Abstract: This research explores how and why the experience of being a (sub-)elite sports performer manifests itself in dietary decisions. This is a novel contribution to the existing literature which has tended to focus either on attempts to develop the most effective nutritional practice to facilitate performance enhancement or to pathologise the current behaviour of performers from a narrow selection of sports in order to propose ‘cures’ for this behaviour.

The argument of this paper is that (sub-)elite sports performers are strongly affected by a ‘discourse of excellence’ and that it is this discourse which most significantly impacts their dietary decisions; causing them to ‘eat for excellence’. This is illustrated in part by the increased risk among some performers of developing pathological eating behaviours whilst competing. However, using data derived from qualitative interviews with eleven (sub-)elite performers in the United Kingdom, the study makes an original contribution by exploring how and why being guided by the same discourse of excellence can lead others to develop ‘immunity’ to such disorders.

Keywords: diet, performance, excellence, eating disorder

Introduction
The contemporary debate concerning diet and physical activity is mainly framed by health scares about obesity, and attention has been directed towards encouraging members of society to “eat less and move more”. Such a climate can cast a shadow over those for whom high levels of physical activity and regulated diets are an occupational given. Although much attention has been paid to the eating habits of sports performers the existing literature predominantly focuses on two areas: The natural sciences have been primarily concerned with the potentially profitable investigation of how diet can be utilised to enhance athletic performance, whereas psychologists and sociologists seem preoccupied with addressing the high incidence of eating disorders, often suggesting ways to ‘cure’ this pathologised behaviour. This research shares neither of these aims. Instead it makes a novel contribution by focusing on how and why the experience of being a (sub-)elite sports performer manifests itself in dietary decisions.

The culture of (sub-)elite sport is imbued with a ‘discourse of excellence’ which, to a large extent, defines who can legitimately claim an authentic athletic identity. The argument of this paper is that (sub-)elite sports performers are strong-
ly affected by this discourse and that it is this discourse which most significantly impacts their dietary decisions. This is illustrated in part by the increased risk of performers developing pathological eating behaviours whilst competing. However, this study shows that the influence of this discourse is also evident in the ability of some performers to develop ‘immunity’ to such disorders.

In order to explore and explain how and why the experience of being an (sub-)elite sports performer manifests itself in dietary decisions the article begins by reviewing the existing literature that contributes significantly to our understanding of the ethos and ethics of contemporary elite sport. It establishes how and why it is possible to speak of elite sport being imbued with a discourse of excellence and how this discourse is likely to affect the experience of sport performers. Through an understanding of these issues it is possible to better comprehend and appreciate the prevalence of eating disorders amongst sports performers.

Too often the existing literature concerning the relationship between eating disorders and sport fails to capture the uniqueness of the elite athletic experience and as a result is limited in its ability to accurately explain the dietary decisions, pathological or otherwise, of (sub-)elite sports performers. As such, the next section reviews the sport/eating disorder literature and analyses the legitimacy of the rarely disputed main contentions of these works. This literature review identifies the explanatory value of existing research whilst also exposing its limitations and hence gaps to be filled by this study. Data from interviews with eleven (sub-)elite sports performers in the UK were interpreted through the frames of a number of key theorists (Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman in particular) to accurately describe and explain the experience of ‘eating for excellence’. By identifying that (sub-)elite sports performers, influenced by the dominant progressive discourse of elite sport, learn to ‘eat for excellence’ this research shows how and why dietary decisions can become so significant for them. It also describes and explains not only why being an (sub-)elite sports performer can facilitate the development of pathologised eating behaviour but also how it can develop a resistance or ‘immunity’ to such behaviour. The contention here is that, rather than being contradictory processes, these are actually different expressions of the same behaviour.

**Sporting Subcultures and the “Supranormal”**

Existing social science research on the dietary practice of sport performers has tended to focus on ‘pathological’ behaviour. However, the notion of “positive deviance” allows us to view such behaviour as entirely in keeping with the subcultural norms and behaviours of those involved and, thereby, to appreciate them as products of particular social fields and the discourses informing them (Ewald & Jiobu, 1985). Far from labelling these performers and their behaviours counter-normative, and therefore deviant, they can be understood as “pronorma-
Eating for Excellence: Eating Disorders in Elite Sport – Inevitability and ‘Immunity’

tive” (Ewald & Jiobu, 1985, 144). Hughes and Coakley’s (1991) concept of the sport ethic and the significance that achieving an authentic athletic identity has on dietary decisions helps develop this point. They propose that the value system within sporting subcultures enables those who adhere to its principles to be defined as “real athletes” (Coakley, 1991, 307). They proffer that legitimately claiming an authentic athletic identity depends on compliance with four criteria: making sacrifices for The Game (read sport); striving for distinction; accepting risks and playing through pain; and refusing to accept limits in the pursuit of possibilities. For these authors, deviance is “the result of being too committed to the goals and norms of sport” (Coakley, 1991, 308). For instance, committing a professional foul or maintaining an extremely low body weight can be viewed as “different only in degree, not in kind” (Coakley, 1991, 316) from behaviour considered generally acceptable and praiseworthy. Positive deviants, then, can be seen to over-conform to the normative standards of their sporting subculture and, consequently, rather than being (mis)understood as deviant or disordered, it is more appropriate to conceptualise them as “supranormal” (Coakley, 1991, 318). A classic example of a “supranormal” individual is the anorexic female gymnast who has learned the value of slimness in her subculture. Why, though, have these criteria come to be recognisable across competitive sports as defining features of athletic identity?

