipt of accolades from others, and a shifting relationship with her body.

The insights provided by Wright and Dewar (1997) and Paul (2006) are especially interesting since much of the literature on women and girl’s participation in sport had previously painted a “bleak picture, particularly for women and girls where the body is couched as a deeply problematic site associated with feelings of unhappiness, frustration and lack, whereby bodies are experienced as constraining, as preventing them from all they would want to become” (Wright & Dewar, 1997, p. 82). That said, it would seem that there is still a privileging of extrinsic over intrinsic benefits of participation in physical activity, a view in which pleasure is very much conceptualized as “instrumental.” Jennifer Smith-Maguire (2008a) argues that instrumental pleasure is a product of consumer society:
In a consumer society, the obligation and pleasure of self-work are harnessed as the engine of economy and social reproduction. Pleasure is instrumentalized, both as a means of motivating individuals to exercise, and as part of the larger reproduction of social economies, consumer cultures and neo-liberal social orders that rely on self-managing, responsible individuals. (p. 71)

Thus, the external rewards related to participation in physical activity (such as material goods, peer recognition, or the consumption of foods and beverages as reward for exercising) are promoted as the primary forms of pleasure. Smith-Maguire (2008b) argues that this latter point is a result of the narrow vision of pleasure in the fitness field more generally:

Exercise itself is not pleasurable; but is a matter of discipline; pleasure comes from the effect one’s fitter body has upon others, the satisfaction in having made “good” use of one’s leisure time, the distractions provided through amenities and status rewards of the health club. Even when fitness activities are represented as enjoyable, they are rarely constructed as ends in themselves. Exercise is instrumentally rationalized as the means to other ends: reduced health risks, improved appearance, or both. (p. 196)

My own lived experiences of sport and fitness practices (including instructing group exercise classes) combined with my academic investigations lead me to agree with Smith-Maguire here. There is pleasure to be experienced or gained through an improved appearance (however defined) or acquiring better health. There is pleasure to be gained through the accolades one might receive from others for one’s commitment to a particular work-out regime. These types of pleasure, and the pleasure one might experience through sport spectatorship or fandom, are no less real than the type of pleasure I am interested in — the sensuous pleasures that one experiences through participation in physical activity, even regimented fitness classes, and extreme fitness challenges such as Iron-distance triathlons. But instrumental pleasures seem easier to express, as I have learned through my work.
The literature exploring the pleasure that men may experience through sport and exercise is limited. Mentioned only in passing references, pleasure is presented as being of less importance than other social issues (Pringle, 2009). As one exception, Gard and Meyenn (2000) conducted empirical research with teenage boys to uncover meanings/understandings of school-level physical activity (physical education and extra-curricular sport). The authors found that for boys pain is often connected to expected gender-performance and social capital (i.e., recognition and admiration from peers for being able to take and give hits in contact sports such as rugby). This finding is not so different from the sport sociology studies noted previously. Where Gard and Meyenn’s study differs is in the consideration of pleasure derived from the bodily contact that is socially sanctioned within masculine sport settings. The authors found a close connection, at least for the young men interviewed, between pleasure and pain: “The picture that emerges is one in which pain and pleasure appear to be intermingled delicately within the bodily practices of contact sports” (p. 29). They also argue that:

it seems plausible on the basis of the data to argue that just as pain and violence are embedded in the discourses and practices of competitive sports, so too are bodily pleasures. These pleasures may not necessarily correlate to any particular sexual orientation. They may in theory be similar during single-sex or mixed competition. (p. 30)

Perhaps or perhaps not. The important point here is that the question remains relatively unexplored.

Some scholars in other fields have used sport and the interpretation of pain as pleasure as a metaphor for the pain/pleasure relationship in sadomasochism (e.g., Eisenbud, 1967; Wall, 2000; Weinberg, Williams, & Moser, 1984). Conversely some sport scholars have turned to S/M to explain the transformation of pain into pleasure in
sporting contexts. For example, in a study of men’s rugby, Richard Pringle (2009) draws from interviews with both active and retired players. He argues that while the pleasures found in rugby are similar to those in other sports, the uniqueness of rugby culture is the conceptualization of risk and pain (one’s own but, perhaps even more so, the ability to inflict it on others) as forms of pleasure.

Using Foucault’s perspectives on S/M, in his study Pringle (2009) seeks to problematize rugby culture while striving to reveal social inequalities reproduced through/by the sport’s popularity in New Zealand. He suggests that “examination of rugby via this heuristic device [S/M], accordingly, lends support to the suggestion that pleasure is organized and used in a contentious manner in combat sport, while also disrupting the romanticized (and sexist) discourse that proclaims participation in rugby turns boys into men of good character” (p. 229). He contends that rugby, like S/M, offers participants forms of excitement related to the physical domination of players on the opposing team as well as the fear of receiving pain at the hands of those same players. He writes:

Rugby, like S&M, can be understood as a taboo-breaking practice associated with transparent games of power connected with the excitement induced from the fear of pain and the ability to dominate. Rugby, as such, can be understood as a consensual but desexualized form of S&M. (Pringle, 2009, p. 228)

Pringle’s main intention is to problematize the normalization of violence and pain in the rugby context. Using Foucauldian theory, he considers the place of power in S/M practices, rejecting popular conceptions of S/M as exclusively related to pain for pleasure (a point to which I will return). However, Pringle states that his interest in thinking about
rugby and S/M is to make the practices of rugby seem strange or, as he puts it, “bizarre.”

I take exception to the way in which he reifies S/M as something abnormal or perverse in his study as it contributes to heteronormative discourses of sexuality.

Bale (2006) also suggests there are comparisons to be made between sport and S/M, using elite, middle-distance running as his point of entry into the conversation. But without the physical, bodily contact that exists in rugby, how does he envision this? He contends that the pain/pleasure in running comes from the feeling associated with pushing one’s body to its limits. He also suggests that there is a pleasure taken from the ability to inflict pain on an opponent in a race through different strategies meant to exhaust the other and by extension, to beat her/him:

The notion of pain being pleasurable takes us into the realms of masochism, the tendency to take pleasure [including sexual pleasure] from one’s own pain and suffering. Sado-masochism is the enjoyment of suffering and inflicting pain at the same time…. Surely this is the situation in which athletes find themselves. Surely also, it appears to be the condition of sado-masochism. These are subjects that seem to be linked to running but about which we have little information. (pp. 68-69)

Bale’s reading of S/M as a metaphor for sport is simplistic, relying much too heavily on traditional and limited conceptualizations of S/M practices/behaviours as being entirely about the infliction or receipt of pain for pleasure.

I am hesitant to draw any comparisons with S/M. The main problem with such comparisons is that they obscure the very different social locations of sport and S/M. Sport and fitness practices are, generally, socially sanctioned, even celebrated; S/M practices, generally, are not. People who express interest in experiencing pain (howsoever defined) in a sexual context can find themselves labeled as “deviants.” People who express an interest in experiencing pain as a physical pleasure within sport or fitness
practices can be labeled “heroes” or maybe even “good citizens,” although there have been some exceptions to this as with the unsuccessful push to include “exercise addiction” on the DSM-IV-TR in the early 1980s. Nevertheless, many psychologists and psychiatrists are still keen to diagnose and treat individuals who they deem to be addicted to exercise (Cole, 1998).

There have been three primary ways that S/M practices have been taken up in academia: as psychological/pathological; as a form of “escape” from one’s self; or as reproducing misogynistic/patriarchal norms found in the broader socio-cultural context (as in radical feminist readings). In each of these perspectives the focus of inquiry is largely on the relationship between pain and pleasure, specifically on the “problematic” gaining of pleasure through painful experiences. Such readings don’t seem to reflect the actual ways in which S/M practitioners conceptualize their activities. Practitioners argue that desire (and the pleasure) in S/M practices is met through playing with power; the infliction or reception of pain is one tool (Bersani, 1995; Cross & Matheson, 2006; Foucault, 1997; Weinberg, 2006). Foucault (1997) envisioned S/M not simply as a one-way power relationship but as the eroticization of strategic power relations:

One can say that S & M is the eroticization of power, the eroticization of strategic relations. What strikes me with regard to S & M is how it differs from social power. What characterizes power is the fact that it is a strategic relation which has been stabilized through institutions…. The S & M game is very interesting because it is a strategic relation, but it is always fluid…. This strategic game as a source of bodily pleasure is very interesting. But I wouldn’t say that it is a reproduction, inside the erotic relationship, of the structures of power. It is an acting-out of power structures by a strategic game that is able to give sexual pleasure or bodily pleasure. (p. 169)

Popular representations and academic readings of S/M which reduce it to a simple case of “pain for pleasure” or “pleasure through pain” are missing the intricacies of these kinds
of practices. In so doing, they fail to acknowledge the “power play” that is central to S/M experiences, in so doing they trivialize S/M practices and practitioners and reproduce normal/abnormal notions of sexuality. I believe that there are more suitable ways to interpret the kinds of pain that people equate with pleasure in sport and physical activity. I discuss some of these ways in chapter five.

**What Does this All Mean?**

Though there has been a decidedly sociological turn to the interrogation of pain and sport since the 1990s it has mostly been in the context of discussions of sport-related injury and much of this (though not exclusively) has been connected to the construction of masculinity. This work has been and continues to be important in so much as we have gained greater understandings about the potential harm done to sporting bodies in multiple ways. It has also worked to undo some of the taken-for-grantedness about what sport “must” look like; in other words, it has challenged the ways in which we think about pain and injury as a normal part of the sport experience. On a personal level, the existing work has highlighted the rather bizarre way that we (myself included) tend to valorize pain and injury — more specifically, athletes’ abilities to tolerate it, endure it, and overcome it. But as Donnelly (2004) reminds us, it is possible to participate in sport without pain, however, the dominant conceptualizations of western sport seem to preclude this possibility. Such a statement is mostly based on findings from research focused on elite male, team sport environments (Pike & Maguire, 2003; Young, 2004). We still know little about the experiences of women athletes and recreational sports people.
Pain and injury are not the same. They can be related, without doubt. But one can experience pain in sport and physical activity without being injured. Admittedly, it is likely not as possible to say the opposite though that is not always the case (Wall, 2000). To always discuss pain in conjunction with injury, however, marginalizes other painful experiences in sport and physical activity. And these undoubtedly factor into the ways that people conceptualize their involvement in sport and physical activity and their bodies and their selves.

I have used the word *sport* almost exclusively throughout this literature review very intentionally. While sport has received much attention from researchers interested in pain very little research has been done to date that explores pain related to exercise and fitness (White, 2004). The work that has been done in this area has been largely theoretical (Crossley, 2006). It is interesting that the exercise and fitness field has mostly fallen outside of critical inquiry about pain, even though the “no pain, no gain” philosophy espoused by Jane Fonda in the 1980s continues to be influential (think back to Lance Armstrong’s quote which begins this chapter). People are increasingly turning, however, to more arduous sport and fitness challenges as ways to better fitness and/or health, to modify their bodies, to gain some sense of identity. This trend makes it more important to interrogate fitness as a unique socio-cultural phenomenon with implications beyond biomedicine and psychology.

While most studies of pain have focused on sporting contexts that emphasize the “win at any cost” mentality, my work here seeks to unpack how the way ideas about pain and sacrifice fit in the broader cultural context, using the Ironman triathlon as one specific example. Existing research has not considered the links between pain and
pleasure, but rather focuses on the type of pleasure one experiences through spectatorship and/or team allegiance, or the pleasure attained through the external rewards often linked to sport and physical activity (i.e., body modification, social capital, consumer goods, etc.) or what Smith-Maguire (2008a) refers to as “instrumental pleasures.” And yet it would seem that participation in sport should provide some sort of sensuous pleasure given both the physicality of it and the dominant conceptualization of it being something that is both “fun.” I am especially interested in the politics of pain and pleasure and how they seem to overlap with discourses of neoliberalism. In considering experiences of pain and pleasure in light of neoliberalism, I want to take the discussion about sport-related pains and pleasures outside of the sporting context to consider how certain ideas about them might contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities.
Chapter 3

Theoretical Considerations: Pain, Pleasure, and the Body

Plato wrote: Socrates sat up on his bed, and bent back his leg and rubbed it with his hand, and said while he rubbed it, “How strange a thing it seems, my friends, that which people call pleasure! And how wonderful is its relation to pain, which they suppose to be its opposite; both together they will not come to a man, yet if he pursues one of the pair, and catches it, he is almost compelled to catch the other, too… (as cited in W.H.D. Rouse, 1961, p. 463)

Pain is so close to pleasure, yeah, yeah / Sunshine and rainy weather / Go hand in hand together all your life / All your life, pain and pleasure. (Queen)

Theoretical attention to the importance of pain and pleasure in social life has a long history. Pain and pleasure have proven to be a source of significant interest to all sorts of commentators including philosophers, writers, musicians, scientists, psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists. With their own specific agendas and perspectives, these different types of people have asked similar kinds of questions about pain and pleasure: what they are, what they mean, how we think about them, how we experience them. Pain and pleasure have been considered separately but also in relationship to one another, as in the two quotes above. If there is any “truth” to pain and pleasure it’s that there are “multiple truths”; there are different ways of experiencing them, different ways of conceptualizing them.

This chapter provides an overview of some of the different ways that pain and pleasure have been theorized in the social sciences. It is not meant to be a definitive
review (such would be impossible in the space and time available). Instead, I am presenting some of the key ideas that have helped inform my understanding of pain and pleasure and their relationships to socio-cultural processes. I focus on the contributions of poststructuralism and the theoretical perspectives of Michel Foucault. These perspectives helped to frame my project from early conceptualizations of it, through my chosen methodological approach, to my analysis of the materials that I gathered. But I have also been influenced by a phenomenological perspective of the body, a perspective that helped guide my approach to the interviews that I conducted for this research as well as my analysis of them (although the latter to a lesser extent). Given my interest in this project in exploring pain and pleasure in relation to neoliberal ideologies, there is some discussion of neoliberalism throughout this chapter as it relates to theoretical perspectives of pain and pleasure (the latter especially).

As a caveat of sorts, it will likely be evident that in this chapter there is more text about pain than about pleasure. This is so for two reasons. First, in the section on pain and socio-cultural processes, I take the time to explain the general tenets of the different theoretical perspectives before I discuss the ways that theorists have considered pain specifically within those perspectives. Second, as some scholars have noted there seems to be a general hesitancy within academia to write about pleasure (Coveney & Bunton, 2003; Pringle, 2009; Rand, 2008). It would seem that “embracing pleasures — especially but not only bodily pleasures — that do not readily appear to advance a higher purpose is often considered suspect, both outside and within academic circles. It comes across as

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7 I want to state here that I am focusing mostly on “physical” pain and pleasure in this project. In doing so, I in no way wish to marginalize or ignore emotional or psychic kinds of pain and pleasure. I have chosen to focus on kinaesthetic experiences for reasons of manageability and also, as will become clear in later chapters, the people who I interviewed for this project tended towards physical explanations of pain and pleasure.
shallow, lazy, duped, dangerous” (Rand, 2008, p. 555). That said there are also notable exceptions to this, exceptions which provide the basis for my understanding of pleasure and its relationship to socio-cultural context. The chapter is presented in five main sections: (1) socio-cultural conceptualizations of pain; (2) socio-cultural conceptualizations of pleasure; (3) challenges to poststructuralism and discursive constructions of the body and bodily experiences; (4) a brief discussion about phenomenology; and (5) my theoretical approach in this project.

Socio-Cultural Conceptualizations of Pain

The goal of this section is to present a general understanding of pain as a cultural product. I engage first in a brief discussion of the ideas on pain that have been dominant in popular culture and academia. These traditional ideas are medico-scientific or biological explanations; they are explanations that most socio-cultural theories of pain seek to challenge. I then discuss theoretical perspectives that propose pain as a social construction, a discussion that is informed by Michel Foucault’s theoretical perspectives on discourse and subjectivity.

Medico-scientific Explanations of Pain

One need only to visit a local book store, conduct a Google search, or visit a doctor in order to understand how medico-scientific explanations of pain dominate our understandings of it. In popular conceptions, physical pain is explained as something that needs to be identified, diagnosed, treated, and/or prevented at the level of the individual. Traditional approaches to physical pain include the prescription of various medications, pain killers, or other medical interventions. More “non-traditional” treatments are
prevalent now in North America (such as acupuncture and active release therapy) but the thinking is more or less the same between these approaches — find and eradicate the source of pain. Pain is reduced to a biological explanation. This notion that pain is something to be diagnosed or prevented through biomedical/scientific intervention means that the lived experiences of pain and the meanings people assign to it have been marginalized or ignored in popular culture and in many academic disciplines.

In academic research that follows this line of thinking, pain is positioned as an experience to be considered, studied, analyzed, or theorized, at the micro-level of human anatomy. More specifically, medico-scientific or biological perspectives position physical pain as a physiological response to a given set of stimuli. As Aho (1998) suggests, pain is reduced to the level of “nerves and neurotransmitters” (p. 115). The knowledge produced by this type of thinking explains and legitimates physical pain as purely somatic (Burkitt, 1999; Morris, 1991; Shilling, 1993; Szasz, 1975; Williams & Bendelow, 1998).

*From Medico-Scientific to Socio-Cultural Explanations of Pain*

Since the early 1990s, scholars in the social sciences have turned greater attention to the relationships between pain and socio-cultural context (Williams & Bendelow, 1998). The main outcome of this body of literature is to challenge biological explanations of physical pain that suggest that experiences of pain are the same for everyone and, by extension, affect everyone the same. Morris (1991) argues that, “pain is not just blindly felt or unreflectively endured as a series of biochemical impulses. It changes with its place in human history” (p. 45). Simply put, to reduce pain to biology ignores the way it is shaped by socio-cultural context.
One of the most influential texts on pain and its relationship to the social is David Morris’ *The Culture of Pain* (1991). In his now landmark work, Morris argued that pain is never just a biological experience. Rather, we need to think about pain as a product of culture. His contention was that “pain is never the sole creation of our anatomy and physiology. It emerges only at the intersection of bodies, minds, and culture” (p. 3). Following his work and the influential works of others such as Elaine Scarry (1985) and Drew Leder (1990), a sociology of pain has emerged (Bendelow & Williams, 1995).

Generally speaking, theoretical perspectives within the sociology of pain have worked to challenge reductionist explanations of it in an effort to explain the ways that pain interacts with culture. Socio-cultural theorists have revealed the relationship between social identities such as gender, sexuality, race, class, ability, and age and experiences of pain. Such perspectives have helped to, amongst other things, explicate the ways in which pain is employed as a technique of power in order to silence, marginalize, and oppress individuals and groups of people (Bruhm, 1994; Philipose, 2007; Scarry, 1985). Such perspectives have also helped to reveal the paradoxical nature of pain. While experiences of pain can work to alienate people from their bodies, at the same time it also works to remind them of their corporeality (Bruhm, 1994; Leder, 1990; Scarry, 1985). Experiences of pain, it is suggested, are one way that people come to constitute themselves as subjects while at the same time they call into question how people think about their bodies, themselves, and their place in the world.

*Social Constructionist Perspectives of Pain*

One way that social theorists have sought to wrest pain from purely biomedical conceptualizations is through the lens of social constructionism. Generally speaking,
constructionists “call attention to the paradox between the historically variable ways in which culture and society construct seemingly stable reality and experience” (Vance, 1998, p. 161). A social constructionist perspective of pain considers it as experienced, understood, and named via social and cultural processes. For example, Morris’ main project was to consider what he referred to as the “neglected encounter between pain and meaning” (1991, p. 3) and the privilege given to medical explanations versus peoples’ lived experiences. In so doing, he made the general argument that we must think about pain as being contextually specific. Experiences of pain are not the same over time, in different cultures, or between genders. Morris (1991) contended that “what we feel today when we are in pain… cannot be the same changeless sensations that have tormented humankind ever since our ancestors crawled out of their caves” (p. 4). Not everyone will experience pain in the same way. Pain is a subjective experience, the product of temporal and spatial contexts and embodiment. Morris (1991) argues in this regard that pain is a subjective experience, perhaps an archetype of subjectivity, felt only within the solitude of our individual minds. It is, in addition, always saturated with the visible or invisible imprint of specific human cultures. We learn how to feel pain and learn what it means. (p. 14)

This is the defining statement of Morris’ perspective on pain and one that other people would not necessarily agree with. Even within the same theoretical paradigm there are different ways of thinking about the relationship between the body, bodily experiences, and socio-cultural context (Coveney & Bunton, 2003; Frank, 1991; Gubrium & Holstein, 2008; Leder, 1990; Loland, 2006; Lupton, 1998; Shilling, 1993; Vance, 1998). In a project in which she explores the sociology of emotions, Lupton (1998) succinctly
highlights the differences within constructionist perspectives. She envisions these
differences on a continuum. At one end is what she refers to as the “weak” thesis. In this
approach to social constructionism, theorists suggest that there are biological or natural
bodily processes that exist but that are influenced by socio-cultural context. Using pain as
an example, the weak social constructionist perspective might suggest that men and
women both experience pain at the level of nerves and neuro-transmitters. There may
also be some biological explanation as to why women and men may react differently to
experiences of pain but also some consideration of the socially constructed gender norms
that produce certain ideas about men’s bodies and masculinity and women’s bodies and
femininity and that shape or influence the different ways men and women experience
pain.

On the other end of Lupton’s constructionist continuum is the “strong” thesis. In
this perspective, theorists argue that our behaviours are irreducibly the product of socio-
cultural context and are wholly constructed. There are no pre-existing, inherent qualities
that we possess but rather we learn to associate and explain behaviours or experiences as
a result of socio-cultural norms that we have learned. “Strong” constructionism has a lot
in common with poststructuralism (Loland, 2006; Lupton, 1998; Shilling, 1993) and it is
the version of constructionism that most interests me here primarily because it can help to
reveal the multiple influences on peoples’ experiences of pain and the multiple ways that
people make sense of it, in so doing challenging meta-narratives produced by the medico-
scientific community.
Poststructuralist Perspectives of Pain

Poststructuralism is difficult to define or summarize. It might be easiest to say that poststructuralist perspectives promote ideas about subjective meanings and understandings of the world while also seeking to show the relationship of meanings to power. Poststructuralists challenge meta-narratives that promote a universal “Truth” about human life in some way, seeking to destabilize these notions of “Truth” by challenging the systems of knowledge that have produced it. Poststructuralists concerned with the body call into question what they perceive as a misconception or misrepresentation of the body and bodily experiences and its meanings as being reducible to biological, medicalized explanations. For example, poststructuralists reveal the problematic ways that biological, scientific explanations about the body have been used to create and maintain problematic social hierarchies based on race, gender, sexuality, ability, and age. Assumptions about biological “differences” have been used to legitimate certain bodies as being “more than” other bodies. Male bodies, for example, have been positioned as naturally stronger than female bodies. The gender distinction in sport is an excellent example of this theory in practice.

Though there are contemporary examples of this distinction, a historical reference proves useful (and disturbing) in highlighting the ways that essentialist ideas of sport, gender, and pain have interconnected to inform ideologies that constrain women’s bodies. At the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam, a number of women competing in the 800 metre race collapsed after crossing the finish line, not unlike the competitors in the men’s event of the same distance. The International Olympic Committee decided as a result to remove from the Olympic roster any running race longer than 200 metres for women, a
ruling that stood until 1960 when the 400 and 800 meter events were reinstated (DeFrantz, 1997; Going middle distance… CBC News, 2008). The women’s marathon was not added to the Olympic roster until 1984 (Cooper, 1998). This is but one among myriad examples in sport of the ways that the alleged frailty and weakness of women’s bodies has been reproduced through regulations and restrictions, contributing to naturalized notions about what women’s bodies should or should not do. Post-structuralists argue that there is nothing natural about these assumptions, rather scientific discourses position them as the “Truth.”

Key to the poststructuralist perspective is the concept of discourse (Lupton, 1998; Salih, 2002; Shilling, 1993). According to Shilling (1993), “discourses can be seen as sets of ‘deep principles’ incorporating specific ‘grids of meaning’ which underpin, generate and establish relationships between all that can be seen, thought, and said” (p. 75). Discourses do not simply reflect or describe “reality” but rather they constitute it. Instead of thinking of discourses as representing the world, poststructuralists posit that discourses work in ways to signify, constitute, and construct the world as we come to know it through language (Fairclough, 1992; Lupton, 1998; Shilling, 1993). A poststructuralist reading of the body and bodily experiences, then, contends that “linguistic categories determine our experience of embodiment” (Shilling, 1993, p. 70). The key theorist on this notion of discourse has been Michel Foucault.

How Foucault Helps: Power/Knowledge and Discourse

As a starting point, Foucault’s main interest in all of his work was in understanding how humans turn themselves into subjects (1982). For him, the relationship between power, knowledge, and discourse was central to this process. Power,
within a Foucauldian perspective is everywhere. He envisioned that power was not solely located within state apparatuses such as the government or the legal system, but rather that it existed in every moment, in every interaction between people (Foucault, 1980, 1990a). Power is not something that is held or exerted necessarily but rather is “produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another” (Foucault, 1990a, p. 93). He also considered power beyond domination or repressive notions (1980, 1988). Markula and Pringle (2006) write:

A consequence of Foucault’s ideas concerning “power” is that relationships of power can be perceived as productive rather than prohibitive or repressive. In other words, it is the daily and ceaseless relations that occur between all people in all locations that ultimately produce subjectivities, economic systems, laws, and, more generally, social realities and transformations. (p. 38, emphasis in original)

Foucault’s perspective of power depended on knowledge; in fact, for him power and knowledge were inextricable from one another. He wrote that, “It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge; it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power” (Foucault, 1980, p. 52). Power/knowledge is inextricably linked to discourse. From a Foucauldian perspective, discourse is in fact the most important concept (Shilling, 1993). In the Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault (1972) suggests that discourse refers to “the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements” (p. 80). Foucault (1972) wrote that discourses are practices that both shape and constitute subjects arguing that power/knowledge produced through discourses “systematically form the objects of which they speak. Discourses are not about objects; they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own intervention” (p.
49). Importantly, Foucault contended that there are multiple discourses circulating in any given socio-cultural context.

Dominant discourse is considered as the collective ideas in society that constitute (or regulate) the norm. It is constituted through written texts, individual interactions, and popular culture (Foucault, 1972, 1990a). Through dominant discourse typical behaviours and performance expectations are established. Dominant discourses of expertise, such as medicine, law, politics, religion, and ethics (Foucault was particularly interested in medical and scientific discourses) produce and disseminate knowledge that individuals take up and make use of as they create themselves as subjects (Foucault, 1972, 1980, 1988, 1995). Scientific discourses, for example, produce specific ways of knowing based on so-called objective and quantifiable measures. These measures are then used to create universal categories or classifications and “people come to recognize themselves as objects and subjects of scientific knowledge” (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 25). Foucault referred to this as the process of subjectification.

According to Markula and Pringle (2006), there are two steps in the process of subjectification. First, “the individual [is made] a subject to someone else by control and dependence, and second, it ties him/her in his/her own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge (p. 138). Following the example from above, scientific knowledge operates as a discourse of expertise. As such, binary categories of normal/abnormal (for example, thin/obese) are created through the so-called objective measures of science and come to be seen as the “Truth” or the norm. Recognizing this, individuals shape themselves and their identities in relation to these contextually specific norms. Individuals define themselves as normal in any number of ways: their sexuality, their gender, their ability, or
their health mostly in accordance to ideas promoted in dominant discourse. As I turn to a specific discussion of pain as a discursive construction, the important idea to carry forward from this (brief) discussion of Foucault is the relationship between power/knowledge, discourse, and subjectivity.

Pain as a Discursive Construction

Theorists who suggest pain is a discursive construction argue that people only come to know their pain through the language that they have to make sense of it. Simply put, pain is seen as a product of culture and not of nature: “Pain is inscribed with meaning (or meaninglessness) based on the socio-cultural context in which it is situated” (Loland, 2006, p. 54). To be clear, I believe that a discursive approach to pain does not deny the biology or the materiality of the body or bodily experiences. Rather, this approach insists that there are no inherent or natural bodily experiences; everything that we know and give meaning to is the product of language, the product of culture. The material and the discursive depend upon one another (Malson, 1997; Squire, 1997). As Squire (1997) comments, “the material is discursive, and the discursive is material” (p. 51). Hughes and Paterson (1997) suggest that language and metaphor “are vehicles for making sense of bodily sensations and actions. In order to turn sensations into sense or meaning, language is necessary” (p. 332). In this way of thinking, theorists propose that contextually specific discursive constructions of “feeling states” will dictate whether or not an experience is a painful one. This does not dispute the physicality of the body, but instead works to “problematicize the relationship between biomedical discourse and the physical body it purports to know” (Malson, 1997, p. 230).
In order to articulate a bodily experience of pain we have to draw on commonly accepted and, we assume, universally understood systems of classification. However, in using these systems of classification to describe our pain we are, in fact, defining it, constituting it. Put another way, there is no definition or description of pain that is independent of our interpretation of it (Best, 2007; Morris, 1991; Scarry, 1985). Though I don’t know that Morris would consider himself a poststructuralist, one of his arguments is useful here to help explain this point. He contends that, “pain… exists only as we perceive it. Shut down the mind and pain too stops. Change the mind (powerfully enough) and it may well be that pain too changes” (p. 4). Simply put, we know our pain through the language available to us. And this is an important point in considering discursive constructions of pain and why they are useful.

Conceptions of pain are largely defined by medical models, as I mentioned earlier. In thinking about pain as discursively constructed, a person in pain has a possibility to “create and reshape its meanings” (Morris, 1991, p. 285). Thinking about pain as a discursive construction also allows us to theorize about the different effects of pain on lived experience and subjectivity. For example, in a study of young peoples’ experiences of chronic pain, Bernie Carter and his colleagues (2002) point to the many different ways that participants in their study talked about their experiences of chronic pain and the impacts it had on their lives. The authors suggest that the different ways that the youth in their study talked about pain reflects the non-universal nature of it as well as the need for the medical community to develop insight and strategies into the challenges young people with chronic pain face on a daily basis.
Pain may be a universal experience (i.e., something everyone encounters at one time or another) but there cannot be universalistic explanations of it. Yet, biomedical and psychological professionals and researchers attempt to do just that. In a study of the experiences of female hockey players and the ways that pain is used to reproduce traditional ideas of heterosexual femininity, Rebecca Lock (2006) writes that, “to refer to pain as universal, speaks to the importance of pain on account of ‘its’ ubiquity and establishes commonality across different experiences of pain. However, it also erases the multiplicity of discursive strategies that construct experiences of pain…” (p. 159). Universalistic explanations of pain, for example, simultaneously produce and ignore the ways that men and women are expected to feel pain differently based on discursively constructed gender norms. In a research project in which they sought to uncover the ways that lay persons conceptualized pain, Bendelow and Williams (1998) argue that dominant discourses of gender shaped peoples’ understandings of pain. They noted that participants talked about the “fact” that “female hormonal and reproductive functioning, together with the role of motherhood, were strongly linked to the capacity for emotion management, thus equipping girls and women with a ‘natural’ capacity to endure pain lacking in boys and men” (p. 214). The study participants also argued that the ways men are socialized to be less emotional and less expressive, contributed to the ways that most men discussed their experiences of, and assigned meaning to, pain.

In sport studies, scholars have drawn from Foucault’s perspectives to consider the role of pain and injury, with a particular focus in most instances on the latter. Some scholars, for example, have considered the dieting strategies present in sports a form of sport injury given the long-term impact such practices have on the body. This includes
sports with weight categories such as rowing and wrestling as well as in those sports with an aesthetic component such as figure skating and gymnastics (Chapman, 1997; Johns, 2004; Johns & Johns, 2000). More specific to pain, scholars have applied Foucauldian perspectives to consider pain and the production of various sporting identities and styles of embodiment (Howe, 2004; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Pringle & Markula, 2005; Sabo, 2004). Generally speaking, these sport scholars have focused on the discourses of pain circulating within particular sporting spaces and how athletes reify or resist these discourses in their practices. In his essay in which he explores the politics of sports injury, Sabo (2004) comments on the relationship between sporting discourses, pain, and injury, and notions of the “self.” He writes, “As athlete identity is constructed across a lifetime, the body and physical movement are shaped, regulated, and organized in ways that are consonant with and ultimately subjugated by cultural definitions of ‘injury,’ ‘pain,’ and ‘athlete’” (p. 71). Markula and Pringle (2006) assert, however, that experiences of sport-related pain and injury and the meanings assigned to them are not monolithic. In their research on men’s rugby, pain, and masculinity, they argue that though there might be an acceptance of pain and injury as part of the game (as Sabo contends) such acceptance was not without critique. They suggested that the men that they interviewed “simultaneously normalized and problematized injury…. The interview participants… were clearly concerned with bodily well-being and the threat of future injury” (p. 489).

The research that has drawn on Foucauldian perspectives to consider sport-related pain and injury has had many important insights to offer. It has, for instance, revealed the unwritten norms that promote the acceptance of pain and injury as a normal part of
athletic participation. It has also highlighted the effects of different power relations on athletes’ experiences of pain, including the influence of coaches, other athletes, and team or sport administrators. While these contributions are largely topical, I believe that we can learn more theoretically about the body and pain as well, given the primacy of the body to sport. As John Hargreaves (1986) notes, the work that people do on their bodies through sport and fitness practices “reproduces the social body: it exemplifies the materiality of power and culture in the sense that social relations are the outcome of material operations on the bodies of individuals carried out with the aid of a vast economy and technology of control” (p. 13). Thus, turning to experiences of physical pain in the context of sport can help to reveal broader discourses about, amongst other things, gender, sexuality, race, class, ability, health and their relationships to subjectivity and embodied experiences.

Socio-Cultural Conceptualizations of Pleasure

The intent of this section is to present a general understanding of perspectives on the relationship between pleasure and socio-cultural processes. As I did with pain in the preceding section, I engage first in a brief discussion about medico-scientific explanations of pleasure, explanations that dominate popular culture and academia. I then discuss pleasure and its relationship to socio-cultural processes. Finally, I turn to a discussion of pleasure as a discursive construction, once again using the theoretical perspectives of Michel Foucault to inform my understanding.
Medico-Scientific Explanations of Pleasure

Dominant ideas about pleasure in popular culture and in academia tend towards medicalized explanations. Biological and psychological perspectives of pleasure, like pain, reduce pleasure to an anatomical or genetic experience, a physiological response to a given set of stimuli. One example of the way that pleasure has been defined is as a “function of dopamine and serotonin levels in the blood. It is an electrical/chemical event… a fleeting excitation of nerve tissue” (Aho, 1998, p. 121). Such explanations position the capacity for pleasure as an essential quality that we all possess and experience in similar ways in our bodies. Biological explanations tell us that the central nervous system receives stimuli and then transmits a message to a certain part of the brain, defined as the pleasure centre, which registers the sensation. In this medico-scientific view “pleasure is an inherent — some may say primitive — human phenomenon” (Coveney & Bunton, 2003, p. 164).

In a recent book entitled How Pleasure Works: The New Science of Why We Like What We Like, cognitive psychologist Paul Bloom (2010) explains pleasure from an essentialist perspective. He suggests that “many significant human pleasures are universal. But they are not biological adaptations. They are by-products of mental systems that have evolved for other purposes” (p. 8). Though not discounting the influence of culture altogether, Bloom’s main thesis seems to be that through the evolutionary process humans have developed deep-seeded, natural instincts about what is and what is not pleasurable. Bloom’s is just one perspective of pleasure circulating in the field of psychology. There have also been efforts within the psychological field to measure pleasure through the creation of, as one example, hedonistic scales, although
such attempts have gained little credibility in light of problems in attempting to quantify human emotions (Coveney & Bunton, 2003; Mellers, 2000).

Essentialist or reductionist explanations of pleasure, such as those advanced in fields such as psychology, neurophysiology, or anatomy, are problematic for a few reasons. The main issue with such perspectives about pleasure is that medico-scientific explanations purport to use “objective” measures to determine what are and what are not appropriate pleasures and what are and what are not appropriate amounts of pleasure to be taken from behaviours and practices. Often times, researchers working in medico-scientific and psychological fields have diagnosis and treatment/cure-oriented agendas, often searching for genetic explanations of peoples’ suggested predisposition to certain “abnormal” or “deviant” behaviours. In other words, the literature in these fields constitute discourses of expertise which work to reproduce a normal/abnormal binary through which people can be diagnosed, pathologized, silenced, marginalized, and oppressed. They ignore cultural influences on pleasure at the same time they produce the normative discourses that shape experiences of pleasure.

The ways that scholars have challenged this lack of consideration of cultural influence on pleasure comprises the rest of this section of the chapter. I will say just this for now: when pleasure is theorized as something that can be quantified, ideas of normalcy are created around what behaviours or practices “should” be pleasurable (i.e., type) and how much pleasure we should take from them (i.e., quantity). When people find pleasure in activities that they shouldn’t they might be labeled abnormal or deviant (think S/M) and may be subject to psychological diagnoses and treatment. In the second idea, peoples’ over-consumption of certain types of pleasures might be labeled as
addictions (think sex, alcohol, drugs, gambling, or hoarding) and people displaying these types of behaviours might be subject to medical and/or psychological interventions or treatments.

*From Medico-Scientific to Socio-Cultural Explanations of Pleasure*

Socio-cultural explanations of pleasure suggest that pleasures are in fact highly contextual and not (just) experienced at the physiological or mental level. The degree to which constructionist and essentialist perspectives overlap will, as I noted previously, depend on where on the constructionist continuum a theorist locates her or himself. On one end, an individual taking a “weak” or less relativistic approach, for example, might suggest that there are natural or biological feelings of pleasure that are inherent and, thus, pre-exist culture. Every person experiences certain types of pleasurable feelings without having to learn them through the process of socialization. On the other end of the continuum, poststructuralists suggest that pleasure is a discursive construction. Regardless of perspective, most constructionists will agree that, to greater or lesser extents, our ideas about pleasure are influenced by factors such as gender, sexuality, race, class, age, and ability and that our ideas about pleasure also change over time and across cultures.

As example of the latter, in an article that reviews different conceptions of pleasure with a view towards critiquing limited ideas about pleasure in health discourses, Coveney and Bunton (2003) point to studies that give evidence to support the suggestion that pleasures are culturally-specific. They cite examples of differences between pleasures in the western world and China, the differences between cultural groups in terms of the pleasures of food and eating, and the pleasures derived from sexual acts.
They also note that the different things people find pleasure in are taken up in very different ways: the pleasure of shopping versus the pleasure of smoking, for example. The first is rewarded in consumer culture (so long as it isn’t seen as an addiction); the second is demonized in a culture in which peoples’ responsibility for their own health is promoted as paramount.

