

**‘THAT IS WHY I GAVE IN TO AGE MY COMPETITIVE ABILITY BUT NOT  
MY SOUL’**

**- A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY IN ENDURANCE RUNNING**

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## ABSTRACT

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In this article, I explore the spiritual dimensions of running. I draw on theological and existential perspectives, athletic career research as well as post-sport ideologies to construct a multi-voiced representation of the spiritual meanings of endurance running current in Finnish running culture(s). Through narrative, analysis, reflexivity, interpretation and theorizing this study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how distance runners negotiate dominant discourses on sport and exercise in the process of making running meaningful to them.

In the analysis I examined the Finnish runner's magazine *Juoksija* for the years 2001-2010. Over this time span studied, I found a variety of data discussing the spiritual dimension of running, including editorials, interviews, columns and research-based popular articles. From these sources I selected 34 columns written by 17 different authors for an in-depth discourse analysis. In exploring the content of the magazine over the decade it became apparent that the diversity of authors and perspectives had increased, which partially reflected the wider changes that had occurred in Finnish runner culture over this time span.

The research results suggest that existential aspects of running underlie, but remain dormant, in the dominant performance discourse of competitive sports. These spiritual and/or existential dimensions become especially meaningful, however, when transitioning from elite level sports. I suggest that finding the existential spirituality of running can be a protective element in athletic retirement, enabling the runner to sustain their athletic identity as a central life-narrative even after the transition.

Keywords: spirituality; running; career transition; post-sports; discourse analysis

## FOREWORD

Before starting the 2-year Master's Degree Programme in Sport and Exercise Psychology (SEPPRO), I had studied a master's degree in theology in the University of Helsinki. With my background in a quite different academic field, I became quickly aware that I had a different approach to sport psychology from many of my fellow students. I searched for a topic that would provide me an opportunity for interdisciplinary research within these fields. Thus, I pondered on my own experiences of sport participation as well as the meaning of spirituality and religion for me. As a runner myself, it was easy to draw from personal running experience, which had become much more for me than an effective form of exercise or a competitive pursuit.

This study was written in the form of a research article, and we produced the text together with my supervisor Tatiana Ryba. Our voices are intersecting throughout the article, where 'I' refers to me, Noora. Our data consisted of runners' narratives in a Finnish runner magazine, and as the only Finnish speaker I conducted the data collection, analysis and translation of the quotes. Tatiana guided me with the theoretical framework and methodological considerations, as well as in editing the article to meet the journal requirements. The manuscript was submitted 15.6.2011.

I wish to thank my supervisor Tatiana Ryba for her insight, support and effort in guiding my work. Also I am grateful to professor Ivana Noble in the Protestant Theological Faculty in Prague for inspiration and sharing ideas with me during the process. Moreover, I thank other teachers and my fellow students in SEPPRO program for their feedback and encouragement. Special thanks go to all the runners I met, interviewed and ran together with during the two year research process. You convinced me there definitely is a spiritual dimension in endurance running.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Have you ever known *anything* to truly satisfy the existential itch in your mind? Nothing ever has. Nothing ever will. [...] What you are truly after neither has form nor is without form. It cannot be grasped or attained or obtained or conceptualized or even described. [...] In other words, there is nothing to get.

(Hagen 2003, pp. 26-27)

This research explores the multi-voiced meaning given to running by Finnish endurance runners. This article aims to show a dialogic process of shifting subject positions through narrative, analysis, reflexivity, interpretation and theorizing to deepen an understanding of the runner's subjectivity. Understanding subjectivity as textual and produced in the culturally and historically specific fields, we nevertheless do not focus on analyses of power mechanisms operating on and through running bodies in the production of meaning. Rather we seek to explore the process of everyday meaning making which, albeit *positioned* (Hall 1994), is also necessarily a *dialogue* (Chaney 2002). 'The unique nature of dialogic relations' (Bakhtin 1986, p. 119) is foregrounded by certain unpredictability of the process because in each case the construction of meaning builds upon one's sociocultural situatedness, the range of one's available interpretive repertoire, and the ways of moving in and between the dominant and subjugated representations. Hence, this paper is written as a polyphonic text and consists of a 'multiplicity of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness...each with equal rights and its own world (that) combine, but do not merge, into the unity of an event' (Bakhtin 1984, p. 208).