Heikkala (1993, 402) advises that the “basic structural principle of high-performance sport” is the “constant enhancement of performance”. This “performance principle” causes sporting subcultures to transform “what medical common sense calls the ‘pathological’ into a ‘normal’ routine” (Hoberman, 1992, 68). As such, sports generally, but particularly (sub-)elite competition, come to legitimise (if not officially, then culturally) and normalise any practice which aims to progress current levels of performance. This inevitably creates sporting subcultures where “athletes are all seeking the extra edge […] the superior diet, the performance enhancing drug, vitamin, or herb” (Lopiano & Zotos, 1992, 276). To feed this seemingly insatiable performance enhancement, Heikkala (1993, 399) contends that “discipline is both a means and prerequisite of sport” and normalises behaviour, which outside of the subcultural context, would be considered deviant and undesirable. This creates a culture and mindset where “every deviation, assertion of personal freedom, and example of neglect is costly in the economy of performance enhancement” (Heikkala, 1993, 400). In such a culture it is easy to appreciate that when diet and weight management are identified as important aspects of preparation, and consequently incorporated into training plans, they will intersect with the sport ethic and can become obsessional areas of athletes’ lives (Atkinson, 2011; Johns, 1993; 1998; Johns & Johns, 2000).

Although pathologies such as eating disorders manifest in individuals, they are far from idiosyncrasies. Nixon (1993, 190) contends that performers are ensnared in a “sportsnet”; a subculture informed by an ethic encouraging certain attitudes. Inter-
action within sport subcultures causes the “crystallisation of norms” (Hughes & Coakley, 1991, 320) and, through acculturation, ‘pathological’ attitudes can become accepted and adhered to. Atkinson and Wilson (2002, 387) propose that in such subcultures “bodily sacrifices and rituals are often part of negotiating identity during one’s career as a subcultural member”. As a result, social conformity becomes “bodily mediated” (Heikkala, 1993, 400) with corporeal appearance and practices acted upon the body (e.g., choosing how to train or to eat) becoming socially significant. Because sporting culture is based on what Hoberman (1992, 83) labels “a linear notion of progress like the citius, altius, fortius of Pierre de Coubertin”, the athletic body can be considered disciplined but “ever-incomplete” (Heikkala, 1993, 403). The Olympic motto translates into English as “swifter, higher, stronger”; an unachievable ideal. The “er” suffix connotes there is always something more to aim for and actively pursue, which is why the athletic body can never be considered ‘complete’. It is this notion which makes Hughes and Coakley’s (1991, 320) “sport ethic” so useful, as they argue that positive deviance occurs when this motto “is taken seriously, and to the extreme”. If the extreme is considered a point where a performer’s health is put at risk, the readily accepted notion that ‘unhealthy’ behaviour can/will improve performance within sport subcultures (Atkinson, 2011; Atkinson & Young, 2008; Theberge, 2008) means that it would actually be a refusal to conform to these pathological practices by those socialised within these subcultures which could be considered deviant. It is this reasoning which causes practices widely considered tortuous, e.g., gruelling physical training and/or restrictive and regulated diets, to be perceived as “cognitively, emotionally and socially rewarding” (Atkinson & Young, 2008, 110). The rugby player who eats so much that s/he feels physically sick in an attempt to build muscle or the endurance cyclist who consumes half as many calories as s/he expends in order to achieve a low bodyweight and thus be more economical on the bike are both cases of performers who have learned ‘what it takes’ to compete in their sport and to be legitimately considered an athlete. The only difference is the specific demands and subsequent subcultural norms of their sports.

Not everyone will internalise it fully, but for Atkinson and Young (2008, 9), the sport ethic is a maxim “so pervasive that most athletes must encounter it and reconcile themselves to it at some point in their sport careers”. Hughes and Coakley (1991, 312) reason that as “self-identification becomes lodged within sport, a person is increasingly susceptible to control that is grounded in the demands of the sport and sport groups”. As such, the majority of sport participants will consciously or subconsciously be aware of, and act upon, appropriate and desirable ways of presenting their bodies and making dietary decisions (with these two factors inextricably linked). Because different sports and their associated subcultures develop specific behaviours considered acceptable/desirable and unacceptable/undesirable, arguably a preoccupation with diagnosable eating disorders should be avoided as this obscures much
that is sociologically interesting. By appreciating this we begin to see the anorexic gymnast’s calorie restriction and the ostensibly perpetual consumption of protein by rugby players as different expressions of the same kind of behaviour. This suggests that a ‘discourse of excellence’, and how this informs athletic identity, can become hugely influential in the construction of supranormal sporting nutritional habits.

**Eating Disorders in Sport**

As Sundgot-Borgen (1999) proposes, within the extensive literature concerning eating disorders in sport three contentions are rarely disputed. Firstly, the prevalence of eating disorders is higher among athletes than non-athletes. Secondly, it is predominantly female athletes who experience these disorders. Lastly, sports which emphasise leanness or are categorised by weight will have a higher incidence than those that do not. These core assumptions have varying degrees of legitimacy which will now be briefly explored.