Susan Bordo (1993) presents a compelling example of how in the same cultural context, pleasure can be found in multiple ways from the same source — food — and how this might be related to gendered ideas about the body. In her book, Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body, Bordo suggests that pleasure in food can be found not only in the consumption of gastronomic delights but also, paradoxically, in the refusal of them. In a socio-cultural context in which there is significant pressure to consume, there can be a certain kind of pleasure found from the attainment of a slim, toned body, which comes to represent self-regulation in a time of plenty (Turner, 1995). Bordo’s work, like the studies cited by Coveney and Bunton, provide illustrative examples of the ways scholars in the social sciences have theorized the contextual nature and complexity of pleasure.

Poststructuralist Perspectives of Pleasure

In poststructuralist perspectives on pleasure, there are no pre-existing, inherent pleasurable feelings; rather pleasure (like pain) is interpreted by people in relation to the discourses circulating in a given socio-cultural context (Foucault, 1990a, 1990b; Pronger, 2000). Theorists who consider pleasure as discursively constructed argue that pleasures “cannot be separated from the words and concepts that are already in circulation to define and describe them” (Coveney & Bunton, 2003, p. 164). These definitions and
descriptions tend to be produced through medical, scientific, and religious discourses — discourses of expertise. Poststructuralists argue that pleasure is malleable. Contextually specific discourses shape, limit, and constrain the way that people come to experience pleasure and make sense of it in their own lives.

How Foucault Helps: Discipline, Bio-power, and Governmentality

There are multiple ways that Foucauldian perspectives are useful in gaining an understanding of pleasure as a discursive construction. Certainly his ideas about knowledge/power, discourse, and subjectification that I discussed earlier are just as applicable to discussions about pleasure. A Foucauldian approach to pleasure would reveal the ways that discursive formations of pleasure might function in the production of different subjectivities. It would also address power and the disciplining of individual bodies.

According to Foucault, individual bodies are produced through technologies of domination (dominant discourses) and practices of discipline and surveillance. Foucault (1995) used the metaphor of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon to describe the normalizing “gaze” that leads to a self-policing and disciplining of the body. The panopticon (a prison design in which prisoners are unaware of when they are being watched but always aware of the possibility) works to regulate human behavior as prisoners come to self-policing to avoid punishment. Foucault envisioned the panoptic gaze within the general social realm. Discourses and their acceptance as “truth” lead to panoptic mechanisms by which individuals self-regulate or self-govern their behaviors with no need for physical means of enforcement or punishment. Instead, this self-governance works to make each individual her/his “own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over
and against [her/him]self” (Foucault, 1995, p. 155). Technologies of domination, for Foucault, function as disciplinary powers but so “that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed, and the efficiency that one determines. Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (Foucault, 1995, pp. 137—138).

Sport theorists have drawn from Foucault’s technologies of domination in different ways: Feminist interrogations of power, female sporting bodies, and constructions of femininity (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1993; Chapman, 1997; Evans, Davies & Wright, 2004; Markula, 2000; Markula & Pringle, 2006); constructions of sporting masculinity (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Pringle, 2005); and, examinations of hierarchal power relations in high performance sport (Johns & Johns, 2000; Shogan, 1999). These studies have all signaled the diverse ways in which sporting practices work to produce and then make use of docile bodies.

In her analysis of high performance sport, Debra Shogan (1999) focuses on the ways that the disciplinary practices of sport produce highly-skilled bodies that are often capable of completing unique tasks. Markula and Pringle (2006) explain how disciplinary techniques relate closely to the production of docile but productive bodies within a fitness centre. The production of docile and productive bodies links to discourses of pleasure in so much as we come to understand through dominant sport, exercise, and health discourses that participation in these kinds of activities is a good thing to do. We want to create ourselves in accordance to discursively constructed norms and, as such, we want to be “good.” When we are good (i.e., we go to the gym four times a week, we have salad instead of French fries, we keep going to yoga despite trying to finish a doctoral
dissertation) or when we perform well in the context of sport (i.e., we break the 40 minute mark in a local 10k road race, we score a goal and lead our team to victory, or we learn the perfect back-spin) we get pleasure. Though this seems a conversation directed very much at individual notions of disciplinary power and the production of docile bodies, the efforts to produce bodies in such way has much more to do with the management of the population.

Foucault argued that bio-power is a technology which appeared in the late eighteenth century for managing populations. It incorporated certain aspects of disciplinary power. If disciplinary power was about training the actions of bodies, bio-power was about managing the births, deaths, reproduction, and illnesses of a population. Rose (1999) writes that, “discipline is constitutively linked to new ways of thinking about the tasks of political rule in terms of the government of the conduct of the population…. Bio-politics and the biologized state… are strategies which recognize and act upon the positivity of the domains to be governed” (p. 22). Disciplinary power is used to create docile and productive bodies, but this is not solely for individual gain. Rather, the individual becomes responsible for the creation of their body in socially sanctioned ways so as to contribute to the health of the population (Markula & Pringle, 2006; McDermott, 2007; Rabinow & Rose, 2006; Rose, 1999). Foucault’s consideration of bio-power led to his conceptualization of governmentality. He writes:

Government has as its purpose not the act of government itself, but the welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health, etc…. Interest at the level of consciousness of each individual who goes to make up the population, and interest considered as the interest of the population regardless of what the particular interests and aspirations may be of the individuals who compose it, this is the new target and the fundamental instrument of the government of population. (Foucault, 1991, p. 100)
Lisa McDermott (2007) provides a useful explanation of governmentality. She says that, “governmentality...represents a rationality and strategy of governing that emerged in the West in the eighteenth century, the focus of which is to manage populations in such a way that simultaneously individualizes and totalizes, in terms of each and all” (p. 306). Given my interest in this project in the ways that pleasure (and pain) reproduces neoliberal ideologies, Foucault’s concept of governmentality is useful given the strategies of neoliberalism to place the responsibility for such things as health on individuals (self-responsibility) rather than on the State (social-responsibility). I discuss neoliberal governmentality in more depth in chapter seven.

The concept of bio-power factored heavily in Foucault’s research on madness, on punishment, and on sexuality. For the purposes of the discussion here and my study more generally, what’s most important in Foucault’s work on the history of sexuality is the way that pleasure factored into his arguments. Through his discussion of the regulation of sex and sexuality he brought to light the ways that pleasure is regulated. Though Foucault’s interest in pleasure was primarily about sexual pleasure, the underlying argument that pleasure is an organizing principle in neoliberal societies has been taken up by different scholars to theorize the relationship between, for example, health discourses and the restrictions of pleasures in daily life (Coveney & Bunton, 2003; Fullagar, 2002; Lupton, 1995). Markula and Pringle (2006) suggest, “the health of a state... rests in part on the discipline of individuals to maintain a normal body size, practice safe sex, avoid harmful drugs, maintain active lifestyles and the like” (p. 45). Health promotion initiatives work as a form of bio-power through which pleasures are governed in specific socio-cultural contexts. Coveney and Bunton (2003) argue that
pleasure and pleasure seeking is thus conceived as the weak link in the chain of command from authoritarian discourses of health governance to docile compliance for body maintenance. The self-policing, or self-management, of health involves the fashioning and rationing of pleasure in ways that are highly socially situated. (pp. 166-167)

Not that long ago, for example, smoking was considered as a certain kind of pleasure, largely uncontested, and permitted pretty much everywhere. With a growing scientific knowledge that connects smoking to various illnesses and disease, smoking is now viewed in a very different light. That is not to say that people don’t find pleasure in smoking still. Their pleasure now, however, is found through something labeled as a deviant behaviour, as something that doesn’t only harm the individual’s health but also contributes to the unhealthiness of the population. It might be said that in contemporary times people who smoke likely get pleasure from the act itself but also from the subversive nature of it.

We must remember that as Foucault suggests, governmentality is about the mobilization of social subjects through political discourses aimed at the “conduct of conduct” (Foucault, 1991). As such, power is not repressive but productive. I have discussed this previously in terms of disciplinary practices and individual bodies. But here, groups of people may materialize or mobilize around a health-related issue that has at its root the regulation of pleasure. One such example would be the reemergence of bareback sex in recent years amongst gay and queer men, an example which provides not only an example of the ways that pleasure may act as an organizing principle but also how pleasure might work as a form of resistance. According to Holmes and Warner (2005), “Bareback sex is considered by many as an ‘extreme sexual practice’ that defies the public health discourse, and constitutes a blatant indicator of tensions between public
health imperatives and individual desires” (pp. 11-12). Holmes and Warner’s suggestion here provides a useful segue into a discussion about the relationship between pleasure and desire, something that poststructuralists also contend is discursively constructed.

**Pleasure, Desire, and Discourse**

The connection between desire and pleasure is an important one. Some scholars suggest that what we find pleasurable is entirely dependent upon what we desire (Aho, 1998; Heathwood, 2007; Rose, 1999, 2001). Aho (1998) comments in this regard that, “pleasure is the satisfaction of desire, the harmonizing of what should be with what is” (p. 125, emphasis in original). But rather than thinking of desire as an intrinsic or inherent feeling that humans possess, most theorists who locate their work in a poststructuralist paradigm will argue that desire is entirely a discursive construction imbued with and constituted by contextually-specific regimes of power. Rand (2008) argues in this regard that what we come to think of as “social norms” function in such a way to regulate our desires. She writes: “Norms solicit our desires. They create, meet, and frustrate our needs with an intensity that is often challenging to explain and, as a result, crucial to explain” (p. 571).

The relationship between desire and pleasure was an important one for Foucault. It would seem that in pleasure Foucault saw the possibility for resistance and even transformation, as he discussed in his perspectives on the technologies of self which are specific practices by and through which subjects knowingly constitute themselves within and in resistance to power. There are varying ways in which such practices can occur: self-care, self-knowledge, and mastery of the self. In short, Foucault envisioned that it is
possible for an individual to transform her or himself. He contended that the technologies of the self, permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immorality. (Foucault, 1988, p. 18)

In terms of sexuality and pleasure, Foucault (1990a) argued that though pleasure acted as a regulatory mechanism, this was only through a negative relation:

Where sex and pleasure are concerned, power can “do” nothing but say no to them; what it produces, if anything, is absences and gaps; it overlooks elements, introduces discontinuities, separates what is joined, and marks off boundaries. Its effects take the general form of limit and lack. (p. 83)

In the absences and gaps, which are not devoid of rules or codes of conduct, “these practices of the self refer to the forming of oneself as a subject within the truth games of sexuality” (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 140).

But in desire, it would seem that Foucault saw the limits, the constraints, the regulatory power dispersed through discourses of expertise that constructed certain kinds of desire as normal and productive and, therefore, desirable (Turner, 1997). He was quite clear about this when in an interview recorded in 1983 he offered comment about the problems of desire and the problems of pleasure: “The problem of desire is much more important than the problem of pleasure…Why do we see ourselves as subjects of desire as opposed to agents of pleasure?” His contention was that desire, though popularly taken to be a natural drive or instinct, was rather the product of scientific and religious
discourse. Desire, he suggested, was mostly produced through the regulations of desires in ways that are construed as benefitting the welfare of the population as a whole.

While religious and medico-scientific discourses continue to influence desire in contemporary times, desire is also shaped by such things as economics (i.e., consumerism) and health. Rose (1999) refers to the “technology of desire” which he explains is a mechanism that induces in us desires that we work to satisfy. For example, in terms of consumption, products aren’t marketed simply as what they are but what they might represent in terms of a desirable lifestyle. Marketers create wants and artificial needs in us through advertising goods, experiences and lifestyles that are tempting to us.

We come to desire these things and thus act in a manner that allows us to achieve these things, whether by working harder and earning more money or by employing technologies of the self to shape our lifestyle to the manner we desire.

(Rose, 1999, p. 86)

Importantly, this is not just about products. While consumerism promotes the idea of identity through products and, thus, consumption, discourses of desire are also about the desire to be “normal” as related to sexuality, bodily aesthetics, or health. Rose (1999) argues that, “in the new modes of regulating health, individuals are addressed on the assumption that they want to be healthy…” (Rose, 1999, p. 86, emphasis in original). The connection between desire, health, and neoliberal strategies of self-responsibility is a strong one. Neoliberalism instills in people the desire to be responsible for their own health by promoting it as an individual responsibility that contributes to the greater good of society as a whole. Rose (1999) states that neoliberal governmentality
“links public objectives for good health and good order of the social body with the desire of individuals for personal health and well-being” (p. 74, emphasis added).

Desire — for “better” health, for products, for normalcy — is not constant or unchanging. What we want and what we strive for are, in a poststructuralist perspective, discursively constructed. When considered in relation to Foucault’s notions of bio-power and governmentality, the relationship between the regulation of desires and the regulation of pleasures (as well as the ways that pleasure can function as a form of resistance or agency) to discourses of expertise becomes that much clearer. I believe that exploring the constructions of pleasure and of desire reveals the discursive formations circulating in a given socio-cultural context which shape peoples’ ideas about their bodies, about their selves, and about their responsibility to the population as a whole.

Constructionist perspectives (and I have focused more on poststructuralist or “strong” constructionist perspectives) may seem to be the most effective way of theorizing pleasure (and pain and the body more generally). Such approaches, however, are not without their critics. I turn here to a brief discussion about some of the objections scholars have made about poststructuralist perspectives and especially Foucauldian perspectives of the body and bodily experiences.

**Critiques of Discursive Considerations of the Body, Pain, and Pleasure**

In this brief critique I give particular focus to scholars’ objections that are based on what might best be phrased as the “lack of bodies” (Bruhm, 1994) and the so-called failure to account for the “extra-discursive” in discursive theories of the body. Both of these criticisms have been leveled at Foucault’s philosophical approach to the body.
According to Shilling (1993), for example, “Foucault’s epistemological view of the body means that it disappears as a material or biological phenomenon” (p. 80). Shilling goes on to argue that if “the body is whatever discourse constructs it as being, it is discourse rather than the body that needs examining in Foucault’s work” (p. 81). Other scholars have suggested that to ignore the biological, the sensorial nature of peoples’ bodies and their experiences is to say that the body is not fundamentally biological and to slip into what has been called discursive essentialism (Best, 2007; Shilling, 1993) or discursive determinism (Lupton, 1998). In short, poststructuralist perspectives influenced by Foucault’s ideas are said to ignore the materiality of the body, the realm of the extra-discursive (Lupton, 1998; Malson, 1997; Shilling, 1993; Turner, 1984).

How, for instance, does discourse analysis account for those moments in human experience where our feeling states, our sensuous bodily experiences escape articulation? The “owww” of a hammer hitting a thumb; the “ugh” that might accompany the burning sensations in one’s body when running one kilometer repeats at anaerobic intensity; the “oooh” when fingers find a spot on a thigh, a breast, an elbow that might be pleasurable; the “ahhhhh” that might accompany orgasm? Do these moments factor into the production of subjects more than poststructuralist perspectives might allow? Scarry (1985) reminds us that pain might be the one human experience that is beyond or, in fact, actively destroys language. The same might be said of sensuous pleasures. As such, some scholars argue that though pain may be made sense of through the language we have available, the physical sensation, the somatic reality of it, is an embodied experience which exceeds the conceptual level (Bendelow & Williams, 1995; Best, 2007; Crossley, 1995, 1996; Shilling, 1993; Williams & Bendelow, 1998). As Best (2007) argues,
“language and metaphor may well be vehicles for making sense of bodily sensations and actions, but this is not the same as the suggestion that bodily experiences solely exist at the level of language and metaphor” (p. 170). Furthermore, “if pain was solely a linguistic or discursive construction there would be ample cultural resources to fully describe and explain the nature of painful experiences, yet clearly there is not” (Best, 2007, p. 170).

It is the so-called absence of the material body — the extra-discursive — from Foucauldian perspectives that has lead some scholars to suggest that phenomenological perspectives may be better suited to explain the body and bodily experiences (Bendelow & Williams, 1995, 1998; Shilling, 1993; Williams & Bendelow, 1998). Surely sensory experiences or feelings contribute to the way we come to understand ourselves? Is it not important to consider not just how discourses construct subjectivity and embodiment but the role of the extra-discursive in such a process?

After reading about the objections some scholars had raised about Foucault’s perspectives, I turned in the early stages of my doctoral studies to phenomenology. It was my hope that such a turn might be able to address my own emerging quandaries about researching and writing the sensuous experiences of the moving body and to help reconcile what I was beginning to think of as a limitation in Foucault’s ideas.

Phenomenology of the Body and Bodily Experiences

Phenomenology is both theory/philosophy and method. Here I am interested in phenomenology as theory as posited by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty and as taken up by other scholars more recently who have a particular interest in the sociology of the body.
and sport (e.g., Crossley, 1996; Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2007; Kerry & Armour, 2000). My interest in phenomenology was to help me negotiate some of the “problems” that adopting Foucauldian perspectives of the body might present in the course of my research. What follows is a brief overview of the ways that different theorists have written about the body and pain from a phenomenological perspective. I also discuss some of the critiques that theorists have offered of phenomenology. This leads into the final section of this chapter in which I outline how I have used these different theoretical perspectives to inform my project.

Phenomenology and the “Lived Body”

As a way of thinking about human experience, phenomenological philosophy emerged in response to naturalistic or objective approaches to the body and bodily experiences. Phenomenology positions individuals as active agents in the world and in their constitution as subjects of the world; rather than being “passive dupes” humans are engaged in the world, capable of making sense of things and developing personal meaning in the process (Loland, 2006; Meier, 1988).

Much of our understanding of the philosophy of phenomenology and embodiment comes from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) key work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, a work which was written largely in response to the Cartesian dualism but which also worked/works to challenge naturalistic views of the body. At the root of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is the concept of embodiment, which to oversimplify for the moment, is a way of considering mind/body and nature/culture dualisms as false constructions (Crossley, 1995; Featherstone & Turner, 1995; Leder, 1990; Williams & Bendelow, 1998).
To accept the philosophy of embodiment is to accept that mechanistic approaches to the body are problematic and fail to fully account for the body as both sentient and sensible. Phenomenology is an epistemological approach to the body that proposes that the subjective experiences of one’s own body are different from the objective or scientific body in physiological terms. Kerry and Armour (2000) sum up Merleau-Ponty’s main ideas nicely:

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body highlights the inadequacies and inability of objective approaches to adequately understand the nature of humans’ embodied being. By redefining the manner in which we conceptualize the lived body, Merleau-Ponty’s work allows us real insight into the depth and richness of human existence. (p. 7)

An embodied approach to interpreting socio-cultural phenomena, then, contends that the body is not a mere object which has things “done to it” (read: inscribed on it) but rather is a key component of the way that the subjective self comes to understand the world, comes to experience the things of the world. Embodiment is corporeal knowing or knowledge of that which constitutes us while simultaneously we constitute it.

For sociologists interested in the body, such a philosophical approach moves beyond a mechanist conceptualization of the body and beyond discursive reductionism. It allows for the consideration of the body as sensory and the body-subject as having physical feelings and emotions that are experienced and given meaning specific to the socio-cultural context. Simply put (if that is possible) we do not experience embodiment but rather we are embodied.

*Phenomenology of Pain*

Drawing from the work of Merleau-Ponty, Bendelow and Williams (1995, 1998) propose that it is not possible to talk about lived experiences of pain outside of
embodiment and without discussing our perception of everyday reality which depends upon a living, conscious body-subject. The authors present pain as something much more than simply sensory or somatic; they also suggest that the experiences and meanings and responses to and of pain change over time and location. Here there is a constructed nature to the idea of pain but not one that can be limited to the discursive as there is still a “real” physical experience of pain. It might be made sense of through the language available, but the physical sensation, is an embodied experience — an embodiment which exists beyond the conceptual level. Thus, as Honkasalo (1998) contends:

Pain as an embodied experience is constituted in the knots of existential, social, and cultural structures, as well as bodily processes. The definition echoes Merleau-Ponty’s thinking, and indeed, I would like to add more explicitly to his concept of pain as a mode of being-in-the-world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 79), which, to my understanding, means being neither a first person nor third person phenomenon but a way of experiencing and perceiving. A central question touches the ways in which culture is embodied in chronic pain. (p. 37, emphasis added)

Being in pain is one way of being in the world. And this is what is key to a phenomenological approach to pain: such an approach suggests that pain is a lived, physically embodied, emotional, and existential experience (Bendelow & Williams, 1995; Loland, 2006). Importantly, pain is much, much more than sensory, much, much more than is reducible to biomedical explanations. In this vein, Turner (1992) proposes that we recognize pain as an emotional state for in so doing we immediately begin considering the idea of the person as an embodied agent with strong affective, emotional, and social responses to the state of being in pain [thus bringing] attention to a neglected aspect of the sociology of health and illness for which a theory of embodiment is an essential prerequisite for understanding pain as an emotion within a social context. (p. 169)

My interest in a phenomenological approach is in getting at the ways in which individuals live pain. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty himself argues that physical sensation should only ever
be understood as an emotion relative to the context in which one exists. Pain, in such thinking, is a relational phenomenon which joins us to, and is produced by, our interactions with others (Crossley, 1996; Lupton, 1998). A phenomenological approach to pain is important, it is argued, in so much as it offers insights into the ways that pain is related to notions of the “self.”

Thus, more so than constructionist approaches to pain, phenomenologists argue that their approach allows more for individual agency, while maintaining some recognition of socio-cultural context. In this regard, Wisnewski (2007) contends that “the task of phenomenology is careful description: the aim of the phenomenologist is to capture the way things reveal themselves to us in everyday life, and to capture this despite our propensity to oversimplify” (Wisnewski, 2007, p. 36, emphasis in original). If phenomenology is the study of peoples’ experiences, then it would seem that it might provide a useful analytic tool to get at peoples’ experiences of pain and pleasure (as example) in the context of sport and fitness practices (Kerry & Armour, 2000; Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2007). Focusing on peoples’ experiences can provide useful insights into the ways that they make sense of their experiences of and place in the world. In this project, a phenomenological perspective would allow me to get at pain and pleasure as sensuous, embodied experiences and how these experiences shape peoples’ subjectivities.

Critiques of Phenomenology

One critique of the phenomenological perspective is that it does not take enough account of the macro factors shaping peoples’ experiences such as social structures, institutions, and power relations (Loland, 2006; Lupton, 1998; Shilling, 1993). Put another way, phenomenologist perspectives tend to theorize too much at a micro-level
with a view towards revealing how the ways people interpret their experiences reveals their “true” selves (Loland, 2006; Lupton, 1998). In this regard, Foucault argues that phenomenology seeks to discover an authentic, founding subject through the analysis of everyday life. He, on the other hand, is aiming at the dissolution of notions of a fixed subject, a view that reflects his anti-humanist epistemology. Laberge and Kay (2002) suggest that Bourdieu had the same reservations about phenomenology stating that, “Bourdieu accords a central place to the body in his social theory. He nevertheless criticizes phenomenology because it considers subjects to be undetermined, and to be empowered to construct the world according to their own vision” (p. 242). Criticisms relate mostly to the idea that phenomenology allows people too much agency and forgets the social world that is inscribed on the body.

Considering pain and pleasure through a phenomenological lens might reveal the ways that people interpret their lived experience and this is not unimportant. A concern that emerged for me, however, is that such analysis seems almost removed from the world, failing to account for (in my view) discourses circulating in and shaping the socio-cultural context in which one exists. While I don’t seek here to deny the biology of the body nor the importance of peoples’ fleshy, carnal experiences of the social world, I would argue that phenomenological approaches to the sporting, physically active, moving body are limited in scope.

One of my primary concerns is that phenomenological inquiries still rely on language in the research and writing process. They bring experience into language. And here we encounter a problem; as researchers and writers of the body, we are governed by the same discursive structures as those whose experiences we may seek to elucidate. We
are limited by language in the questions we ask as well as the way we choose to write about lived experience. The people we ask questions of are limited in their answers. In this respect, Denison and Markula (2003) suggest that language works to reduce our “complicated, sophisticated, intense, and personal movement patterns into a flat, one-dimensional text” (p. 18). I take this to mean that they think there is something non-discursive that we are not able to get at. They also argued that it “seems unlikely that we will ever be able to produce truly embodied accounts of people’s movement experiences given the current research climate and the emphasis on language and texts…” (p. 18). All partners in the research process are limited and constrained by language.

While it is interesting to think about how we might use Merleau-Pontian philosophy to theorize the body beyond mind/body, mechanist approaches, I do not know that this is possible without also accounting for the discursive influence on lived experience and subjectification. What seems most significant to me is how people describe their experiences and how they might make sense of such descriptions/inscriptions by taking into consideration the broader socio-cultural context in which that experience takes place. I suppose in this way of thinking I follow Foucault (1972) who does not deny that there are real and material things of the world but that outside of discourse nothing has any meaning.

My Theoretical Approach in this Project

From the outset of this project, I was interested in following the suggestion of scholars who contend that poststructuralist and phenomenological perspectives can be used in conversation with one another. Combining or “blending” approaches, it has been
suggested, will help to get closer to peoples’ embodied experiences while also accounting for the relationship between discourse and the construction of subjectivity and embodied experience (Crossley, 1996; Lupton, 1998; Loland, 2006). I felt that such an approach might be especially useful when considering the “voluntary” nature of painful experiences in sport and fitness practices and the ways that painful experiences may be sought out and/or “felt” as pleasurable.

Phenomenological perspectives did help me design the interview process and certainly influenced the ways that I viewed and analyzed the mediated representations of the Ironman. By considering my own Ironman participation and physical experiences in this project, I also think that I was able to get closer to the lived, embodied experiences of pain and pleasure. I was able to think about how my body experienced different aspects of the Ironman and how I “felt” doing it. I am, however, at a loss as to how to go any further with a phenomenological inquiry for the reasons outlined above: the limits of language.

In this project then, I mostly use Foucault’s perspectives of discourse and subjectivity to help make sense of peoples’ constructions of pain and pleasure in the Ironman context. His notions of bio-power and governmentality also inform my work here, particularly as I consider how the current socio-political context — neoliberalism — contributes to the constructions of pain, pleasure, and health in the Ironman context (i.e., participant narratives, my own experiences, and mediated representations).

My critical discourse analysis (explained in the next chapter) is informed mostly by poststructuralist perspectives but I have sought to consider the complex relationships between the discursive and the extra-discursive and, in so doing, I have tried to avoid
reproducing a sometimes “too-rigid division between texts (of the body) and the material realities (of the body)” (Malson, 1997, p. 227). In this I follow Foucault (1972) who argued that discourses do not emerge in a vacuum. Rather, their emergence and development is made possible by a variety of socio-cultural conditions, both discursive and extra-discursive. My inquiry here contributes to on-going debate within the sociology of sport (and the sociology of the body more generally) about the ways that we think about the body and its meanings. In the chapters that follow, I seek to resolve some of my own theoretical quandaries about researching and writing the moving body and especially about how to account for the extra-discursive in such projects.
Chapter 4

Methodological Approach

This chapter outlines the methodological approach that I adopted for this research project, the ways that I went about collecting and analyzing the “data,” and the reasons behind my choices. As with any qualitative research project, I chose my approach in order to gather the richest source materials possible while also maintaining consistency with the overall objectives of the work and its theoretical influences. I collected data primarily through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. I also conducted a media analysis to help contextualize the primary materials. I analyzed the data drawing on the tenets of critical discourse analysis. The research was conducted in compliance with the guidelines established by Queen’s General Research Ethics Board (GREB). A copy of the GREB approval letter is attached as Appendix A.

In undertaking this project, I sought to get at the ways in which people construct pain, pleasure, health, and identity in the context of their participation in Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons. I also wanted to look more generally at the interaction of sensual embodiment with socio-cultural processes. Based on my own experiences of Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons as a participant, a race-day volunteer, a spectator of live events, and a long-time consumer of mediated representations of it, I knew it to be a socio-cultural context which creates/demands multiple and varied bodily experiences including some which would be defined as painful and others which would be defined as pleasurable. Once considered a fringe sport for “eccentric fitness freaks” (Granskog, 1993) with an “addiction to inordinate amounts of exercise” (McDermott, 1979) and a
sport largely unthinkable for most, Ironman and Iron-distance races are now events that (very particular types of) people do for recreation and for fitness.

In my investigations, I adopted for my methodological framework, what Ellis and Bochner (2000) refer to as reflexive ethnography:

In reflexive ethnographies the researcher’s personal experience becomes important primarily in how it illuminates the culture under study. Reflexive ethnographies range along a continuum from starting research from one’s own experience to ethnographies where the researcher’s experience is actually studied along with other participants. (p. 740)

Such an approach coincides with my preference for more personal approaches to research. In this regard I have been particularly influenced by feminist scholars. As Reinharz (1992) contends, feminist research often begins “from one’s own experience” (p. 259). Even more than this, research influenced by feminism seeks to move away from the detached, formal, and “unbiased” rhetoric of positivist writing and strives to include the personal voice as a way of conveying emotion, passion, and enthusiasm. Given my history in Ironman I was immersed in the research from the beginning. As I commented earlier, the last Ironman event in which I participated was the impetus for this project. My history, my embodied experiences, and my reflections on them undoubtedly factored in the creation of the interview guide, in the conducting of the interviews themselves, and the ways in which I took up the mediated representations of the sport.

This project is an attempt to respond to on-going calls for more reflexive and/or embodied research projects in sport and physical activity (Denison & Markula, 2003; Denison & Rinehart, 2000; Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2007; Holt, 2003; Kerry & Armour, 2000; Markula, 2003; Sparkes, 2000, 2002). Admittedly, I adopted a more personal, reflexive methodological approach in the hope that including some of my own
experiences throughout the project would help me to unpack some of my own conceptualizations of pain, pleasure, health, and identity. These conceptualizations, despite my critical reflections on sport and society, have become normalized through my years of involvement in different physical activities such as figure skating, cross country running, road racing, triathlon, and group fitness classes, in which I have been both participant and instructor. In this regard my thinking has been and continues to be very much influenced by Jim Denison (2003) who has suggested that for him,

qualitative research as a way of knowing satisfies the questions I hold about who I am and how I think about the world…. At heart, becoming a qualitative researcher is an ontological commitment to a way of sensing who and what we are that acknowledges the complexity and ambiguity of social life as an interactional process. (p. 202)

Some readers may be resistant to my interest in such personal objectives for a doctoral thesis. These are not my only objectives but they are, I think, important ones for a qualitative researcher who is interested in the body, bodily experiences, and socio-cultural processes. If I cannot come to know myself in relation to the world, how can I relate to others and their understandings of their relationship to the world? A reflexive ethnographic approach offers a way to get at both of these things.

Some fields within academia remain resistant to more personal forms of research (Denison & Markula, 2003; Holt, 2003; Mykhalovskiy, 1996; Sparkes, 1996, 2002). This is no longer entirely the case within the sociology of sport or the sociology of the body. With respect to the former, an entire issue of the Sociology of Sport Journal (2000) was dedicated to new ways of writing and research with a particular focus on autoethnography and narratives of the self. This and other calls for more autobiographical writings have pointed to the domains of sport and physical activity as particularly suited to
autoethnographic investigation and non-traditional narratives (Denison & Rinehart, 2000; Denison & Markula, 2003; Holt, 2003; Sparkes, 2000). These arguments have primarily been made in relation to the embodied aspect of sport and physical activity and the fact that most of us writing about sport, exercise, and physical activity have usually experienced “the beauty, grace, power, and exhilaration associated with movement” (Denison & Markula, 2003, p. 9). As such, we are uniquely situated to think about the relationship between movement, our bodies, the meanings we make of these things, and the broader socio-cultural context in which we exist (Denison & Markula, 2003; Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2001; Sparkes, 2002, 2009). Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2001) comment that autoethnographies of sport and physical activity work because of the combination of field notes and “head notes.” In other words, autoethnographers are able to think critically about what they are doing while they are doing it as opposed to being solely dependent upon memory recall and the recounting of experiences and stories after the fact. With a few notable exceptions (see Allen-Collinson, 2003; Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2001; Denison, 2006; Hockey, 2005; Sparkes, 1996, 2009), these calls for more personal forms of writing appear to have been largely unheeded beyond special journal editions and texts.

The resistance to more personal forms of writing has been discussed thoroughly elsewhere (see Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Markula, 2003; Mykhalovskiy, 1996; Sparkes, 1996, 2002). Much of the resistance to personal scholarship seems to be grounded in its contestation of “traditional” approaches to research and writing, approaches which purport to be objective, unbiased, truth-producing, unemotional, and uninvolved. Mykhalovskiy (1996) has argued that such resistance is located in a
commitment to “rationality, objectivity and subject/object as well as other dualisms, all often subsumed in the notion of an autonomous masculine academic subject or voice” (p. 135). Similarly, Sparkes (2002) argues that, “the universal charge of self-indulgence leveled against autoethnography and other forms of vulnerable writing is based on a misapprehension of these genres as self-conscious navel-gazing and is ‘grounded in deep mistrust of the worth of the self’” (p. 91).

In more traditional approaches to academic writing, the self has been diminished as much as possible, minimized, neutralized, standardized, and controlled. It is also, more importantly, separated from the cultural context being studied. As Ellis (2004) has argued, however, it is unreasonable to think that the researcher-self can ever be removed from the cultural context in which s/he has been immersed. Similarly, Mykhalovskiy (1996) writes that, “the claim of narcissism rests in an individual/social dualism that obfuscates how writing about the self involves, at the same time, writing about the “other” and how work on the “other” is also about the self of the writer” (p. 133).

Autoethnographic projects provide unique opportunities to share personal experiences in an attempt to connect them to the cultural context in which they are lived. Yet autoethnographic projects can be extremely difficult to undertake (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Sparkes, 2002). At the very least, an autoethnographer must make a conscious decision to share her/his feelings, emotions, and epiphanies. On this idea of exposing the personal, Ellis and Bochner (2000) contend that the “self-questioning autoethnography demands is extremely difficult. So is confronting things about yourself that are less than flattering…. Honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of
fears and doubts — and emotional pain” (p. 738). I am cognizant of the difficulty of thinking critically about one’s own experiences.

There are certainly some instances in this project where I have included comments that are “less than flattering” to me. In the concluding chapter I talk a bit about the difficulty that adopting a more personal approach to my work here presented. Nevertheless, I do remain present in the project throughout and when including material about my own experiences, I have attempted to move beyond simple “confessional mode” (Denison & Markula, 2003; Markula, 2003; Sparkes, 2002) to provide a substantial reflexive critique. Since I was interested in getting at ideas about the extra-discursive and about socio-cultural processes generally, and the potential relationships between pain and pleasure and the production of subjects more specifically, I felt that an embodied approach to research was called for. My own experiences of pain and pleasure in the context of this sporting practice bring me that much closer. My own perspectives allow me to add more depth to the project by telling my own stories of pain and pleasure from my Ironman experiences, stories which both concur and conflict with the stories and ideas about pain and pleasure shared with me by my interview participants.

Studies of pain and injury in sport that have drawn primarily on interviews have been critiqued for relying on retrospective narratives produced out of context, that is when athletes are not necessarily in pain or injured (Howe, 2001, 2004). Howe proposes that ethnographic research provides richer insights to these embodied experiences:

In the case of the ethnography of pain and injury, the “snap” of a tendon, the “crunch” of a tackle, and the “grimace” of pain can all be recorded [which when] coupled with other methodologies that are more commonly employed in social investigations of the sport (through interviews and surveys), leads to a more complete understanding of the sporting world and in particular its relationship to pain and injury. (p. 6)
Similarly Rand (2008) suggests that participant observation works well in considering pleasures in their socio-cultural context. She writes that participant observation makes possible

a certain intimate access to pleasure, which may be physical, mental, and/or emotional... and, in either category, understood as easy to articulate or impossible to put into words. Questions born of doing, watching, and interacting as a practitioner can help to flesh out, for instance, the connections between gear, bodily movement, and the pleasures taken in them. (p. 570)

When I began this study I had hoped to adopt a methodological approach similar to that proposed by Howe and Rand. My intention had been to participate in training sessions with people as they prepared for various Ironman/Iron-distance events. I wanted to try to get at some of the painful and pleasurable moments that may be taken-for-granted within that context and that could provide insight into pain and pleasure as embodied experiences. I was not able to join the groups geographically available to me in the role of participant-researcher, however, as I could not gain permission from the groups to do so. I envision that this remains a worthwhile project down the road and as I contemplate participating in a fourth Ironman in 2012 this would be more feasible at that time. Such an inquiry would add to Atkinson’s (2008) participant observation study of triathlon training clubs in south-western Ontario and the autoethnographic accounts of Ironman participation published by Drummond (2010) and McCarville (2007).

While I did not have the opportunity to integrate myself into training groups for this project, I have used journals from my training and racing experiences (2002, 2004, 8

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8 This is in no way a commitment to doing another Ironman in 2012, or any other year for that matter. Friends who are still actively involved in the Ironman have planted the seed of celebrating my 40th birthday two years from now by completing another Ironman with them. While the idea of turning 40 somewhere on a beach with an over-sized sangria sounds far more pleasurable and far less painful (at least at the time), I must confess that the idea of doing another Ironman is not unappealing, especially when I think of the possibilities of experimenting with new and innovative ways of researching and writing the moving body (Denison & Markula, 2003).
and 2007) and my own memories from a number of other Ironman and Iron-distance events at which I was a spectator to augment the interviews and media sources.

**Interviews, Personal Stories, and Media: Gathering Qualitative Materials**

I gathered and analyzed three types of materials from the Ironman community for this project: (1) transcripts from semi-structured interviews; (2) autobiographical data from my own participation in Ironman events and training; and, (3) broadcast and print media. I will address each in turn.

*Semi-Structured Interviews*

Steinar Kvale (1996) has suggested that qualitative interviewers should “attempt to understand the world from the subjects’ points of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples’ experiences” (p. 1). The strength of semi-structured interviews is that there is significant access to the participants’ relationships to the social — their interactions, agency, notions of self, and collective identities (Laslett, 1999). For this project, talking to people helped to get at their lived experiences in Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons and the meaning that they make of their experiences. This provided insights into the discursive themes available to participants in this sporting practice. Through our conversations I was able to gain an understanding of the ways that this group of Ironman triathletes thought about pain, pleasure, and health and how these connected to their ideas about their own identities and their relationship to the broader socio-cultural context.
Participant Recruitment

I sought participants for my research by posting a notice on an electronic listserv for the multisport community (boasting a membership just shy of 7,000)9 of which I was and continue to be a member. Recruitment criteria specified that all participants be English-speaking Canadians, 18 years and older, who had completed, or who were training for, an Ironman or Iron-distance triathlon. I also stipulated that they must reside in or near Kingston, Ontario or Ottawa, Ontario. Potential participants were informed that they would be asked to take part in one interview that would last between 90 and 120 minutes and would be recorded with a digital audio recorder. Within 48 hours of posting the notice, I had received 40 responses from interested persons. I then sent a follow-up email which included the Letter of Information and Consent Form (see Appendix B). Twenty-two people responded to that email, three of whom had to be excluded because of their geographic locations.