This paper is based on Noora's master's research in sport and exercise psychology supervised by Tatiana. The positioning of the authors is developed simultaneously through Noora's voice, expressed in the first person 'I', and the intersection of Tatiana and Noora's voices, expressed in the unified 'we'. We begin with a review of literature relevant to the analysis and discussion of research findings. The review of the study's theoretical framework and the previous research is woven into Noora's reflexive narrative. We then discuss the use of critical discourse analysis in our inquiry and share the key findings.

## 2 'MY OWN THING' (Noora)

I am a runner. Running became an integral part of me during my first period as an exchange student in Prague in the winter 2007-2008. When I arrived in Prague, all my belongings could be fitted into a backpack and my knowledge of the local language was limited to fewer than 20 words. I was an active person and enjoyed cycling, roller blading, weight training and also did a little bit of running. Moreover, I had worked for some years as an exercise instructor. But at this time, I had not found a sport that I really 'loved'. The limited exercise facilities in Prague were probably the initial reason I started running more. I lived in the very centre of Prague, but I could run down by the river Vltava which was three minutes away from the dormitory. I still have vivid memories of runs down by this beautiful river, the lights of Prague castle reflecting on the water and my footfalls on the cobblestones and the wooden blocks of the old railway bridge. At first I ran some three to four times per week, but soon I became fascinated with it and realized I did not miss the other forms of training. I had never known it was possible to experience this kind of sensation of the world and myself through physical movement.

During my time in Prague running became my way to connect with myself and make sense of my new situation. In Prague I was 'the other', cut off from my own culture, and I had to adapt to a different way of living and find new people to relate to. Running became a friend I knew and the language I understood. Moreover, it made me aware of my deeper thoughts, ideas and feelings, as well as the sensations and joys of the movement of my body. I remember the victorious feeling when I had completed my first 'long run', in preparation for a marathon. At the end I was physically tired but felt stronger than ever; I had never run for more than an hour before, but I found out I could easily run for 90 minutes. The realization of the physical potential of my body left me wondering about the wonderful capacities we humans possess, but never come to realize.

The student exchange in Prague was part of my theology studies. During the process I had started with my running, I was immersing myself in pneumatology, the theology of

the Holy Spirit. In particular, I was affected by readings from the catholic theologian Karl Rahner, who depicted how the mystical, spiritual experience was to be found from the ordinary Christian's everyday life. For him, a human being was ultimately a spirit in the world, striving towards a close connection to God. In Rahner's theological anthropology, the divine grace was present in all ordinary and unordinary situations of human existence (Rahner 1970). Fascinated with the idea of encountering the sacred in everyday activities, I reflected upon my running. I realized how some of my runs were moments of intense presence of the Spirit. When running, I sensed myself, and the beauty of the surroundings, in dimensions not accessible during everyday living, such as a tram trip across the city. Through my running I started to discover what Rahner (1979) meant with the spirituality in the ordinary, and our blindness to the sacred and mystical in our everyday lives.

When I returned to Finland, I did not return to other forms of exercise. I was becoming a runner. During the years after my time in Prague, running became an integral part of my daily life, and an integral part of me. I have run races over different distances on roads and trails, faced successes and failures, and also experienced different setbacks from small inflammations to serious injuries such as a recent stress fracture. I have met and run with runners with different cultural backgrounds, levels and reasons behind their running. I realize I have changed some ways of thinking, speaking and managing my daily routines. I have given courses to novice runners on how to get started, heard how 'I hate running but I want to learn to do it', exchanged ideas of the experience and meaning of running with my fellow competitors, and heard and read stories from former athletes reflecting upon their careers.