At the outset, the term “eating disorder” needs clarification. Strictly speaking the term refers to “the clinically diagnosable syndromes of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa” (Wilson & Eldredge, 1992, 115). Although a third category commonly known as “eating disorder not otherwise specified” exists, because the criteria for this category are that someone meets some but not all of the criteria for either anorexia or bulimia, there are arguably only two categories and thereafter different degrees of variation (Beals, 2004; Fairburn & Walsh, 2002; Kalodner, 2003; Thompson & Sherman, 1993). Other conditions have also been identified, for instance Dosil and Garcés de Los Fayos (2007, 77) describe “orthorexia” as being “characterized by a pathological obsession with consuming healthy foods” and also highlight a condition, predominately affecting male performers, where muscular physiques are obsessively strived after, called bigorexia/muscle dysmorphia/reverse anorexia. Pope et al. (2000) term this “The Adonis Complex” and contend that men are increasingly preoccupied with enlarging musculature, exemplified and exacerbated in contemporary times by the use of anabolic steroids. Although these conditions are recognised, they are not clinically diagnosed as eating disorders. This means that the three main contentions identified by Sundgot-Borgen (1999) can be reduced to acknowledging that athletes, especially females and/or those who compete in sports where leanness/weight is emphasised, are more susceptible to conditions characterised by perfectionism, self-starvation, excessive exercising, obsessions with thinness, over-compliance, denial of discomfort, eating binges and purges. Thompson and Sherman (1999) argue that this is hardly revelatory, further contending that these characteristics are not simply found in athletes but are in part actually responsible for successful performance. Wilmore (1992a; 1992b) reasons that few athletes or coaches escape the fixation on weight prevalent in sport. Thus, body weights which are associated with elite performance become goals for aspiring athletes. This becomes problematic in a clinical sense
when weights below what is considered ‘healthy’ are strongly recommended with the “implicit message that sport performance is more important than the athlete’s health” (Thompson & Sherman, 1993, 36). Because “most athletes are willing to live up to the ideal of being an athlete” (Johns, 1993, 198), it is not surprising that Brownell et al. (1992) and Byrne (2002), amongst others, have suggested that considerable overlap exists between the attitudes and behaviour of certain committed and successful sport performers and people with eating disorders.

A focus on clinically diagnosable eating disorders may suggest that a simple dichotomy exists between those who deviate from normative patterns of eating and those who do not. It is of course much more subjective than this. Andersen (1992, 178) describes how “in the midst of training for a sports event, it might not be clear who has an eating disorder and who is simply a committed athlete”. The lines between pathology and the actions of an aspiring performer are thus blurred and, as such, a focus only on athletes with eating disorders misses much in terms of sociological significance. This is where Beals’ (2004) distinction between eating disorders and disordered eating is useful. Disordered eating describes “the spectrum of abnormal and harmful eating behaviours that are used in a misguided attempt to lose weight or maintain an abnormally low or unhealthy weight” (2004, 4). Although similarities exist between people with eating disorders and sport performers, there is usually a significant difference. For those with an eating disorder thinness is often the only goal (Beals, 2004) while many sport performers strive to be thin in the belief that this will lead to improved performance (Meredith & Stern, 1992; Weingarten, 1992). Disordered eating is therefore the grey area between clinically diagnosable disorders and a ‘healthy’ preoccupation with diet. Appreciating the existence of this grey area, Sundgot-Borgen (1993) developed the concept of “anorexia athletica”: a condition where athletes at least 5% below their “normal” weight (in relation to age/height) still demonstrate an intense fear of gaining weight. This condition acknowledges that whilst many athletes do not have an eating disorder, they are still preoccupied with their weight/bodies and their eating habits can be classified as disordered. Whether disordered is the correct term is debatable. Arguably, eating with such clear intentions to improve performance is in fact characterised by order (Atkinson, 2011). Beals (2004, 7) fortifies this contention explaining that for many athletes, “achieving and maintaining extremely low body weight is not a disorder but rather a requisite for optimal performance, and thus it becomes a significant part of how they define athletic success”. However, this reasoning and “anorexia athletica” ignore those at the opposite end of the spectrum who, for example, whilst already being very muscular are preoccupied with increasing their muscle mass; developing what could be described as disordered eating habits in an attempt to achieve their corporeal goals to fulfil their sporting ambitions.
One of the limitations of existing eating disorder literature is its focus on women. Orbach (1978) and Bordo (1993) acknowledge that both sexes are susceptible to eating disorders but explain the higher incidence amongst women as resulting from the more apparent contradiction of fat and femininity as opposed to masculinity. However, there are also preferred male body shapes, which many men try and align themselves with (Andersen, 1992; 2002; Kearney-Cook & Steichen-Asch, 1990; Pope et al., 2000). But because much of the behaviour involved in attaining such a body involves gaining weight and thus does not comply with the criteria for anorexia or bulimia, men (and some women) who may be just as obsessive about their bodies and eating behaviours do not contribute to the statistical evidence on the incidence of eating disorders. The narrow clinical categorisation of eating disorders, which necessitates meeting “sex-biased requirements” (Andersen, 1992, 180), in some respects creates a self-fulfilling prophecy which continually suggests that these conditions are a ‘female problem’.