A total of 19 people ranging in age from 29 to 57 were included in the study. Seven of the participants self-identified as female, the rest self-identified as male. All the participants were white. When asked to define their ethnicity, the most popular term used was “Canadian.” Others identified as Caucasian, white Anglo-Saxon protestant, Jewish, Ukrainian-Canadian, Franco-Ontarian, “white,” or Euro-Canadian. With one exception, all had completed at least an undergraduate degree, one had finished a master’s degree, two had completed their doctorates, and one participant was completing a Ph.D. at the time of the interview. By virtue of the education levels and nature of employment of the participants, each could be argued to belong to the “professional middle class” (Fletcher, 2008). Thus, the participants in this study seem to support the idea that the sport of

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9 At time of writing, there were 6767 members on the listserv (www.TriRudy.com)
triathlon is very much a white middle-class sport (Atkinson, 2008; Hilliard, 1988; Jones & Carmichael Aitchison, 2007) similar to “lifestyle sports” more generally (Wheaton, 2004).

Participants in my study represented a wide range of Ironman experiences; one participant had not completed a full Ironman/Iron-distance event at the time of the interview. The most any one participant had completed was 12. The typical number of events was between one and three. All participants defined their participation in Ironman as “recreational” save for two men who positioned themselves as being “competitive age-groupers.” This means that for these two participants, their primary interest in Ironman was trying to win medals in their respective age groups at the different events in which they competed. The main reason for involvement in Ironman for one of these two men was to compete in his age group at the Ironman World Championships in Kona, Hawaii.

Without exception, all of the interview participants explained that their participation in Ironman and Iron-distance events was part of their “lifestyle.” As I noted in the introductory chapter, I have adopted Wheaton’s (2004) conceptualization of “lifestyle sports.” The idea of lifestyle is important not only in the participants’ own constructions of their involvement but also in my discussion about the meanings of pain and pleasure in the context of Ironman and in the broader socio-cultural context.

The semi-structured interviews took place between September 2009 and February 2010 at locations of the participants’ choosing; most opted to meet at a local coffee shop or at their place of employment. Prior to beginning each conversation I reviewed the

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10 At the time of the study, this participant was training for his first event. In July 2010 he completed his first Ironman event.

11 Please see Appendix C for a demographic overview of the participants.
purpose of the study and provided a hard copy of the Participant Consent Form. I reminded each participant that participation in the study was strictly voluntary and that they had the option to withdraw at any time. In compliance with the guidelines established by the GREB, two copies of the Consent Form were provided for signing. Each participant kept one copy and the other copy was stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home. Following completion of these administrative duties, the conversations began. The conversations ranged in length from 45 minutes to three hours, with the average being slightly less than two hours.

In conducting the semi-structured interviews, I borrowed from feminist approaches to research, which suggest that within the interview setting, there should be an attempt to diminish power imbalances between the researcher and the researched. In feminist research practice, disclosure of personal experiences by the researcher is encouraged and the conversation is participant-oriented and, as much as possible, participant-directed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Neuman, 2000). The sharing of my own experiences within the interview setting had proven successful in my previous work on the experiences of gay male marathon runners (Bridel, 2006; Bridel & Rail, 2007). Participants in that study commented that it was likely much easier to talk to me than to someone with limited or no understanding of that particular social space and the social identities associated with it. I adopted a similar approach in the present project, offering to share my own ideas about pain and pleasure and other topics in the interview setting when asked to do so by the interviewees. Many of the participants commented that I made them very comfortable and that it was easy to speak to me given our shared “Ironman identity.”
All of that said, as much as I sought to keep the interviews more conversational, I did make use of an interview guide (Appendix D). I used the guide to ensure that relevant conversation topics were broached. This allowed some consistency to be maintained among the participants and made sure that they each contributed narrative material on all of the themes, which was important during the data analysis stage (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). My interview guide outlined the topics and contained a list of questions to be explored in part or more fully. The general topics were: (a) historical experiences in sport and/or fitness; (b) Ironman/Iron-distance experiences; (c) conceptualizations of pain and pleasure; and, (d) conceptualizations of health and fitness. I concluded each interview with a review of the purpose, the collection of demographic information (including ethnicity, education, employment, and age), and provided the opportunity for participants to make further comment. A majority of time in each interview was focused on the ways in which the participants defined pain and pleasure and how they might explain their experiences of pain and pleasure (howsoever defined) within the context of training for and participating in Ironman or Iron-distance races.

I recorded all conversations with a digital audio recorder. I also took brief written notes throughout the interviews, explaining to the participants beforehand that I would be doing so. Written notes included information that could not be captured by the audio-recorder (e.g., body language, gestures, inferences and inflections, environmental distractions, and points of interest to which I wanted to return at some point during the interview). These notes were incorporated into the transcription of the recorded data where relevant.
Following completion of each interview, I transcribed the conversations verbatim using the software that came with my digital audio recorder and I stored copies of the transcript on my password-protected personal computer. I personally transcribed each of the interviews to allow immersion in the materials I had gathered. I then sent each participant a verbatim transcription of our conversation (in Microsoft Word format) for her/his review. Participants were asked to review the transcript to ensure that it adequately represented the actual conversation. This also provided an opportunity for participants to revise or delete any statements that they had made. Any requested revisions (of which there were very few) were for purposes of clarity only (as example, a misunderstood word from recording to transcription) or were related to my less-than-perfect word processing skills. Four participants took the opportunity to add further commentary to the bottom of the transcript, noting that they had put further thought into some of the topics we had discussed. As an example, one participant who had “struggled” to define pain during our conversation elaborated on his response. Another participant used the revision process to inform me that following our conversation she had posted a comment on an on-line forum regarding her participation in my research. This particular participant was a member of an on-line forum for runners and multisport athletes.12 Her posted comment indicated that she had participated in my research and that she had been surprised at some of her responses, particularly those related to pain and injury. Her posting resulted in a thread of 50 other comments from forum members, mostly reflecting the subjective nature of pain and, at the same time, the role of pain in these peoples’

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12 “Multisport” is a term applied to athletic competitions/events in which athletes race in a continuous series of stages or “legs,” and rapidly switch from one athletic discipline to another. Triathlons (swim/bike/run), duathlons (run/bike/run), and most kinds of adventure races are examples of these kinds of events.
training, racing, and life more generally. I have folded some of this discussion into the chapters that follow.

Either at the time of the interview or when sending the transcript for review, I gave participants the opportunity to self-select a non-identifying pseudonym (i.e., not a nickname that would allow others to recognize them) to be used throughout the remainder of the study. Most of the participants asked me to choose a pseudonym for them though some did choose their own. Hard copies of the transcripts were stored in coded file folders in a locked filing cabinet in my home; electronic versions were saved on my password-protected personal computer and on a password protected external hard drive.

**Personal Experiences**

I made comment in the opening paragraphs of this chapter about my presence in the research as it related to the development of the interview guide, the conversations with the participants, and my interrogation of the mediated representations. I have also included as part of the qualitative materials gathered for my project, different personal records that I have kept from the time in which I was actively training for and participating in Ironman events. This included training journals that I maintained in 2002, 2004, and 2007 (the years in which I participated in an Ironman event) as well as race reports written following the events.

I also have attended several Ironman and Iron-distance events, acting as a volunteer or providing support to friends who were participating. Thus, my personal observations have also been included as part of the materials gathered for my project. Similar to the other qualitative materials gathered, I imported my race reports and notes taken from my training journals (which were handwritten) into Atlas.ti for inclusion in
the coding and analysis phase of this project. I assume the perspective that the researcher’s voice should not be considered any less relevant than those of the participants when the researcher shares experiences of the social phenomenon being studied. I would argue that such an approach is especially useful when considering embodied experiences of sport and physical activity that are often hard to articulate.

*Broadcast and Print Media*

The mediated representations of the Ironman which I used included television broadcasts and magazines. I used my analysis of these materials primarily to help contextualize the interview materials and the data related to my participation and observation.

*Television Broadcasts*

The primary media sources which I examined were television broadcasts of the Ironman World Championships which take place annually in Kona, Hawaii. This event has been broadcast on television every year since 1980. The broadcast coverage has evolved from being just one of many sports featured during ABC’s long-running program *Wide World of Sports*. After 10 years with ABC, Ironman moved to NBC in 1991 when it became a stand-alone sports program. As I was not able to access the ABC footage from 1980 to 1990 due to licensing issues, my analysis is based on all of the NBC broadcasts of the Hawaii event (1991 to 2009) representing a total of 18 broadcasts. The length of the broadcasts (without commercials) ranged in length from 60 to 90 minutes, with more being longer than shorter. It is important to note here that these broadcasts are produced from footage from races that can last up to 17 hours. Race footage is edited down by a production team to the narrated, scored, and heavily dramatized program which generally
airs six to eight weeks following the date of the actual event. The broadcast is also often re-aired in the months following.

Though other Ironman events have been broadcast over the past several years on various specialty television channels such as the Outdoor Life Network (OLN), TSN, and Sportsnet, I focussed on NBC’s coverage of the World Championship event from Kona, Hawaii because it is the only Ironman event to be broadcast on a mainstream network in North America. A broadcast aired on the same major network over a number of years provided some consistency in the coverage and, thus, made for interesting insights into the ways the event and its participants have been represented over time.

The Hawaii Ironman broadcast always draws large viewing audiences for a sports program that is not football, baseball, or basketball in the United States or hockey in Canada. The broadcast often earns critical acclaim, evidenced by the fact that it has been nominated for more than 50 Sports Emmy Awards (winning 15 times) since becoming a property of NBC. I also know from my own involvement in this sport community that the broadcast is often used as an opportunity for people to gather together and watch. Many recreational triathletes utilize the broadcasts as a training tool, playing and replaying the broadcast while they ride their bikes on indoor trainers or log miles on treadmills. All of this speaks to the popularity of the broadcast and the potential influence it may have on Ironman participants both in terms of potential involvement (for new participants) and the ways the sport and participation in it are taken up.

For this project I viewed the broadcasts with multiple objectives. Primarily, I was intent on taking note of the various ways in which pain, pleasure, and health were constructed in the broadcasts. Taking the focus of my project, as a starting point, I sought
out the inclusion of specific words (i.e., pain, pleasure, health) or close synonyms (e.g., suffering, injury, trauma, joy, exercise, fitness). I took formal notes recording instances when such terms were used by the broadcaster, by participants (most often in pre-race interviews but also uttered during the event itself), or in graphics incorporated into the broadcast. Many times I recorded participant and broadcaster quotations verbatim.

I also wanted to see who was featured during the broadcasts and how they were represented both visually and through the broadcasters’ narratives. I took note of whether there tended to be representations of particular kinds of bodies doing particular things more so than other bodies doing other things. Before my analysis, based on my existing knowledge of the broadcasts, I assumed that there would be many representations of bodies in pain, bodies suffering, while at the same time there would be a celebration of the health and fitness levels of the participants. This played out much as I expected it would, something that is reflected in the content of chapters five and six. I also recorded my own reaction to the broadcasts when I was moved in some way by what I was seeing. In retrospect, recorded reactions focused mostly on broadcasts I had not seen previously and on what I felt to be disturbing, celebratory representations of participants whom I perceived to be in distress.¹³

My analysis of the 19 years of annual broadcasts gave me a sense of the ways ideas about pain, pleasure, and health have been represented through the images, sounds, and narration that appear on television. My notes helped to highlight not only the prevalence of ideas of pain, pleasure, and health in the broadcasts but also patterns and themes around these ideas and their relation to both the discursively constructed meaning

¹³ I discuss the representation of Paula Newby-Fraser in the 1995 broadcast, and my reaction to it, in chapter five.
of the event and participation in it. I also noted how the broadcasts in general and ideas of pain, pleasure, and health more specifically have changed over time and how gender, race, age, class, and ability were reproduced through the mediated representations. In short, I sought to take notes as a participant observer in any social setting might. My notes provided a sort of running dialogue about what it was that I was seeing as it related to my work. I also included notations of the time in the broadcast that such expressions were present and the context in which they were used and how often they occurred. When I had finished watching and analyzing each broadcast, I transcribed the handwritten notes into Atlas.ti (a qualitative research software program discussed further below).

**Triathlon-Oriented Magazines**

Along with the broadcasts, I reviewed a sample of two triathlon-oriented magazines: *Triathlon Magazine Canada* and *Triathlete*. *Triathlon Magazine Canada* has been in publication since 2007 and is published bi-monthly. Although a relatively new publication, I felt that it was important to include it because it is produced in Canada and, thus, shares the social and political context of my interview participants and myself. Most of the interview participants had access to this publication because it is included as part of the Ontario Association of Triathletes (OAT) membership fee. Though it is not mandatory to register with OAT, many of the interview participants were members. *Triathlete*, an American publication, has a much longer history than its Canadian counterpart; publication of this magazine began in 1982. In 2009, 95,000 copies were printed each month with a subscriber list totalling 45,000 names (of which almost 2,000 are Canadian). Many of the interview participants noted that they either subscribed to or purchased the magazine on at least a semi-regular basis.
Both magazines are readily available at Canadian book stores, pharmacies, and news and magazine retail outlets. They are often also available in stores which triathletes frequent, namely cycling and running stores. I have at varying points in time been a subscriber to *Triathlete* (now only buying it from time to time). At the time of this research, I received *Triathlon Magazine Canada* on a bi-monthly basis through my membership in the OAT.

Because both of these magazines are targeted at the multisport community at large, they do not always include stories or features about the Ironman specifically. This narrowed down the number of magazines which I examined more explicitly. I began with 45 magazines randomly selected from the years 1983 to 2010, the majority of which were *Triathlete* given its longer history. Though most of the 45 magazines included at least one story related to Ironman racing or training, I focused on the 20 that featured Ironman athletes and/or stories on the cover page.\(^{14}\) At this point it is important for me to note that the interview participants in this project noted that they were much more invested in the television broadcasts. Given this, I used the magazines to provide me with a general sense of the history of the sport and some of the ways that pain, pleasure, and health have been presented over time. A more detailed textual analysis of the magazines is a future project that would be an important part of a genealogical analysis of the Ironman (see chapter eight).\(^{15}\)

\(^{14}\) Some triathletes featured on the covers of the magazines are not exclusively Ironman athletes but compete in varying distances. For this project, I chose to focus on those athletes who are primarily Ironman participants.

\(^{15}\) I am also quite interested in *Triathlete* magazine’s annual “swimsuit edition” and the various and interesting ways that that specific issue has been taken up by the magazine’s readership.
My particular interest in reviewing the magazines was to seek out explicit references to or images of Ironman training and/or racing on the cover pages or in feature stories in the magazine. When Ironman athletes were featured on the cover, I noted who they were and how they were described in any related text. I also noted if there was specific reference to the Ironman or Iron-distance events on the cover and, if so, how it was constructed. I then reviewed the contents of that article and also noted any other articles that might be specifically related to ideas about pain, pleasure, health, or fitness (or what I had determined to be their synonyms, mostly from the ways in which the interview participants constructed these same ideas) in the context of Iron-distance triathlons. I did not include a textual analysis of the brief race reviews which are typically included towards the back of the magazine. These short pieces are primarily concerned only with results. I kept my focus on feature stories of some substance which included descriptions of how one might go about accomplishing an Ironman/Iron-distance triathlon (i.e., training and racing “tips”), detailed re-caps of the big races like the Ironman World Championships, or stories about Ironman/Iron-distance athletes and their experiences, views, opinions, training strategies.

As I did with the television broadcasts, I took hand-written notes as I read the magazines, noting not only how the Ironman and Ironman participants were represented in text and images but also how ideas about pain, pleasure, and health appeared in Ironman-related stories. Rather than simply counting the number of times, for example, pain was referenced, I was more interested in whether it was represented as something to be avoided, to be celebrated, to be “managed” (and if so, how this might be achieved) and
— given my knowledge of the ways in which pain has been taken up in the sociology of sport literature — I was also interested in how it might be gendered.

My analysis of the magazines revealed patterns and themes largely consistent with those from the television broadcasts. Because the magazines went back further in time, they were helpful in strengthening my understanding of the ways some of the discourses have shifted over time.

Data Analysis

I transcribed or input (as applicable) the materials that I gathered through each mode of data collection into a qualitative software program (Atlas.ti). I then coded the materials using a combination of inductive and deductive coding. I began by using my research questions and the relevant literature to establish a priori themes to organize the data. These themes were continually refined, meaning that the final outcome or “template of themes” had moved beyond my initial categorization (Boyatzis, 1998; King, 2004; Smith-Maguire, 2008a). I worked with the understanding that although I arrived at the data knowing some of what I would be looking for, different themes would emerge from the materials and my pre-existing ideas about themes would be revised in some way, or removed altogether (Smith-Maguire, 2008a).

Initially, the themes of pain, pleasure, and health were of primary interest to me. However, as I became more engaged with the materials and began to move away from thematic and “vertical” analysis to a more comparative or “transversal” view of the materials, I recognized the need to also consider ideas that arose about suffering, hurt, comfort/discomfort, fun, and joy as ways of articulating embodied experiences that I had
previously conceptualized simply as pain and pleasure. These ideas are explored in chapters five and six respectively.

The ways that the ideas of challenge and achievement seemed to be connected to ideas of pain and suffering in the narratives (including my own) and in the mediated representations encouraged me to think quite a bit more about desire. It occurred to me that in order to interpret the ways that participants’ constructed things like pain and pleasure, I would also need to take into account the desire underlying such constructions. I use the word desire here in the sense that Foucault might have, as I discussed in the last chapter. I also became aware of the emergent difference between health and fitness, leading to an analysis of what I refer to as negotiated health. Another theme that emerged that I had not previously considered was the idea of transformation, something which I explore in chapter seven as it relates to notions of neoliberalism. Among the themes I was unable to address in this project are representations of disability, Ironman-related philanthropy, and the strong connections made between Ironman and militarism, something which emerged from the Ironman television broadcasts especially.16

Once I had organized the material thematically I subjected the coded material to a critical discourse analysis. I worked with the understanding that such a methodological approach seeks to uncover the ways that texts both shape and reflect power relations (Fairclough, 1992; Lupton, 1998; Mills, 2004; Wetherall, 2001). As example, Fairclough (1992) argues that discourses construct social relations rather than merely reflecting them. He writes that, “any discursive event, can be seen as simultaneously a piece of text,

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16 From the earliest broadcast through the most recent, there were significant connections made between the Ironman and the military both metaphorically and in the feature of particular athletes. Perhaps not surprisingly, the 2001 broadcast (airing post-9/11) revolved almost exclusively around themes of militarism, Americanism, and “justice.” There is much to be unpacked here which I intend as part of the genealogical analysis introduced previously.
an instance of discursive practice, and an instance of social practice” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 4). In other words, discourses are active producers of our understanding of ourselves and our social context; rather than simply describing social phenomena, discourses work to define social relations, identities, and social practices. Thus, critical discourse analysis provides an opportunity to interrogate the reification of and/or resistance to the discourses that are prevalent in and that help to constitute particular socio-cultural contexts. Unlike more positivist approaches to research, critical discourse analysis is not interested in making any claim of objectivity or universal truth but rather seeks to interrogate those discourses that are taken to be the “Truth” (Graham, 2005; Wetherall, 2001). In other words, critical discourse analysis (within a poststructuralist paradigm) is a mode of interpreting the social world. Here it is important to note that the understanding of the concept of discourse with which I am working is Foucauldian. I discussed Foucault’s perspectives on discourse in the previous chapter, but a few brief comments here are useful as it relates to the analysis of the uses of discourse to exercise power.

Foucault’s (1972) definition of discourse can be summarized as systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak. Foucault traces the role of discourses in wider social processes of legitimation and power, emphasizing the construction of current truths, how they are maintained and what power relations they carry with them. Foucault (1990a) later theorized that discourse is a medium through which power relations produce speaking subjects. Objects do not exist outside of discourse waiting to be discovered through an act of objective description. Rather, a discourse “finds a way of limiting its domain, of defining what it is talking about, of
giving it the status of an object — and therefore making it manifest, nameable, and describable” (Foucault, 1972, p. 41).

Foucault also noted, however, that discourses can be both an instrument and an effect of power and a point of resistance: “Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart” (Foucault, 1990a, p. 101). Importantly, discourses as a social practice have powerful, real material effects on embodied subjects. They “regulate and discipline populations, individuals, bodies by constituting fields of knowledge, instituting truths, constituting subjectivities in particular ways” (Malson, 1997, p. 229). Thus, revealing the relationship of discourse to lived experience can provide insights into how discourses are used by people to define, shape, and make sense of their experiences of, in this instance, pain, pleasure, and health in the context of Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons.

Furthermore, a critical discourse analysis of the Ironman allows for an exploration of many of the discursive and material practices that have allowed for the creation and growth of the Ironman and other similar extreme fitness practices in neoliberal times.

An important aspect of Foucault’s perspective of discourse that is often the site of challenge, debate, and contest is what some refer to as his failure to account for the materiality of the body, the extra-discursive. I also discussed this in the last chapter, but here a comment as it relates to methodology is necessary. Foucault has often been interpreted as claiming that there is no non- or extra-discursive, that everything is constructed through discourse (Mills, 2003). My reading of Foucault, however, is not that he denies the materiality, physicality of the body but rather that we can only make sense of our experiences through the discourses that are available to us. I have attempted to
account for the complex relationships between the discursive and the extra-discursive throughout, something which is a particular focus in my discussions on pleasure in chapter six.

It is my hope that my chosen methodological approach — the combination of participant narratives, my own experiences, and mediated representations — will lead to better understandings of pain and pleasure as they are constituted in an increasingly popular extreme fitness practice. It is also my hope that my chosen methodological approach helps lend some insight into the relationship between the extra-discursive, socio-cultural processes, subjectivity and embodiment. In all of this, there remains an overall objective of commenting on the ways that sport, exercise, and other seemingly innocent movement-oriented practices continue to foster inequality in the world despite dominant attestations otherwise.
Chapter 5

On Ironman Pains

I don’t think I’ve ever really encountered the same kind of challenges and pain and intensity that I did for Ironman training. And I learned that you can push yourself through quite a bit of pain if you can just not be afraid of it. You have to accept that you’re going to hurt. But so what? It’s going to hurt. Keep on going. Part of the training becomes learning how to keep on performing despite any pain. (Jordan)

In this chapter I consider the constructions of pain in the context of Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons. Jordan’s view expressed in the excerpt above captures only one of the ways that the people I spoke with conceptualized their experiences of and feelings associated with pain. Though his view on pushing oneself through hurt or pain was shared by many others, there were also participants who resisted this idea to greater or lesser extents. My own experiences at the time of my active participation in the sport and how I think about those experiences now share some similarities with some of the participants whom I interviewed but also differ in some ways. The representations of pain in Ironman-related media promote other ideas about pain and the meaning of painful experiences. These multiple and sometimes conflicting ways that pain is constructed in the Ironman context reflect the subjective nature of it. The different ways that Ironman participants think about pain and make sense of it in their own practices in the sport also reveal the ways that pain might be used in the production of peoples’ sporting bodies and the constitution of their sense of “self.”

The content of this chapter comes mostly from the interview materials. The autobiographical materials I have included are primarily excerpts from my training journals and race reports. I have also included some of the ways I think about my own
experiences of pain now that I am no longer actively doing these kinds of events (at least at the time of working on this project). Notes from my media analysis help to contextualize these other materials. I have drawn from existing sport sociology literature that has investigated pain and injury in order to understand how the constructions of pain in the Ironman share similarities with but also differ from constructions of pain in other sporting spaces. I also make use of more general ideas about pain, the body, and discourse to help inform my reading of pain, negotiation, and discipline in the Ironman context. The chapter is presented in four sections: (1) mediated representations of suffering, pain, and Ironman bodies; (2) participant constructions of pain as either negative or positive; (3) negotiation and discipline; and, (4) pain and toughness. Though presented separately, the ideas in each section overlap and intersect.

**Suffering, Damaged, and Collapsing Bodies: “This is the Ironman!”**

The ABC camera crew travels just in front of her, capturing images of a young woman in blue shorts and a matching blue and white singlet. A too-big-for-her-head baseball cap sits slightly askew atop her head. Her body is shutting down; her legs are no longer able to support the weight of her body. She is trying to run but collapses to the ground. After several failed attempts to walk, she resorts to crawling on her hands and knees, head hanging low to the ground. People clap their hands and yell at her, encouraging her to get up and keep going. “You can do it!” they yell. “You’re almost there.” She places one hand, one knee in front of the other and repeats, the wildly enthusiastic cheering of the crowd accompanying each painful movement. And then she is there; the finish line. (My description of Julie Moss’ finish at the 1982 Hawaii Ironman as featured in ABC’s broadcast)

In 1982 a young female triathlete by the name of Julie Moss literally crawled across the finish line of the Hawaii Ironman triathlon, her legs no longer able to support her body weight. The text above is an excerpt from my research notes, my attempt to capture in words what is now an infamous moment in the history of the Ironman, a
moment that gained much attention when it was included as part of the race footage shown on ABC’s *Wide World of Sports*. The image of Moss crawling over the finish line is frequently cited as the moment that changed the history of the sport (Plant, 1999). As just one example of its impact, registration for the Hawaii Ironman the next year more than quadrupled (Granskog, 1993; Plant, 1999). Many Ironman participants to this day still reference the image of Moss crawling across the finish line as one of their primary motivations for participating in the event.

I remember watching that particular Ironman broadcast. I was 10 years old, a competitive figure skater who had no idea what to do with water (in terms of sport) unless it was frozen. I had never experienced anything like that in figure skating, pushing my body to such extreme limits. Obviously the idea had some appeal as 20 years later I was wading in the waters of Lake Okanagan with 2000 other people, some who like me were attempting to finish an Ironman for the first time. For me, for countless others, and for the sport itself, the image of Moss crawling across the finish line has become connected to the idea that underlines Ironman participation: “Finish… whatever it takes.” This mentality is generally revered in the Ironman context.

In 1995, race leader Paula Newby-Fraser, a several time winner of the event, fell to the ground about 400 meters from the finish. After lying on her back with arms and legs splayed for several minutes, she finally declared to the crowd and the television cameras that she thought she was dying. Even when viewing this footage of Newby-Fraser some 15 years later in the course of doing research for this project, I was terribly affected by it.
It is most disturbing to watch her body in that particular state and to hear her repeat over and over “I think I’m dying” while spectators are imploring her to get up and keep going. Equally disturbing to me was how the spectators started cheering wildly when she did manage to get to her feet and move on. The 90-minute broadcast of the 1995 race featured 10 minutes of Newby-Fraser’s collapse, revival, and then each pained step that she took towards the finish line. When watching moments such as this, it is difficult to suggest that there is anything “good” about this particular sport. And it is difficult for me to remember what was the original motivation for me to get involved in it; I just find this image so weird. Evidently my thinking about what bodies should “do” has changed since I first watched Julie Moss crumple to her hands and knees and crawl to the finish line. It took my experience of a very difficult race and critical reflection on it to begin to think differently about images such as the ones of Moss and Newby-Fraser and what they might represent generally and to me as a participant. I will discuss this again later in this chapter and in the ones that follow.

Millions of North Americans have witnessed the images of Moss and Newby-Fraser in television broadcasts. They have more recently seen repeats of them on YouTube. And there are many other moments like them. There is no shortage of images of bodies being pushed to significant levels of suffering and pain, bodies being pushed past their limits, bodies that eventually collapse, in the Ironman context. Every broadcast of the Hawaii Ironman event from 1991 through to 2009 included such images — professional triathletes, elite and recreational age groupers alike collapsing at various points in the race and with various outcomes. Some athletes manage to finish under their
own power, some are carried away by medical volunteers, and some are placed onto stretchers and then placed into the back of waiting ambulances.

Part of the 2003 television broadcast, for instance, focused on an age group (recreational) athlete named Scott Goodfellow. Viewers were introduced to him when the camera crew filmed him lying by the side of the road on the marathon course. At first in the broadcast, it is unclear what is the matter with him but eventually we are told that he has fallen asleep. Medical officials attend to him but once he wakes up he insists he is fine and continues on his way. “He must finish” the NBC commentator asserts.

The 2003 broadcast also includes several minutes of footage of professional triathlete and two-time Ironman World Champion, Tim DeBoom, asking for medical assistance. Viewers watch him double over and then pass out into the back of a waiting ambulance. Eventually we are told that DeBoom had been passing a kidney stone throughout the race and that he had finally succumbed to the pain — but not before he made a valiant effort to get to the finish in spite of the “incredible pain that he was in.”

Despite the different ways that some of these images may be recorded on race day and then re-presented in a broadcast that is about one-seventeenth of the length of the actual event itself, pain (more specifically enduring it, tolerating it, or overcoming it) is clearly central to the ways the Ironman is produced for public consumption. Television broadcasts frequently feature bodies that are hurting and suffering, bodies that are in pain, and bodies that, in some cases, feel like they might be dying. These bodies belong to men and women and to people of different ages and abilities. The representations of the bodies come to be seen as the “truth” of the Ironman experience and they are often valorized by media and spectators.
Mediated representations of the Ironman are not that much different from those favoured in coverage of other sports in terms of their treatment of suffering, pain, and injury. In general, mediated representations of sport cultivate problematic relationships between pain, injury, and bodily expectations. Young (2004) suggests that the contemporary emphasis placed on competition and winning at all costs and the omnipresence of the sports media means that professional and elite sport have become mediated, and often celebrated, worlds of hurt and disability. The roaming television lens captures and replays the writhing athletic body in “super slo-mo,” while commentators and well-known media personalities respond using discourses of approval and rationalization. (Young, 2004, pp. 13-14)

Much sport coverage is heavily edited, elaborately produced and framed by dramatic narratives that highlight challenge and achievement, which in so doing tends to downplay the potential seriousness of the pain or injury athletes are enduring for the sake of achievement (Gillett, White, & Young, 1996; Nixon, 1993; Young, 2004). And this tendency is not just evident on television. Magazines also feature articles and images that valorize pain, suffering, and physical collapse.

In my media analysis, it was not uncommon to find reference in magazines to the difficulties experienced by some athletes during their participation in Ironman or Iron-distance events. A 1988 issue of Triathlete included reference to American triathlete Jan Ripple as an “up and coming” Ironman star. This accolade seemed to be based not so much on her abilities but on the fact that she collapsed at the finish line of the 1987 Hawaii Ironman: “Next to Julie Moss, Kirsten Hanssen, and Joanne Ernst, and thanks to ABC’s television coverage… Ripple is probably the best known female triathlete in the United States today. Her 14th place finish… was overshadowed by her crumbling finish…” (Olivares, 1988, p. 32).
More recently, *Triathlon Magazine Canada* featured a story about an age group Ironman participant, John Wragg, who has completed 108 Ironman races. The author notes that although Wragg was hit by a car two months before an Ironman event, he nevertheless showed up to race. The author also makes it clear that this was all the more incredible and enviable as Wragg had only started walking again a few weeks prior to the race, the result of a fractured hip incurred in the accident. Wragg’s girlfriend, also an Ironman participant, comments that “he is as stubborn as they come and quitting is just not an option for him, even though it should be at times” (Mackinnon, 2009, p. 49).

For most of the time that I was writing this project two photographs hung over my desk, both from *Triathlete* magazine. One was entitled “The Pain Brigade.” It featured a number of people looking less than well making their way over part of the Hawaii Ironman course. The other was a 2007 picture of Natascha Badmann, several-time winner of the Ironman World Championship, crumpled on the road, with her bike lying on top of her. Her face is screwed up in agony, reflecting the physical pain she must have been experiencing as a result of a crash. The rather banal yet celebratory caption under the picture reads:

> Six-time Kona champ Natascha Badmann crashed early in the bike, so hard that she would require surgery in late October to repair tendons in her shoulder. Remarkably, on the day of the race Badmann remounted the bike and tried to continue. She eventually dropped from the race on the advice of her coach and partner Toni Hasler. (p. 86)

Here we see an example of Young’s (2004) observation that, “injured athletes become lionized as heroes” (p. 14).

Magazines do not only convey messages celebrating the overcoming of pain en route to finishing an Ironman event, they also frequently include articles that discuss how
to deal with or work “safely” through various types of pain. Over the history of *Triathlete* magazine, readers have been coached on such skills as how to “feel the burn in the water” (Zempel, 1993, p. 18), how to deal with shin splints (Ockert, 1998, p. 78), and about different types of supplements that will help with performance and recovery (Mickleborough, 2008, p. 164). In the September 1998 issue, a young man is shown lying on the ground being attended to by a medical official, part of a story about a race that was held in extremely hot conditions. The caption under the photo simply reads “Brian Martin was the first male junior” (p. 27). In the same issue, a column is dedicated to fluid replacement in which it is noted that “dehydration, to the athlete, is the ‘silent killer’— it strikes swiftly, and with authority” (Newby-Fraser, 1998, p. 60). Readers are told how athletes can avoid dehydration in training and racing. It seems unfortunate (to say the least) that young Brian Martin was not privy to this information prior to the event.

While mediated representations of pain and suffering may produce certain ideas about the ways in which pain should be experienced and received, this is not to say that participants are passive recipients of these messages and images. As Nixon (1993) argues in this regard we should not conclude that “athletes are so effectively socialized or strongly influenced that they cannot see behind the messages and pressures to play with pain and injuries or that they cannot make their own decisions about these matters” (p. 188).

Stories about peoples’ experiences in training and racing in which they push their bodies to extreme ends (vomiting, passing out at the side of the track, blacking out on the bike) are not unusual in the triathlon community. Such stories are often received with admiration, reverence, and a “could I do that?” sentiment. It is also the case that such
stories are also rejected and seen as problematic by some triathletes. The interviews I completed for this project and my own training journals and race reports highlight some of the different ways that pain is conceptualized and made sense of in peoples’ experiences of and practices in the sport. In the discussion that constitutes the rest of this chapter, I do not want to give the impression that everyone experiences pain in the same way in Ironman or that it produces subjects who are all the same. Morris (1991) reminds us that pain is “a subjective experience, perhaps an archetype of subjectivity…. [and] always saturated with the visible or invisible imprint of specific human cultures” (Morris, 1991, p. 14). Morris’ argument seems particularly apt for an interrogation of sport-related pain. Based on my analysis of discursive formations circulating within this particular sporting space, I suggest that very specific ideas about how pain feels and what it means both reify and resist the ways that pain is typically represented in Ironman-related media and in discourses of sport, fitness, and health more generally.

Pain as either Positive or Negative

In the interviews I asked participants to define pain and to talk about what they might consider or conceptualize as painful experiences in training and/or racing. Given the subjective nature of pain, it is perhaps not surprising that the interview participants constructed their experiences in quite varied ways. Defining pain proved difficult for most participants. Most of them drew on scientific explanations and/or metaphors to help me understand what they were trying to say. It seemed easier for people to talk about their painful bodily experiences and the meanings or consequences of them than it was to talk about pain in an abstract way. To explain their own experiences of pain they could
use personal anecdotes or comparative examples. This follows from Scarry’s (1985) assertion that pain is a human experience that actively destroys language. In order to share experiences of pain, people must rely on what she refers to as the “as if” scenario. The statement “it’s as if my legs were burning” serves as just one example that participants in my project used to describe a certain kind of exertion-related pain.

Most participants tended to refer almost exclusively to physical (rather than psychic or emotional) pain and they tended to categorize their experiences as either negative or positive types of pain. In two instances participants talked about what I have called emotional pain without labelling it as such; in both instances the emotional pain stemmed from not being able to finish an event. I want to say here that emotional pain as related to sport, fitness, and exercise is something that is highly under-researched from a socio-cultural perspective. Forced retirement, losing a championship, failing to pass a qualifying test, being released from a team, bullying, and other scenarios that cause emotional pain are issues ripe for inquiry, perhaps in interdisciplinary projects conducted by sport sociologists and researchers who have an interest in the psychology of sport, fitness, and exercise. That said, while I don’t want to discount the importance of other types of pain, my focus here on is on physical pains and the ways people articulate them.

I have, with some confidence, organized the different pain narratives into categories of negative and positive. I do not, however, want to imply that constructions were coherent, even within the respective categories. As we know, discourses are not wholly cohesive and, thus, discourses of pain should not be taken as a unitary whole, a tendency that has underscored much of the research on sport-related pain and injury to date. I remain cognizant of the caution posited by Markula and Pringle (2006) that
sweeping statements cannot be made about discourses as being dominant or liberating as no discourse should “be judged as either dominating or “liberating” in advance…. It is important for sport scholars to look for the localized power relations close to the experiences of the sporting people they study” (p. 215). Ethnographic research is one way of doing so.

_Hurt, Discomfort, and Suffering: Constructing “Positive” Pain_

Despite the arduousness of this sport, many of the participants were reluctant to use the word pain at all to describe the bodily sensations they experience in the course of their participation in it. For most Ironman participants, training in an average week ranges from 15 to 20+ hours of physical activity. This includes swimming, biking, and running, of various lengths and intensities. Some Ironman triathletes, including myself, also participate in other complementary forms of exercise such as resistance training, Pilates, and yoga. It is during these hours of training that most of the “painful” bodily experiences occur though it likely goes without saying that the event itself, which may last anywhere from eight to seventeen hours, also produces its own type of “painful” experiences. But rather than using the word _pain_, participants in my project used words such as “tough” (instead of painful), “hurt,” “discomfort,” “fatigue,” or “suffering” to describe the types of bodily sensations they experienced. In my review of the training journals I maintained while preparing for three different Ironman events (2002, 2004, 2007) I noticed that I quite often used the word “hurt” in reference to hard workouts or to describe difficult points in my training. I tended to only use the word “pain” when referring specifically to my injured back — something I had to deal with in my preparation for all three events.

For ease of discussion in this chapter, I have grouped the different yet, as I see it,
analogous terms (i.e., suffering, discomfort, fatigue, hurt) together under the more
universal heading of positive pain (Howe, 2004; Parry, 2006) which is distinct from
negative pain (i.e., injury or injury-related pain), an idea I explore later in this chapter.