After a couple of years of running and feeling good - increased running fitness and improved racing times - I became interested in more structured training and seeing how I could improve my performance. I found the local athletic club and was offered help, but suddenly I found myself in an unexpected crisis. Maybe the meaning of running would change? Running had been like play for me: if I felt like intervals on the track, so be it, but if I longed for trail running in the forests, the track could certainly wait. Religious observance of optimal heart rates and running distances did not seem to fit my ideology of running. I had started to run in order to keep fit, I had become interested in competitive running culture, but running had also revealed to me much deeper

dimensions. It had opened a way for me to experience the world more deeply, made me aware of the miracles of everyday life and my body, and it had become my own, safe space wherever I went. Engaging in competitive sport culture with a technological approach to the body (Pronger 2002) felt contradictory to my own values and the relationship I had developed with running. For me, running as optimizing the resources of my body and a site of social recognition was significantly different from running as a miracle and a gift. However, I wanted to explore both sides of running as I believed that competitive and existential, structured and playful, hierarchical and freedom could all be lived through the same life-narrative.

Running—my experience of the world through bodily movement—gave me access to realms I could not have discovered in any other way. Never previously in my life did I feel so totally physically exhausted nor so powerful. While running had helped me to organize my thoughts and put my life in perspective, I also found that running had a value in and of itself. The strongest sensations of running have not been the successful races, but the very ordinary runs in the forests and sleeping cities when mundane everyday activities were unpredictably transformed into encounters with me, the world, and my Creator.

I began this research to explore what kind of stories about the spirituality of running other Finnish runners have to tell. Inspired by Rahner's writings of experiencing the Spirit in everyday life, I wanted to see what kind of existential dimensions there were for others in such an ordinary and boring-looking activity that had given me personally so much.

*'If you say "hi" in Finland, you can get a one year prison sentence' (Tero)*

Finnish people want their religion private. In line with the rest of Europe, participation in communal religious practices has decreased rapidly in Finland in the last few decades (The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland 2010). This trend was initially explained by the classical secularization theory, where it was suggested that the role of religion would inevitably decline in the modern, industrial and highly urbanized society (Kääriäinen 2003). However, the story has revealed to be much more complex. Several researchers have suggested that even though people are not members of organized



churches any more, on an individual level they still hold religious beliefs (Davie 1994, Kemp 2001, Kääriäinen *et al.* 2003). A national survey in Finland in 2003 showed that individual belief in some kind of God, spirit or life-force had not decreased since the mid 1970's (Kääriäinen *et al.* 2003). Even if the Finns' participation in collective religious practices was among the lowest in Europe, their reported belief in a G/god and the frequency of prayer was above European averages (Niemelä 2003). Finnish religion was characterized by late-modern individualism and subjective search for the meaning of life from multiple sources. This quest was oriented towards a holistic wellbeing, where the physical, psychological and spiritual co-constituted the meaningful life (Kääriäinen *et al.* 2003).

With these characteristics of Finnish spirituality, I reflected that sport and exercise might be a prominent area for the search of spiritual. Prebish (1993) depicted sport as a playground where religious elements are often more or less visibly intertwined, and in popular culture Finns have been often labelled 'the nation crazy for sports'. Finnish researchers emphasized a connection of nature and Finnish religiosity (Kääriäinen *et al.* 2003), and running mostly takes place in forests and on paths outside the city.

The modern individual religiosity with its mixed traditions and nature experiences has also drawn critique from Christian theologians. From Watson's (2007) theological viewpoint, transcendent experiences felt through sport may be likened to nature mysticism, but they should not be considered religious experiences in the framework of Christian tradition. He maintains that the centrality of the Cross must remain the focus in Christian theology, and the pantheistic beliefs associated with nature experiences are essentially not within the teaching of Christianity as a monotheistic religion. I was personally surprised with this critique, since in my own life, running in the forests had provided stronger religious experiences than any Sunday service, retreat or meeting with my Christian communities. Moreover, Watson's critique drew a significantly different perspective from Rahner's pneumatology of the personal encounter with the divine in everyday life. For me, running on a more-or-less daily basis, was the closest to this revelation of the Spirit I could imagine.