There is an increasing awareness that there has been a focus on “high-risk” and/or “thin-build” sports within eating disorder research (Beals, 2004; Brownell & Rodin, 1992; Dosil & Diaz, 2007). Research with this focus has helped highlight that sport, which is generally perceived to contribute to health, can also do the opposite by, for instance, encouraging practices such as weight cycling and using drugs to increase/maintain/lose weight (Brownell & Steen, 1992; Pomeroy & Mitchell, 1992). However, to further understand the relationship between sport and eating behaviours, more investigative research needs to be conducted into sports where less certain hypotheses can be drawn prior to commencing the study. Does the pathology lie with sport in general or within particular sports? The existing literature does not provide a definitive answer as all too often the uniqueness of the elite athletic experience is either ignored or unproblematically appropriated within existing frameworks of knowledge which take no account of the distinctive differences between members of the wider population and (sub-)elite athletes. The following research attempts to engage with such a process by focusing on (sub-)elite performers, from a range of sports, who could reasonably be expected to be significantly affected by the discourse of excellence which typically informs this level of competition. This allows the effects of the elite sporting experience on performers’ dietary decisions to be examined more generally rather than narrowly focusing on behaviour associated with clinically diagnosable eating disorders.

**Theoretical Considerations**

Throughout the discussion of the research findings various theoretical tools from a number of academics have been used to conceptualise the collected data; chief among them Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Erving Goffman. Although these theorists are by no means unified in their approaches to the social world, they have
all provided theoretical insights which are considered useful here for analysing the dietary decisions of (sub-/)
elite sport performers. Although adopting an eclectic approach when using theory increases the risk of producing a disjointed analysis, the assumption in this analysis is that by drawing strategically upon and synthesising the work of key theorists, instead of relying on a single theoretical lens, a coherent and arguably more insightful piece of research can be constructed.

Some of Foucault’s theoretical concepts have been utilised here to describe how an ethos such as the ‘sport ethic’ becomes influential within (sub-/)
elite sporting sub-cultures and constitutes a ‘discourse of excellence’. Specifically, his concepts of “self-surveillance”/“panopticism” (Foucault, 1995) and “technologies of the self” (Foucault, 1988) are used to indicate how discursive influences can operate at the individual level. These theoretical insights are complemented by Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of “habitus” which describes how discourses such as the ‘sport ethic’ become embodied. Furthermore, his contention that “eating habits, especially when represented solely by the produce consumed, cannot of course be considered independently of the whole lifestyle” (Bourdieu, 1984: 185), helps to illustrate why the dietary decisions of (sub-/)
elite athletes are so highly associated with the wider context of their lives and the subcultural norms within which they are immersed. Goffman (1959; 1963) had an astute awareness of how such social norms lead to particular ways of presenting oneself, becoming praiseworthy or stigmatising depending on the different social environments and culture/discourses informing them. His dramaturgical approach helps us to understand how the dietary decisions made by (sub-/)
elite sports performers informs their identity. The application of these theoretical concepts and how they have been used to help make sense of the dietary decisions of (sub-/)
elite performers will become apparent in the discussion of the findings

Methodology

Research Design

The main consideration when designing this study was how best to collect data which would facilitate conclusions being made about how and why the experience of being an (sub-/)
elite sport performer manifests itself in dietary decisions. As such, focusing on any one sport or social grouping within (sub-/)
elite performers, e.g., female gymnasts or male bodybuilders, was considered to be too restrictive. The approach taken in this research had to be far more investigative in nature and include performers from previously un(der)-researched sports. Essentially, the questions posed were, do the ethos and ethics of (sub-/)
elite sport, irrespective of discipline specificity, influence the dietary decisions that performers make and if so how does this manifest itself? In order to answer these questions it was necessary to sample performers from a range of sporting disciplines who competed at an (sub-/)
elite level. However, it was
unnecessary for them to be grouped in other significant ways, for instance all being a particular sex. It was felt that selecting a sample in this open way would allow any common themes uncovered to be legitimately ascribed to the “elite sporting experience” (as opposed to, for instance, gendered explanations) as this would be the sole factor linking everyone in the sample.

Data Collection
The most appropriate way to capture the lived experiences of (sub-/elite sport performers was to conduct interviews which were open and flexible, and which encouraged thoughtful and evocative responses. This style of interview has been described in various ways (e.g., Berg, 2007; Elliot, 2005; Kvale, 1996; Silverman, 2006) and, although subtle differences exist, the objective of all of these styles is to avoid rigid and prescribed answers, encouraging instead rich and thoughtful responses by offering both the interviewer and interviewee a certain amount of freedom. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were chosen to permit main themes to be prominent in the questioning whilst allowing freedom to digress.

It was appreciated from the outset that (sub-/elite sport performers in the UK are a challenging demographic both to contact and obtain research time with and are therefore a population which researchers increasingly struggle to access. Recruiting participants was facilitated by my personal involvement in sport as a participant, student and teacher. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity and the project was approved by the university’s ethics body. As such, all the names used in this article are pseudonyms. Eventual interviewees volunteered their time and gave informed consent. Interviews were then arranged for a time and place which was most convenient and comfortable for the interviewee. This meant that interviews took place in a variety of locations including interviewees’ homes and local cafes. Eventually, eleven interviews with (sub-/elite athletes (see Table 1) were conducted. The range of interview duration (18 to 74 minutes) indicates the individualised nature of each interview (the majority lasted between 30 to 50 minutes). To encourage meaningful dialogue an active solicitation technique (cf. Atkinson, 2007, 172) which involved, when necessary, exposing myself as an “insider” was utilised. It was felt that making the interviewees aware that the interviewer was, to some extent, ‘one of us’ would put them at ease and encourage them to talk more freely. It was also expected that participants would appreciate talking to someone who understood their point of view and practice and, therefore, would not perceive them as odd or strange for engaging in nutritional practices which could be considered aberrant and/or deviant in wider society. This helped to build rapport with interviewees and to achieving the ability to ask meaningful questions, and this was conducive to sharing what is considered by some to be quite personal information.
All participants were committed to performing at an elite level and the majority compete(d) internationally. As already noted, by representing performers from a range of sports it was possible to identify themes which facilitated the drawing of conclusions about (sub-)elite sport performers more generally rather than specific sexes, classes, ethnicities or sports. Research aiming to isolate any of these criteria in order to investigate how they influence the nutritional practice of (sub-)elite performers is both of merit and required. However, the focus here was the level of competition and performers’ ambitions to excel. The sports were not selected arbitrarily though. The aim was to represent sports which have been extensively, but also disproportionately researched, e.g., female endurance athletes and male bodybuilders, and those neglected, e.g., team and racket sports as well as other explosive activities. In sum, by selecting the sample in this way the aim was to explore how a common sport ethic shared throughout (sub-)elite competition might facilitate/encourage performers to approach dietary decisions in distinctive ways.