I don’t actually use the word pain to describe a lot of my workout. I wouldn’t say
“wow that was a painful workout.” I’d say it was hard. I’d say it was tough. But I
don’t usually use the word pain because it’s very temporary. And, it doesn’t
usually result in long term harm. Uh... strain may be a fair word. It does hurt but...
but I don’t really think of it as pain. (Peter)

I consider during an Ironman it’s more suffering as opposed to pain. So I don’t
consider it really pain. You’re just not feeling very good. There’s mental fatigue
more than pain. I guess you get the twitches of pain from your hamstrings or your
quads but generally it’s more a feeling of fatigue rather than pain. (Martin)

Is it pain that I’m going to injure myself permanently or is it just discomfort? Do I
just need to walk or change my pace for a minute or so, so I can overcome this
sensation? It’s good to push the boundaries during training a bit to kind of have an
idea of how much your body can handle but I don’t know if you need to feel pain
during your training. (Daniel)

I guess when I go through a workout or something I think probably more... it’s
hard to get through a workout. But I don’t think it’s a pain. I think after when I’m
done I think more of fatigue. (Lily)

I guess I wouldn’t define it by reference to something that stops me from doing
something because a good part of triathlon is doing what you’re doing even
though it hurts. (David)

What I am referring to as positive pain was always related to the idea of pushing
one’s body to its limits, to experience “burning legs,” “nausea,” “light-headedness,”
and/or “fatigue” with the outcome of improved performance. Different kinds of pain were
also considered positive if they provided a physical remnant/reminder of the participant’s
performance in a training scenario or race in the hours or days following. The type of activity that spawned pain seemed to determine the terminology used to describe it: for example, longer bike rides, runs, and most swim training were positioned as causing experiences of discomfort or fatigue whereas shorter, more intense interval training (mostly referenced in relation to run training) conjured up words such as suffering, burning, or puke-inducing.

This last term, somewhat embarrassingly now, appeared in multiple entries in my three different training journals. It would seem that I worked with the idea that if in training practices I could push myself hard enough to vomit, this was a good thing. In retrospect, I know that I also took pride in these experiences. If it wasn’t enough for me to record it in my journal, I also recall talking about these moments with friends who (understandably) reacted to these stories in very different ways! The fact that I conceptualized vomiting as a good thing speaks to the ways in which bodily experiences in sporting contexts can represent very different things from the same or similar bodily experiences in other parts of life. Case in point: if I vomit now as the result of being sick I generally make it a cause for concern. This is far removed from the pride I took in vomiting when it was related to exertion and what I envisioned as the successful training of my body to be ready to take on the demands of an Ironman event.

In general, explanations of positive pain, however conceptualized, were positioned as productive and even necessary by the people I talked to. In this formulation, participants relied on scientific explanations of the physically active body and the idea of “adaptation.”

Like, it’s just the lungs burning and not getting enough oxygen. Head is about to
explode. That to me is a good pain. It’s sick to say it but...I don’t know why... the endorphins I guess. (Leanne)

There’s that threshold… is it the type of strain that’s going to improve your physical stamina or is it the type of actual pain that is injury related? (Liz)

David Howe (2004) articulates a widely shared view that in sport (I would add fitness), “pain is constructive only when it is limited to periods of intense training that are followed by no negative side effects” (p. 87). And this is the crux of my participants’ constructions of positive pain. They are firmly located in sport science explanations of adaptation, that is, of pushing the body in order to achieve gains. For example, many of the people I spoke with for this project mentioned the burning sensations that seem to signify the accumulation of lactic acid in muscles in periods of high intensity training. This type of pain is seen as positive and productive as the body is being trained to deal with greater demands. If periods of intense training, however, lead to some sort of injury (e.g., a pulled hamstring or a rotator cuff injury) this is not seen as constructive.

I am not going to argue the “science” of adaptation but it seems interesting that in the context of the Ironman that sport science discourses are taken up with little critical reflection. The fact that the idea of positive pain was prevalent in almost every one of the interviews I conducted speaks to an unquestioned acceptance of the traditional “no pain, no gain” philosophy that has shaped sport and exercise discourses since the early 1980s (Loland, 2006; Sabo, 2004; Smith-Maguire, 2008a). Following the ways in which my participants constructed positive pain, it might be better suited to reframe the philosophy as “no discomfort, no reward” but — admittedly — it’s not as catchy.

With respect to conceptualizations of positive pain, Ironman is not that different
from other endurance-activities to which academics have turned a critical lens. Distance running, for example, requires athletes to train at levels high enough to encounter what Howe (2004) refers to as positive but also “Zatopekian” pain. Scholars have noted that distance runners come to normalize a certain degree of discomfort and pain, both at the elite (Bale, 2004, 2006; Hanold, 2010; Howe, 2004; Smith, 1998) and recreational levels (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Chase, 2008).

In her autoethnographic account of her own experiences of running and running-related injury, Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson (2003) suggests that while elite athletes might embody ideas of risk, pain, and injury as part of the game, this “can be extended to non-competitive sports and physical activity when undertaken as ‘serious leisure’” (p. 223). I concur with Allen-Collinson’s last point and suggest there is more that can be said on this point. In the next chapter I will look at how positive types of pain, suffering, discomfort, or hurt are not just normalized but come to be constructed as sources of pleasure for some people in the sport.

As I mentioned earlier, within the categories of pain as I have organized them there was not coherency. Some of the people whom I interviewed made it clear that they try to avoid any type of pain, even sensations which others constructed as positive, in their training or racing. For example, one participant mentioned several times in his interview that he had no desire to go into the “hurt zone.”

I am very in tune with my body. This other girl once accused me of not going hard enough or not going into the hurt zone enough. But I don’t believe in that. (Ricky)
Another participant suggested that while he really enjoyed training for and participating in Ironman events, he wasn’t really that willing to push himself “too hard” (in relation to what he perceived others do):

Like maybe I’ve got a problem, which is I don’t push myself to the point of suffering as much as other people. I’ve always enjoyed the race; it’s always been a very pleasant experience. I’ve never had [a race] that I didn’t... I’ve never had a “did not finish” or had one where I really hated the event or went through a lot of discomfort or anything like that. (Martin)

It is difficult to imagine that one can participate in Ironman or Iron-distance triathlons without experiencing any type of discomfort or hurt given the proscriptive rules and temporal constraints of the event (Shogan, 1999). Not only must people doing these events cover 226 kilometers of swimming, biking, and running they must do so within the overall time restriction of 17 hours. Additionally, there are time restrictions on the swim and the bike portions; people failing to complete those portions of the event in the allotted time are disqualified and, therefore, unable to continue. Most participants in this study commented that to experience at least some sort of pain, however defined, was inevitable. Their descriptions of race day bodily experiences ranged from “uncomfortable” to “doing the death march.” How much the Ironman triathletes I spoke with could make use of what they conceived of as positive pain and how they could learn to work with greater amounts of it seemed more the debate rather than whether or not one could do one of these events without experiencing pain at all.

*Bodily Damage and Injury: Constructing “Negative” Pain*

Put simply, negative pain (sometimes referred to as “bad pain”) was associated with injury. Participant narratives were rife with stories of injury and injury-related pain and not surprisingly given the mediated representations of the Ironman, the nature of the
event itself, as well as discourses of sport and fitness more generally. As one participant stated quite matter-of-factly, “there is always something wrong with me.” While not all participants used the terminology “bad pain” or “negative pain,” there nevertheless was consistency in all of the interviews that bodily damage and injury were painful, negative experiences. These experiences had certain physical feelings associated with them.

Pain... pain would be injury. Injury would be an extreme, extreme soreness. Pain is a different level than soreness. (Gordon)

Well it was a very sharp pain. It was aching. My whole abdomen area was aching and radiating out. It was just like there was a vice and it was tightening. I can’t think of any other words really. (Jordan)

I think there’s also an acute pain that you can have too; that’s different. That’s when there’s definitely a problem with your body and you have to respond to that. (Daniel)

As in the excerpts above, negative pains or injury-related pains were suggested to have an acuteness or sharpness or ache to them. Beyond these sensations, descriptors such as “searing,” “burning,” “fiery,” and “OUCH!” were used to articulate the experience of injury-related pain. All of these terms worked to differentiate “bad” pain from the positive types.

Definitions of injury were not solely connected to bodily sensations but also to participants’ ideas about functionality. If the physical sensation of pain was also accompanied by an impairment of an athlete’s ability to train or race or (potentially) operate “normally” in daily activities, this seemed to delineate injury more than just the sensorial experience itself:
How do I define pain? So for me [it’s] when I’m limited from what I would
normally do on a day to day basis. (Lily)

I am so fucking frustrated. My lower back is really bugging me right now. It just
burns when I’m doing long rides and even stretching doesn’t help. I had to cut this
morning’s ride short and couldn’t even think about running. I’m supposed to be
meeting friends this afternoon, but there’s no way. I think there might be
something really wrong. (Excerpt from my 2007 training journal)

Not surprisingly, and as stated explicitly in my training journal, there was a great
deal of frustration attached to experiences of negative pain/injury-related pain as these
meant interruptions in training, decreases in functionality, and, in some cases, incomplete
(or un-started) races. However, the idea that some sort of negative pain is inevitable for
people participating in Ironman or Iron-distance events resonated through all the
materials I gathered for this project. Participants who talked about the inevitably of
negative pain mostly did so in relation to the possibility of over-use injuries (a more
frequent occurrence than acute-type injuries in endurance sport events):

I’ve had some overuse injuries and that’s just... you’re like, “yeah, it’s sore but I
can’t miss my workout” so you push. And then you push too hard. And you’ll see
this happen with endurance athletes all the time. They want to get their workout
in; they’re kind of addicted. They push themselves to the point where they get an
overuse injury, right? (Peter)

As you probably know yourself if you do the training wrong, you’re going to be
injured for most of it. Even if you do the training right, you can be injured for
most of it. It just depends on your biomechanics. I tell people to get a good
chiropractor and a good massage therapist... (Liz)

Liz brings up the idea of sport medicine practitioners. All participants commented
that they did everything possible to avoid getting injured. For most this included regular
appointments with various sport medicine practitioners (e.g., chiropractics, massage
therapy, physiotherapy, active release therapy) to help prevent the occurrence of injuries while training. Treatments would be intensified if injury did occur, shifting from preventative to rehabilitative strategies. Such preventative measures cost money. The ability to access these specialists relies both on income and the flexibility of peoples’ daily schedules to find time to get to their appointments. The reliance on specialists is one of the class dimensions of Ironman.

Though I did not specifically ask all of my participants how much these types of treatments cost them annually, most of them mentioned that they used all of their employment benefits allocated for physiotherapy, chiropractics, massage therapy, and/or active release therapy. Some mentioned that they then also used their own money to pay for additional treatments. Using the standard benefits package provided to employees of the Canadian federal government, it is possible that the 19 participants in this study spend a combined amount around $28,500 annually on these various treatments either as prevention, rehabilitation, or maintenance. While this number may not seem that significant, White (2004) reminds us that when we consider all physical activity-related injuries together the “injuries sustained in sport, exercise, and physical activity present a serious health problem” (p. 326). A concern here is that strong connection has been made between total amounts of exercise and greater chances of injury. Yet there remains in Canadian health promotion initiatives a concerted effort to promote physical activity as a way to better health, despite the fact that there is little evidence of the point at which the benefits might outweigh the risks.
Whether some of my participants would seek some sort of medical treatment seemed to depend not only on a decrease in their functionality, but also on the degree of pain that they were experiencing.

I think that there gets to be a point where I’ll go and see a chiropractor or a massage therapist or an osteopath or whatever and try to keep it at a low level. As long as it’s sort of a dull ache, I keep going. It’s when it starts to get more intense or it’s been going on for a long time... “Alright, this isn’t going to go away. I need to figure out what to do to make it go away.” So, you know...ibuprofen works well. Ice, massage... I do a lot of that kind of stuff. (Emma)

Here Emma speaks about the role of sport medicine practitioners and also strategies adopted such as ice and ibuprofen, which can be administered by athletes themselves.

Emma’s comment about ibuprofen is uncomplicated, matter-of-fact.

The excessive use of different types of pain killers on a regular basis during training and racing as both a treatment for injuries and a pain prevention strategy stands as a good example of the normalization of injury-related pain in this community. In an article published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine, Gorski and colleagues (2009) found “a high prevalence of the consumption of NSAIDs among the triathletes participating in the 2008 Brazil Ironman Triathlon… together with a low awareness of the effects and side effects of NSAIDs” (p. 5). The authors went on to recommend the introduction of an educational plan for long-distance triathletes to make them aware of “the risks and benefits that these drugs offer” (p. 5).

Emma was not the only participant in my study who referenced the use of ibuprofen or some other type of painkiller as part of their regular training and racing routines. I know that it is quite common for triathletes to place NSAIDs in, for example, their bike bag or cycling jersey for longer training rides. And I know that I am certainly

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17 Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)
not the only Ironman participant who has placed Advil or some other type of painkiller or anti-inflammatory medication in my special needs bag so that I have access to it during the bike and run portions of an event. The regular and often unproblematised use of NSAIDs is a concern given some of the suggested long-term effects of their overuse such as alterations in kidney function, gastric bleeding, and the possibility of the occurrence of hyponatremia (Gorski et al, 2009, p. 4). The use of NSAIDs in the Ironman community highlights some of the discourses circulating within the triathlon community related to injury and injury-related pain. It apparently is enough of a concern that Triathlon Magazine Canada published a featured article on the use of NSAIDs and the “disastrous side effects” they may have on both performance and health (Wallace, 2010, pp. 50—53).

NSAIDs also have the effect of “masking” pain or at the very least diminishing the sensation of it. If people define injury and injury-related pain by assessing sensuous experiences and if they are taking NSAIDs, this obviously becomes problematic. NSAIDs can also give people a false sense of functionality. If a person takes them but uses their body’s ability to function to justify continued training or racing, this is problematic. In such a case, more damage could be done without the athlete being able to feel it. The regular and/or excessive use of NSAIDs certainly seems to be a significant concern in the Ironman community at large. But not everyone takes up discourses in the same way (Foucault, 1972, 1988, 1990a). There were also participants in this project who were very opposed to such practices. As just one example of this opposition, Martin offered the following comment:

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18 Special needs bags are located at roughly the half-way point on the bike and run courses during an Ironman/Iron-distance event. Athletes put different things in the bags that they think they might want during the event. This might include extra food, energy gels, liquids, a jacket, something motivational like a picture or a card, or, as noted above, some form of NSAID.
No, I’ve never done that [taken NSAIDs]. And I don’t think that would be right for me anyway. I think the pain is telling you something and if you put it aside then you could be risking injury I would think. Especially if it’s a physical pain — you know, if your knee or your ankle is hurting and you’re taking the painkillers to dull it then you could be doing damage to it.

I am of the same mindset as Martin now. But when I was actively participating in Ironman, part of my long training and race day strategies was to take two ibuprofen tablets before I began and then again as I needed them throughout the day. It would have not been uncommon for me to take six tablets over the course of a long bike ride and between eight and ten during a race. For me, ibuprofen acted as a pain prevention and management strategy — with greater or lesser success throughout my time in the sport. As such, I recognize now that my active negotiation of pain was hampered by my frequent use of NSAIDs which, paradoxically, led to more significant problems with my lower back. This paradox was not uncommon in my participants’ narratives either.

Despite the regular assertion in the interviews that positive pain was productive, useful, maybe even necessary, and that negative pain was something to be avoided, the interview transcripts are rife with injury experiences, injury prevention, and rehabilitation strategies. There are also many uncomplicated comments similar to “there is always something wrong with my body.” Perhaps the bluntest statement made (which seemed to surprise even the participant in retrospect) was the suggestion that she “would have finished the race on [an] injured knee even if [she] injured it for life” (Michelle). While Michelle’s comment was a bit of an exception in its forthrightness, there was a general consensus in the interviews that it would take a significant injury to force a person not to finish. Finishing is, after all, the primary objective and brings with it many rewards and pleasures (to be discussed in the next chapter).
I did not finish the first Ironman that I attempted. But the only reason I stopped was because I was hypothermic. I got so cold during the bike portion that my body was shivering wildly and, as a result, I could scarcely control my bike. I stopped at an aid station that was at the 160 kilometer point. The two volunteers there happened to be retired nurses. They told me to get in the back of their van. They cranked the heat up and piled blankets on top of me. Eventually a medical vehicle came and collected me. My race was over. But here a small revision is necessary. It wasn’t the hypothermia that stopped my race; it was theadamant suggestion of the retired nurses at the aid station that I should stop. Had they not been there, I suspect I would have continued on in the race, potentially incurring serious injury. Such is the powerful draw of the Ironman finish line, something I unpack through the remainder of this project.

The ideas about negative pain and the ways that injury and injury-related pain tend to be minimized by my participants and I seem not all that different from the ways that pain and injury are normalized by participants in other sporting spaces as we have learned through other sociological inquiries into sport-related pain. In the existing literature, injury and injury-related pain are conceptualized as a “natural” part of sport (Bale, 2006; Curry & Jiobu, 1984; Curry & Strauss, 1994; Howe, 2001, 2004; Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Young, McTeer, & White, 1994; Sabo, 2004; Young, 2004). However, as noted in my review of literature, the majority of studies published to date have used professional men’s team sport to arrive at these conclusions. Scholars have variably argued that traditional ideas about masculinity and men’s bodies, the imperative for victory, commercial interests, and/or the constitutive rules of sport (especially those which permit violent bodily-contact) render injury and injury-related pain silent, in so
much as athletes won’t necessarily admit that they are in pain or injured for, as one example, the fear of lost playing time (Howe, 2001, 2004; Nixon, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1996; Sabo, 2004; Young, 2004).

The fact that participants in my study mostly reproduce these same ideas about injury and injury-related pain is troubling given the voluntary and largely recreational nature of their participation. For most people in the sport, it is not about winning or financial gain. For most participants, in fact, there is a significant financial cost to being involved. This particular sporting practice is also (more or less) free from physical contact with other bodies; experiences of pain are largely self-governed. Finally, participation in this sport is often said to be related to the purported goal of achieving better health and fitness from participation. The prevalence of injury-related references in the participants’ interviews then is paradoxical.

More generally speaking, the normalization of injury and injury-related pain also contradicts the suggestion that lifestyle sports such as these types of triathlons provide the opportunity to produce counter-discourses of sport (Wheaton, 2004). One possible counter-discourse is that newer, non-mainstream, non-competitive sport practices might offer the chance for moving, physically active bodies to experience sport differently. Donnelly (2004) reminds us that it is possible to participate in sport and physical activity practices without experiencing pain of any kind. But from my own observations of and participation in Ironman, I think it is safe to say that it is rare that an individual crosses the finish line of an Ironman or Iron-distance triathlon without some sort of injury. If one measures injury by functionality, however, maintaining enough of it to finish the event
minimizes what people think of as injury or negative pain; perceptions shift as bodies
become disciplined to deal with greater and greater demands.

All of that said, as much as many of my own and my participants’ constructions
of negative pain and the ways that we minimize and normalize it seem to be influenced
by discourses of high performance sport (that arguably promote challenge and
achievement over health and wellness), I also want to suggest that there is an important
point of difference. While all participants in my study spoke about negative pain and
injury as part of the experience of Ironman, almost none of them put forward the idea that
it was acceptable to push through injury or that pushing through injury was something to
be valorized or revered. Bluntly stated, participants suggested that it was stupid for
people to continue training or racing while injured. In fact, some participants were quite
critical of the mediated representations of Ironman that focus so much on images of
collapsing, pained bodies as previously described. Others were also quite critical of
people who continue to train and/or race while injured or people who push to a point of
near or full collapse during a race:

I remember at [Ironman] Canada sitting in the medical tent because I had said that
I didn’t feel well. And these guys were coming in at 13.5 hours and they looked
like somebody’s just shot them. And I’m thinking, “What was it? You’re not
going that fast? What was it that you did with your training or your race execution
that you put yourself in this position?” That’s not how I approach triathlon at all.
(Emma)

It’s ironic that Emma herself was in the medical tent, yet as her comment demonstrates
there was general resistance by the interview participants to the idea that it was
acceptable to continue to train or race while injured. Almost everyone interviewed
refused to push their own bodies to the point of collapse and rejected the idea that images
of suffering, collapsing bodies should be something that is celebrated. In the moments
following our conversation, one of the participants noted that he found it troubling that Julie Moss was such an inspiration or motivation for people to get into the sport, noting that he would never want to end up crawling during an event. For him, no achievement was worth that. In retrospect, I concur.

The fact that people I spoke with took issue with the prevalent suffering in the mediated representations of Ironman challenges the dominant notions about injury and injury-related pain circulating in sport discourses. Typically in sport, the ability of an athlete to endure or play through injury and injury-related pain is celebrated and, often, presented as a type of “bravado” wrapped up in traditional notions of sporting masculinity. Most participants in my study made it clear that if they sustained an injury, prompt and proper treatment was imperative (and available given the participants’ professional middle class identities). But injury could, it was suggested, be avoided altogether. Regardless of the way that participants in this study seemed to make sense of negative pain and its consequences on their bodies, with very few exceptions, they suggested that the way to remain “injury free” was to successfully negotiate the difference between positive and negative types of pain.

**Negotiation, Discipline, and the Production of Skilled Bodies**

When talking about the different kinds of pain, interview participants made it clear that they needed to manage their bodies carefully so as to avoid the negative pain of injury while also making use of the positive pain of productive training practices. Put another way, a huge part of Ironman involves pushing one’s body to “extreme” limits in both training and racing. At the same time, one has to have control over one’s body so as
to not go too far. For many Ironman participants and based on what I wrote in my own training journals, this almost seemed to be the whole point of training:

I had to walk the last 5k of my long run today. I was supposed to do 34k. Back really started to hurt at the Bronson bridge. I wanted to keep going but my body said “no more.” (Excerpt from my 2004 training journal)

Isn’t that part of the point of training? To teach the mind that pain is temporary? To learn to push through the pain? To ignore that voice that says, “this hurts, let’s stop”? (On-line forum posting)

While there was general acceptance among the participants in this study that there was a risk of injury from being involved in the sport (negative pain), they also suggested that injury only results from a lack of discipline or an inability to make proper use of positive pain. This dualistic approach to the body and bodily discipline is further emphasized by the use of carefully crafted training plans, the maintenance of training journals, and membership in different on-line forums which all figured into the narratives about discipline. All participants mentioned using, to different degrees, various technologies to both track and guide their training:

I use a Garmin [now]…. When I was first training for Boston and I think that for the Canadian [Iron-distance triathlon] as well I trained more specific to my heart rate. But now it’s all according to speed. I wear a chest strap even though I don’t really need to because I don’t follow my heart rate. I always train based on speed. So I use the Garmin for that all the time. If I don’t wear it... if I don’t wear it I feel very lost. One day if I forget my watch, I feel very naked. I feel like, “Oh my god.” I know how fast I’m going and I know what I should be doing. There’s a loss of control if I don’t have it with me. [So I wear it] all the time now. (Jordan)

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19 As noted in Chapter 4, one of my interview participants posted a comment on an on-line forum following our conversation. This sparked a thread of over 50 comments, of which this is one; this statement reflects one side of the debate that emerged in that thread and also in my interviews.
I used a heart rate monitor. And a lot of my training was just based on heart rate. And I found, especially for the longer stuff it was good because it was holding me back. ‘Cuz coming from a short course background, you always want to push hard but then you realize you can push hard for the first two hours but then what about the next four hours. So it was good to always look down and see, “OK, I’ve got to keep my heart rate down.” So I’d kind of ease off and then it would keep you fresh and you’d feel much better at the end of the ride. (Ted)

I do follow the computer on the bike pretty carefully though to see what speed I’m going at. Cadence. So I do let that direct me a little bit there to. It’s a training tool I guess. So it’s a little bit of having the machine control you. But I mean it’s just... not exactly how I’m feeling but how I’m performing. I guess they say that a cadence of 90 is optimal. So if I’m only going 75 then I realize I should be picking up the cadence a little bit here. (Martin)

The training tools mentioned by my participants typically came in the forms of heart rate monitors and/or Garmins, as above. Some people made use of computer software programs to track workouts and/or other types of equipment such as treadmills and computerized bike trainers to dictate/control workouts (pace, length, intensity, etc.).

It seems paradoxical that important knowledge about the body is accumulated in rather disembodied ways, a result of the extensive reliance on technology, particularly given the stated importance of negotiating between positive and negative types of pain. There was not one participant who did not reference some sort of training-related gadget as a way to monitor performance. Indeed, the triathlon community in general is notorious for producing “tri-geeks,” people who consume the latest and greatest training and racing technologies as quickly as they are produced. This is, of course, not unrelated to the class of people who tend to do Ironman and Iron-distance events (and triathlons more generally).

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20 A Garmin is a GPS device used by many multisport athletes, walkers, and runners and that is generally worn on the body. It monitors your time, distance, pace, calories and heart rate (when paired with heart rate monitor). Following completion of their workout, people download the stored information so that they can review and analyze the data and to see how they have improved.
Contrary to the exclusive use of technology, a few participants commented that they did at times base their workouts and races on the concept of “perceived exertion” (i.e., they let how their body feels dictate the pace, length, intensity of the workout), as in the following excerpt from Gordon’s interview.

It would be more how I felt. If I was going out for a two hour ride with friends then we need to go hard and we need to feel exhausted at the end of that two hours, where as if you’re going out for a four hour ride, you want that same feeling of exhaustion at the end of the four hours. So you sort of learn to gage if you go too easy or if you go too hard and couldn’t get off and run. It’s more perceived exhaustion. It’s more just a feeling.

In the following excerpt it is interesting to note that even when listening to his body to guide his workouts there was still a desire on Alexander’s part to be more “disciplined” about maintaining his workout plan.

If I’m feeling like crap one day and I’m supposed to be in Zone 3 I might say “Whatever... I’ve had a tough day at work, I was up all night, I’m just going to go out and do what I can do.” I wish I was disciplined enough to do all my workouts in the zone I’m supposed to but it doesn’t always happen.

In listening to his body he might potentially be averting injury and yet he himself does not seem to see it that way entirely. Alexander’s desire to be disciplined speaks to the ways that discourses of achievement and toughness (in this case defined by the idea of “finish...whatever it takes”) circulating in this sporting space influence the way he understands his relationship to his body. Would he be so hard on himself in different circumstances?

Finally, most participants (but not all) took part in regular, organized group workouts and/or belonged to training clubs/groups. Some had coaches, though it is important to note here that coaches in this sport function differently than they do in most
high performance competition sports. Ironman participants tend to use coaches only to
develop training plans and to monitor training. More than one participant suggested that
reporting to a coach or belonging to a training group kept them “honest” and helped with
their discipline for example, in “pushing” through sprint intervals on the track or through
the final 20 or 30 kilometers of a long bike ride.

Conversely, some participants highlighted the discipline required to train on one’s
own:

I find training long on your own is really what makes the Ironman experience....
the Ironman thing and the pushing yourself especially on your own is really
what... because you have no one to pick you up, no one to say, “suck it up princess”.... I find that it’s doing those long, you know, long training by yourself
is really what builds character. (Ted)

For all three of my Ironman events I mostly trained on my own. The exception was in my
preparation for Ironman USA in 2007 when I did all of the long bike rides and long,
outdoor swims with a group of friends who were entered in the same event. Part of the
appeal of doing an Ironman for me, I realize now, was in doing the training on my own.
Having grown up heavily involved in competitive figure skating and, thus, always having
a coach dictate my training practices, I found a certain “freedom” in being able to
orchestrate these things for myself — what I would do, when I would do it, and how
much I would push (or not).

Training on my own also allowed me to undertake some of what I see now as the
more problematic aspects of my training. This included running anaerobic intervals at
lunch time in the heat and humidity of Ottawa in July. Not that my friends would have
wanted to join me (they were much smarter about their training than I was) but
organizing them on my own also eliminated the worry about training partners’ advisories
against the session or, admittedly, their possible inability to keep up. I unpack this particular training practice of mine, and the pleasure I found in it, in the next chapter.

The participants in my study and I adopted different approaches to the disciplinary practices involved in the sport, yet all with the same intention — the creation of a body conditioned enough to finish an Ironman or Iron-distance triathlon, something which necessarily involves avoiding injury (as much as that is possible) while making the best use of positive types of pain. That the interview materials are rife with injury-related narratives attests to the fact, however, that pain is not always negotiated successfully. But I don’t want to give the impression that I am wholly critical of the various bodily practices adopted in this particular social space by the participants or the ways that they think about injury and injury-related pain. I have had ideas similar to theirs in the past as evidenced by my training journals and race reports.

The idea that there is an active negotiation of pain speaks to a certain degree of agency at work. Participants actively adopt various strategies and techniques including the use of bodily sensations defined as discomfort, hurt, or suffering, in order to produce bodies that are capable of finishing an Ironman event. Put another way, and following the ideas of Foucault, Ironman bodies are docile bodies, and docile bodies are productive bodies, “bodies that are able to carry out precise and often rarefied skills” (Shogan, 1999, p. 13). It is easy for those not involved in the sport to be critical of this process and of the ways that pain figures so prominently into the experiences of those people in it. Nevertheless, Ironman athletes are producing bodies that have a very specific skill. Debra Shogan (1999) makes an excellent point about critiques of sport by others in her insightful interrogation of high performance sport and the “making” of high performance
athletes. She writes:

When subjection to the disciplinary technologies of sport is criticized, the implication is that discipline is only appropriate when it produces “worthwhile” activities and that sport is not a worthwhile activity…. Production of athletic skills through sport discipline is thought to be inferior bodily know-how or procedural knowledge. (pp. 14-15)

Shogan emphasizes this last point by arguing that there is often a privilege given to the “disciplined” academic body as an agent of change, while the “disciplined” athletic body is positioned as a passive dupe. Such is not my intention in interrogating the ways that my participants talked about their experiences and ideas about pain. My interest is more in exploring the discursive formations circulating in this particular sporting space that seem to promote certain ideas about positive and negative pain. I think this is especially important when these discourses might contribute to the minimization and normalization of injury and injury-related pain and, thus, the health and wellness of people doing these types of events.

Exploring the different ideas about Ironman pains — and the negotiation of positive and negative pain especially — also reveals the unique relationship between sport, pain, and sporting bodies and the privilege afforded to people in sport. In most scenarios pain complicates the ways that people think about their bodies and complicates their ideas about their identity (Frank, 1991, 1993, 1995; Leder, 1990; Morris, 1991; Scarry, 1985; Williams & Bendelow, 1998). This has the result of disrupting peoples’ “biographies, selves, and the taken-for-granted structures of the world upon which they rest” (Williams & Bendelow, 1998, p. 159). In sport, however, experiences of pain seem to draw people closer to their bodies and closer to their selves. Recognizing the pervasiveness of pain, in fact, is important since it seems that the ability to endure it,
tolerate it, overcome it becomes a significant way that sport participants come to identify themselves (Bale, 2004, 2006; Loland, 2006; Young, 2004). As I will discuss in chapter seven, it also serves as a way to differentiate sporting (Ironman) bodies from non-sporting (Ironman) bodies.

Though different conceptualizations of “pain” emerged from the qualitative materials I gathered for this project, one thing is certain. Ironman stories are not about the marginalization of pain; pain is central to Ironman stories. Whether through the glorification of collapsing bodies so prevalent in the television broadcasts, the valorization of the ability to overcome pain in order to finish the event, the provision of training strategies in order to train the body to deal with greater amounts of discomfort, or the careful negotiation of the different types of pain, pain is prevalent. The prevalence of suffering and pain was evidenced in my study through the ways that participants and I talked about the successful negotiation of positive and negative pain and the production of our bodies through disciplined, physical training regimes with one primary objective: “Finish… whatever it takes.” This is a value that reifies discourses of challenge, achievement, and toughness.

**Pain and Toughness**

The multiple and sometimes competing ways that pain was constructed by the participants, in the media, and in the records of my own experiences, speaks to the subjective nature of it and the ways that discourses differently construct subjects and their embodied experiences. Turning to Foucault’s perspective on discourse has helped me make some sense of the various ways in which pain seems to operate in peoples’
experiences of the sport. I follow his argument that while individuals may exist within a continuous circuit of discourses, discourses themselves are unstable, malleable, and open to resistance and change; they can be used to shape one’s sense of self (Foucault, 1990a, 1995).

As I noted in chapter three, Foucauldian perspectives have proven useful in other inquiries into sport-related pain and injury (Chapman, 1997; Howe, 2004; Johns, 2004; Johns & Johns, 2000; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Pringle & Markula, 2005; Sabo, 2004). These works have focused on the discourses circulating within particular sporting spaces and how athletes may be understood to reify or resist dominant discourses of the body in the disciplinary practices they adopt. These studies have had many important outcomes, not the least of which is to reveal the influence of unwritten “norms” on the acceptance of pain and injury as a normal part of one’s sport participation.

Don Sabo (2004) contends that “as Foucault might observe, the structural blueprints and cultural messages surrounding pain in sport are not simply internalized by consciousness, they are mediated through, coded within, and incorporated by the body” (p. 71). Embodied practices that follow from these discursive formations can, as I have demonstrated, problematically lead to injury when there is a failure to “successfully negotiate” the different kinds of pain. This negotiation is made tricky by discourses of toughness.

Finishing an Ironman represents the successful disciplining of one’s body and, as I have suggested, the ability to negotiate pain. The ways that the participants in my project strive to make use of positive pain and to make feelings of discomfort, hurt, and suffering productive, does seem to reproduce discourses of toughness, albeit in a different
way from the ways that toughness functions in other sporting spaces. This last point is evidenced, I suggest, by the resistance to the valorization of injury and injury-related pain. Nevertheless, there did seem to be a relationship between the negotiation of pain, discipline, and toughness in the participant narratives and in my own journals. This is a relationship which is very much influenced by discourses of challenge and achievement circulating in sport and fitness discourses but also in the broader socio-cultural context.

My muscles are telling me that they are working it. And my brain is probably interpreting it in some way that might say, “suck it up princess, we’re having a good day here.” (Alexander)

I mean you’re sort of in this position where your shoulders are hunched up all day, but the way I saw it, I was like, “if these are the conditions that I have to deal with on race day I’m going to have to suck it up and pull through it.” So, I might as well train in it. (Liz)

When it comes to a workout you may not want to do the workout but you have to get through it. So you do your warm up and then you start. A lot of times I have this fear, I have this set and I think I can’t do it. And getting through the first one is usually hard. It’s not painful but it’s hard. (Lily)

There’s my whole “no pain, no gain” and “suck it up” mentality. If it is training or I’m doing an activity and I recognize that I might experience pain during the process, as long as I can withstand it and it is pain with a purpose, to me that’s different. And I get some sort of sick pleasure out of overcoming that I think. I think to me it’s a bit of a challenge to figure out how tough I am. (Leanne)
It is not unusual to come upon the words “suck it up, buttercup” several times throughout an Ironman event written in chalk on the roads, printed on posters that are hung on the course by family and friends, and maybe, just maybe, even yelled to you by on-lookers who might think you look like you are faltering (and yes, I was!) The idea that one has to get through workouts, get through events, push one’s body, tough it out, speaks to the relationship between positive pain, discipline, and toughness.

In the mediated representations of the Ironman, the idea of “challenging one’s limits” is a significant theme that has carried through the history of the broadcasts. As one example, in the 2009 program the NBC commentator states that people in the Ironman “exceed their limits. Or perhaps find out that they don’t have any.” The idea of exceeding limits reproduces discourses of toughness; these are only further enforced by the constant focus on suffering and collapsing bodies in the broadcasts. In addition to the specific examples I discussed earlier in this chapter, the entire opening segment of the 2009 Ironman broadcast (which lasted for almost two minutes) featured people in various states of collapse on the side of the road, crashing off their bikes, being carried on stretchers, and doubled over.

The following text is another excerpt from my research notes on the television broadcasts. This particular incident occurred during the 1997 Ironman Hawaii event. It has gained such notoriety in the triathlon community that a person can simply refer to “The Crawl-Off” and most people will understand what s/he is talking about.

Sian Welch of Australia is struggling, her body “out of fuel.” She is weaving back and forth and then falling. We don’t see her again for a few minutes. When we do she is in the finishing chute but once again she is staggering; her legs begin to buckle like a new born horse or deer trying to stand for the first time. Then Wendy Ingraham, an American triathlete, appears in the camera lens behind her. Ingraham is also struggling; the muscles in her legs also appear to be unable to
support her weight and she is bent over at the waist, her head hanging as if there is no muscle left in her neck at all. As she attempts to pass Welch, she tumbles to the ground and takes Welch along with her. They both end up crawling on their hands and knees, side by side, racing for fourth place. The event announcer and the crowd go crazy. The two completely spent, suffering, past-their-limit athletes finally reach the finish. The moment Welch touches the line, milliseconds behind Ingraham, she is literally dragged like a rag doll by medical volunteers to her feet. Her husband (a former Ironman Hawaii champion himself) and another volunteer take over, scooping her up in their arms. If she wasn’t wearing the lycra uniform of a triathlete, one might think she was a victim of a fire, an earthquake, or some other natural disaster. The approving voice of the commentator over top of the images and the sounds of the still-cheering audience: “The body was obliterated but the spirit was not.” (My description of an excerpt from the 1997 NBC broadcast of the Hawaii Ironman)

The images of these athletes’ bodies struggling to make it to the finish combined with the words of the commentator represent the ways that ideas about challenging one’s limits and toughness are produced in the Ironman context. But, as I mentioned previously, the people with whom I spoke mostly resisted these images and the ideas that they represent. Here I follow the suggestion that discourses of toughness may be negotiable in certain sporting spaces.

In her inquiry of female ultrarunners, Maylon Hanold (2010) argues that “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” (p. 172). Most of my participants defined their involvement in Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons as recreational and as part of their lifestyle. None of my participants were professional triathletes (i.e., they do not make their living through their participation in the sport) and only two of them considered themselves to be “competitive” Ironman athletes. Thus, the attitude of “win-at-any/all-costs” was not all that apparent. Furthermore, Ironman is a highly individual, non-aggressive sporting practice. There is little to no pressure from teammates or club
officials to continue to “play” regardless; any such provocation would be largely self-inflicted. Finally, most of the participants had families and, so they noted that they still needed to be functional following their different training regimes and races. All of these things undoubtedly factor into the ways that participants discipline their bodies. They negotiate toughness in ways that make the most sense to them while still doing enough to be able to complete their events. Simply put, the experiences of pain and the connection to ideas about toughness as they were discussed by the participants in my project were not universal. Many of their ideas also seem to differ from the ways that pain and toughness function in other sporting spaces, particularly as related to ideas about gender.