In popular cultural narratives, Finnish people are represented as non-communicative, inward and shy. There seems to be certain truth to that. A questionnaire-based national

survey that revealed the Finns to have a religious side and individual spirituality also showed that for Finns religion was considered a private matter (Kääriäinen *et al.* 2003). In my everyday life in Finland, I rarely discussed religion and personal beliefs with others. Hence, when I began my research I had my doubts as to whether Finnish people would publicly discuss their spiritual experiences when running, especially if it were with a researcher whom they didn't know well.

As anticipated, it was extremely difficult to find respondents to talk about spirituality. This was doubly frustrating as I found a number of texts relating to spiritual awakenings coming from American runner culture (Sheehan, 1998; Joslin, 2003), but no runner I knew was talking about this in Finland, least of all about their personal experience. Finnish runners discussions mostly focused on race plans, current training and injury situations and, in winter times, complaining about the miserable running weather. My big question was, whether this absence of spirituality was due to the cultural norm, or due to the lack of the experiences.

*'It is definitely a higher power, everyone names it the way they want!'* (Pertti)

In the Finnish language there is no proper translation for the word spiritual. Instead there is the word 'henkinen' which has psychological connotations, while the word 'hengellinen' is most often understood as religious, referring to the transcendent. During the research project some Finns asked me what I meant by this word 'spiritual', and when I returned this question, I found that many understood spiritual to be almost synonymous with religious belief. Also, due to my background in Christian theology, I had mostly used the word spiritual in a religious context. Discussing my research with other Finns was often problematic and I felt that others were often confused and/or uncomfortable. In contrast, with foreign friends and colleagues it felt much easier to reach a common understanding.

Robinson (2007), as exemplified by my own situation, maintains that in Western society the concept of spirituality has been traditionally linked to religion and the Christian church. As a theological concept, spirituality is understood as a relation to the transcendent. From psychological and humanistic perspectives, spirituality is usually defined as a broader concept, where spirituality includes both religious and humanistic

worldviews (Zinnbauer *et al.* 1997, Webster 2004, Helminiak 2008). According to Helminiak (2008), spirituality is the possibility to reflect on the significance of one's life through matters transcending the here and now. The spirit refers to the meaning and values by which a person lives, and the deliberate concern and engagement with these is spirituality (Helminiak 2008). Similarly, Webster (2004) emphasized that, while the meaning-making process is central to all human activities, spirituality is the deliberate concern, reflection and search for the meaning of one's being and the fundamental purpose of one's life. In line with Helminiak and Webster, we defined spirituality in this research as the existential value and meaning that the runners gave to their running experience. However, we acknowledged that, in contrast to the majority of academic definitions, many people understand spirituality in reference to organizational religious practices (Zinnbauer *et al.* 1997). Especially with the lack of a Finnish word specifically referring to spirituality, we were cautious during our analysis to determine whether the Finnish authors were referring to mental, spiritual or religious in their narratives.

*'Then your movement has a meaning' (Jouko)*

My shift from theology to sport and exercise psychology was a leap to a different paradigm. In theology, research on spirituality and spiritual experiences was the most 'natural' area of study, while in sport sciences many of my new fellow students found it obscure. In Christian theology the Biblical understanding of a 'man' as a spiritual being is the fundamental starting point, while in sport psychology there is a controversy as to whether such a thing as the human spirit even exists, and whether spirituality is a legitimate research area for the scientific discipline (Crust 2006). Indeed, spirituality is rarely discussed within the social cognitive approach, dominant in sport psychology. Not satisfied with the one-sided and reductionist view of athletics and body culture in mainstream sport psychology, I began to investigate alternative frameworks at the margins of the discipline. Exploring the literature, I have found my questions addressed in existential sport psychology, where spirituality, suffering, love and sacrifice were among basic conditions of human existence (Nesti 2004). After the leap from one academic field to another, apparently so dissimilar, I was reading the same Kierkegaard!