<table>
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<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sprint Swimming</td>
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<td>Middle-distance Running</td>
<td>Tennis</td>
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<td>Bodybuilding</td>
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<td>Rugby (two respondents)</td>
<td>Middle-distance Running</td>
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<td>Skeleton Bob</td>
<td>Open water/endurance Swimming</td>
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Table 1: Sample Characteristics

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Each individual transcript was analysed soon after the interview had taken place. Salient comments and significant themes were identified in each interview transcript. Once all the interviews had been completed and each transcript analysed individually these comments and themes were collated in order to identify emergent conceptual themes.

As with any qualitative research, data derived from interviews cannot be considered to represent ‘reality’ in any singular or simplistic manner. The social world presents us with multiple realities to explore and attempt to explain and there are many possible interpretations of any given data set. The challenge is to use data to present “reality-congruent knowledge” (Maguire & Young, 2002, 3) concerning the subject at hand. This is largely dependent upon the researcher’s ability to accurately analyse the collected data, as data seldom, if ever, speak for themselves. If interviewees were not completely honest in their responses, it remains sociologically interesting to engage with explanations as to why they felt they needed to present themselves in a particular way. However, there was no reason to suspect participants of presenting a reality at odds with their lived experiences.
Findings

The two most original contributions to emerge from the data analysis are conceived here as ‘eating for excellence’ and ‘eating disorders in elite sport: inevitability and ‘immunity’.

Eating for Excellence

Using a Bourdieusian and Foucauldian framework, Hughes and Coakley’s (1991) “sport ethic” can be viewed as a discourse of excellence informing sporting fields/subcultures. Within this discourse capital is associated with particular bodies and behaviours, with performers coming to habituate, and in a very real sense, embody this logic. The contention is that this discourse becomes manifest in the “habitus” of these performers (Bourdieu, 1984). What are considered “legitimate” bodies and uses of the body (Bourdieu, 1993) by performers are thus appearances and actions aligned with this discourse of excellence. The common pursuit of excellence establishes norms in sporting subcultures (Heikkala, 1993; Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Performers’ dietary decisions are therefore subject to comparison with normative nutritional practice within particular subcultures and as a result they learn legitimate ways of eating and drinking (Chapman, 1997). Nutritional practice thus becomes another aspect of performers’ lives informed by, and usually subsequently constructed in alignment with, the performance principle. This causes dietary decisions to become affirmative and/or indicative of the dedication and discipline that is expected of “real athletes” (Hughes & Coakley, 1991, 307) and is evident in the following comments from an interviewee explaining why he made the dietary decisions that he did:

there are so many inputs [...] it is hard to attribute how much of each one affects the outcome so you just try and maximise all inputs or make them all as effective as possible. (Steve)

This desire to maximise performance can be considered responsible for the majority of interviewees choosing brown, over white, bread, rice and/or pasta as well as low fat ‘alternatives’. As Foucault (1995, 140) contends, “for the disciplined man [sic], as for the true believer, no detail is unimportant”. Whether informed by a coach, teammate, nutritionist, magazine, website, or their own logic, if performers believed, for instance, that eating brown bread would benefit their performance this was extremely likely to impact their dietary decisions. Loy et al. (2003, 354) contend that, in sport subcultures, although “not always medically correct or scientifically sound, most training and dietary regimes are perceived as proper and legitimate”. Legitimacy derives from a belief that they are performance enhancing. Bourdieu (1993, 128) writes of people’s attempts to attain “intrinsic profits”, e.g., improving the body’s capacity to perform, and reasons “real or imagined, it does not matter much, since they are real inasmuch as they are really expected”. Therefore, whether choosing brown bread or
adhering to pathological nutritional practices are actually performance enhancing or not is less significant than whether they are perceived to be.