I suggest that important insights could be gained by further focused inquiry into the ways that pain produces gendered and sexualized subjects in recreational physical activity, lifestyle sports, and exercise and fitness regimes. An in-depth inquiry, however, is beyond the purview of this particular project especially since gender difference did not necessarily present in the interview materials that I gathered. That said I do want to make a few brief comments here on pain and toughness as related to gender and to class.

_Some (Brief) Comments on Pain, Toughness, Gender and Class_

Discourses of toughness are typically connected to the construction of problematic and damaging masculinities as has been suggested in much of the sport sociology literature (e.g., Howe, 2001, 2004; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Messner, 1990, 1992; Pike & Maguire, 2003; Pringle, 2001, 2005; Sabo, 1986; Young, McTeer, & White, 1994). Markula and Pringle (2006) sum this idea up when they contend that in previous research “the cultural dominance of heavy-contact sports primarily encourages males to relationally distance themselves from practices deemed feminine and to believe
in toughness, competition, pain tolerance, and physical dominance” (p. 491). The few scholars who have interrogated women’s sports and pain and injury have suggested that similar discursive constructions seem to shape female sporting spaces as well (Charlesworth & Young, 2004; Nixon, 1996; Pike & Maguire, 2003; Theberge, 1997, 2000; Young & White, 1995).

In my study, there did not appear to be significant differences in the ways that male and female participants articulated their ideas about pain and its role in their experiences in the Ironman. Indeed, if I took away the names attached to each quote included in the body of this chapter, one would likely not be able to differentiate between those attributed to people who self-identify as women or who self-identify as men. This is not so different from Young and White’s (1995) contention that

both female and male discourses of sport were replete with the language of conquest (performance orientation and achievement principles). Female athletes were as willing as men to expose themselves to physical risk, and women and men were relatively unreflexive on matters such as being pressured to perform aggressively [and] to play with injury. (pp. 55-56, emphasis in original)

Nancy Theberge (1997) argues that the similarity between women’s and men’s narratives of sport diminishes the capacity of women’s sporting spaces to transgress the norms of sport. But the ideas about pain that concern me here are not merely shaped by discourses circulating within a particular sporting practice; consideration must also be given to discourses circulating in the broader socio-cultural context as well. When thinking about the intersection of gender and sport or exercise-related pain, for example, scholars interested in such things must take into account naturalized assumptions about the ways that men and women are expected to react or not react to pain, as the case may be (Bendelow & Williams, 1998; Lock, 2006).
I want to make it clear that I am in no way trying to say that the Ironman in general is not a gendered space. The very name of the event implies differently. The ways that the women’s and men’s races have been presented differently over time in the Ironman broadcasts also speaks to the way that this sport reproduces the traditional gender order. There is typically a much more significant focus on the men’s elite race (though the difference does seem to have reduced somewhat in recent years). The general priority given to the men’s race, however, follows general gender inequalities in television sport broadcasts historically and in recent times (Messner & Cooky, 2010) and notably none of this speaks to the ways that the male and female athletes are actually represented in the broadcasts.\(^{21}\)

Though I stated previously that there was not a significant difference between the ways that male and female participants collectively talked about pain, that doesn’t mean there weren’t instances when such was not the case. Ted, for example, in an earlier quote used the word “princess” as a way to motivate himself during his training (as in “suck it up princess”). In his research on triathlon, Drummond (2002) suggests that, for the men he interviewed, to be beaten by a woman was seen as an affront to their masculinity. And for Drummond (2010) himself, his experiences as an elite-level Ironman competitor played a significant role in his conceptions of his own masculinity. He writes: “It was triathlon that was going to change me as a man and impact on my masculine identity. I had a preconceived notion that this emerging sport was going to reconceptualize me as a man and redefine who I was” (p. 380). He then goes on to make a connection between

\(^{21}\) There is more that could be said here but I will save that for a future project in which I intend to conduct a genealogical analysis of the Ironman, an analysis which will necessarily interrogate constructions of gender as they have played out in the birth and growth of the event.
suffering, pain, and the pushing of physical limits to ideas about masculinity: “Pushing one’s body to its point of exhaustion was upheld as a masculinized act within the context of this sport” (p. 381).

The ways that I make sense now of my experiences and conceptualizations of pain when I was an Ironman athlete differ from what Drummond posits in his auto-ethnographic project in which the text cited above can be found. In thinking back on the relationship between pain, my training practices, and my body I don’t think that my experiences were necessarily related to ideas of masculinity. This difference is likely not unrelated to our different motivations for participation: Drummond considered himself an elite Ironman triathlete; I was a recreational participant. Like many of my participants, I considered my involvement in Ironman as part of my lifestyle.

In thinking back on my experiences in Ironman, it is clear to me that I used my ability to tolerate the pain of hard training sessions as well as the minimization of injury-related pain and injury as a way to come to know myself as an Ironman and, more generally, as a demonstration of control over my body. I asserted control over my pain and rationalized it as part of what I needed to do to be a successful Ironman finisher. But for me this had more to do with proving my healthiness and shaping my body in a way that I thought would be desirable to other men. It also had much to do with things I valued in life: self-discipline, demonstrated ability of continued improvement, and achievement-based notions of health and fitness.

Here I contend that one explanation about the lack of difference between women’s and men’s constructions of pain in my study can be explained not only by the fact that this is one of those rare sport/fitness practices in which women and men
complete the exact same event at the exact same time and, as such, complete much of the same training, but also because all of the participants in my study are members of the professional middle class (Fletcher, 2008). They are influenced by professional middle class values, values that encourage and reward certain behaviours such as self-discipline, self-actualization, continual progress, and the deferral of gratification amongst other things (Atkinson, 2008; Eisler, 2004; Fletcher, 2008; Hanold, 2010; Rose, 1999). I also recognize the masculinist language implicit in these neoliberal values and their relationship to pain. I tease out the connection between these values and pain (and pleasure) in chapter seven.

For me, the relationship between pain and toughness, the ways that I either minimized my own experiences of negative pain or made it seem positive (and even pleasurable, as I will discuss in the next chapter) concerns me now, especially since the journal from the 2007 Ironman USA event coincided with my graduate studies and it didn’t differ all that much from the journals I kept while preparing for my earlier events (pre-graduate school). At a time when I was immersed in critical studies of bodies, sport, and exercise, I adopted ideas about pain and my body that were similar to those I had held previously. This is perhaps no more evident than in my resistance to quitting when, during that race in 2007, I was in excruciating pain:

Two hours into the ride I began to think that none of my friends and family would care if I didn’t finish. The goal was to start. I had every reason to quit and no one would think the less of me. But, I didn’t…. This is Ironman and it’s supposed to hurt. (My 2007 Ironman USA race report)

My uncomplicated idea about the Ironman needing to hurt, the way that this was
specifically connected to injury and injury-related pain, and the idea that I couldn’t quit speaks to the power of discourses of toughness and achievement, both within the context of the sport itself and beyond. Now removed by three and a half years from the daily work of disciplining my body through Ironman-related practices, I no longer think the same way about positive and negative pain. I can still “feel” how my body experienced some of the more difficult training and it seems not that enjoyable anymore. It just seems, well, painful. But that is the way that I think about positive pain, negative pain, discipline, and negotiation now. This is what makes sense to me, my body, and my sport and fitness practices at this point in time. My relationship to pain and to my body vis-à-vis painful experiences has changed. This is not to say it might not change again at some point in the future. Just as discourses shift so to does the way that we make sense of them in our lives.
Chapter 6

On Ironman Pleasures

Aside from just the overall pleasure of finishing, I enjoyed the training. Yeah, it took up way too much of my life but I enjoyed it. I enjoyed getting to the start line. For the most part I did enjoy the race but that doesn’t mean it wasn’t painful. That’s why I would never say I’m 100% sure that I’d never do one again because I think you kind of... there’s still an excitement and an enjoyment of knowing that you could actually do that that keeps you... that keeps kind of burning there. And you’re like, “Yeah. I wonder if I could do that again.” (Diana)

One of my primary objectives in undertaking this project was to try to gain some understanding of the ways that people who participate in sport and physical activity conceptualize pleasure through and from their participation. I was especially interested in getting at the sensuous bodily pleasures people find in sport participation, something that I found lacking in the socio-cultural literature on sport. The few socio-cultural studies specifically interested in sensuous pleasure have mostly focused on contact sports; researchers have tried to theorize the pleasure athletes seem to get from rough physical contact with someone else’s body (Gard & Meyenn, 2000; Pringle, 2009; Theberge, 1997; Young, 1997). I was interested in how participants in non-contact and (mostly) non-competitive sporting spaces might talk about sensuous pleasure.

Given the amount of time Ironman/Iron-distance triathletes spend being physically active, it seemed to me that they would be able to provide insights into the ways that people think about the pleasurable experiences of their (sporting) bodies. I was interested in considering what their ideas might reveal about the discursive formations of pleasure in the Ironman context, in sport and fitness practices more generally, as well as in the larger socio-cultural context. The focus in this chapter is more on the first two.
More theoretically, I was interested in what my participants’ explanations of pleasure, my own ideas about pleasure, and the mediated representations of it might teach us about the relationship between the extra-discursive, socio-cultural processes, and subjectivity. This proved more challenging than I expected.

Though my primary interest was in getting at kinaesthetic pleasure, what I had not anticipated was the ways that instrumental kinds of pleasure including ideas of reward, recognition, challenge, and achievement dominated the conversations I had with participants. What surprised me even more was what I found to be the interdependence of each type of pleasure on the other in talking about Ironman-related pleasures. The excerpt above from one of my participant interviews certainly alludes to this relationship. The connection of sensuous and instrumental pleasures challenged my previous beliefs about my own experiences in the sport, maybe more than anything else that I encountered while undertaking this project. Perhaps less surprising to me was how some participants in my project conceptualized certain types of bodily pain as a source of pleasure. As in the previous chapter on pain, discourses of high performance sport, sport science, and fitness figure prominently as do dominant constructions of health.

In this chapter, I have drawn primarily from the participant interviews and my own experiences in the sport. I turn to the notes from my media analysis mostly to consider the ideas about pleasure circulating in the Ironman context as a way to categorize the participants’ constructions. That said, it was especially challenging to get at ideas about sensuous pleasure in the mediated representations which seemed to take pleasure, fun, and enjoyment for granted. Unlike the dominant focus and implicit reliance on narratives and images of pain and suffering (as I discussed in the last chapter), there
seemed no need to talk about pleasure explicitly. This point will become clearer throughout the discussion in this chapter. I also use the small body of socio-cultural literature that has discussed sport or fitness-related pleasure and more general texts on pleasure and the body to inform my arguments here. The chapter is organized in four interconnected sections: (1) general conceptualizations of pleasure; (2) sensuous pleasures; (3) instrumental pleasures; and (4) the interconnectedness of sensuous and instrumental pleasures.

**General Definitions of Pleasure**

As was the case with pain, participants had a difficult time defining pleasure. The excerpts that follow reflect that difficulty and the different strategies people adopted to put pleasure into words.

I don’t know what it is but I know it when I see it. I don’t know what it is but I know it when I feel it. And the manifestation is a spontaneous smile on my face. And if I find myself smiling, to me that’s an indication that there’s something pleasurable happening. You’re doing something, or seeing something, or something’s being done to me that is causing me pleasure. (Christopher)

I take pleasure in being able to achieve a goal and being proud of myself. That is pleasurable. Pleasure’s a good feeling inside, right? Feeling good about yourself. Pleasure’s just also appreciating what you have and what’s around you. (Simon)

[Pleasure is] something that makes me happy. [Pleasure is] something that I enjoy doing. That’s about it. (Leanne)
I can put it into physiological terms. Like... the whole post-exercise hypotension where your blood pressure just sort of drops and you get this like overwhelming sense of “ahhhhhh.” Like... there’s been a big stress and now there’s a big release and you’re relaxed. And the endorphins are kicking in as well. And so you’ve got a bit of a buzz and, uh, so much more oxygen to the brain and so you feel more awake and more alert. (Liz)

I can probably think of lots of other words for pleasure like satisfaction, pride, sense of accomplishment, and that kind of thing. (David)

The linguistic reframing of pleasure as “satisfaction,” “pride,” “enjoyment,” “happiness,” among other terms, was quite common. “Joy” and “fun” were also used commonly to indicate pleasure. As the excerpt from David’s interview suggests, participants’ ideas about pleasure were often tied to notions of challenge, accomplishment, reward, and recognition. That is not to say, however, that some participants didn’t conceptualize some of their experiences in the sport as providing feelings that were defined as sensuous kinds of pleasure.

**Sensuous Pleasures from Disciplinary Practices and from the Pain**

After discussing their general definitions of pleasure, participants and I talked about pleasure in relation to our involvement in Ironman or Iron-distance triathlons. The following discussion highlights the way that my participants represented the pleasures they experience in the bodily practices they undertake in the process of training for and participating in these types of events. I also have included some of my own experiences. I have organized the discussion into two main categories: (i) sensuous pleasure related to the “doing” of the training; and (ii) sensuous pleasure as related to bodily experiences that are also defined as painful.
The Pleasure is in the “Doing”

For some participants, there seemed to be great pleasure in the process of training for the event itself. These participants spoke about the bodily sensations experienced in their training sessions and the feelings they attached to those as pleasurable.

Such an incredible ride today! 6 hours up in the Gats. Beautiful weather. Just got lost in it and the time flew by. A couple of tough points later in the ride but for the most part I felt amazing. So alive. (My 2002 Ironman Canada training journal)

I get that like warm, fuzzy [feeling]. You know, when something great is happening? It happens on the long runs too. Usually anywhere from 30 to 45 minutes in but I get this little warm, fuzzy [feeling]. (Simon)

Am I exercising to be healthy? Probably yeah but it’s more the enjoyment when I’m doing it, especially in the off-season. (Peter)

When asked to define how they might explain the bodily feelings associated with physical experiences of pleasure as they understood it, the participants who found pleasure in the physical aspect of their training practices used words and phrases such as “bliss,” “a physical high,” “being caught up in the moment,” “happiness,” and “exultation.” It is important to note here that these participants, including myself, found pleasure in the way our bodies felt while doing the workouts which was different from some participants who indicated that they did not, a point I elaborate later in this chapter. When workouts were constructed as providing sensuous pleasure people described them as a kinaesthetic and/or spiritual/emotional type of sensation, a type of inner-satisfaction that was described as feeling “good” in some way. There was also some evidence of this
kind of thinking in some of the interviews when participants described the physical sensations experienced on race day, as represented by the following excerpt:

I kind of like the theory that I heard once which is to consider the race day as a celebration for the training that we’ve done. I’ve always really enjoyed all the events I’ve done from that point of view.... I’ve always enjoyed the race; it’s always been a very pleasant experience.... I’ve never had a “did not finish” or had one where I really hated the event or went through a lot of discomfort or anything like that. They’ve always been very enjoyable. (Martin)

Similar physical pleasures can likely be found in peoples’ experiences in most sporting spaces. As one example, in her socio-historical text on gender and figure skating, Adams (forthcoming) comments on the kinaesthetic pleasure people found in the simple act of ice skating in the nineteenth century: “At its roots Viennese skating was about pleasure — the pleasure of moving to music, the pleasure of the easy and long-held edge” (p. 136). Other scholars interested in bodily experiences of sport and physical activity have explained pleasurable moments by drawing on Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow (Allen-Collinson, 2003; Atkinson, 2008; Atkinson & Young, 2008; Bale, 2004; Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2007; LeBreton, 2000; Loland, 2006; McCarville, 2007; Pringle, 2009).

At the risk of oversimplifying, Csikszentmihalyi’s theory suggests that people are in a flow state when they become so involved in what they are doing that they lose all sense of what is happening around them; nothing else seems to matter. The activity in and of itself is so enjoyable that people will keep doing it just for the pleasure of doing it, even if there might be a significant cost (e.g., injury). For example, in her auto-ethnographic consideration of distance running Allen-Collinson (2003) describes some of her and her running partner’s experiences by referring to Csikszentmihalyi’s theoretical perspective:
Following such runs we experienced intense pleasure, primarily because decades of distance running experience indicated that, only when the running was going *really* well, when we were “on top of things,” did such temporal shifts occur. These running sessions were supremely effortless and just seemed to flow. (p. 341, emphasis in original)

I agree with scholars who have used the idea of flow state to theorize certain experiences of the sporting, exercising, or physically active body. I would suggest that the desire to experience such a state of being helps to explain why people participate in certain physical activities, including Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons. Indeed, several of the participants in my study commented specifically on the experience of the “runner’s high,” which has been described as a flow experience, as one way to articulate their ideas about sensuous pleasures.

Sometimes I manage to find something that works really well and that’s the old runner’s high and I feel quite good about it actually. It’s something similar to what you feel when crossing the finish line—really, really happy. I don’t know where that comes from. It’s a momentary feeling of... I’m not sure what the right word is... but it’s sort of the difference in the feeling between that and how much you’ve been hurting to get there. (Alexander)

In his comment Alexander raises many of the ideas about pleasure that came up in my conversations with Ironman athletes: the “runner’s high,” “happiness,” and the difficulty in finding the “right words.” This last point speaks to the challenge of considering embodied experiences of sport.

The language available to people to describe their embodied experiences is shaped by contextually specific discourses. If we remember one of Foucault’s primary assertions about discourse, language not only describes a thing but simultaneously defines it: “Discourses are not about objects; they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own intervention” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). The particular way that someone might describe a sensation such as the “runner’s high” might reify dominant discourses.
of, for example, toughness or discipline. Their description might also provide evidence of some sort of resistance to dominant ideas associated with this particular kind of physical experience. The important thing here is that we are never outside of discourse; we make sense of our experiences through the discourses available to us. The way how people do that can reveal much about the relationship between the extra-discursive and constructions of subjectivity and embodied experiences. But, a critical question remains: “Do embodied sensations contribute to the production of discourse rather than being the outcome of discourse?” (Lupton, 1998, p. 36). The so-called “runner’s high” is an interesting example of this, in a sort of “which came first” scenario. Do the embodied sensations felt in the state of the “runner’s high” shape the discursive construction of that sensation, or does the discursive construction of the “runner’s high” produce the sensations felt?

I don’t think it needs to be an either/or scenario. I would argue that discourse depends upon the extra-discursive, material physicality of the body. The physical body can be thought of as a condition of possibility, what Foucault (1972) refers to as “a surface of emergence” of discourses about the body. Working within a Foucauldian framework, Helen Malson (1997) writes that the body’s “pains, processes, sensations, and capacities are not only constituted in discourse; they also make possible or plausible particular discursive constructions of a body” (p. 231). Thinking about the body and bodily experiences in this way does not deny the physical reality of sensuous experiences of sport (for example) in any way, but does highlight what I also see as the dependence of embodied experience on discourse; we would not know the one without the other. I return to this idea later in this chapter.
When “Ouch” is also “Ohhhh”: Pleasure in the Pain

While the views that I discuss in the following paragraphs might seem similar to the views that there was sensuous pleasure to be found in the doing of the training itself (as discussed above), there is a significant difference. In the constructions that follow, the participants make very specific connections between pain and pleasure. In other words, the pain experienced in the course of training for or participating in an Ironman or Iron-distance triathlon is conceptualized as a source of sensuous pleasure. Though not every participant shared these views, with some rejecting the relationship outright, it nevertheless was a prevalent view.

I enjoy what it feels like when you push yourself as hard as you can. Just to see how much further you can go each time. The whole experience of the workout is a pleasure even though there is pain involved. That’s part of experiencing the pleasure. (Jordan)

I think [pleasure] might be harder to define than pain….They’re almost kind of intertwined sometimes, especially in the Ironman world or in the world of athletics. Because it almost seems like you almost need to have pain in order to have pleasure. I find the greatest, uh, my greatest kind of victories have been when I’ve pushed myself out of my comfort zone and then got something which is worth celebrating. (Ted)

There are some days when I really want to push myself and there’s a great feeling of pleasure from really pushing myself hard. Pushing myself hard was both painful and pleasurable. It felt good. Like I wanted to push hard and I did. So there’s both pleasure and pain. (Michael)

I liked the “after” sore. I enjoyed that. I felt that it reminded me of what I did, what I was able to do! (Sarah)

The conflation of pain with pleasure was not restricted to training practices but also applied to the day of the event itself, perhaps even more so. The following statements from Leanne’s and Diana’s interviews capture most if not all of the ideas put forward by other participants with similar views on race-day suffering, pain, and pleasure.
I wouldn’t have the same pleasure of completing an Ironman if I didn’t have that pain or suffering. Because to me I equate the pain with pushing myself to the limit. And if I didn’t feel that pain, then I didn’t push myself hard enough…. If I don’t feel like I almost was going to die when I crossed the finish line, whether it was endurance fatigue or from speed then I don’t get as much pleasure after because I think, “Well, maybe I could have pushed a bit harder.” So they’re linked in that way for me. (Leanne)

So they’re going out faster than I am, so their level of pain may be greater than mine as I chug along but it’s still that level of physical pain that you then have to turn into pleasure. Otherwise you’re not going to finish. (Diana)

It is important to note that the pleasure these participants are talking about is not a result of injury. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. As I argued in the previous chapter, ignoring or pushing through injury and injury-related pain were not valorized. The word pain in the above excerpts refers to the kind of suffering, discomfort, and hurt that most participants constructed as positive and productive. The ways that discourses of challenge and achievement dominate mediated representations of the Ironman might help explain why some participants in my project conceptualized painful bodily experiences also as pleasurable.

While many participants spoke of the pleasure they get from enduring the pain of training and racing, I feel safe in saying that these recreational athletes do not seem to be involved in Ironman as a way to intentionally seek out painful bodily experiences. In their consideration of deviant types of behaviour evidenced in some sports such as triathlon, Atkinson and Young (2008) suggested the possibility that some athletes may engage in sport in order to experience different types of pain including self-inflicted pain. They wrote that “for certain individuals, the phenomenological experience of pain may in fact be the purpose for athletic participation” (p. 109, emphasis in original). Their project
focused especially on what they refer to as “self-violent maintenance of body weight” (p. 110) or extreme dieting practices that result in emaciated bodies. Their contention was that some athletes might take pleasure from such practices. They contend that rather than simply categorizing such behaviours as pathological we should consider the possibility that, “slimming down in sport is part of carefully undertaken performance practices that not only improve endurance abilities but also act as a component of pleasurable pain and endurance rituals” (p. 110).

I began this project following Atkinson and Young’s assertion that people may seek out painful experiences through Ironman participation and that they may view such experiences as a kind of pleasure. When thinking about the mediated representations of the sport discussed in the previous chapter, it certainly seemed to me that in this sporting context, pushing one’s body to the point of collapse was a source of pleasure. I know that there was a time in my own training when I considered vomiting during or at the end of a workout as a kind of pleasure. I also would go out and run one kilometer repeats on hot and humid summer days, days when weather advisories cautioned people against being outside at all let alone performing acts of significant physical exertion. The thick layer of salt that coated my skin, the burn of the sweat in my eyes, the light-headedness, the way that my heart seemed to pound even harder in my chest than normal when doing this type of training, and the ways that my body just felt “heavy” when pushing through the thick, humid air seemed to me the greatest feeling in the world!

In retrospect, the fact that I encountered people who I knew to be (Ironman) triathletes doing the same thing as me, grimacing the same as me, and ultimately taking pleasure from these grueling practices in less than ideal circumstances just like me,
suggests to me that there was some “truth” about Atkinson and Young’s idea about the intentional seeking of painful experiences as a type of pleasure in the sporting context. The participants in my research, however, did not seem to share such motivations. Even Peter, who arguably adopted some of the more extreme practices I heard about did not put on a weighted vest for some of his runs or put water bottles filled with cement on his bike as a way to consciously experience painful sensations:

The weight jacket... I probably should say that it’s not to the point where it’s not pleasurable, it’s just a little bit more work than you’re used to but your body kind of adapts… it’s not a painful experience. (Peter)

The relationship between pain and pleasure that emerged in some of my participants’ interviews and in my training journals and race reports reifies discourses of toughness. I discussed the relationship of discourses of toughness to the constructions of pain evident in the Ironman context in the previous chapter. Here though, it seems that some participants didn’t just tolerate the different types of pain they experienced in Ironman. They took pleasure in bodily sensations that they conceptualized as positive pain. While most participants agreed that positive pain was productive, only some of them found those feelings to be pleasurable.

It is maybe tempting to think about the interconnectedness of pain and pleasure in this context as masochistic. In fact, in early presentations of my dissertation topic to both academic and non-academic audiences the assumption has been that in writing about pain and pleasure I will be considering the potential links between Ironman and S/M practices. The idea that practices and experiences in the sport could be considered as “sadistic” or
“masochistic” did arise in a few of the interviews (and it is certainly a notion that also emerges in the television broadcasts). One interview participant suggested the following:

I guess I wouldn’t define it as pain but when you’re suffering, in my definition of it I guess, but there still is some...maybe it’s sadistic...but maybe there’s some feeling that you’re accomplishing something through this as well too, so it’s going to be worthwhile and how good it’s going to be to get to the end. (Martin)

This example aside, the terms sadistic or masochistic were not common in the interviews. Even in Martin’s comment the reference to sadism seems not so much related to pain and sensuous pleasure but rather the endurance of pain for the reward of finishing, on which more later. As I discussed in chapter two, I am generally hesitant to draw any comparisons between S/M and sport/fitness practices for fear of obscuring the complexities of both sets of practices. Instead, I concur more with scholars who suggest that the pain related to sport participation is not about masochism but rather about sacrifice (Fry, 2006; McNamee, 2006; Parry, 2006; Sabo, 2004). And there is great value in sport and in culture generally attached to ideas about sacrifice and the related ability to endure pain; from this ability to sacrifice and to endure comes, so it is said, great reward.

In his consideration of the politics of sport injury, Sabo (2004) contends that “the phrase ‘no pain, no gain’ beckons athletes to ‘push yourself to the limit,’ ‘sacrifice your body,’ and ‘pay the price for victory’” (p. 62). Dominant notions about pain in sport and fitness practices can lead people to sacrifice their bodies in different ways with a view towards success, howsoever defined. But, based on my interviews, I would also contend that just as scholars interested in sport and pain need to be careful to distinguish between negative and positive kinds of pain (so as not to ignore the way that people seem to make
use of positive pain in their constitution of their bodies and identities), scholars must also be aware that sport participants might take pleasure from bodily sensations conceptualized as positive pain and this need not necessarily be a bad or worrisome thing.

Despite the ways that some participants in my project talked about experiencing sensuous pleasure through their participation in the sport in one way or another, this was not an opinion shared by everyone. For example, Sarah suggested that the length of the event makes it difficult to enjoy:

[Ironman] was too long to be doing it just for enjoyment, I felt, anyway. The race itself... I think for me it was more the challenge to know I could do it. It was never a bragging right. It was never so I could say I was an Ironman. It was for me. I don’t think I ever let myself enjoy it at that level to be pleasurable. (Sarah)

Many participants also commented on the difficulty of talking about bodily experiences of pleasure within the Ironman context. As one example, Ted made the following comment when I asked him to talk about pleasure as related to his Ironman experiences:

I think it might be harder to define than pain. But, uh... I think it’s probably the opposite of... it’s kind of unconscious self-awareness. It’s where you kind of get caught up in the moment. You kind of turn around and nothing’s happened but you kind of get... you kind of stop and think and say “you know... this is pretty darn cool.” (Ted)

Some participants avoided the discussion of sensuous kinds of pleasure altogether. This is not to say that they don’t experience bodily sensations that were similar to those participants who did. Stated another way, while participants were more than willing to discuss the way they experienced their bodies in relation to the disciplinary practices of the sport and how they perceived these experiences as pleasurable, at the same time it
was often challenging for them to find a way to articulate such embodied experiences. This is likely so for a couple of reasons.

First, “the field of bodily feelings is not one commonly talked about or developed with any specific discipline or understanding [thus] finding a language to talk about such an area [is] not easy” (Wright & Dewar, 1997, p. 89). Second, human pleasures are subject to political interventions and, as such, are heavily regulated by, for instance, health and fitness discourses. Rand (2008) reminds us of this when she comments that while a seemingly “innocent,” innate bodily sensation, pleasure is subject to contextually specific power relations:

[In the] details of pleasures — including the sometimes weird, sometimes surprising, sometimes utterly mundane attachments to objects and practices that they involve — there resides, at once, important information about the intimate life of power as it contributes to our formation as political and consumer subjects, a call for democratized access to pleasures, and exciting prospects of making pleasures better still. (p. 558)

The contentions of both Wright and Dewar (1997) and Rand (2008) can help us to understand why the perceived pleasures from participation in Ironman tended away from sensuous explanations and the general difficulty of articulating non-tangential outcomes of sport participation. Discourses of sport, exercise, and fitness tend to focus on instrumental pleasures — rewards, recognition, achievement, accomplishment, and social networking (Atkinson, 2008; Paul, 2006; Pringle, 2009; Smith-Maguire, 2008a, 2008b; Wright & Dewar, 1997). Furthermore, dominant health discourses also shape the ways that people think about pleasure. Coveney and Bunton (2003) argue that health promotion initiatives tend to focus on “negative” pleasures in so much as most campaigns focus on the restrictions of “risky” health behaviours such as smoking, drinking, eating junk food, or “unsafe” sexual practices. They comment that “personal pleasure and satisfaction…
are now derived from a range of practices appropriate to self-transformation through self-policing” (p. 167). Certainly participation in the physical practices of Ironman training and racing can be read as reifying dominant health discourses. As I discuss in the next chapter, it was very common for the participants in this project to talk about the differences between their health behaviours and the behaviours of others, which for some materialized as a source of pleasure.

**Instrumental Pleasures: Challenge, Achievement, Rewards, and Recognition**

Though one of my primary objectives in conducting research that focused on the Ironman context was to explore ideas about sporting bodies and experiences of sensuous pleasure, it became evident to me in the process of conducting the interviews for this project that any discussion of pleasure would have to include the consideration of non-sensuous pleasures as well. My thinking in this regard was supported by my media analysis and a turn to the academic literature exploring sport and fitness-related pleasure.

Though multiple forms of instrumental pleasure were evident in the materials that I gathered, I have focused on the interconnected ideas of challenge, achievement, rewards, and recognition. Other forms of instrumental pleasures mentioned in the interviews included the pleasure to be found in achieving balance (defined as finding a way to include physical activity, work, and leisure time in their lives), relief of work and/or family-related stress through physical activity, creating or finding social networks/friends, and encounters with nature/the environment. Though each of these ideas is worthy of further investigation, I have chosen to focus on the instrumental forms
of pleasure that were more dominant in the participant interviews and that also figure heavily into the mediated representations of the sport.

**Challenge and Achievement**

Mediated representations, participant interviews, and my own experiences of the sport, suggest that participation in the Ironman is very much connected to notions of challenge and achievement. The challenge of undertaking an event of this magnitude acted in fact as both a form of motivation and a source of pleasure. This most typically also connected to the notion of achievement for most people. Though many people with whom I spoke commented on enjoying the challenge of training for and doing the event, this most often went hand-in-hand with the achievement of completing the training and the event.

I enjoyed the training. Yeah, it took up way too much of my life but I enjoyed it. I enjoyed getting to the start line. For the most part I did enjoy the race but that doesn’t mean it wasn’t painful. That’s why I would never say I’m 100% sure that I’d never do one again because I think you kind of... there’s still an excitement and an enjoyment of knowing that you could actually do it that keeps kind of burning there. And you’re like, “Yeah. I wonder if I could do that again.” (Diana)

The challenge. Being able to finish something like that. Being able to say, “Yeah, I did that.” I think it’s just... it’s a self-satisfaction. I’m very competitive with myself so knowing that I could do that and getting through it. Oh yeah. That would put me on a big high. (Lily)

[Does the pleasure you experience from doing an Ironman] outweigh the pain? Uh... obviously if I’m thinking about doing another one! I think that’s... when I think about doing another one I don’t think about the pain.... I think about the length of the day and how long it is. But, I don’t really think about the pain. So yeah. Finishing it. And having that accomplishment outweighs it for sure. (Michelle)

When the announcer said, “William Bridel, you are an Ironman” I realized I had done it. The seed that had been planted had sprouted and now fully bloomed. After 22 years of dreaming and eight months of dedicated and focused training, I was an Ironman. Of course, I pumped both fists into the air. (My race report, Ironman USA 2004)
The challenge of undertaking and the achievement of finishing these events was not only a common theme in the participants’ narratives but one that seems in keeping with the general theme of challenge and achievement circulating in the mediated representations of the Ironman. Magazine articles, for example, do not inform readers so much on how to enjoy the process of doing the event but rather provide all types of training and technical advice as to how to best get to the finish line where pleasure will be found/experienced. They also frequently feature strategies for training that will make people faster, slimmer, more efficient in the water or on the bike, and just generally more “capable” triathletes. It was interesting for me to note that in all of the magazines I reviewed for this project, not one had the word “joy,” “fun,” “pleasure,” or any term even closely related to ideas of sensuous kinds of pleasure on the cover.

In terms of images, seven of the forty-five magazines that I reviewed featured people smiling on the cover. Of the seven who looked happy, five were pictures taken as the people crossed the finish line at an event. In each case, these people were the overall winners of the men’s or the women’s event. Two covers of *Triathlete* featured athletes who seemed to be in a state of enjoyment (i.e., smiling). They were both American professional triathletes (Barb Lindquist and Wendy Ingraham, the latter who primarily raced Ironman triathlons) and they were posed for the camera. Ingraham is lying on the beach, chin resting on folded arms (December 1993) and Lindquist is standing poolside, evidently having just completed a swim workout (February 2003). I recognize that there are other ways of representing sensuous pleasure but this was something that really struck me. For the most part, the cover images featured athletes with very serious expressions on
their face or expressions of anguish, suffering, or pain, some people seeming to be only slightly less in agony than others.

The television broadcasts regularly feature, along with the images of collapsing bodies as discussed in the previous chapter, images of joy, jubilation, and outright exultation at the moment an athlete enters the finishing chute or when s/he crosses the finish line. It is not uncommon to hear the commentators say things like: “No matter what they went through out there, it was all worth it.” “They want an answer to the question: ‘Am I a complete person? Can my body get me to the end of this? Can my mind get past the tricks of negativity that may pollute the day?’” “This sport was never meant to be pleasant. The reward is the great inner satisfaction felt from success.” When athletes do appear to be enjoying the process of the event itself, the broadcaster indicates that this should not be the case. The following are comments made in different broadcasts by the NBC commentator (Al Trautwig) about six-time Ironman World Champion Natascha Badmann, who is well known in the sport for smiling throughout her races.

Trautwig states: “How is she smiling? The Ironman isn’t supposed to be pleasant!” (2001). Badmann’s “upbeat demeanour is astounding considering what she’s in the middle of!” (2003). “Badmann has won this race 4 times with a demeanour that doesn’t always fit the pain. But don’t let the smile fool you. She’s paid the price.” (2004). (excerpts taken from my notes of the 2001, 2003, and 2004 Ironman Hawaii broadcasts)

In his autoethnographic account about his experiences of an Ironman event, McCarville (2007) claims that “in triathlon, it seems the greater the struggle, the greater the self enlightenment, and the more reason to celebrate” (p. 169). But the challenge seems to be framed as pleasurable by participants in the sport when it is accompanied by the achievement of finishing. In my race report from the event I did in 2004, I wrote the following comment:
I know events such as these, and life in general, are meant to be about the journey and not the destination, I have to confess that in this particular instance — on Sunday July 25 in Lake Placid, New York — the destination was pretty kick-ass.

Most of the people I interviewed talked about the ability to finish an Ironman or Iron-distance event as one of their most significant achievements. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the ability to finish was connected by most participants to the successful disciplining of their bodies and the ability to negotiate negative and positive pain. In this, the participants seemed to find — as the quote from the 1995 television broadcast above puts it — great inner satisfaction. This acts as a source of pleasure. There were also myriad references, however, in the transcripts and the mediated representations of the sport that connect the achievement of finishing to rewards and recognition, ideas which seem to be about more than just personal pride.

Rewards and Recognition

Many ideas emerged in the materials that I gathered for this project that were related to rewards and recognition. One of the most dominant of these was the reward of food and beverage (read: alcohol). Participants often presented their consumption of (what they defined as) large quantities of food, “naughty” food, and/or alcohol as being a pleasurable reward of their participation. They also constructed this consumption as “guilt-free” given the amount of training they do.

Another pleasure is food. I’m a total creature of comfort. I get real pleasure out of food. I don’t have to be like “oh, I can’t have that chocolate bar.” I’m like, “hey... I just burned 3000 calories, I want that chocolate bar!” That being said, I don’t often do that because I’m not a big fan of chocolate but you know what I mean right? I don’t deny myself in terms of food intake. I LOVE food. So for me, that’s a huge part of the pleasure of being in a very active lifestyle. Long training hours and you can just eat. (Liz)
Also to do an Ironman, you don’t have to have the lifestyle where you can’t go out and enjoy beer at night and eat wings. Not that I do a lot of that. But I also see people who once a week let loose and once a week they’ll go and get hammered [as a reward for the training]. But they get up and train the next day. So you don’t have to be an absolute dedicated person to be fit enough to do an Ironman.

(Gordon)

I was certainly one of those people Gordon refers to, though I typically rewarded myself more than once a week! When preparing for my last Ironman in 2007, just like the carefully crafted training schedule that I designed and followed I had a similarly crafted system of rewards. A successfully completed long bike ride earned a Dairy Queen Peanut Buster Parfait. But the reward for the completion of a long run was much more satisfying — a cold beer or two on the patio of a gay bar in Ottawa with good friends later that same day.

Several participants also made mention of rewarding themselves with clothing purchases (Lululemon seemed a favourite) or new triathlon-related gear. The rewarding was linked in some way, either directly or indirectly, to training. For example, Alexander made the following comment:

Triathletes are known to be terrible gear geeks! And I could be like that but my wife keeps me honest. It’s a bit more of a reward for me. You know, lose 5 pounds and then I can buy a carbon piece for my bike! (Alexander)

Christopher also made a similar comment about his own consumption in the sport, something which he was trying to move away from:

A lot of people just still think of me as the Ironman slut who goes to all these races and spends all this money and buys all the gadgets and gizmos and spends
too much money on coaching and... [but] I’ve always had a lot of other interests.

(Christopher)

The idea of material rewards as a source of pleasure for my participants and I certainly reflects what Smith-Maguire (2008a, 2008b) has argued to be a dominant form of exercise-related pleasure promoted by the fitness industry, something that is in keeping with the more general promotion of pleasure through consumption circulating in contemporary times (Bordo, 1993, 1999; Coveney & Bunton, 2003; Lupton, 1995; Turner, 1995).

Another type of reward that figured greatly in participants’ narratives was the recognition they said that they received from other people. Not surprisingly, most participants mentioned the pleasure that they took from being watched by spectators at the event itself.

I guess there’s another thing and this is a little bit on the shallow side but there’s... when you’re out there doing the event and there’s all kinds of people cheering that can’t help but make you feel good as well. I mean, I said it was shallow... to require that affirmation from others is maybe...is maybe... I keep thinking to myself that I hope that’s not the main reason I’m doing it but, you know, you almost do feel like a rock star when you’re out there running sometimes. (Martin)

All these people are cheering and they’re right there and they’re so loud and you’re still feeling really good at that point. So just feeling great. (David)

For some participants, recognition-related pleasure was experienced in the context of training for the event either by literally being watched, as in the next excerpt (Simon), or through the re-counting of training stories to other people, as in the second and third excerpts (Ted and Michelle).

I don’t like the power workouts when I start doing them. But once I’m half way through them I feel this... OH!... this testosterone. You’re just powerful. You
know that people are looking at your speed or they’re watching you and you’ve got [the treadmill] cranked to 15 degrees and you’re running fast. I joke around sometimes that the crazier the workout is that if there’s someone there to watch it or see it, the more enjoyable it is. If you have that pouring rain and you’re running outside and someone sees you, you get that warm and fuzzy. The..., “I’m just friggin’ crazy but I love this!” You know what I mean? (Simon)

I think part of the pleasure is feeling like a freak. Just telling people that I went for a six hour ride sometimes is fun to see the look on their faces. (Ted)

I want to say the shock value. I like that sense of awe when you tell people what you did on the weekend. (Michelle)

In the quotes above, the participants take pleasure from the recognition they get from others for their Ironman-related practices and participation. Other participants commented that they took pleasure simply from being recognized as an Ironman athlete. This seemed to happen when participants were wearing finisher’s apparel, to which Daniel and Simon allude:

I definitely wear my Ironman hat and shirt — I’ll put it on at certain instances, like if I know who’s going to be there. It’s also a way to brag a bit but I also just like talking about triathlons and talking about running…. People wear Steelers hats right? But I don’t really care about football, so... (Daniel)

Like why do we wear Ironman gear? Why do we tattoo our leg? Well, I haven’t yet but I want to. Why do we do it? I want people to friggin’ know that I’m not just that guy who comes in [to the gym] for an hour everyday and gets his run in, right? I’m the guy who has the ability to do that [an Ironman]. And I don’t really want to tell you but at the same time I do want you to know. (Simon)

Simon mentions tattoos in his comment. This is another way that participants said that they were recognized as an Ironman. It is very common for participants in the sport to get an Ironman tattoo once they have completed an Ironman event. Like most people
who have one, my Ironman tattoo is of the M-dot, the official logo of branded Ironman events. It is comprised of a capital M, positioned underneath a solid circle. Some people personalize their tattoo in some way. One participant commented that one of her training partners had added water droplets to the M-dot to signify the fact that one of the races she had done was exceptionally rainy.

My tattoo is on the outside of my right leg, just above my ankle. Given the frequency with which I wear shorts (as a group exercise and yoga instructor and more generally as someone who typically refuses to believe that autumn has arrived) my tattoo is very visible to others. I originally tried to pass off the decision to get a tattoo as a way to remind myself of my achievement, but my partner at the time rightfully challenged this assertion. He suggested that if such was indeed the case I would have gotten the tattoo somewhere less visible to others and more easily visible to me. Needless to say, I wasn’t impressed with his opinion. But, I must admit that when a salesperson at Aldo once asked me why I had the 3M logo tattooed on my leg, I was quite miffed. 3M. Really? Clearly my tattoo was the Ironman logo, signifying my hard work and the sacrifice I made to finish the events that I did. My reaction to both my partner’s comment and the innocent question of a shoe store clerk provided some pause for thought at the time. It is only now, however, that I can better articulate why this recognition was so important to me.

The common practice of getting a tattoo seems an outwardly visible representation of the sentiment expressed by Ironman founder Captain John Collins, when he wrote on the bottom of the first set of rules and regulations for the race in 1978, “Swim 2.4 miles! Bike 112 miles! Run 26.2 miles! Brag for the rest of your life” (Plant, 1999) a statement that is now a registered trademark of the World Triathlon Corporation.
But, it is also about more than that. Being recognized in some way as being an “Ironman” — whether while participating in certain training practices or in the event itself, through mention in conversation, in wearing finisher’s apparel, or in having a tattoo — is very much about the visible representation of one’s “Ironman identity.” Ironman is popularly seen to stand for the values of discipline, control, and (ultimate) health and fitness. To claim or display an Ironman identity is to link one’s self with those values. A tattoo or other signifier of Ironman status also helps to distinguish “Ironman bodies” from non-Ironman bodies (including other triathletes) contributing to very specific ideas about health, fitness, and class in an already distinct social field, the sport of triathlon (Atkinson, 2008). As I have argued previously, participants in the Ironman are almost exclusively members of the professional middle class. Thus, following Bourdieu (1991), the Ironman tattoo is a visible representation of what might be called Ironman habitus, a type of symbolic capital representative of something intricately connected to middle-class ideals. Bourdieu (1991) writes that,

class habitus defines the meaning conferred on sporting activity, the profits expected from it; and not the least of these profits is the social value accruing from the pursuit of certain sports by virtue of the distinctive rarity they derive from their class distribution. (p. 369)

I engage in a more detailed discussion about the “Ironman identity” in the next chapter as it relates to ideas about transformation, health, and leisure circulating in our neoliberal socio-political context. For the moment I contend that the representation of challenge, achievement, rewards and recognition in Ironman-related media and the prevalence of these values as types of pleasure in my participants’ and my constructions speaks to the
“uses of pleasure” in contemporary times. Looking at the dominance of these kinds of pleasure through the Ironman we can see some of the ways that pleasure functions in power relations that contribute to our formation as (consumer) subjects. This idea should become clearer through the discussion in the next section.

The Interconnectedness of Sensuous and Instrumental Sporting Pleasures

I mentioned in the introductory paragraphs of this chapter that what I began to see as the interconnectedness of sensuous and instrumental pleasures surprised me the most in the process of conducting this research. This surprise results mostly from, I think, my own “bias.” It occurred to me while analyzing the materials that I had gathered for this project that I very much wanted to think that the way I experienced pleasure from participating in the Ironman was solely in sensuous ways. I didn’t want to admit that I also found pleasure in the instrumental outcomes of participation, as described in the section above. And I didn’t want to admit this because I thought that by conceptualizing my Ironman pleasures as exclusively sensuous I could demonstrate some critical awareness of, and active resistance to, what I see as problematic limitations of instrumentalized pleasures circulating in our current social context. This is especially so when thinking about how pleasures are related to consumption and to the constitution of identities that marginalize others (Bordo, 1993, 1999; Pronger, 2000; Smith-Maguire, 2008a, 2008b).

Smith-Maguire (2008a) contends that a predominant focus on instrumental pleasure constrains the subjective experience of what might be the “playful aspects of leisure” (p. 71). She argues that by conceptualizing leisure time as an extension of work
time, we promote the obligation of “self-work.” I discuss this idea in the next chapter. For now, I do remain critical of the discursive formations circulating in sport and fitness (and more generally as well) that promote instrumentalized notions of pleasure. I am not saying that instrumental forms of pleasure are any less important than kinaesthetic pleasure. When instrumental pleasures are shaped as the primary pleasurable experience, of sport, exercise, and physical activity, however, I am especially concerned about the potential outcomes on the people who participate in such practices as well as those who don’t.

Put another way, when the desire to finish an Ironman and to gain the rewards and recognition thought to be associated with such an accomplishment seems to become the primary motivation and a significant source of pleasure for participants, this might result in a scenario where the costs outweigh the benefits of participation. Such a scenario is prominent in sporting spaces, including the Ironman, when achievement is positioned as the ultimate outcome and a primary source of pleasure. It can contribute to people pushing their bodies to extreme limits, often incurring injury. My last race is a perfect example of this. Despite the incredible strain I was placing on my already-injured back, I continued to push through to the end of the race so that I would be able to experience the pleasure that is related to the achievement of finishing.

In this regard it is interesting to note that while many participants in my project stated that they experienced some kind of sensuous pleasure from the disciplinary practices associated with Ironman participation, by and large when asked if they would continue to do similar types of training should the Ironman not exist, most participants
answered with a resounding “no!” This response seems to speak to the discursive power of achievement-based notions of sport and fitness pleasures.

That all said, the ways that some people talked about sensuous pleasure experienced through their physically active bodies also seemed to speak to the joy that might be found in the moving, active, sensing body, something which sport scholars have not discussed to any great length (Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2007; Kerry & Armour, 2000). Even if it was difficult to articulate, there was still a sensuous kind of pleasure related to the Ironman for the vast majority of the participants in my study. It is, in fact, difficult to imagine that someone would participate in an Ironman simply for the experience of instrumental kinds of pleasure. But, it is also difficult for me to imagine now that someone would participate in an Ironman simply for the experience of sensuous kinds of pleasure (no matter how badly I wanted that to be me).

For some participants, what I refer to as the interconnectedness of sensuous and instrumental forms of pleasure was represented in the way that they talked about the completion of their workouts. People talked about this in two ways: a feeling of accomplishment, as in the first two excerpts below, or as the absence of discomfort or pain, as in the third comment.

I get through the second and third [interval] and I know I can get through the last two; so just being able to get through it, that’s pleasure. Because I know... if I know I can get through those I know that I’ll be able to get through the next ones. Getting through a workout gives me a great feeling [of pleasure]. (Lily)

There’s always that feeling at the end of a workout where you’ve gotten physical and the fatigue kind of feels good because it gives you that sense of
accomplishment. You know, you’ve gone a further distance than you’ve done before and you can sit back and say “yeah, I did this.” (Liz)

The pleasure would happen if the discomfort goes away. The discomfort is something to acknowledge or to be aware of. The discomfort itself is not pleasurable. There can be... the pleasure happens afterwards. (Christopher)

In each of these constructions sensuous pleasure is related to the process of training for the event itself. The pleasure is related to the idea of the training being over, however, of the participant having “survived,” or having successfully disciplined the body to sustain and endure. Lily’s and Liz’s comments in particular suggest a close relationship between sensuous pleasure and instrumental pleasures of challenge and achievement.

Such a relationship was also evident when people talked about the pleasure that they took from finishing a race. Although I discussed previously the instrumental pleasures of finishing, I did not mention the ways that finishing the race connected to very specific kinds of sensuous pleasures, sometimes even long after the event was over.

[The finish line is] awesome! Look...[pointing to her eyes] it makes me want to cry. It’s the best feeling you could have. The hard work pays off. See how emotional you get? So when I do my next one it will be just as emotional. (Lily)

That also happens when you cross the finish line at a big event, like at the 70.3 events. I’ve had that nice surge. So there’s the runner’s high type stuff and sometimes I don’t really know why. And there’s also the comfort of just grinding it out and I don’t know why but you are going uphill and... it’s such a cliché... but you’re getting into the zone and I feel so strong and once I get over the “wow this hurts” and then I find a rhythm and I feel almost comforted by that. (Alexander)
My philosophy [is] feeling good about each and every race and every training run…. I never say “What are you doing this for?” Never. I’ve never had that feeling. And I want to keep having that because I want to keep doing this. It always has to be fun. (Ricky)

I can attest to the amazing “feeling” of crossing the finish line from my own experiences. I cried when I finished the events in 2004 and 2007. But to put other words to the feeling that you get the moment you cross the finish line is difficult to do. Here there is the representation of both the difficulty of articulating sensuous experiences as well as the ways that instrumentalized notions of pleasure can shape sensuous pleasures. I am not trying to conflate the two kinds of pleasures here but rather to reveal what I see as the relationship between discourse and embodied experience. I also want to reiterate the idea about the difficulty of sport participants talking about the non-tangential pleasures from their sporting experiences.

In both this chapter and the last, I have referenced the ways that I conceptualized certain aspects of my Ironman training as positive pain and/or as pleasurable. I am especially referencing here my desire to complete intense training sessions in some of the most uncomfortable conditions. In this chapter specifically I spoke of the sensuous pleasures related to my experiences. I still hold what I wrote above to be true. To leave those experiences, however, as solely phenomenological explanations would be to, in my opinion, problematically ignore the instrumental pleasures connected to these experiences. In so doing, I would be ignoring the way that I locate my own subject position in dominant discourses and then I would be missing an opportunity to think more about the relationship between bodily experiences and socio-cultural processes (Lupton,
186). This in turn would miss the opportunity to reveal the ways that experiences of pleasure are influenced by socio-political interests.

To be blunt, I liked the way my body looked when I was doing the kinds of workouts I described previously. I ran shirtless at every possible opportunity, a kind of pleasure afforded to me by virtue of my male body. I chose routes that I knew would likely be well populated with other athletes who would recognize my “hardcore-ness” just as I recognized theirs. There would also be people just outside enjoying the sun, perhaps sitting on a bench by the Rideau Canal. Male or female, I enjoyed thinking that people might be looking at me. Often times, I also ran in places where I knew that gay men cruised for sex. I had no intention of ever stopping to partake in any sexual activity (that would, after all, completely disrupt my carefully crafted and adhered to training plan and potentially impact my ability to finish the race). Knowing that I might earn the appreciative glance of another man when I ran by sporting just my running shoes and short running shorts, however, provided a different type of pleasure altogether. This also carried over to the pleasure that I gained from the way that I perceived that my “Ironman body” looked when I was standing on the patio of the previously mentioned gay bar.

I liked the glances that I would get, though I would play it down at the time. In short, I liked the attention that I was getting. I hadn’t received this type of attention prior to my involvement in endurance sports when I lived a mostly sedentary lifestyle, smoked, drank copious amounts of beer, and weighed over 200 pounds. I liked it when other men who were at the bar asked about my training, something they only knew about because I was certain to mention it. I liked the “shock value” and the way that I felt like a “freak.” It differentiated me from these other men at the bar and, to be frank, it made me feel
better than them in much the same way that running by people simply sitting alongside the Rideau Canal did. I was out doing amazing physical feats, disciplining my body in such a way so as to be able to complete an Ironman, something most of them would not even dream of being able to do. I found pleasure in the public display of my body and my abilities because they adhered to socially constructed norms about what bodies should look like and what they should do which hadn’t always been the case for me.

Through my participation in Ironman and the way my participation shaped my body, I began to notice how my body was attractive to other men, especially when I was in the “peak” condition required for/resulting from participation in it. I knew that my body factored extensively into how other people viewed me and the way I conceptualized who I was at the time. These different scenarios speak to the pleasure I took from the gaze of others and reflects what I now have the language to define as my body as a form of social or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Pronger, 2000; Shilling, 1993). Pronger (2000) specifically notes in this regard that in “modern society, the body is a commodity that has exchange value in (at least) several respects.... It has cultural value in its capacity for symbolic exchange” (p. 105). Several scholars have commented on the value of the hard slim body of the physically fit person in general (e.g., Bordo, 1993, 1999; Bourdieu, 1994; Pronger, 2000) and specific to the male body in the gay community (Bridel & Rail, 2007; Duggan & McCready, 2004; Kassel & Franko, 2000; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003).

I could read my sensuous experiences of Ironman — the sweat, the physical sensation of my body in the heat and humidity, the way I “felt” pounding down the bike paths along the Canal or through Rockcliffe Park, or shuffling through the marathon in front of thousands of spectators, the sounds of the applause encouraging me onward —
through a phenomenological lens. Such a reading would provide some insights into individual, sensuous, embodied experiences of sport and sporting pleasures (Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2007; Kerry & Armour, 2000). But such an account would miss the ways that I now see dominant discourses constructing my subjectivity and my embodied experiences.

In retrospect, my physical experiences that I viewed as sensuous pleasures were not only influenced by the notions of challenge, achievement, and recognition, but also by discourses of gender, sexuality, and class. I think that this reveals the tension between “the notion of the body and subjectivity as constituted by discursive processes, and that of subjectivity and the project of the self as agential” (Lupton, 1995, p. 137). Though instrumentalized notions of pleasure dominate mediated representations of the Ironman and circulate through dominant sport, exercise, and health discourses more generally, this does not preclude the possibility of people finding sensuous pleasures in these same experiences of the sport. Furthermore, it does not mean that these sensuous experiences do not contribute to the ways that they think about their bodies and their selves and to the ways other people think of their bodies and selves: in my scenario, for example, the other men in the bar and the people on the benches.

I began this project thinking (maybe naively) that my involvement in Ironman had only to do with the way it made me feel while doing the various components of it (i.e., the swim, bike, and run training, as well as the events themselves). Certainly my training journals and race reports, though containing references to the “hurt” and the “pain” that I experienced, did not indicate otherwise. I never once mentioned not enjoying the physicality of the Ironman (training and racing), until my final race in 2007. As such, I
began this project thinking that the only reason I wasn’t doing Ironman events anymore was that I had lost the joy of the physical experience, the pleasure I found in pushing my body in the ways I had done previously. But, perhaps my reluctance to be involved in the sport right now says more about a changing relationship to my body and the ways I produce my “self” in accordance to contextually specific discourses. And maybe it also speaks to an awareness about how that relationship relates to and fosters problematic social relations.

Wright and Dewar (1997) contend that, “participation in physical activities which provide opportunities for empowerment and sensual pleasure may also provide alternative ways of thinking about our embodied selves and so shift our relationship to the social” (p. 94). Now that I am a few years removed from Ironman and triathlon participation and with a greater interest in yoga, my relationship to my body and what I expect of it is perhaps shifting. I seem to have less desire to put my body through the same challenges that I did previously. Perhaps this indicates greater comfort with “who I am” in many respects: as a fitness instructor; as a fitness practitioner; and, as a gay man. That said, and as I reluctantly hint at throughout this project, it’s entirely possible that I am not firmly entrenched in this new way of thinking either. Through the process of conducting the interviews for this project and when doing the data analysis, I found myself thinking more and more about doing another Ironman. Many of the people who I interviewed were so passionate about the sport and their experiences in it that it started to make me think more about the parts of the sport that I did take pleasure in, as opposed to thinking almost exclusively about the negative experiences of my last race.
Like discourse, subjectivity is in a constant state of flux. Both are malleable, shifting, transitory. And from this discussion, it would seem to me that discursive constructions of pleasure seem to figure prominently in the process of subjectification. This is likely so as, following Leder (1990), “pleasures are usually secured through the body’s commerce with the world effecting a satisfaction of need or desire. Moreover, such pleasurable sensations are primarily experienced as in and from the world, not merely my own body” (p. 74). Like pain, pleasure is known at the intersection of bodies, minds, and culture. In other words pleasure, like pain, is contextually specific, shaped by dominant and or counter-discourses.

People might describe a physical sensation as feeling “good,” “great,” “fantastic,” or in some other anecdotal or metaphorical way but only because they have come to define it as pleasurable. Some will not agree with me here. Context will, in my opinion, greatly influence this definition (to greater or lesser extents). In fact, I have a difficult time thinking about a situation where contextually specific discourses don’t shape the way people define pleasure, either in the reification of or resistance to. This follows Foucault’s assertion that nothing has meaning outside of discourse. Critics of Foucault suggest that his perspectives deny the materiality of the body, the existence of anything beyond discourse. I don’t read his work this way.

Foucault does not deny that there are physical objects of the world and he does not argue that there is nothing but discourse; however, we can only experience material objects and our bodies/selves in the world through discourse. Mills (2003) cites Laclau and Mouffe who write:

The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought…. An earthquake or the falling
of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of ‘natural phenomena’ or expressions of ‘the wrath of God’ depends on the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence. (p. 56)

We undoubtedly experience our bodies in immediate ways; we feel hungry, we feel tired, we feel aroused, we feel angry, we feel sad, etc. But these feelings, these sensations — the extra-discursive — are filtered through discursive structures which we, as active agents in our subjectification, use to determine the particular meanings and effects of these feelings. Malson (1997) argues in this regard that for Foucault, “exploring the discursive productions of objects, subject positions and truths, it also precisely seeks to engage with the complex dependencies between the discursive and the extra-discursive” (p. 228).

Often times in the case of sport, bodily sensations that might be defined as pleasurable in that context would be defined as anything but in another. Think about a scenario when giving or receiving a bone-shattering tackle or body check would be found pleasurable other than on the football field, rugby pitch, or during a hockey game. And think about the way some of the participants in my study found pleasure in their painful experiences of the Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons.

It is my contention that the ways that people come to define experiences as pleasurable reveals contextually-specific norms that “affects our ability to partake in the status, rights, and privileges afforded to people categorized as citizens, as well as in innumerable daily activities (Rand, 2008, p. 571). Daily activities such as sport and fitness practices. These contextually-specific norms that construct our embodied experiences also rely on contextually-specific notions of desire. Put more simply, desire
is also discursively constructed. In this regard, Coveney and Bunton (2003) contend that, “even to describe something like pleasure…in the ways that we do is to draw upon specific discourses of desire that are themselves culturally and historically situated” (p. 164). What pleasure (and pain and pain/pleasure) seem to have in common is their relation to our desires. While some scholars will argue that desire is a libidinal force, an innate drive, a natural occurring phenomenon at the level of the individual, I locate myself in a (strong) constructionist perspective which suggests that desire is discursively constructed and as such I contend that no discussion of pain and pleasure in the Ironman context would be complete without also considering the relationship of Ironman-related pains and pleasures to the broader socio-cultural context. For my purposes in this project, this means interrogating the discourses circulating that would operate in such a way as to produce the desire to do these types of events in the first place and that then shape conceptualizations of bodily experiences in the sport. That is the focus of the next chapter.
Chapter 7

On “Ironman Identity” in Times of Individual Responsibility

*I think [Ironman] disciplines you in many ways. Not just the exercise but also the day to day, I think it helps you become... uh... I don’t want to say a better person but I think it helps. I think you’re a different person than people who maybe just sit around and go through the motions. We have different outlooks and stuff like that.* (Lily)

The Ironman finish line. It has variably been referred to as “the holy grail,” “life changing,” “life altering,” and “symbolic of surviving the struggle.” We are told that “getting to the finish is the only thing that can validate the cause. And the cause has an effect — emotional and physical.” And we are told that “the finish line is the place where Ironmen are born.” More so than just being a momentary source of pleasure for Ironman participants, crossing the finish line represents the primary mark of achievement and a moment with transformative potential for them.

Transformation is a predominant theme in the mediated representations of the sport, the television broadcasts especially. These ideas figure extensively in participants’ narratives as well. In this regard, multiple Ironman finisher and academic Jane Granskog (1993) comments:

*The transformative impact of doing the Ironman does not really begin to be felt, however, until the last several miles of the marathon — when one knows that it is almost over and that one is going to indeed finish.... My own experience as well as that of others who have done it more than once is that the emotional impact of the finish is just as significant every time one does it; it is like being re-born anew.* (p. 16)
But a question begs to be asked: “re-born” as what? Transformed in what way and how? The idea of transformation implies that there is something pre-existing from which one must transform. The former “self” is somehow shed or redeemed by crossing the finish line. In this chapter I discuss ideas about the construction of the Ironman finish line as a place of transformation, a place where people acquire their “Ironman identity.” I focus in particular on Ironman identity and notions of health, self-esteem, pain, and leisure-time. My goal in the chapter is to make some connections between the ways that the imperative of self-responsibility in our neoliberal social and political context is reproduced in the mediated representations of the sport and in participants’ narratives (including my own). I am also interested in how Ironman reinforces the values at the centre of neoliberal conceptions of bodies and health and contributes to what I contend is a shifting of norms toward extreme ends of a fitness/health continuum. This contributes to an already problematic hierarchy of bodies and health, something which we can see reflected in the excerpt above from one of the participant interviews. I have organized the chapter in five sections: (1) “Ironman identity” and health; (2) “Ironman identity” and self-esteem; (3) the use of pain in self-help culture; (4) the productive use of leisure; and, (5) Ironman and the imperative of self-responsibility.

Consistent with the last two chapters, the majority of the ideas here come from my analysis of the participant interviews. I also consider my own experiences in Ironman and how I think now about the way neoliberal values influenced my participation and the meanings I have made of it. The television broadcasts and magazines help to contextualize the other qualitative materials. As with previous chapters I seek not to critique the ways that my participants conceptualize their bodily experiences of pain and
pleasure or their ideas about health, fitness, and leisure. Instead, my interest is in augmenting existing critical readings of the discursive formations of fitness, health, and leisure in our neoliberal social and political context.

**“Ironman Identity” and the (Paradox) of Health**

It has been well argued that health and health care have been and continue to be heavily influenced or governed by neoliberal interests (Crawford, 1980, 2004, 2006; Ingham, 1985; Lupton, 1995; Petersen, 1997; Rabinow & Rose, 2006; Rose, 1999). Robert Crawford, one of the leading theorists in the area of neoliberalism and health, introduced the term “healthism” in the 1980s as a way to theorize the move toward individual responsibility for health and well-being in capitalist societies. Healthism is a belief system that puts the onus on the individual to be in “good” health, ideas of health in this instance primarily based on medical models (Crawford, 1980). These models place the problem of disease and other medical issues at the feet of the individual.

Thirty years after Crawford coined the term, ideologies of healthism continue to shape much of the current popular beliefs about health and, as a result, the pursuit of health is a primary and highly valued activity (Crawford, 1980, 2004, 2006). “In a health-valuing culture, people come to define themselves in part by how well they succeed or fail in adopting healthy practices and by the qualities of character or personality believed to support healthy behaviours” (Crawford, 2006, p. 402). Rose (2001) contends that, “Every citizen must now become an active partner in the drive for health, accepting their responsibility for securing their own well-being” (p. 6). The positioning of health as a “super value” (Crawford, 1980) — meaning that one’s health comes to represent all that
is good in life — has created a scenario in which health becomes an important aspect of subjectivity or, as Crawford (2006) puts it, a feature of modern identity.

Healthism is part of neoliberalism. As I noted in the introductory chapter of this project, neoliberalism is a form of government that operates in much the same way as the free market (Foucault, 2004; Giroux, 2004; Lemke, 2001; Rabinow & Rose, 2006; Rose, 1999). Thomas Lemke (2001) states that, “neoliberalism encourages individuals to give their lives a specific entrepreneurial form” (p. 202). In so doing “problems which had hitherto been the domain of state agencies specifically empowered to undertake such tasks” (p. 202) become “problems” at the individual level. In this way of thinking, neoliberalism promotes a type of personal ethics that asserts that every person should manage her/his own life as an entrepreneurial project. Ideals are created that guide the way that people live their life morally and ethically in terms of the choices that they make: their friends; their partners; their sport, fitness, and health practices, all with a view towards maximizing the capacity for production and consumption.

Put another way, neoliberalism is a form or technique of governing in which a person really becomes her or his own governor, with the expectation that he or she will make rational decisions and take actions according to knowledge circulated through contextually specific discourses of expertise or “truth.” Foucault referred to this process as governmentality or, more famously, as the “conduct of conduct” (Cole, Giardina, & Andrews, 2004; Rose, 1999). For Foucault, governmentality was conceived as a contact point between technologies of the self and technologies of power (Petersen, 1997). Rather than functioning in an oppressive or directly controlling way, neoliberalism operates through the inducement of “formally free subjects to make calculative choices on their
own behalf” (Ong, 2005, p. 698). Governmentality recognizes the agency of subjects (technologies of the self) while still taking into account the ways that discourses of expertise function as modes of regulation (technologies of power). Foucault’s notion of governmentality frames the following discussion on Ironman identity and (the paradox of) health.

Transformation Narratives and Health

Stories focusing on peoples’ health dominate mediated representations of the Ironman, most typically in the form of transformation or restitution (Frank, 1995) narratives. These include stories about people who have turned to Ironman as a way to overcome an addiction or about people who have “conquered” or overcome significant injury, disability, or illness. The 2002 broadcast of the Hawaii Ironman, for example, featured a segment entitled “Volkswagen Heroes” which was a new addition to the broadcast that year. This follows the general trend of finding and naming “heroes” in all aspects of (American and increasingly Canadian) life after September 11th, 2001. In the “Heroes” segment of the 2002 broadcast specifically, two age group participants in the Hawaii Ironman were recognized for demonstrating that “the human spirit truly is amazing.” One recipient was a man who had donated a kidney to a friend a few weeks prior to the race. The other was a woman who had survived cancer and had made the completion of Ironman Hawaii the goal of her recovery. It is made clear that both athletes finished the race that year.

In the 2008 broadcast, we are introduced to age group athlete Sean Swarmer. The image provided of Swarmer is him at 13 years of age; he is referred to as “obese,” a “condition” we are told that is the result of chemotherapy treatment. Now 20 years past
cancer he is conquering “all of that” through doing the Ironman. We see him finish the event. As he does so a picture of him when he was 13 flashes on the screen and then the coverage returns to him crossing the finish line. The commentator states: “This is Sean Swarmer finishing the Ironman, the doubt about what he was now is gone.” It is unclear, however, whether the comment is in reference to the fact that he is no longer “fat” or that he is cancer-free.

Most health-related stories of transformation in the television broadcasts are related to weight loss or fighting aging. More often than not, the age group athletes featured in the race coverage in such a way are held up as examples for those of us at home watching the broadcast. The voice of the NBC commentator often addresses the home viewer directly, enticing us to make the decision to do the Ironman just like the “everyday ordinary” people we see on the screen before us. As just one example, the 1991 broadcast included the following commentary about one of the participants:

[70 year-old Richard] Parkinson decided it was time to save himself. He began to get in shape and it was the Ironman training regimen that did it. Now in his seventh Ironman to date, this World War II and Viet Nam veteran has the body of a man decades younger. The vision of Parkinson on his bike should be a beacon to us all…. Those of you watching at home may at least want to get off the couch and stretch. (1991 IM broadcast)

The participants I interviewed for this project discussed similar ideas about health and transformation:

I’ve actually gained or lost anywhere from 40 to 70 pounds maybe five or 6 times in my life. From about age 12 to 33. So over almost an 11 or 12 year period. And in that time I was a heavy smoker. Booze. I was sedentary. I never ran. I did nothing. Until I realized at one point how sick I was really getting. I would lose my breath just going up the stairs. Even just going to the bathroom would make me lose my breath! (Simon)
During my working years, I smoked and drank a lot and worked a lot and just didn’t care about my body. From that point to the finish of an Ironman, there was this big dramatic change. (Daniel)

I didn’t realize how many calories were in those Tostitos chips and the salsa that goes with them. I just said “No” and changed everything. I started taking a big regimen of vitamins and changed my diet. I went down to like 145 or 148. I lost 40 pounds. Most of that I lost in the first year. (Ricky)

It’s going to help you... I think it’s going to make me live longer. Other people subscribe to a different belief, that your heart only has a certain number of beats so why bother wasting them doing that kind of activity. But I think it’s making me healthier, it’s going to make me live longer in the long term. (Martin)

And I remember thinking about the marathon and thinking, “Well, I could never do that.” The first time I ever even heard about Ironman I was still at 200 pounds at that point. And I thought “Well, that’s something I’m going to do one day” but I would never tell anybody that because they would just laugh at me. So, it... yeah... I think it [being an Ironman] probably defines me now. (Michelle)

My own story is not that different from these. Following my retirement from competitive figure skating at the age of 21, throughout my undergraduate degree and into the first year of my working life I gained over 60 pounds, primarily the result of an excessively sedentary lifestyle coupled with poor eating habits and copious consumption of alcohol. I woke up one morning and decided that I had had enough. My fatness, in my mind at least, was problematic and so I took up the sport of triathlon primarily in an effort to shape my body differently. To be as accurate as possible, I should make it clear that there were many steps between the decision to change my lifestyle and my first sprint distance triathlon and even more between that and my first attempt at the Ironman.
distance. What emerged through all of it was a fascination with my body and, primarily, my body as a project. I viewed my body as something to be strengthened, streamlined, trained, and for whatever reason, something to be forced beyond its limits. In retrospect, at that point in time I treated my body like a machine, with one primary objective — sporting performance.

I actively sought to shed pounds and to become “shredded.” I took steps to become less hairy; triathletes are, after all, smooth and so began many (often horrendous) experiences with razors, Nair, and wax. My efforts to become less hirsute and to lose weight also had a secondary benefit; by becoming slimmer and smoother I was also producing my body in ways that reflected the dominant gay aesthetic at the time. As my body changed and I became more competent in the three disciplines of triathlon I began to swim, bike, and run faster and then longer and then faster and longer. I experienced all the injuries that seem to go hand-in-hand with endurance sport activities but I didn’t care. I felt that these were signs that I was living! I was no longer the pack-a-day smoking, beer guzzling, pizza-eating, “slob” I once was. No. I was an Ironman triathlete and I took a great deal of pride in that. And if my body didn’t always feel great in its Ironman incarnation, it still certainly felt better than my previous corporeality. Or so I thought at the time. Now I wonder how much of that thinking was influenced by the idea that it “should have” felt better to me.

The ways that my participants, the mediated representations, and I focus on the transformative potential of Ironman as related to “better” health is perhaps not that surprising when considering the value assigned to health and to our ability to manage, take control, and be responsible for it, in neoliberal forms of government. In the current
social context, failure to achieve good health is seen as a moral failing and is connected to a lack of self-control, an inability to resist instant gratification, and a lack of personal effort/fortitude. In this way of thinking, one’s ability to attain good health reflects one’s level of moral character, sense of responsibility, and rationality, characteristics projected by neoliberal ideology (Crawford, 2004, 2006; Howell & Ingham, 2001; Ingham, 1985; Kirk & Colquhon, 1989; Lupton, 1995; McDermott, 2007; Sparkes, 1989).

There are, of course, many problems with neoliberal approaches to health. The main problem is cutbacks to state-funded health care systems (Crawford, 1980; 2006; Ingham, 1985), which place the onus of illness and health at the feet of individuals. It is this that prompts the notion that we should all be self-regulated, independent people. In this, socio-cultural determinants and the power inequalities that they reproduce are ignored. Among the socio-cultural determinants are class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, and age (Crawford, 1980, 2004, 2006; Lupton, 1995; McDermott, 2007; White, Young, & Gillett, 1995), each of which can create barriers to participation in sport, exercise, and physical activity. These don’t seem to be impediments for most Ironman participants. Health, however, in the Ironman context is paradoxical.

*Considering the (Un)Healthiness of Ironman Participation*

While some participants considered their participation in Ironman as a healthy pursuit, others commented on the potential unhealthiness of the sport. This mostly occurred in two ways. First, some participants called into question some of the practices of others in the sport, practices that they viewed as “unhealthy.” They talked about finding balance and not letting the sport consume one’s life:
I think there’s a risk of the triathlon stuff, Ironman especially, being unhealthy if you overdo it and you let everything else go in your life. I think that’s probably the case of it becoming too important. (Alexander)

My vision of healthy beyond the physical is not being so tied to something that I feel that I can’t do this because it will affect that. It’s a balanced healthy. And I think that there are people out there that are just totally consumed by it and perhaps that’s not healthy. (Diana)

The second way people talked about Ironman as an unhealthy practice was related to bodily damage incurred through participation:

It’s almost that it is a fact of life for me. Like it’s… I don’t think that my knee and my back are that bad. It’s a trade off that I’m definitely willing to make, you know. And if 20 years down the road I need knee surgery because of it, so be it. You know? I’d rather be doing what I’m doing now. (Michelle)

I think that there’s no question that all the medical markers of my health are pretty good. I have pretty low blood pressure, pretty low resting heart rate…. But, my hip flexors are totally broken!!! But that ability to do whatever I want because I’m in good shape is important to me. (Emma)

I may be shortening the life of my knees. It’s really bone on bone when I run…. So I continue to exercise knowing that this may shorten some of my activities down the road but it’s almost more like I want to live for now and enjoy my activities now and hope that 10 or 15 years down the road when I do need a knee replacement that it’s advanced from what it is now. (Gordon)

The participants’ views referenced here reaffirm the paradoxical idea of Ironman as a (healthy) fitness practice with potentially unhealthy outcomes. In these quotes from the
participant interviews, the idea of what I refer to as “negotiated health” emerges. There
seems to be here a conscious decision to sacrifice one part of the body for the sake of
another. Despite the stated careful negotiation of positive/negative pain and also the
(paradoxical) prevalence of injury-related narratives, very rarely did participants see
injury as synonymous with unhealthiness. One participant commented specifically that
she had never thought of her injuries and consistent use of sport medicine practitioners as
related to her health.

In terms of the quote from Gordon’s interview specifically, it should be
mentioned that it is entirely possible that he could have the same relationship to fatty
meals as he does to running. He might view his consumption of “unhealthy” foods in the
present as unproblematic in the hopes that in the long-term, medico-scientific knowledge
might have in place a solution to resolve or undo whatever “problems” had been created
through his consumption. There is a significant difference, however, in how each of these
practices would be/are taken up. In brief, even though he might be ruining his knees in
the long-term through Ironman participation, in the immediate present he is putting into
practice the tenets of good neoliberal citizenship in terms of self-work through exercise
and “healthy” pursuits.

When taking the healthy/unhealthy paradox and the idea of “negotiated health”
into account, it seems that within the Ironman milieu, a milieu which has flourished in an
era governed by neoliberal ideologies, the idea of exercise as a “legitimate and heavily
promoted way for the individual to minimize the risk of ill-effects — obesity, inactivity,
diabetes, cancer, heart disease — of modernity” (Smith-Maguire, 2008b, 45) can be taken
up in strange and potentially problematic ways. This seems to add fodder to other socio-
cultural studies of pain and sport that challenge the notion that athletes should be held up as examples of healthy bodies (Theberge, 2008; White, 2004; Young, 2004). And yet they are. These often pained and/or injured Ironman bodies are celebrated, revered, and rewarded as fit, healthy bodies, because of their ability to finish such a demanding test of their health and fitness. One participant in my study made the following comment in that regard:

I almost see finishing the Ironman as an ultimate expression of being healthy. I mean, when you do an Ironman there’s not that many other people on the planet that can do that, what you just did. So there’s an expression of healthiness to it definitely that comes to mind. (Daniel)

Whether these Ironman bodies are healthy or not is hardly the point. They “look” the part and they have crossed the finish line — the “ultimate” expression of health and fitness.