Evidence of performers monitoring their nutritional practice in order to comply with norms which are rooted in the discourse of excellence was apparent in the study and can be linked to Foucault’s (1995) notion of panopticism. Panopticism, which is also referred to as self-surveillance/-policing, describes how somebody becomes institutionalised by internalising a system of surveillance which was initially necessary for their subjection. Shogan (2002, 105) describes that “the watchful eye of the coach and the normalising standards of the sport become embodied”. Athletes internalise a “need” (Shogan, 1999, 13) for discipline and control as they recognise that achieving their goals “demands” (Heikkala, 1993, 403) this. Thus, they become “invested in their own conformity” (Shogan, 2002, 107). Foucault (1995, 200, 214) describes this as a “visibility trap” where the external gaze of surveillance becomes largely redundant as a “faceless gaze” is internalised and thereby embodied. Once at a level of self-surveillance, the performer is always aware of the “morality of obedience” (Foucault, 1995, 166) and as such all decisions become moral ones. Therefore, missing training or making dietary decisions considered indulgent rather than necessary becomes ‘bad’, ‘unjustifiable’, and/or ‘immoral’. All of the (sub-)elite performers interviewed were conscious of choosing diets perceived to have a positive impact on performance. Commonly, this established a binary of choices that were variably described by the participants as “junk”/“bad”/“death” and “healthy”/“good”/“clean”. The basis of this binary was the perceived effect these choices would have on bodily form, and ultimately performance, but it was not usually a reflection of the pleasure derived from them. One performer’s description of his weekly shopping trip illustrates this:

coming to the treat aisle would be like ‘I really do want that’ and it would be like a debate. I suppose there was an inner thing of ‘am I going to let myself have this?’ I was definitely conscious of the fact that this is bad, like you couldn’t eat it without thinking about it. (Steve)

As such, dietary decisions become acts of discipline for (sub-)elite performers which are upheld by the faceless gaze of self-surveillance. This is not to say that performers remained absolutely disciplined, but it caused dietary decisions to be viewed through the moral lens of panopticism. If the effects of consuming something were considered contrary to the performer’s sporting aims then it was common that, through association, feelings of guilt would follow its consumption (Giddens, 1991; Rappoport, 2003). These feelings of guilt were sufficient enough to ensure some performers prevented themselves from (regularly) straying from the path of discipline. One team sport performer commented:
I never thought about that before but now that I set my goals so high I know that every day counts so everything I put in my body could be the difference [...] I feel guilty every time I have something unhealthy [...] even a couple of pieces of chocolate, a bite of chocolate, then I feel like ‘oh I might not make it now’.

(Juliette)

This illustrates how effective panopticism is in maintaining discipline and encouraging ‘food fascism’ (Lupton, 1996). This behaviour was less evident amongst interviewees who focused more on maintaining corporeal discipline, thus using their bodies as gauges that would then dictate their eating habits. Because these performers expressed that they could still conform to the subcultural “body rules” (Atkinson & Wilson, 2002, 387) or “perfection codes” (Evans et al., 2008, 57) and maintain high levels of performance despite making dietary decisions others avoided, they did not feel the need to restrict themselves, as severely, in relation to things they enjoyed. The following admissions demonstrate this:

I am happy to eat things which aren’t good for me because I don’t feel like it changes, possibly my appearance more than my performance, but if something doesn’t inhibit my performance I am not afraid to eat foods which would certainly be regarded as unhealthy. (Michael)

I responded to the training in terms of whatever I ate it came off [...] As long as I was still thin for me I could get away with eating out every night and I wasn’t putting on weight and it wasn’t difficult for me to hold it off so why would I restrict when I could go out and still be the same weight? (Steve)

This is perhaps unsurprising considering that, in sport subcultures, levels of commitment and conformity are often felt to be represented corporally (Drummond, 2010; Heikkala, 1993; Helstein, 2007). Regardless of idiosyncrasy, the significant seed planted in the minds of all of the (sub-/)(sub-/elite performers was that diet should aid their sporting ambitions by supporting/enhancing performance. In this sense, the dietary practice of (sub-/)(sub-/elite performers’ can be conceptualised as a technology of the self (Chapman, 1997). Foucault (1988, 18) describes technologies of the self as operations which people choose to perform in order to “attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality”. One performer (Juliette) commented that she likes “to think I am invincible. If I am eating the right food it gives me an upper hand”, which seems to encapsulate this concept. However, this approach to diet most commonly manifested itself in the analogy of treating food as fuel, for example:

I think of it as fuel really [...] it’s just all because I am eating this and the results are going to be like I’m going to trim up and I’m going to get in shape. (Sam)
I think of it more as getting enough fuel for performance-wise (Michelle)

Therefore, dietary practice as a technology of the self was evident in the way each interviewee described incorporating dietary decisions into their training plans and how they perceived them to contribute to their pursuit of excellence.

Agency can easily be neglected when using Bourdieusian and Foucauldian frameworks. However, it was apparent that dietary decisions were part of the “front” presented by (sub-/)/elite performers, as the following quotes suggest:

if you have prepared the protein shake before you go training and then drink it immediately after because that is when it is at its most effective and if people are doing that you can tell they are making that extra effort to maximize their performance. (Gareth)

I think there is a lot of it that, it is a sign of commitment and I don’t think an outward sign necessarily [...] If I felt like I was doing alright with my food, then I guess like I felt like I was not impinging on the other aspects where I was trying to work really hard. (Steve)

Goffman (1959, 56) explains that “individuals often foster the impression that the routine they are presently performing is their only routine or at least their most essential one”. By consuming a diet perceived to be maximising performance, the “front” presented is one of the “real athlete” striving for excellence (Goffman, 1959; Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Interviewees clearly appreciated this and behaved in certain ways to indicate to themselves and to others that they were a committed/”real” athlete. This ‘act’ was not homogenous as notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ dietary decisions were largely sport-specific and therefore neither creditable nor discreditable in themselves (Goffman, 1963). As such, stigmatised dietary decisions in some sporting subcultures may be considered necessary and, thus, praiseworthy in others. Interviewees appreciated that being seen to conform to praiseworthy nutritional practices fortified their identity as a (sub-/)/elite performer. However, although legitimately claiming an athletic identity was important to them it was the desire to excel which caused them to actually comply with dietary norms rather than simply act as if this was the case.