In the popular media, Ironman has been positioned as the next great fitness conquest for weekend warriors and ordinary mortals (Robertson, 2007; Vogel, 1998; Zurn, 2005). In a *Sports Illustrated* article that represented the first mainstream journalistic account of the Ironman triathlon, McDermott (1979) refers to participants’ addiction to inordinate amounts of exercise. At the first Ironman event it was proposed that the first person to cross the finish line would be called the *fittest* as opposed to the *fastest*. Peter Reid and Lori Bowden, a married couple (at the time) from British Columbia each won their professional category in the 2001 Ironman World Championship. Following their victories, they were featured on the cover and in a story in *Maclean’s*, more than once being referred to as the “world’s fittest couple” (Rendon, 2001, p. 10, my emphasis).
(Un)Healthiness and the Representations of Ironman Bodies

It is interesting to note here that both male and female participants in my study commented on how they had noticed that the bodies on the covers of triathlon-related (and running) magazines tend towards “ultra” thin people. Many of the participants also noted that such representations do not reflect the reality of bodies participating in Ironman. With very few exceptions the images of Ironman athletes on the covers of the magazines include male and female professionals in the sport and they are not representative of the people who participate at the recreational level.

I think that you have this misperception that if you’re a triathlete or an Ironman that you have to be like this [indicating thinness with pointer finger]. But I’m not like this. I think that’s the stigma... really thin, lanky, and being a triathlete is fading away. Because you see so many new body types out there. (Lily)

I think if you ask a non-triathlete, not necessarily a non-Ironman, I think they would tell you that they’re all just little skinny things. But what I’ve found is that there are so many different shapes and sizes of people that do these races. (Diana)

But the thing is, you look at some of the community, what I realized in Lake Placid in ‘04, there’s such a myriad of people over there. Skinny, not-so-skinny... all kinds of different sizes and shapes. You think of a triathlete as having a certain somatotype but [in reality] you have a big range of people. (Ricky)

One of my interview participants argued strongly that this traditionally-represented Ironman body which one participant described as “lean but muscled, lanky with often exceptionally low-body fat, overly tanned, and hairless” is something not to be strived for, something that is, in fact, not healthy:
If you put a world class Ironman triathlete and a crack addict beside each other, you couldn’t really tell them apart. These people have sunken-in cheeks, they’re pale and, you know, they don’t look all that healthy. They’re tiny. The thing is, I know I’m never going to be like that just because of my build and the way I lead my life but, uh, some people really push it a little too much. (Ted)

The important point in these particular excerpts is that there seems to be a disconnect between the visual representations of Ironman/triathlon bodies, general understandings of what Ironman/triathlon bodies look like, and the lived experience of people who participate in the sport recreationally. For these participants it might be the case that the value associated with challenge and achievement, with enduring pain, and with having a body functional enough to finish the event are more meaningful than meeting a certain physical aesthetic. My findings here are supported in a recently published study about female ultrarunners.

In a study of high performance female ultrarunners in the United States, Maylon Hanold (2010) examines the ways that elite, female ultrarunners talk about their bodies in relation to experiences of pain and to normative notions of female bodies within ultrarunning and the broader social context. Ultramarathons are similar to Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons in terms of the demands placed on the bodies doing them. They both require the ability to endure fairly significant amounts of physical suffering, discomfort, and pain. Both sporting spaces also seem to produce normative notions about bodies in the sport. Hanold offers the following comment about the ways the women she interviewed talked about their bodies in relation to normative ideas produced in that sport:

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. (p. 170)

The dissonance that Hanold refers to here is related to the traditional representation of the “distance running body” as very lean, sinewy, yet muscular. In contrast to this, the women with whom she spoke suggested that they made a conscious decision to create their bodies based on functionality as opposed to form. Hanold (2010) comments that all of her participants “felt good about their running bodies and did not desire to change their bodies to fit the normative running body ideal” (p. 170). Hanold’s research and my own both show evidence of resistance towards sport-specific idealized body types such as the “distance running body” (Abbas, 2004; Bridel & Rail, 2007; Chase, 2008; Hanold, 2010; Smith, 1998) or, here, the “Ironman body.” It would be interesting if these ideals were losing some of their currency as people who participate in these types of sports begin to think more about what their bodies can do and how they feel versus what they look like.

At the same time, it is evident that there is still much currency given to the physical and social capital that is thought to be represented by a body that can finish something as arduous as an Ironman or an Iron-distance triathlon. Although the currency of traditional aesthetic-based representations of normative sporting bodies — such as the “distance running body” — may be diminished, it is also clear that currency isn’t only about aesthetics, especially since the distance running body, the ultrarunning body, and the Ironman body seem to be popularly seen as representations of healthiness.

Bourdieu’s notion of habitus is useful to help unpack ideas about social and physical capital as they relate to peoples’ bodies and their health. Bourdieu (1984) describes habitus as a set of embodied attitudes and dispositions acquired through
socialization. One might say that it is a subconscious view of the world which is constituted through our social location. Habitus is located within the body and affects embodiment. Middle-class habitus has important connections to the ways that people experience and think about their bodies in so much as, in Bourdieu’s thinking, the body is an end to itself with people adopting long-term visions for their bodies that require constant work, supervision, and mastery. In neoliberal contexts, the work, supervision, and mastery related to middle-class bodies is largely connected to ideas of health. Though people within the sporting space of Ironman and ultrarunning might challenge ideas about the traditional representations of bodies in these sports, there nevertheless remains a cultural currency associated with their bodies, especially when they are compared to non-ultrarunning and non-Ironman bodies.

Ironman Bodies, Health, and Differentiation

One of the many problems with the valorization of athletic bodies in general, and Ironman bodies specifically, as contemporary examples of “good” health is the creation of a hierarchy of bodies defined by (alleged) health status (Crawford, 1980, 2004, 2006; Ingham, 1985; Lupton, 1995). While this hierarchy is often reproduced through dominant representations of male and female bodies, which link ideas about health to a certain aesthetic, in the Ironman milieu it also seems that this hierarchy is reified through notions of what bodies can do. If the ability to finish an Ironman becomes a marker of health, then the bodily practices undertaken by people who do Ironman also act as a mode of differentiation or distinction.

Bourdieu (1984) contended that in some social spaces or fields, groups of individuals develop cultural peculiarities that distinguish or differentiate them from
others. Simply put, they have distinct cultures, hence, “distinction” (Crossley, 2008). These differences can become a source of struggle, however, as the members of the distinct culture seek to legitimate their difference and, at the same time, assert their superiority. The struggle for distinction is a process through which distinct class habitus is formed. Crossley (2008) states that “groups form themselves, in some part, by cultivating distinguishing features and signs of ‘superiority’. Note, however, that this already presupposes some degree of ‘in group’ identification and interaction” (p. 96). My discussion in chapter six of the typical practice of athletes getting an Ironman tattoo after completing an Ironman stands as a good example of this. The tattoo works to delineate or demarcate Ironman bodies from other triathlon bodies, an already distinct cultural group (Atkinson, 2008). Lily’s quote (which opened this chapter) hints at this idea of distinction more generally, as do these interview excerpts:

It’s better than sitting on the couch and eating Cheetos…. I mean, some people, they’d rather… they release themselves through drinking or going to see movies or anything that you can think of. They collect comic books or they love TV. I don’t really watch TV. I love being out there training. (Ted)

To me I’m a very physical body…. I accept if other people are eating junk food all the time and not exercising [but] that just doesn’t turn me on. (Ricky)

So I get pleasure that I’ve gone from unhealthy to this. I know that I’m healthy now… [and] when you’re a family man, a father, or a business man, I’d rather someone look at me and say, “He really looks after himself. He looks good. He has great discipline.” (Simon)
Importantly, these statements reify discursive formations that align health with individual responsibility. In neoliberal forms of government, health becomes one of the primary marks of good, moral citizenship. Health acts as a regulatory mechanism through which people are rewarded or punished depending upon their health status. As Petersen (1997) states in this regard: “Individuals whose conduct is deemed contrary to the pursuit of [health] are likely to be seen, and to see themselves, as lacking self-control, and as therefore not fulfilling their duties as fully autonomous, responsible citizens” (p. 198). I return to and elaborate upon this point in the concluding section of this chapter.

“Ironman Identity” and Self-Esteem

In general, athletes talk about acquiring greater self-esteem through the finishing of an Ironman event (or events) and this becomes a significant mode of self-identification for them. For example, in an athlete profile included as part of the 2003 Ironman broadcast, professional triathlete Paula Newby-Fraser said: “Doing Ironman has given me my identity; it has given me my self-esteem; it has given me my path in life.” The ways that my interview participants talked about training successfully for and crossing the finish line resonate with Newby-Fraser’s comment. The “Ironman identity” was something that was of significant importance to them beyond their health; it also brought with it a sense of self.

Well at first it was just about finishing it. I couldn’t believe I was doing it. The nerdy little kid in high school who never even took phys ed.... There was a lot of self-definition, a lot of self-esteem issues in the beginning... (Christopher)
Yeah, I think it probably defines me now. As somebody that runs. And sometimes that’s scary because I did Ironman in 2006. It’s been three years. I did a marathon two years ago now. So that’s way in the back of my mind now…I define myself as a long distance athlete but I haven’t done much in a while. (Michelle)

You’re only part of the [Ironman] community because you’re involved in the sport so it’s part of your identity. But, yeah because it’s something I’m really proud of, the accomplishment is really part of my identity; I’m proud of doing it myself. (Michael)

It must be said that none of my participants suggested that Ironman provided them with their sole sense of identity — most also talked about work and/or education and family, giving those two identities primacy (for the most part). The interviews made it clear, however, that some sense of self, to greater or lesser extents, was established through participation in the Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons.

This follows what scholars have suggested about other lifestyle sports; participants seem to seek “a lifestyle that [is] distinctive, often alternative, and that [gives] them a particular and exclusive social identity” (Wheaton, 2004, p. 4, emphasis in original). The exclusive social identity in this instance, I contend, largely relates (though not exclusively) to ideas about finishing and to being part of a “collective” — a community of individuals who share similar interests and desires, like triathletes for example (Atkinson, 2008). At the same time, this social identity is also used by people to distinguish themselves from others. Emma made it clear in her interview that the Ironman identity was an exclusive one, and one that held great importance for her:

Something that bothers me actually, is that now they’re calling the 70.3 races [a series of half Ironman events organized by the World Triathlon Corporation]
Ironmans. I’m like, “It’s not an Ironman. It’s half an Ironman. And that’s okay. So why do you need to pretend that it’s an Ironman. It’s half!” Right? That’s something that bothers me. I think I’m probably more of a purist than some people. (Emma)

Emma is speaking about the ways that some people refer to half-Ironman events as simply “Ironman” (thus implying that they are the same thing). Here it should also be noted that in the triathlon community whether an individual is an “Ironman” or not when s/he has completed an Iron-distance triathlon but not a branded Ironman event is a source of great debate. One of the participants I interviewed for this project refused to label himself as an Ironman since he had never participated in a branded event. This has significant implications on the idea of “Ironman identity” but for sake of this project I have let my own personal opinion guide my semantic decisions; to me it is about the distance and not the brand. Thus, I include in my consideration of the Ironman identity and what such an identity is thought to represent participants such as the aforementioned who have done Iron-distance but not Ironman events. Such definitional skirmishes make it clear, however, that the “Ironman identity” is important to people in the sport.

The interview transcripts, my training journals and race reports, and the materials from my media analysis are rife with narratives reifying neoliberal values of self-esteem largely connected to the so-called transformative potential of the Ironman finish line and the claiming of Ironman identity. These ideas seem to be a significant part of the allure of the Ironman and all that it is suggested to represent. A shared desire to finish the event and to earn the right to call themselves an Ironman drew these people together to form a collective of sorts (following Bourdieu, a distinct culture) quite intricately connected to notions of improved self-esteem.
Many scholars have pointed out the problematic ideals of self-esteem in neoliberal agendas (Eisler, 2004; Fisher, 2008; Lemke, 2001; Rose, 1999, 2001). Tomas Lemke (2001), for example, argues that self-esteem “has much more to do with self-assessment than with self-respect, as the self continuously has to be measured, judged, and disciplined in order to gear personal ‘empowerment’ to collective yardsticks” (p. 202). My own involvement in endurance sport speaks to this as do many comments made by participants in the narratives I gathered for my project. Most of us began our involvement in the sport with sprint distance triathlons and most of us came from a background in running (though this was not the case for everyone). For those of us who were runners, completing our first (and maybe subsequent) marathon was a significant achievement. But then there emerged the need for more. I can’t say that this same desire wouldn’t have existed in a context outside of neoliberalism, but I certainly think that neoliberalism helps to explain it. If self-esteem, as Lemke suggests, is measured and marked by achievement, then the progression to longer, more arduous, and significant challenges stands to reason. And these longer, more arduous, and significant challenges are intricately connected to ideas about health (as above) and to perspectives on pain.

“Ironman Identity” and the Use of Pain

In chapter five my discussion about pain focussed on the kinds of pain experienced in the process of doing or preparing for an Ironman or Iron-distance triathlon. I suggested that discourses of high performance sport, sport science, and fitness and the related promotion of ideas about challenge, achievement, and toughness are reproduced through the mediated representations of the sport. The fact that suffering and
collapsing bodies feature so prominently in the broadcasts speaks to the glorification of pain — especially the ability to endure it and overcome it — something which reifies a dualistic approach to the body. I also suggested that people who participate in this sport, including myself, adopt specific disciplinary practices in which we experience different kinds of pain that we conceptualize in ways necessary to fulfill our ultimate desire in the sport: to cross the finish line. My aim here is to unpack what it is that I believe the Ironman identity represents. So far I have considered neoliberal ideas about health and self-esteem as they are exemplified through Ironman participation. Turning to the broader socio-cultural context in which these events take place provides further insight into how the management or control of pain plays a central role in conceptualizations of this identity.

The desire to participate in the Ironman and, by extension, to endure the types of pain related to it, is voluntary. I have argued in this project that Ironman-related pain is constructed through the mediated representations as something to be celebrated, revered, aspired to. There are a number of discourses through which we might make sense of this celebration and reverence. In her essay Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag (2003) describes religious perspectives in which pain is linked to “sacrifice, sacrifice to exaltation” (p. 99). Among the other discourses through which the idea of “finish… whatever it takes” and the endurance of pain might make sense are: discourses of traditional heterosexual masculinity; Christian ideas of self-sacrifice; the protestant work ethic. Here I am going to focus on neoliberalism because through the “extremes” that we see in the Ironman, I contend that we can learn a lot about broader understandings of
health and the body. One way in particular is through neoliberal ideals of pain and self-work.

Making productive use of one’s pain is an extremely prevalent theme in self-help literature, a prominent (and lucrative) way of governing citizens in contemporary times (Eisler, 2004; Lemke, 2001; Moskowitz, 2001; Rimke, 2000; Rose, 1999). A quick search that I did of chapters.indigo.ca, a popular Canadian on-line book seller, revealed more than 35 titles related to pain and self-help including titles such as: The Pain Behind the Mask: Overcoming Masculine Depression; Pain Relief Handbook: Self Help Methods For Managing Pain; Kabbalah On Pain: How To Use It To Lose It; and, Finding Purpose in Your Pain. Related directly to the productive use of pain, Tom Venuto, author of Burn the Fat, Feed the Muscle a popular weight-loss/healthy-living text, comments that

the statement “no pain, no gain” has been misinterpreted, criticized, and labeled a fallacy by many. However, the people doing the criticizing are almost always “comfort zoners” who haven’t achieved much in their lives. Don’t listen to them. Never follow the herd (unless you want to step in a lot of manure). Instead, follow the small percentage of people who step out and achieve great things.

Popular self-help “guru” Tony Robbins urges his followers (i.e., consumers of his philosophies) to take control of their pain and pleasure and, in doing, so, to take control of their lives: “The secret to success is learning how to use pain and pleasure instead of having pain and pleasure use you. If you do that, you’re in control of your life. If you don’t, life controls you.” And for a certain dollar figure, Venuto and Robbins (and countless others like them) will teach you how to use pain effectively and make

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22 The prevalence of so-called “life coaches” has grown dramatically in the past few years. There are now official certifications that one can attain to be a licensed life coach. There is significant cross over between life coaching and the fitness industry. As just one example, two years ago at the CanFitPro Conference, the
appropriate choices in terms of pleasure, especially in terms of unhealthy pleasures and addiction (as discussed in chapter six).

These two examples are not exceptions. In her history of the recovery movement from the late 1800s through to contemporary times, Eva Moskowitz (2001) suggests that we now live in a time in which the public profession of hurt and pain has become commonplace, especially through popular television talk shows. The people featured on these shows are used as examples: people who have failed to use their pain effectively but who now are taking the right steps towards healing by taking control of it, making use of it. While some people turn to self-help literature, counseling, group therapy, or (I suppose) television show “confessionals” like Dr. Phil, others turn to physical activity including sport and fitness practices. “Because sport carries an authoritative promise of self-improvement, it is a good example… [of] how power operates without coercive forces: individuals who recognize the necessity of their own discipline freely submit to governing techniques” (Cole, et al., 2004, p. 214). Sport, exercise, self-help literature, or hiring a life coach or counselor share something in common. They all reflect the privatization of “help” in neoliberal governmentality.

Whatever form the “self-help” takes, it is governed by neoliberal ideals of self-responsibility that come from the rolling back of social services and welfare that began in the 1970s and which escalated through the 1980s (Ingham, 1985; King, 2006; Lemke, 2001; Petersen, 1997; Rose, 1999). As Ingham (1985) notes: “In the budget allocation process, both State and civil sectors are touting the ideas that self-help is preferable to

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largest fitness-related conference of its kind in Canada, a stream of seminars was offered over the course of the four days of the conference through which individuals could become certified life coaches.
entitlements and that the private initiative is preferable to public subsidization” (p. 49).

Twenty-five years later, Ingham’s point remains relevant.

As I noted in the introductory chapter, one of the outcomes of neoliberalism is the increased withdrawal of the state from social responsibility, rendering individuals responsible for social “risks” such as illness, unemployment, and poverty (Foucault, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Lemke, 2001; Rose, 1999). Hand-in-hand with the focus on individual responsibility and self-governance within neoliberal frameworks are the values of self-management and self-enterprise. Individuals are expected to work towards the desired goal of self-empowerment, which is achieved through, for example, self-work, discipline, and consumption (Ingham, 1985; Lemke, 2001; Rose, 1999, 2001). Health and the individual quest for self-esteem are key targets for neoliberal agendas. The use of pain has also become tied to the central notion self-responsibility in neoliberal governmentality promoted through self-help, sport, and exercise discourses. Such conceptualizations that situate pain and self-responsibility together, are extremely problematic for people living with chronic pain, like fibromyalgia, or other types of physical, mental, or psychic pain. If one “fails” to make use of one’s pain in productive ways, as promoted by the self-help and sport and fitness industries, this is construed as a failure in self-responsibility and results in social stratification.

There is an expectation in neoliberal governmentality that people will “fight” against pain (and illness and disease and obesity, etc.) The fact that pain can seriously disrupt peoples’ everyday lives and damage or destroy their sense of identity seems of little concern (Best, 2007; Leder, 1990; Morris, 1991). Contemporary self-help and fitness discourses urge us to use pain, to endure it, to conquer it, in an effort to produce
ourselves as model, moral citizens. As Tony Robbins contends, if you learn to use your pain and your pleasure “you’re in control of your life. If you don’t, life controls you.”

Pain, as a neoliberal trope, produces difference between individuals and between groups of people. Other peoples’ experiences of pain — and how they are seen to deal with them — are used as a way to create or maintain problematic norms of gender, race, class, and ability, norms that depend on and reify the discursively constructed ideals of white middle-class masculinity that are the unmarked centre of neoliberal citizenship (Ong, 2005; Philipose, 2007). This follows Samantha King’s (2006) contention that “neoliberal governmentality is implicitly racialized and gendered” (p. xxix). It likely goes without saying that it is also sexed, classed, abled, and aged.

Pain also functions as a discursive strategy for governments to justify budget cutbacks and reduced funding for social programs and public health initiatives. As one example, the notion of pain has, it would seem, become one of the central discourses of the British coalition government as it embarks on its program cuts. In an abstract for a recent cultural studies symposium entitled The Politics of Pain, the pain of the financial cuts that the government has made is positioned as something for all citizens to bear “in the interests of fairness” (culturalstudiesresearch.org). Such an approach suggests first that pain is bearable and second places the responsibility on individuals to be responsible for themselves and for others, and takes the focus off the role of the government. There is important work being done by academics who are critical about the place or use of pain as a strategy of governance. The important point to remember here is that regardless of the specific usage of pain, as a neoliberal trope the notion of pain provides evidence of another way that self-responsibility functions as a form of governance in contemporary
times which, of course, takes the focus off the structural impediments and barriers which are often the root cause of pain in the first place.

**“Ironman Identity” and the Productive Use of Leisure**

One of the outcomes of a shift to neoliberal forms of governance is that we now use economic language to make sense of what were once considered extra-economic domains. One of these domains is “leisure” time. In a critical interrogation of the commercial fitness field (comprised of structures, texts, producers, and consumers) in the United States, Jennifer Smith-Maguire (2008a) argues that the fitness field works to “naturalize the association of exercise with leisure” (p. 62). Amongst other things she argues that exercise manuals — the materials to which she turned a critical eye — are not simply about prescribing fitness regimens but also work to construct notions of leisure and self-work. They do this by prescribing ways in which people might manage their leisure time as a form of self-investment and by the promoting of instrumental types of pleasure that are tied to consumption. Smith-Maguire concludes her article with the suggestion that the commercial fitness field is “but one example of the institutional and discursive modes by which individuals are educated in how to yield more value from their available time and corporeal resources” (Smith-Maguire, 2008a, p. 72). The Ironman (and lifestyle sports more generally) does the same conceptual work in two ways: leisure time used for health and fitness gains; and, leisure time and work time conflated. Excerpts from the interview transcripts provide some empirical evidence for these ideas.

*Leisure and Fitness*
In the interviews that I conducted for this project, participants spoke about the ways that they had to work their Ironman training practices around their work schedules. From my own experiences, and from what they told me, it is difficult to incorporate 15 to 20 hours per week of training around a required 40 to 50 hour work-week (or more). Workouts get scheduled before work, at lunch time, and after work; a good part of the weekend is spent training, with most Ironman athletes doing long bike rides (maybe as long as seven or eight hours) on Saturday and long runs (as long as three hours) on Sunday. There can be time required to get to the training venues such as swimming pools, running tracks (for interval sessions), or yoga studios. Most participants in my study also mentioned the recovery time following the longer training sessions; a six hour bike ride is not just about the six hours of activity but also the recovery (stretch, shower, eat, nap) that follows in the afternoon. When training for an Ironman, it is safe to say that most peoples’ non-work time is dedicated to various disciplinary practices involved in the sport.

The last couple of years my training has been pretty consistent where I would run three times... I would do everything basically three times. So pretty much nine to eleven workouts per week: three runs, three bikes, three swims, and a couple of weight workouts or a yoga class. So that works out to 15ish or 20 hours a week depending on where those long sessions get put. [Me: You were working full time through this whole period?] Yes, working full time… (Christopher)

I’d say the peak for the other two might have been closer to 15 or 17. But we’re talking only a month. I found what workouts worked. So if I swam twice, biked twice, ran maybe three. That was fine for me. My body couldn’t handle more. [Me: And did you work the whole time?] Yes. I fit the workouts in before or after work and on the weekends. (Michelle)

These two excerpts work as (more extreme) examples of the ways that discursive formations promote the use of “free” or leisure time. Smith-Maguire (2008a) reminds us that “population inactivity…is addressed not through calls for collective solutions, which
are likely to be opposed as infringements on individual choice, but through calls to better
discipline one’s non-work time, which ironically reaffirm the equation in the popular
imagination of leisure with freedom and choice”(p. 66). In other words, the neoliberal
political agenda promotes our freedom to be productive in leisure; the body at leisure to
be disciplined. “Leisure time is to be used to produce value — the value of the fit body”
(Smith-Maguire, 2008a) because, as many scholars have argued, the fit body (or at the
very least, bodies that appear to be fit according to contextually specific constructions)
carries a certain value in the broader social context (for example, Bordo, 1993, 1999;
Bourdieu, 1984; Featherstone, 1982; Frank, 1991; Lupton, 1995; Pronger, 2000).

The Conflation of Leisure Time and Work Time

The unproblematic conflation of leisure time and work time emerged in many of
the interviews I did for this project. I also know of the tendency to conflate these two
things based on my own experiences. I suggest that the ways that work and leisure tend to
supplement each other is evidenced in two ways. The first two excerpts below reflect the
idea of leisure time as a way to relieve work-related stress. The second two excerpts reify
notions of leisure time as a way to work through work-related and other kinds of
problems.

Shitty day at work. But ran the 18k home. It was hot. Felt amazing when all was
said and done. Need to do more of this. It’s such a difference when I get home
after having run; I just feel like I leave all that stress at work. Makes me more
available for X which I know makes him happy. (My 2004 training journal)

I love being outside on my bike…. Going for a bike ride on a hot day with friends.
And maybe stress relief from work. I’m the type of guy who after work wouldn’t
go to the bar for a beer; I’d go for a bike ride or a run. I don’t want to say that I
ever really needed that but I think that was my outlet from work related stress or
life stress. (Gordon)
I will process a lot of what I’ve done during the day and what needs to be done. So it’s not a blank mind, it’s a bit of both. There are times when I’m up in the Park and I’m just loving the colour of the leaves.... Or there are other times where I’m running through my work from the day or whatever the situation is. What did I do? What do I need to do tomorrow? So I’ll use it for both. I use it to clear my mind but yet [also] to plan my day or critique my day. (David)

If you need to think about something that you’re doing at work or some problem that you’ve got to solve, it’s a really great time just to think. There’s no disturbances, there’s nobody to bother you... you’re just out there doing your thing. It energizes you for the rest of the day. And then there are the benefits. You’re healthy; you’re in good shape. I haven’t been sick a day in I don’t know how long... years. So it’s a very positive thing. And it’s been that way. It’s part of my lifestyle. (Jordan)

The participants in my study related their training to their functionality at work. In fact, Alexander, Lily, and Simon all commented that they were “better” employees as a result of their involvement in endurance sports. They spoke about going running on their lunch hours and how this benefited them (as a form of stress relief) and their employers (both in terms of them being less stressed and also as a source of motivation for their colleagues to become more active). Ted spoke specifically of the confidence he had gained from doing Ironman triathlons as effecting his work performance:

I just gave a presentation. Even though it had nothing to do with Ironman I can find some confidence. Because you know a lot of people didn’t think I could do Ironman and I did it. And so now I can do this. It’s not a problem. (Ted)

Both my interview subjects and my media sources talked about the way that Ironman improves confidence. Friends of mine also drew on such narratives when I suggested that I was struggling with the writing of this project and the time constraints on it: “You can do it,” I was told, “You’ve done two Ironmen!” No one seemed to want to mention that I had also failed at a third attempt! Regardless, narratives such as these speak to discourses of self-empowerment and their connection to achievement in our neoliberal context. The
mediated representations of the sport and some of the views of my participants promote the idea that each time a person finishes an Ironman, it represents a victory of mind over body, a successful conquest of bodily limits through proper and productive training, the ability to endure, tolerate, and overcome pain, and the demonstration of health. Each of these characteristics speaks to the notions of self-empowerment and self-actualization, both of which are key values in neoliberal forms of government (Fisher, 2008; Lemke, 2001; Ong, 2005; Rose, 1999, 2001).

There is an irony in such productive but demanding use of leisure time as it might simultaneously have a negative impact on the productive use of work time. As one participant noted, so demanding is the training for an Ironman or Iron-distance event that “You’re always fatigued. Your muscles are always sore. You’re always tired” (Jordan). Jordan was not the only interview participant to note that training for an Ironman or Iron-distance event was grueling and often resulted in fatigue. His tiredness sometimes resulted in less productivity at work. Though this idea came up in a few of my participants’ interviews I will turn to my own experiences to provide an example.

During the two first Ironman races in which I participated (2002, 2004) I was employed by Skate Canada, the national governing body for figure skating in Canada. I held the position of Acting National Teams Director in 2002 and the Director of Elite Athlete Development in 2004. As a director in the organization, I was privileged to have an office with a door. The only windows were to the outside (and there were blinds). There were multiple times in both years that I would close my office door in the afternoon with a sign on the outside that said “Conference Call. Please Do Not Disturb.” Most times that I did this, I was actually taking a nap, allowing my body to recover from
my morning and/or lunch training sessions so that my evening training session would be productive.

Many participants conceptualized fatigue as a pleasurable feeling, the lingering reminder of the hard training that they had done. But constant fatigue also reflects the privilege of professional middle-class status. It is difficult to imagine a person employed in an occupation requiring extensive manual labour or constant standing participating in the Ironman or Iron-distance triathlons. I do not want to over-generalize here and suggest that people with manual labour or standing service jobs do not participate in Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons. I am comfortable in saying, however, that those who do are the exception.

The desire to use leisure time productively reflects neoliberal values and the ways it can feel to many people like they are obliged to use their leisure time productively — “the arduous task of making oneself ‘fit’ for a life in a consumer culture and service economy” (Smith-Maguire, 2008a, p. 72). These same discourses might also be read as inciting in some people the feeling that they “want to” use their non-work times productively. And what use Ironman athletes make of their leisure time! For most, training over the course of a week ranges (at minimum) 15 to 20+ hours. There are costs involved with every aspect of training — swimming, biking, running, and, sometimes, gym or yoga studio memberships, clothing, accessories, equipment, maybe coaching. Payment is made to sport medicine practitioners. My grocery bills usually doubled in the final 10 to 12 weeks of training. There are significant costs involved with racing and most

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23 In a study focused on Canadian workers who stand for prolonged periods of time (despite having the option not to), Messing, Fortin, Rail, and Randoin (2005) point out many of the health and body-related problems that these workers experience. Given the large number of people employed in the service sector in North America, the physical-nature of their jobs must also be mentioned here as it further reinforces the professional middle-class privilege related to Ironman participation.
participants race during their vacation time. Registration fees for branded Ironman events are $550 US and most participants also have to pay to travel to the race locales. Often hotels in the cities hosting Ironman events are able to demand a five-day minimum stay the “weekend” of the event. Many people also travel to race locations (when possible) for training weekends.

In all of this we see that not only are healthy bodies being produced, but the consumption of goods and services also factor extensively into leisure time in the context of the Ironman and other lifestyle sports. As Wheaton (2004) notes in this regard, “each lifestyle sport has its own specificity… there are commonalities in their ethos, ideologies, as well as the consumer industries that produce the commodities that underpin their cultures” (p. 11). I discussed in chapter six the ways that some of the people I interviewed spoke about material rewards as a form of pleasure. Consumption, in neoliberalism, is also intricately tied to notions of identity (King, 2006; Lemke, 2001; Rose, 1999). Consumption technologies, Rose (1999) contends,

offer new ways for individuals to narrativize their lives, new ethics and techniques for living which do not set self-gratification and civility in opposition…. individuals play their own part in the games of civilization as they shape a style of life for themselves through the acts of choice in the world of goods. (p. 86)

The “world of goods” as Ingham (1985) reminds us, is intertwined with the notions of health and lifestyle both of which are directly linked to ideas of individual (i.e., consumer) choice with powerful moral implications: “One ‘chooses’ to be healthy or unhealthy, moral or immoral, normal or deviant. The imperative is to choose the right lifestyle, channel desire to avoid the abyss of deviance” (Pronger, 2000, p. 221).
At the core of this ideology of morality and choice is self-responsibility — the key tenet (as I have mentioned throughout this project) in neoliberal governmentality. While this individually-oriented form of governance benefits some, others are marginalized or excluded (through no fault of their own). Ingham (1985) writes that, “regardless of one’s version of the good life…lifestyle as an ideology of self-discipline continues to define structural impediments as personal troubles” (p. 48). This is an important point. More so than just ignoring social class (and all that is related to that) as a very real impediment to participation in this lifestyle sport (and others), there is an ideology circulating within the context of the sport that “anyone can do the Ironman.” This kind of thinking has significant political implications. In my concluding discussion I want to try to pull together what I see as the promotion of social inequality through (extreme) sport and fitness practices such as the Ironman.

**Shifting Notions of Bodies and Health and the Problems of Self-Responsibility**

The Ironman is often positioned as being more accessible than it really is. There is an ideology in the community that “anyone can do it.” The 2006 Ironman broadcast provides some insights here:

The opening of the broadcast begins with shots of various “natural” aspects of Hawaii (ocean, waterfalls, volcano). Narrative (by Trautwig) about “life learning” on the Big Island; an experience provided in which “boundaries are made to be broken.” Ironman is presented as revealing “true-self” through the breaking of these boundaries. Multiple voices making it feel like “everyone can do this.” The participants in the Ironman are not extraordinary – they are simply presented as being “you and me.” Cut to image of suburban America; alarms goes off at 6 a.m. Day begins; newspaper, coffee pot, and various voices saying things like “I am a plumber”; “I am a teacher”; “I am a nurse, a marine, FBI, a hair colourist… From this I get the idea of the “every day person” doing Ironman. We are taken to a preview of the elite race but it is referred to as the minority who are in this
category. The “everyman” idea re-emerges. “I am a soldier.” “I am a nun.” (Notes from my analysis of the 2006 Ironman Hawaii broadcast)

While we are led to believe here that the “everyman” can do this race it is rather evident that the “everyman” is generally representative of the professional middle class. This is only further reinforced when in a featured profile during the 2003 Ironman broadcast, the famous Julie Moss made the following comment: “How do I want to be remembered? Probably as an ordinary girl who managed to do something extraordinary.” It was certainly the view of several of the participants in my study that anyone (the ordinary) can do an Ironman (the extraordinary).

Other than the capital outlay to get the equipment to do the sport, it’s pretty much a sport that anyone can do. And it is in a way very egalitarian to me. It’s a sport of participation. (Christopher)

I think it’s more accessible now. Not everyone will, but I think most people could do an Ironman if they put their mind to it. (Sarah)

The point of accessibility that Sarah makes is an important one. The Ironman is becoming far more accessible than it was in the event’s early years. Internet coaching, Ironman-specific training groups, books, websites, and greater numbers of events all make the sport — and the ability to finish one of these events — more feasible. That said, it is key to note that it remains accessible to a very particular group of people: the professional middle-class. Simply put, they have the money and they have the time.

The mediated representations of the Ironman and some of the narratives circulating in the Ironman and triathlon community that suggest that “anyone can do the Ironman” position success in the sport as a matter of will. Such sentiments reflect and
reinforce the tenets of neoliberalism which contend that people should simply take care of
themselves and not require the help of the State, for to require State aid is seen as a form
of weakness, a failure to properly control one’s self, or as immoral (Ingham, 1985;
Lemke, 2001; Rose, 1999). There is a “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” mentality that
helps justify notions that people should be responsible for themselves in the interest of
the well-being of the population (Petersen, 1997; Rose, 2001). That this “anyone can do
it” mentality is applied to the Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons is all the more
problematic when thinking about the extreme nature of them.

Stated bluntly, a person who is able to finish the Ironman reifies and shapes ideas
about what makes a good citizen in contemporary times. The Ironman is a very particular
form of self-work through which bodies and selves are produced in accordance with
neoliberal governmentality. Rose (1999) contends that within a neoliberal context, norms
of conduct as produced through discourses of expertise

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\text{operate a regime of the self where competent personhood is thought to depend}
\text{upon the continual exercise of freedom, and where one is encouraged to}
\text{understand one’s life, actually or potentially, not in terms of fate or social status,}
\text{but in terms of one’s success or failure in acquiring the skills and making the}
\text{choices to actualize oneself. (p. 87)}
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The desire for self-actualization is constantly reified during the television broadcasts of
the Ironman with comments made such as: “the pain doesn’t last forever but for those
who bear witness, the memory of accomplishment always will”; “the finish line continues
to be a glorious display of human achievement.” The images of Julie Moss, Paula
Newby-Fraser, Sian Welch, Wendy Ingraham, and the other images of suffering bodies I
have described through my project only work because they are not *failing or quitting
bodies*. They succeed in crossing the finish line — “finish… whatever it takes.” Whether
a person is competing for the first time or the 108th time it does not seem to matter. Each
time that an athlete crosses the finish line of an Ironman, they prove that limits can be exceeded.

The notion of limits is central to the mediated representations of the Ironman:
people finding, challenging, and (ultimately) exceeding their limits with the goal of
finishing… whatever it takes. These are not innocent representations of sporting bodies
with little or no relevance to the broader socio-cultural context. Rather, given the growing
popularity of the sport in terms of participation, the increasing presence of the sport on
television and the internet, and the greater symbolic value the sport seems to have in the
mainstream, these images contribute to our ideas about sporting bodies, physical
capabilities, and health. Pronger (2000) writes that, “the omnipresence of popular
representations of the fit body undoubtedly contextualize the ways in which people read
bodies, whether they themselves follow exercise and dietary regimens or not” (p. 144).

While conducting the research for this project I had to attend a conference that
was held for academic researchers and sport policy makers. After I presented my
proposed research agenda (which at the time was very much in its infancy) four different
people at the conference approached me. I assumed that they had questions or comments
about my project. Instead, each person asked if they could shake my hand as they had
never met an Ironman finisher before. It was uncomfortable for me, to say the least, but
also reaffirmed what I had suspected to be the case — Ironman participants are held up as
contemporary examples of, amongst other things, health, fitness, and toughness. And this
is problematic because the representations of Ironman bodies in this way also begin to
shift normative expectations for bodies and health generally. They shift perceptions of what anyone should be able to do.