Eating Disorders in Elite Sport: Inevitability and ‘Immunity’

The predominant perception of diet as a technology of the self amongst (sub-/)/elite performers suggests that at this level of competition clinical conditions are most likely to result from performers, informed by a discourse of excellence, attempting to meet the demands believed to bring success. For instance, supporting Malcom’s (2003) observations about female softball players, all participants were concerned with presenting appropriately athletic bodies irrespective of whether this contradicted gender norms as this was considered necessary to compete at the highest level.
Eating for Excellence: Eating Disorders in Elite Sport – Inevitability and ‘Immunity’

For (sub-)elite performers, it appears the discourse of excellence is the klaxon heard above all others and therefore, although performers have hybrid identities (Shogan, 1999), the discursive influences of factors such as gender, class and ethnicity appear to be less influential at this level of competition.

As noted in the existing literature, eating habits can easily become obsessional and escalate into clinical conditions in (sub-)elite sport. In some sports this seems almost inevitable. Thin-build and aesthetic sports unsurprisingly exhibit a high incidence of clinically diagnosable conditions since anorexic and/or bulimic behaviour can be considered, to some extent, beneficial to performers in these events; not conforming to this behaviour could be considered deviant within these subcultures. However, highlighting the subjective nature of determining pathological conditions, sports less commonly associated with such behaviour can cause dietary decisions and bodily perceptions to become just as obsessional without necessarily meeting the criteria used to identify eating disorders. The obsessional pursuit of one performance-enhancing body could lead to the diagnosis of an eating disorder, whereas an even more obviously obsessional pursuit of another would not register as a clinical condition. It is not being argued that either should be diagnosed in this way. Rather, this is an illustration of how the norms and demands of some sports are more likely to lead to clinically diagnosable eating disorders whereas behaviour and nutritional practice that has the same aims but is informed by different demands and norms will not register on the clinical radar. The comments of the following two interviewees help to illustrate this point:

I used to weigh myself and I’d get my skin folds done and we used to have these graphs done up to show like lean muscle mass. So as long as I was heading in the right direction and putting on lean muscle mass then I felt like I was doing ok with what I was eating. (Dan)

I would say I am probably a bit smaller, well not heavy enough [...] so at the moment I am trying to get a bit heavier [...] It’s not really me that has identified it [a particular body size/weight], people just assume I guess that you need to be that size [...] so I guess I have to. (Jonathan)

Although it was clearly important to both of these performers and it motivated them to make particular dietary decisions, neither indicated that they were particularly obsessive about this. However, if performers in the same or similar sports were to develop obsessional behaviour, different only in degree from these performers’ approaches, they would not have their behaviour pathologised in a clinical sense. This is because it is concerned with achieving certain goals related to gaining weight or lean muscle mass and not reducing fat and/or losing weight. The “supranormal” dietary decisions of the (sub-)elite anorexic performer differ only in degree, not in kind, from that of...
other (sub-/)elite performers, yet the former becomes a statistic. By comparison, the performer competing in an explosive sport who is fixated on increasing lean muscle mass can exhibit the same preoccupation with producing a performance-enhancing body but does not have their behaviour pathologised in the same way.

Perhaps the most revelatory finding from this research was one of resistance. Far from sport increasing the likelihood of performers developing clinically diagnosable conditions, as the literature suggests, there was evidence that an ambition to be an elite performer could actually ensure that some performers resisted pathological behaviour. Thus despite acknowledging that pathological eating behaviour was normalised in their subculture, many interviewees negatively evaluated both the performance and personal implications of developing such conditions. As a result, the discourse of excellence which drives some (sub-/)elite performers to develop eating disorders, causes others to develop a kind of ‘immunity’ to them. For instance, the following quotes highlight the generally negative attitude towards calorie counting; a common practice amongst those with eating disorders (Dosil, 2007; Thompson & Sherman, 1993):

I don’t calorie count at all and I never intend to. (Wendy)

I don’t pay attention to my calories [...] that would take over my life I think. (Juliette)

These performers obviously did not want to become obsessed with particular limitations. However, there is also an implicit acknowledgement that if they were to begin calorie counting it could become obsessional and they wanted to avoid this. One team sport player clearly demonstrated this:

obviously like in elite sport you are aware of people, like there are so many eating disorders [...] anyone can get caught up in it [...] I feel that if I focus on it [diet] too much then it is probably less likely to help me, it’s probably more likely that I’ll get hooked up on it. (Michelle)

It therefore appears that some (sub-/)elite performers acknowledge the importance of nutritional practice but also recognise the possible personal implications of obsession and straying into pathologised behaviour. This can cause them to act in ways which may be considered out of character for disciplined performers (Goffman, 1959; Heikkala, 1993; Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Shogan, 1999). Thus one interviewee described deliberately choosing a meal at odds with her ambition to excel whilst out at a restaurant with timid team members who she could feel watching her and anxiously trying to choose the ‘right’ option from the menu. This performer claimed that although she would not eat this food normally, or often, she wanted to show the others that it is possible to excel at sport and allow for some dietary freedom. She reasoned:
if people are watching me and watching what I’m eating I’ll probably go the opposite way to show them it’s actually ok to eat whatever you want rather than being ‘oh don’t eat that, don’t eat this’ [...] I mean obviously you can’t have junk food every night of the week but every once in a while it’s fine. Some people do take it very seriously and it would make me unhappy I think if I took it really, really seriously (Wendy)

From a Foucauldian perspective, if this performer were docile/disciplined she should have remained disciplined by making the ‘right’ dietary decisions, whilst exposed to the normative gaze of others. However, she did the opposite, almost in defiance of the perception that being completely disciplined would maximise performance. Many of the interviewees suggested similar reasoning and questioned the benefits of completely abstaining from the consumption of foods which could be considered detrimental to performance. The following was quite typical:

it boils down to moderation [...] I think it is important to have a break, even mentally. So to have things that you enjoy makes you happy and a happy athlete is invariably a good performing athlete. (Michael)

Phrases such as “every once in a while” and “in moderation” were used and demonstrated that these performers felt discipline and conformity were both necessary and warranted. However, for some, there also appeared to be an appreciation that the best thing they could do, both as performers and personally, was to avoid constant self-surveillance. Arguably, allowing oneself to deviate from discipline but acknowledging such acts as deviations, and therefore not normative behaviour, demonstrates the power of discourse and the trap of panopticism (Zanker & Gard, 2008). Rewarding disciplined behaviour with ‘treats’ in order to maintain discipline for the majority of the time can be seen as an act of “docility-utility” (Foucault, 1995, 137) as evident in the comments of one rugby player:

I feel like if I train hard and if I play hard and if I stick to my dietary plan like I have told myself that I am allowed one night off [his dietary plan] a week. (Gareth)

However, just as many (sub-)elite performers learn to have disciplined diets, they may also learn not to be dominated by them or let them become obsessive. This is why, although it is limited in its accuracy, “disordered eating” (Beals, 2004, 4) is perhaps the most useful term to describe many sport performers’ nutritional practice. A growing awareness of eating disorders in sport appears to lead some performers, with ambitions to excel, to internalise a need to avoid this behaviour. This, in part, explains why Thompson and Sherman (1999, 189) found that many athletes with eating disorders are “more amenable to treatment once they are informed that recovery can result in improved health, which should in turn enhance performance”. Obviously, in
sports where eating disorders are demonised by those outside the subculture but accepted as performance enhancing by those within it (e.g., female gymnastics), performers may not learn or adopt this attitude. However, in sports relatively ignored in the eating disorder literature, and even some prominent within it, (e.g., Sundgot-Borgen, 1993; 1999; Ewald & Jiobu, 1985), there is an acknowledgement that this behaviour can be damaging to both health and levels of performance and should therefore be avoided. This can be appreciated in the following response:

I’ve seen it [the development of pathologised dietary practices] in other people and I just think ‘don’t get caught up in it because you’ll just become obsessed and be obsessive over it’. (Michelle)

Perhaps it is this approach which leads some performers to ignore specific advice given to them by coaches and/or nutritionists aimed at improving performance, as these performers have a notion of the greater good in mind.

There appeared to be an acknowledgement by research participants that it would be easy for them to become obsessed with their dietary practice and this could lead them to develop an eating disorder which they thought would negatively affect their performance. Therefore, by conducting themselves in a manner which may appear less disciplined, they are behaving in a way which they believe will be most beneficial not only to their performance specifically, but also to their development as performers more generally. In this way, panoptic self-surveillance may serve to ensure that some performers are ‘undisciplined’ as well as disciplined, although a distinct difference exists between (sub-/)elite performers eating “junk”/“bad”/“death” food and ‘allowing’ themselves to eat “junk”/“bad”/“death” food. The motivation for ‘allowing’ themselves this deviation from discipline may be a desire to avoid becoming obsessive about diet. This desire is informed by the belief that developing an eating disorder might impede optimal performance and as such it must be recognised that what may appear ‘deviant’ at first can actually be ‘disciplined’ when considered more holistically.

**Conclusion**

Contrary to the dominant position in existing literature, this research suggests that being involved in sport, and having ambitions to excel, can actually reduce the likelihood of developing an eating disorder. As a result of their desire to excel, many performers will develop clinically diagnosable conditions. However, focusing on these performers neglects others whose behaviour is equally significant. Of course, the potentially fatal consequences of eating disorders may seem like justification enough for the prevalence of studies in this area. The contention here though is that understanding why and how those in (sub-/)elite sport who avoid eating disorders manage to do so should be just as important for those interested in developing preventative strategies. With that said, those interested in developing such strategies need to ap-
preciate that in some sports and/or teams pathological eating behaviours are encouraged, overtly and/or covertly, because of the perceived (but also sometimes very real) performance gains that accompany such behaviour. Thus, just as it is the desire to perform at an elite level which may cause performers, in some respect, to develop a defence against eating disorders, the very same desire could lead others to develop them. Finally, whether (sub-)elite performers’ eating habits are pathologised or not, the argument presented here is that the motive behind these decisions is usually informed and encouraged by a discourse of excellence. This discourse defines the (sub-)elite sporting experience and transforms any decision (dietary or otherwise) made without performance enhancement as its primary aim into a deviant decision. Therefore, the experience of being an (sub-)elite performer can be considered to manifest itself in performer’s dietary decisions by ensuring that these decisions become yet another area of their lives where the performance principle is prominent.

References


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