In the Ironman context (and presumably in other extreme sport and fitness practices which have arduous aerobic challenges as their main feature) what constitutes the production of a fit or fitter body well exceeds mainstream ideas about how much physical activity one needs to do on a weekly basis. As noted throughout my work here, it takes a great deal of physical training to be able to finish an Ironman event within the allocated time and in a relatively safe manner. People in the sport recognize this and so they set about to manage their bodies to accomplish their goals with: carefully designed training schedules; group training sessions; technologies to determine and/or measure working levels; carefully monitored nutritional strategies (save for when they are rewarding themselves with chocolate, alcohol, or some other type of “naughty” food or beverage); negotiation of positive and negative bodily sensations defined as pain; and, the extensive use of sport medicine practitioners and often, the use of painkillers. These practices are not only normalized by participants in the sport but are constructed as the norm through mediated representations of the sport as well. Problematically, the alternative to participation is positioned not as some other form of exercise but as sedentarianism. As Ted’s quote earlier in this chapter alluded to, the Ironman is constructed as being better than “sitting on a couch eating Cheetos.” This kind of either/or dualism suggests that bodies are given meaning through a stark fit/unfit binary. This is worrisome when this thinking is taken into account with the “anyone can do an Ironman” ideology.
Not everyone can do an Ironman. It likely goes without saying that not everyone wants to do one either. Ironman athletes take the values of self-responsibility for health and self-esteem to the extreme. Their use of pain in producing “healthy” bodies that are revered and celebrated for their abilities and capabilities, as well as the way they make such productive use of their non-work time in the pursuit of health, results in a “real” example of what citizens can do. This reproduces the notion of choice, while ignoring barriers and impediments to sport and exercise participation, which further marginalize those who aren’t able to participate — through absolutely no fault of their own. I suggest that there is a sentiment emerging with the increased popularity of the Ironman and other similar extreme sport/fitness practices: “Look at what these bodies can do. Why can’t you?” This serves to reinforce the ideologies of self-responsibility, which support the core strategy of neoliberal governmentality justifying the State’s withdrawal from the funding of social programs such as health-initiatives and public welfare, and making diminished State responsibility for citizens even more insidious than it already is.
Chapter 8

Concluding Thoughts

There are three things I want to accomplish in this concluding chapter: (1) revisit the main arguments I have sought to make in this project and what I consider to be their importance; (2) raise some of the limitations of my work here and suggest what I foresee as future lines of inquiry; and, (3) provide a brief reflection on my personal experiences of undertaking and completing this project.

The Main Arguments

“Finish… whatever it takes.” This statement and ones similar in sentiment were common in the materials I gathered and analyzed for this project. The television broadcasts of the Hawaii Ironman promote this ideal not only through the broadcasters’ narratives but also through the dominant representations of exhausted bodies painstakingly making their way to the finish line. Triathlon magazines encourage the “finish no matter what” kind of mentality through the feature stories of athletes pushing themselves to their limits (or beyond) in order to reach the finish line. The magazines also provide training tips and strategies (including different kinds of pain prevention techniques) which can help people who want to become an Ironman and claim an “Ironman identity,” something which is only achieved by crossing the finish line. In challenging themselves to “go where they haven’t necessarily gone before,” in pushing their bodies to their limits and beyond, and in making it to the finish, people are
apparently transformed. Making it to this place of transformation relies heavily on conceptualizations of pain and pleasure.

Pain

Pain and sport have received the attention of many sport scholars since the early 1990s (Roderick, 2006; Young, 2004). The body of literature as a whole has revealed the problematic tenets of sport which promote ideals of victory, sacrifice, pushing bodily limits, domination, and aggression. Some scholars have argued that athletes’ ability to play with an injury produces athletic capital. As such, pain/injury becomes normalized as an expected part of peoples’ sporting experiences. To a large extent, athletes’ ability to play in pain or with an injury has been connected to the construction of certain kinds of sporting masculinity (e.g., Howe, 2001, 2004; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Messner, 1990, 1992; Pike & Maguire, 2003; Pringle, 2001, 2005; Sabo, 1986, 2004; Young, 2004; Young, McTeer, & White, 1994). Scholars have also argued that the normalization of pain and injury is evident in female sporting spaces, something which is explained by the reification of the core tenets of sport. Similar to male athletes, female athletes seem to acquire a sense of athletic identity through their relationship to pain, namely the ability to control it (Charlesworth & Young, 2004; Pike & Maguire, 2003; Theberge, 1997, 2000; Young, 2004). Paradoxically, while athletes may formulate an athletic identity around the ability to endure, tolerate, and play in pain, being injured can have a significant impact on one’s sense of identity especially when it impacts on their ability to participate in their chosen sport or sports (Allen-Collinson, 2003; Hockey, 2005; Howe, 2001; 2004; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Pringle & Markula, 2005; Young, 2004). I do not contest these important findings in any way. My study, however, suggests that we need to think about
sport and fitness-related pain beyond the pain/injury nexus which has dominated most discussions within the sociology of sport to date.

My study demonstrates that in Ironman there were multiple discourses circulating within which worked in different ways to construct subjectivity and to shape pain as an embodied experience. Perhaps this is not that surprising given Foucault’s contention that we operate in a “multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (1990a, p. 100). The ways that my interview participants talked about pain suggested that there were multiple ways that it was made sense of in their experiences of the sport and the meaning they make of it in their lives.

Many of my interview participants were critical of the way that pain and suffering feature so prominently in the mediated representations of the sport, in the television broadcasts especially. For them, ignoring or pushing through injury was not something that we should valorize or revere. Many of them commented that it was possible to get through an Ironman without “looking like that” at the finish line. Some of the interviewees also suggested that it was possible to complete an Ironman without getting injured at all, if individuals are able to negotiate the different kinds of pain successfully. In her study of female ultrarunners, Hanold (2010) notes a similar kind of negotiation evidenced in her participants’ narratives. She writes that “while disciplined by 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” (p. 174). The negotiation of pain was between what I have categorized as positive and negative pain, following the lead of the majority of participants in this study who constructed pain in such ways.
There was an unquestioned acceptance of the idea that people have to push their bodies in their training for and participation in Ironman races. The bodily sensations related to these experiences were described as suffering, hurt, “good” pain, and discomfort, which I categorized as positive pain (Howe, 2004; Parry, 2006). The majority of the participants in my study suggested that positive pain was productive and even necessary in order to prepare oneself for the arduousness of these kinds of events. This follows Hanold’s (2010) suggestion that ideas about “pushing the limits operate as a disciplining discourse because [they go] unquestioned and are produced through desire” (Hanold, 2010, p. 173). A significant part of success in the sport (i.e., finishing) seems to relate to peoples’ ability to make use of the productive kinds of pain experienced while undertaking the disciplinary practices involved in the sport (i.e., the swim, bike, and run training).

Negative pain was, for many of the people I interviewed, synonymous with injury. Sustaining an injury was seen as an unsuccessful negotiation of positive and negative kinds of pain and as a failure to discipline or manage their bodies properly. More simply, it was seen as their own fault. Injury was neither something that people thought should be ignored when sustained nor valorized as it is in the mediated representations of the sport. Nevertheless, the interview transcripts are rife with injury-related stories. The role that sport medicine practitioners play in many of these participants’ Ironman experiences seems mostly taken-for-granted. Several of them commented on their use of NSAIDs as a form of pain prevention and/or pain management which is a concern for the Ironman community at large given the side-effects that result from the excessive use of them (Gorski et al, 2009). In terms of injury
and injury-related pain, there appeared to be disconnect between peoples’ criticisms of the way suffering and pain factors into the mediated representations and their own practices. It seemed that in many instances injury and injury-related pain were minimized and, thus, made a normal part of peoples’ involvement in the sport. I am fairly confident in saying that maintaining enough functionality to be able to finish influences peoples’ ideas about negative pain (i.e., injury). Each person with whom I spoke conceptualized pain in ways that made sense to them in an effort to produce their bodies in ways capable of reaching the finish line and, thus, earning the rewards and recognition suggested to be associated with completing an Ironman or Iron-distance triathlon. For the most part, however, there was an unquestioned acceptance of the fact that there would be pain of some sort involved.

I have argued that the predominant constructions of pain to emerge from the participant interviews mostly seemed to reflect dominant high performance sport, sport science, and exercise discourses, as well as discourses of achievement and toughness. The reification of such discourses might best summarized as “no pain, no gain” — but with a caveat. The pain in this context refers to the positive kind of pain that most of the participants constructed as productive (and some even pleasurable).

There was one exception in the group of triathletes I interviewed. Ricky commented that he did not view any of his experiences in the sport as painful, positive or negative. His desire to be involved in the sport was located in what he described as the fun and enjoyment he found in all aspects of physical activity; the length of the different training practices as well as the race afforded him greater opportunity to be outside, to be active, and to be moving. Here we have, it would seem, some empirical support for the
idea that it is possible to participate in sport or physical activity without experiencing pain (Donnelly, 2004). Ricky was an anomaly. His view was not reflected in the other participants’ ideas about positive and negative types of pain and the use of pain in productive ways.

My argument is that the notions of pain in the Ironman context are influenced by sport and fitness discourses that promote ideas about challenge, achievement, and toughness. Recognizing that sport doesn’t exist in a vacuum, I considered the ways that pain is discursively constructed through neoliberal ideologies as something that people must learn to make use of in their lives in their efforts to become moral, “good,” and responsible citizens. The prevalence of pain in self-help literature, which acts as a key form of governance or “conduct of conduct” in contemporary times, speaks to the ways that pain functions as a neoliberal trope as does the way pain is represented in the mediated representations of the Ironman and taken-up by participants in the sport, myself included.

Pleasure

The idea of finishing factored extensively into the way that people talked about pleasure and the way pleasure is represented in Ironman-related media. In the television broadcasts, ideas about pleasure are mostly connected to the finish line. Images of different kinds of celebratory expressions and behaviours intermix with the images of bodies in various states of wellness. But during the race itself, it is rare to see any type of image that might be even closely related to pleasure; the commentators’ narratives typically portray the suffering and pain that athletes go through in order to get to the finish line.
The people with whom I spoke also talked about the pleasure that is related to finishing. While they did discuss other kinds of pleasures related to involvement in the sport including social networking, body modification (i.e., weight loss), and a connection to the environment/nature, the ideas of challenge, achievement, rewards, and recognition dominated most of our conversations. In brief, many participants found pleasure in the achievement of completing challenging workouts and the events themselves. For these participants, there was not a lot of pleasure to be found in the process of training but rather in its completion. This conceptualization of pleasure interconnected with the pleasures associated with rewards and recognition. Rewards were discussed in terms of consumption; people allowed themselves to partake in “naughty” food and beverages on occasion and permitted themselves the purchase of triathlon-related gear if certain goals were met (e.g., weight loss, personal bests). Such positions reify dominant conceptualizations of fitness as a means to an end rather than a means through which one might take pleasure (Smith-Maguire, 2008a, 2008b). They are influenced by dominant constructions of health that rely on the restrictions of certain pleasures while promoting and rewarding others (Coveney & Bunton, 2003; Fullagar, 2002; Lupton, 1995).

In all of the interviews, I introduced conversations about sensuous kinds of pleasure in Ironman experiences. Discussing sensuous pleasure was difficult for many of the participants and for me, which I suggested was related to the problem of language; articulating the extra-discursive is challenging as we don’t talk about our bodily feelings that often (Wright & Dewar, 1997). I also suggested that the dominant constructions of pleasure in health and fitness discourses promote instrumentalized notions of pleasure, thereby limiting other ways that people might articulate their embodied experiences.
Nevertheless, some of my participants did comment on the sensuous pleasure they found in the sport. These kinds of pleasure were conceptualized in two ways: the way that peoples’ bodies felt when doing some of the training involved in the preparation for an Ironman and the pleasurable feeling of productive, positive pain. In short, these participants just liked the way that they felt when training and racing. This was certainly not, however, a dominant theme in the interviews. Most people I spoke with tolerated the positive pain associated with training and racing in order to find the pleasure in the achievement of finishing and the associated rewards and recognition.

In my discussion about Ironman-related pleasures I noted that it is difficult to distinguish between sensuous and instrumental kinds of pleasure. These two categories of pleasure were quite interconnected in my participants’ discussions about their experiences in the sport and, admittedly, in reflecting on the pleasure I gained through my participation in Ironman. This highlights both the methodological difficulties of getting people to talk about the non-tangential outcomes of their participation in sport and fitness practices and also the ways in which pleasure is politicized generally (Rand, 2008; Pringle, 2009). Unpacking the ways that pleasure is constructed in the Ironman context reveals the ways that dominant sport, fitness, and health discourses relate to the construction of subjectivities and embodied experiences in contemporary times. Unpacking the ways that my participants talked about pleasure and the way it is discussed (or not discussed more accurately) in Ironman-related media, also speaks to the dominant constructions of pleasure in neoliberal governmentality which situates pleasure more to be found through consumption, “better” health, and bodily aesthetics.
Ironman and Self-Responsibility

More than just representing the literal end of the 226 kilometer Ironman journey, the finish line of an Ironman or Iron-distance event represents a place of transformation. Whether discussed in terms of weight loss, overcoming illness or disease, “conquering” a disability, battling an addiction, or waging war against aging, the transformative potential of the Ironman finish line as related to peoples’ health and fitness status is a dominant theme. In fact, for many of the people with whom I spoke, and in the mediated-representations of the sport, the transformative potential of the finish line is a primary source of pleasure. The finish, however, is not just about the literal completion of the race. It is about what it is suggested to represent and that is self-responsibility and the demonstration of “ultimate” health and fitness. This is likely not that surprising given the importance placed on individual and population health in contemporary times (Crawford, 1980, 2004, 2006; Ingham, 1985; Petersen, 1997; Rabinow & Rose, 2006; Rose, 1999, 2001). The focus on transformation narratives related to health — often related to weight-loss — in the mediated representations and the ways that my participants and I thought about our health in relation to Ironman reflects neoliberal ideologies of health and self-responsibility in so much as there is a significant focus given to improving one’s health through the Ironman. This is, of course, paradoxical given the prevalence of injuries in the sport, as I mentioned previously.

The ways that Ironman participants make use of pain reflect neoliberal values about health and self-work. They take control of their pain, they manage it, they endure it, and they make use of it, all which reflects the place of pain in self-help literature, a body of literature which reproduces certain ideas about self-actualization that are promoted by
neoliberal forms of government (King, 2006; Lemke, 2001; Moskowitz, 2001; Rose, 1999, 2001). The ways that Ironman participants make use of their leisure time also reflects neoliberal agendas in so much as leisure time is seen as an opportunity for people to work on themselves in accordance with contextually specific constructions of health, fitness, and productivity (Lemke, 2001; Smith-Maguire, 2008a, 2008b). In a form of government that uses the free market as its model, the ways that Ironman participants transform themselves into healthy, productive citizens becomes something to celebrate. Their commitment to their health and fitness is seen to be productive at the individual level but also contributes in productive ways to the economy at large. Their assumed non-dependence on the health care system, as example, meshes well with neoliberal agendas of individual responsibility. While Ironman bodies are constructed as having significant social and physical capital, the question of how healthy the practice is remains up for debate.

The key point I wanted to make in my discussion of the Ironman in our current neoliberal socio-political context was that the growing popularity of the sport, and what the sport and its participants are constructed as representing, works to shift ideas about health and fitness to a more extreme end of a health/fitness continuum. This is problematic as it works to establish norms that marginalize people who aren’t able or who choose not to participate in these types of events. The ability to finish an event of this nature allows the division or distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) of Ironman bodies from non-Ironman bodies (including other triathlon bodies). This reproduces an already problematic hierarchy in which bodies that are physically active (or at least look to be physically active) are privileged over bodies that aren’t with blame placed on those
bodies that don’t fit culturally specific health and fitness norms. In an era that promotes the idea that health is an individual responsibility, those who fail to transform themselves into healthy people are constructed as lazy, morally corrupt, and “bad” citizens. Quite the opposite, Ironman participants can be (and are) construed as ultimate neoliberal citizens. Such conceptualizations, of course, ignore socio-cultural barriers that prevent some people from being physically active not the least of which is class (Crawford, 1980, 2004, 2006; Ingham, 1985; Lupton, 1995; McDermott, 2007; White, Young, & Gillett, 1995). These barriers also have extremely negative implications for people who live with disabilities (Brittain, 2004; Depauw, 1995; Fisher, 2008).

Participation in Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons is a privilege reserved mostly for the professional middle-class. Having the time and resources available for the extensive training required, access to sport medicine practitioners, funds to cover training and racing expenses, as well as less physically-intensive forms of employment is essential. This is not so different from other kinds of lifestyle sports (Atkinson, 2008; Fletcher, 2008; McCarville, 2007; Wheaton, 2004). But more than just being a sport for the professional middle-class, I argue that the increasing popularity of Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons, similarly to ultrarunning (Hanold, 2010), affirms neoliberal ideologies which promote the measurement and value of health, fitness, and self-esteem by extreme achievements. In light of these ideologies, pain is defined not as something to be eliminated but as something that should be made use of, while “leisure” time becomes almost exclusively about self-work.

More than 25 years ago Ingham (1985) and Crawford (1980) argued that the ways that health and well-being were shifting from a public issue to a personal one was
extremely problematic. This shift was reflected by popular yet unfounded notions that we should all be able to assume personal responsibility for our health and wellness. The structural changes that accompanied this shift to neoliberal forms of government included roll-backs in public welfare and decreased or eliminated spending on social programs. At the same time, for an individual to not take responsibility for her or himself is seen as a failure in citizenship given the relationship constructed between the health of the individual and the wellness of the population (Rabinow & Rose, 2006; Rose, 1999). The fact that the middle-class can accomplish things like the Ironman with their leisure time, with their bodies, and with their “health” validates the neoliberal agenda. While crossing the finish line of an Ironman (whatever it takes) is undoubtedly a significant achievement, we mustn’t forget that many cannot get to the start.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

In this project I have attempted to use the Ironman as a heuristic device to get at constructions of pain and pleasure and their relationships to subjectification in our current neoliberal social and political context. What I have not done to any great extent is draw out the relationship between this process and gender, race, disability, and age. This absence is, as I see it, the most significant limitation of this study. It lays the groundwork for further specific inquiry into the Ironman as a socio-cultural phenomenon in its own right.

The Ironman triathlon began in 1978 with just 15 participants, the result of — according to popular accounts — an argument amongst a particular group of athletes as to whom among them was the fittest. As we know, since that time the sport has grown
exponentially. Ironman imagery and ideology proliferates in popular culture in the use of the Ironman to construct ideas about challenge and achievement and to provide role models for people outside the sport. Ironman athletes have been featured on the covers of non-multi sport magazines and have even made it on to Oprah. Additionally, Ironman is used to market various commercial interests such as food products, sports equipment, clothing, and fragrances. Not that long ago, a sport so extreme would have been seen as unthinkable.

I contend that the Ironman is a socio-cultural phenomenon ripe for genealogical analysis. The intention or goal of a genealogical study is to read a cultural activity or event not with the intention of producing an absolute “truth” or pointing to one specific cause or consequence, but rather to consider its origin as a result of contextually-specific discourses and material practices (Mills, 2003). Though it makes for a great story, the Ironman was not borne out of one argument. Future research might consider further what combination of material and discursive factors have made possible the creation and growth of the Ironman. In this project I have done so in light of neoliberalism. The growth of the Ironman certainly coincides with Reagan-era politics and the shift from public to private or individual responsibility for health and fitness (Cole, 1998; King, 2006; Smith-Maguire, 2008a, b). There is likely more to be said about the birth and growth of the Ironman brand in relation to the so-called “crisis of masculinity” (Kusz, 2004), American militarism, and “thon” related philanthropy (King, 2006).

Stepping outside of the Ironman context, I think there is much more that can be said about sport as a place of domination and of pleasure. The fact that constructions of pleasure in this project relied so heavily on instrumental notions speaks to the need to
continue to chip away at the ways that pleasure is represented in dominant sport, fitness, and health discourses. As Coveney and Bunton (2003) point out in this regard, pleasure in health promotion initiatives tend to be positioned “at the root of irrational, often spontaneous actions which predispose individuals to unhealthy, so-called risk taking behaviours” (p. 166) and yet, “pleasure might be considered a motive for human action (or indeed inaction)” (p. 163). Gard and Meyenn (2000) remind us that “just as pain and violence are embedded in the discourses of competitive sports, so too are bodily pleasures” (p. 30). Yet we still know little about constructions of pleasure. My project contributes to this knowledge through findings which are very much located in peoples’ lived experiences of sport and fitness and the meanings they make of it.

In adding to this body of literature, I have reproduced a common tendency in the sociology of sport; we tend to focus on what I (affectionately) call the “freaks” (i.e., those participating in sporting endeavours that seem bizarre, strange, dangerous, risky, “sexy,” etc.) or the “elites” (i.e., collegiate, competitive age group/master’s athletes, and “professionals”). These foci are not unimportant. But what might we learn by turning to more grassroots participation? For example, Hanold (2010) suggests that further examinations into the constructions of pain and injury, “feeling good,” and the relationship between them could yield deeper understandings about [recreational] subjectivities. In addition, an investigation of the experiences of male, “middle of the pack” runners, and the DNF could provide more insight into [ultrarunning as a] middle-class sport activity. (p. 175)

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24 As a recipient of a Sport Canada Research Initiative grant in conjunction with the SSHRC doctoral grant I was awarded, I am required to submit a knowledge transfer paper to Sport Canada. My intention is to primarily focus on the limited conceptions of pleasure as well the (related) methodological difficulties of getting people to talk about the non-tangential outcomes of participation in sport and physical activity.
As I noted in chapter seven, the expectations of what bodies should be able to do seems to be shifting, as evidenced by the different kinds of extreme activities that are emerging everywhere such as Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons and ultrarunning.

Looking at more grassroots level of participation in sport seems all the more important with the increased focus in Canada on initiatives such as Sport Canada’s *Canadian Sport for Life*. This recent initiative aims to “increase sport’s contribution in Canadian society, recognizing sport as an important part of everyone’s life.” As part of the Sport for Life initiative, each national sport organization in Canada has been given the task of developing a long-term athlete development plan, which includes as the first step the creation of a long-term athlete development model. These models are meant to chart the ideal progression of people through a sport from the time of enrolment to international and Olympic levels of competition. But, these models are also meant to offer strategies to retain recreational athletes in their chosen sports, as well as strategies that would keep people active in sport for life. At the root of this focus on recreational and life-long participation is the notion that participation in sport is a way to improve one’s health.

We must remember that the majority of my participants in this project viewed their participation as recreational or as part of their lifestyle. If events such as the Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons continue to grow in popularity, what further influence might that have on activities that aren’t so extreme and on the people who don’t consider themselves Ironman material? What do people who don’t do such extreme sports or who don’t participate in elite levels of sport think about pain and pleasure and their (potential) relation to their views on health and fitness? We don’t know, for
example, about how someone might think about pain, pleasure, and health who, as their primary mode of physical activity, goes for a run a few times a week and who might participate in organized events of some sort only periodically (if at all). We don’t know how someone who plays tennis two or three times per week might think about these issues or someone who participates in spinning classes as their primary form of physical activity. Such knowledge could be useful to both academic understandings of the discursive constructions of pain, pleasure, health, and fitness at the grassroots level of sports but it also could provide useful information to the fitness industry itself which, as Smith-Maguire (2008a, 2008b) argues, promotes very limited conceptualizations of pleasure. I am well situated to transfer some of the knowledge gained through academic inquiries of sport and fitness pains and pleasures to the industry given my dual role as academic and group exercise instructor.25

Sport Canada’s Canadian Sport for Life initiative targets the development of children through sport by “promoting each child’s healthy and logical development in a sport or physical activity.” It seems to me that in the sociology of sport and exercise we know very little about how children’s bodies and their understandings of their bodies are constrained by discourses of sport and health and yet this would seem of the utmost importance for several reasons. I was involved with the development of Skate Canada’s long-term athlete development model. In fact, I wrote it. Each stage of the model focused on ideal physiological, psychological, and social development through figure skating. The content of each stage was pulled together by experts in the sport whose specialty was at

25 As example, an article I wrote entitled Is the Language You are Using Alienating Your Members? was published in a recent edition of CanFitPro Magazine. Drawing on some of the existing sociology literature, I discussed the problems of using certain types of language in group exercise class, focussing specifically on referring to entire classes as “guys” and the use of bodily aesthetics as a form of motivation. I hope to publish more of these kinds of articles in the future.
that specific level. People who had coached athletes at the World Championships and the Olympic Games, for example, were responsible for developing the content for the “Learn to Win/Live to Win” stage. My task was to take the information created by each sub-group and formulate one cohesive document.

Looking back, I don’t remember ever having any specific conversations about sport-related pain other than in terms of prevention or management of injuries through the help of sport science professionals. There was no consideration of the relationship between pain, injury, and athletic identity nor was there any discussion about the ways that different people might think about pain differently. Although the idea of pleasure (in this case, fun) was referenced in the earlier stages in the model (e.g., Learn to Skate), no real discussion about what “fun” might be or how it might be experienced by different people in the sport occurred outside of ideas for reward and recognition. I am not “guiltless” in this.

As a member of the steering committee I could have raised these ideas myself in one of the many meetings I attended or attempted to get at them when I wrote and re-wrote the athlete development model. But it would seem that dominant notions about challenge, achievement, rewards, and recognition dominated my thinking while undertaking that particular project. It seems ironic to think that children’s embodied experiences in sport might be limited by projects that are being created with the objective of keeping children in sport. I contend that we need more research that combines lived experience and discourse analysis in order to understand the experiences and meanings of sport participation at the individual level. Furthermore, despite the body of work in sport
sociology that challenges the taken-for-grantedness the definition of sport as “healthy,” projects such as *Canadian Sport for Life* continue to promote this relationship.

**Some (Brief) Reflections on an Arduous Task of a Different Nature**

This project was much more difficult than I anticipated and it was difficult in surprising ways. It forced me to face how I negotiated pain when active in the Ironman context and also how I thought about pleasure in relation to my physically active, moving body. Even more so, it challenged me to think about these things in relation to my current role as a group exercise instructor. It forced me to think about the words, the language, the physical gestures, and the movements I use when leading group cycling and yoga classes. Perhaps even more so, this project really forced me to think about the ways in which I might reify or resist (what I am conscious of being) problematic ideas about peoples’ bodies promoted by the pre-choreographed exercise programs (e.g., Body Pump, Body Flow, and RPM) that I instruct. How do I or might I use my “academic” knowledge in the process of providing fitness classes to participants and, in turn, how might they take these things up? Although this was not my project here I found that, in a sense, I was never able to get away from it.

I also struggled throughout with ideas of representation. It was evident to me during the interview process that the majority of my participants got great joy from their participation in Ironman and the sport of triathlon more generally. For many their involvement tied to their social networks and to their sense of identity beyond work, school, and/or family. Their excitement about the events, about the community, and about their place in both challenged me to think about my own negativity directed at the sport following what I had constructed as a mostly horrible experience at my last race (of any
kind) in 2007.

Rand (2008) suggests that our desires change, or perhaps our reasons for not pursuing them do. I was content to think that my desire to be an Ironman, a triathlete, a runner had been fulfilled through my years of involvement and, as such, I had turned to other kinds of activities. I did not think I missed any of it. But I found myself getting goose bumps when participants described their finishing experiences. My eyes watered during one of the interviews when the participant, Lily, began to cry as she described the sensations that she experienced when crossing the finish line. This caused me to question what right I had to be critical of their constructions of a sport they so clearly loved. What right did I have to reduce their lived, bodily experiences to flat, one-dimensional text (Denison & Markula, 2003), to political tropes, and to neoliberal discourse?

I have tried to frame this project as not being critical of the participants’ constructions but rather of the discursive formations that produce them. I hope that I have been able to do this while at the same time providing useful insights into the political nature of pain and pleasure and the production of good, moral neoliberal citizens and the effects this process has on “other” bodies and selves. Ideally participants will see themselves represented fairly throughout the pages of this project. I hope this project might motivate questions and discussions for them and for other people who participate in Ironman and Iron-distance triathlons or other similar activities.

All that said, while I “close the book” on this particular inquiry (if even only temporarily) I am left with lingering questions about where I stand in all of this, and to be honest, I have multiple and conflicting thoughts and feelings about that. I am surprised that I find myself thinking about doing another Ironman even after my last experience. I
am scared that I find myself longing for another opportunity to experience the crossing of
the finish line… whatever it takes. I am dismayed that I don’t believe that I have been
able to find anything else that provides the same sort of feeling that one gets when
crossing the finish line 12, 13, 14, or 17 hours after starting an Ironman race. I am
perplexed that I am starting to think that the drudgery of completing length after length in
the university pool, the smell of chlorine embedded in my skin, and goggle-lines etched
on my face for embarrassingly-long periods of time, weren’t such bad things after all. I
am starting to think that I did take some joy in the process of completing long bike rides,
long runs, and interval workouts on the track.

And with all these feelings, I find myself once again trying to figure out what it is
about this weird, whacky, challenging, relatively unhealthy sport and fitness practice that
speaks to me on such a personal level, despite my critical reflections on it. Is it the
successful negotiation of pain that appeals to me? Is it the pleasure of the achievement? Is
it that it’s a space in which I am privileged enough to be able to make certain types of
pain pleasurable? Is it the production of a body desirable to others? Or is there something
else going on here?

After spending most of my youth as a competitive figure skater — a not always
easy experience as a boy in a small town where boy bodies were supposed to play hockey
— is there some subconscious desire to prove my masculinity even still all these years
later? Am I perhaps not as comfortable with my sexuality as I think I am? Does
repeatedly reasserting myself as an Ironman somehow legitimize my gayness, my
maleness? Does participation in endurance sports (marathons, triathlons, Ironmans)
become symbolic of something I am running towards? Or maybe it’s away from? There
is likely an autoethnographic, psychoanalytic project begging to be undertaken here. But I am not sure I have the courage to do such a thing. All of this uncertainty makes me angry because in the end I think ultimately I had hoped to find an answer to the question posed of me most often by my interview participants, by my friends, by my colleagues, and by my partner throughout the months leading up to and while working on this project. They all asked me: “Will you do another Ironman or Iron-distance event?” All I can do is sigh and shrug my shoulders because when all is said and done, I still don’t know.
References


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Appendix A

Letter of Ethics Approval

August 8, 2009

Mr. William Bridel
Ph.D. Candidate
School of Kinesiology and Health Studies
Queen’s University

GREB Ref #GPHE-066-09
Title: “Exploring pain, pleasure, health, and extreme fitness practices”

Dear Dr. Bridel:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB) has given expedited approval to your proposal titled “Exploring pain, pleasure, health, and extreme fitness practices”. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been approved for one year. At the end of each year, GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB; of any adverse event(s) that occur during this approval period (details available on webpage www.queensu.ca/vpr/greb/procedures/adverse ). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that any adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be approved by the GREB. Examples of required approvals are: changes in study procedures or implementations of new aspects into the study procedures that affect human subjects. These changes must be sent to Linda Frid at the Office of Research Services or FRID@queensu.ca prior to implementation. Ms. Frid will seek the approval of the GREB reviewer(s) who originally assessed your application or the GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, PhD
Professor and Chair
General Research Ethics Board

Copies: Dr. Samantha King, Acting Chair Unit REB
Dr. Mary Louise Adams, Faculty Supervisor

JS/#r
Appendix B

**Title of Project:**
Exploring Pain, Pleasure, Health, and Extreme Fitness Practices

**Principal Researcher:**
William Bridel, Ph.D. Candidate  
School of Kinesiology and Health Studies  
Queen’s University

**Research Supervisor:**
Dr. Mary Louise Adams  
School of Kinesiology and Health Studies  
Queen’s University

**Tel:** (613) 533-6000 ext. 74699  
**Email:** william.bridel@queensu.ca

**Tel:** (613) 533-6000 ext. 74723  
**Email:** mla1@queensu.ca

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**General Information:**

My name is William Bridel and I am a doctoral student at Queen’s University in the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies and I am a two-time Ironman finisher. I am conducting research on the Ironman for my doctoral dissertation. My advisor for this project is Dr. Mary Louise Adams. My project involves exploring the experiences of Ironman participants, with a particular interest in your ideas around pain, pleasure, health, and fitness.
One component of this project is interviews with individuals who have completed or who are training for an Ironman or Iron-distance race. Interview participants will be asked to take part in one conversational interview, which should last between 90 and 120 minutes. These interviews will be digitally audio recorded and will be about experiences in Ironman and sport and fitness more generally. I am also interested in ideas about health and the interview will include questions about pain and pleasure.

The interviews will be confidential and a fictitious name will be used when I transcribe the interview. You may choose to withdraw from the interview process at any point and, upon request, I will destroy all materials gathered prior to time of withdrawal. Further explanation of consent, anonymity, and withdrawal follows below as part of the Participant Consent form.

The purposes of this project are to gain greater understanding of the growth in popularity of the Ironman as a recreational pursuit. The project will also provide the opportunity for Ironman participants to share their stories and opinions, contributing to contemporary understandings of health and fitness in Canada.

**Participant Consent**

I, ____________________________________________, hereby accept to participate in this study conducted by Mr. William Bridel, Ph.D. candidate of the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies at Queen’s University.

I understand that the general goal of this study is to explore my experiences in Ironman/Iron-distance triathlon, and sport and fitness more generally. I also understand that I will be asked to discuss my ideas related to pain and pleasure as related to sport, fitness, and/or health. My participation will consist of participating in one interview to discuss these ideas. The interviews will last approximately 90 to 120 minutes and will
take place at a time and place of my choosing. I further understand that the data collected will be used for William Bridel’s doctoral dissertation and will possibly be published at some point in the future.

I accept that all materials collected as a result of my participation will be used only for research purposes, and that confidentiality will be protected at all times. I am assured that the digital audio recordings of each interview and the resultant transcripts will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the office of William Bridel and will be accessible only to William Bridel. I also understand that the digital audio recordings will be destroyed at the completion of the study (August, 2010) and that the transcripts of the interviews will be stored for 10 years in a locked filing cabinet in William Bridel’s office at Queen’s University and then any subsequent institution with which he may be affiliated, after which time they too will be destroyed.

I have also been assured by the researcher that any information that I have shared will remain strictly confidential. My anonymity is also guaranteed. I will be assigned a pseudonym by the researcher and this pseudonym will be used in the interview transcription. Should the researcher cite parts of my interview in his study, my pseudonym will be used and any information that may reveal my identity will be deleted.

I acknowledge that given the nature of this research, I will be required to express or share personal information and as a result there may be a minimal level of emotional discomfort at certain moments. I have received assurance that the researcher will do everything he can to minimize the risk of discomfort. Moreover, I will not be required to respond to any questions that may bring discomfort, and should I choose not to answer a question, there will no negative consequences for me. The interview will be conducted in a very informal manner where the questions will be posed in simple language. In the event that I do not understand a question being posed, it will be rephrased in such a manner that it can be better understood. Finally, I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any point and for any reason. Upon request, all data collected up to time
of withdrawal will be destroyed. I understand that this request will be respected by the researcher, without prejudice.

I understand that I will be asked to sign both copies of the consent form, and that one of the copies will be for me (the other, for the researcher).

For any additional information, I have been informed that I can contact William Bridel or Dr. Mary Louise Adams (William Bridel’s supervisor) at any time. If I have any questions with regards to the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of Research Services:

Dr. Joan Stevenson, Chair  
General Research Ethics Board  
Office of Research Services, Queen's University  
Dunning Hall, Room 113  
94 University Ave., Kingston, Ontario  
Canada, K7L 3N6  
Tel: 613-533-6081

I grant permission for the digital audio recording of my interviews for the purpose of this study. I understand that my interviews will be transcribed and provided to me at a later date at which time I will have the opportunity to re-read and change, remove or correct any passages that I feel may not be appropriate. I agree to, and understand, each of these stipulations:

Yes:  
No:
I freely and voluntarily consent to take part in this research project.

Participant: _______________________________  __________

Signature  Date

Researcher:

I, _______________________________, declare having explained the objectives, the nature and any inconvenience of the study to the participant mentioned above. I commit myself to the strictest confidentiality with respect to the information received in this study.

Researcher: _______________________________  __________

Signature  Date
### List of Interview Participants

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* As defined by the participants during the interview process

** “No plans” means that these participants are fully intending on doing another Ironman but haven’t made a specific commitment to a race. “Unsure” means that these participants haven’t ruled out the possibility of doing another Ironman.
Appendix D

Interview Guide

Introduction
a) Purpose of the study
b) Overview and signature of the consent form
c) Information on the recording of the interview

PART I: Historical Experiences in/of Sport and Fitness
a) How would you describe your background in sport and/or fitness?
b) How would you describe yourself as an athlete?
c) What do sport and/or fitness mean to you?

PART II: Ironman Experiences
a) What got you interested in Ironman? What are your present goals? What are your future goals?
b) How would you define your Ironman participation?
c) What would you consider your best Ironman experience and why? What would you consider your worst Ironman experience and why?
d) If someone asked you why you do Ironman, what would you tell them? Would you encourage someone else to do an Ironman – why or why not?
e) How would you describe the sources of enjoyment/constraints in your Ironman experiences?
f) Do you typically train on your own or with a group? If combination of both, what sort of time is spent on your own and with the group?
g) How would you describe how you feel during an Ironman? How would you describe how you feel at the end of it?
h) What is your daily schedule like? What is your weekly schedule like? How much of your time is spent training for Ironman?
i) How do you think other people in your life would describe your participation in Ironman?
j) How did you (or how do you) learn about Ironman training and racing? Do you subscribe to any magazines? Do you watch television broadcasts of the sport? What role does the Internet play, if any?

**PART III: Conceptualizations of Pain and Pleasure**

a) How would you define the term “pain?” How would you define the term “pleasure?”

b) Using these definitions, how would you define the roles of pain and pleasure in your life? In Ironman? In fitness in general?

c) How would you define the particular type of pain you experience in training for/racing in an Ironman? How would you define the particular type of pleasure you experience in training for/racing in an Ironman?

d) Do you think it is necessary to experience “pain” during Ironman?

e) Does the type of pleasure you experience in/from Ironman outweigh the pain you experience?

f) Can you talk about the role of “treatments” in your Ironman training (e.g., medical, chiropractic, ART, physio)…

**Part IV: Conceptualizations of Health and Fitness**

a) What does “being healthy,” mean to you? What are key words that you would use to define health? Can you describe to me what a healthy individual would look like?

b) Do you care about health? How much? Why?

c) Where do you think your ideas on health come from? Where do you get information on health? Is there a lot of information out there? Are you interested in this information? Why/Why not?

d) What does “being fit” mean to you? What are key words that you would use to define fitness?

e) Do you care about fitness? How much? Why?

f) Where do you think your ideas on fitness come from? Where do you get information on fitness? Is there a lot of information out there? Are you interested
in this information? Why/Why not?
g) Which is more important to you—looking or being healthy?
h) What role does the Ironman “community” play in your understandings of health and fitness?

Conclusion

a) Review of purpose
b) Demographic information: ethnicity, education, employment, and age
c) Additional information participant may wish to add
d) Next steps