In existential sport psychology human beings are approached as persons (Nesti 2004). In research, the 'focus is on investigating how persons participate in and bring meaning

to the situations experienced in their lives' (Nesti 2004, p. 21). With the explicit link to philosophy of existentialism, the approach challenges the view of psychology as a natural science (Giorgi 1970). While existential philosophy cannot be considered a unified perspective, the universally human concern of finding a meaning to their being (Heidegger 1996) has been seen as a core concept in existential thinking (Webster 2004). The existential approach in sport psychology takes a holistic view of the person as a cultural and situational being and seeks to explore the complexity of human experiences and behaviour, instead of providing reductionist explanations (Fahlberg *et al.* 1992).

The research on spirituality in sport can be roughly divided along two lines—the examination of altered states in sport performance, and the construction of meaning and value in sport (Parry *et al.* 2007). Theoretical frameworks have included humanistic and positive psychology (Maslow 1962, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000) and, especially in the second line of research, existential and transpersonal psychology (Dale 1996, Ravizza 2002a, Nesti 2004). Moreover, several practicing sport psychologists (e.g., Balague 1999, Ravizza 2002a, Watson and Nesti 2005) have addressed the need to integrate spirituality in applied practice and increase consultants' understanding of spiritual aspects in sport experiences as well as religious athletes' motivations and meanings in sport.

In the past sport psychology research in this area the focus has been on transcendent experiences (Watson and Nesti 2005), such as flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), runner's high (Sachs 1984), peak experiences and peak performance (Maslow 1962, Privette and Bundrick 1991, Ravizza 2002b), and 'being in the zone' (Dillon and Tait 2000). In his early work on peak experience, Maslow (1962) depicted peak experiences as 'moments of highest happiness and fulfilment' (p. 69), where the psychological experiencing surpassed the usual level of intensity and meaningfulness. In exploring flow experiences among rock climbers, Csikszentmihalyi (1975) found descriptions which he categorized as '...transcendent, religious, visionary, orestatic' (p. 88). According to Privette (1983) the common characteristics of peak experience, peak performance and flow include absorption, clear focus, and the 'graceful, integrated, Taoist nature of the person in the event' (p. 1366). While peak experiences occur spontaneously and flow states might be

facilitated (Privette, 1983), task mastery seems to be one key factor in arriving at both of these transcendent states (Watson and Nesti 2005).

The runner-specific sensation, runner's high, is a confusing concept for both academics and runners themselves (Sachs 1984, Acevedo *et al.* 1992). This 'euphoric sensation experienced during running, usually unexpected, in which the runner feels a heightened sense of wellbeing, enhanced appreciation of nature and transcendence of barriers of time and space' (Sachs 1984, p.274) was described among ultramarathoners for example as 'being outside oneself', 'an exhilaration of being alive and moving', 'omnipotent' and 'oblivious' (Acevedo *et al.* 1992, p.249). Interestingly, 45,5% of these ultramarathoners reported *never* having experienced such a high (*ibid*), which is notable for dedicated, long-term runners. Similarly, the phenomenon was seldom mentioned in our data, which may be partly due to poor translatability.

In the second line of research, spirituality is investigated as the deeper purpose and value in sport participation. This research line has concentrated largely on studying religious athletes' lived experiences. For example, in investigating the use of Christian prayer in sport participation, several researchers (Vernacchia *et al.* 2000, Park 2000, Czech *et al.* 2004) have concluded that praying can be very significant for religious athletes as a coping strategy and in providing meaning to sport participation. Moreover, Balague (1999) suggests that personal meaning derived from the religious beliefs of the athlete is closely linked to motivation. However, there is a lack of research on spiritual meaning of sport from humanistic perspectives. Watson and Nesti (2005) suggest that the questions and reflection of deeper meaning in sport are most likely to emerge at critical points in an athletic career such as, transitions (different level, team), retirement and career-threatening injuries.

From the existential perspective, love, faith and hope form the core of human spirituality (Nesti 2007). For a religious person, love culminates to the love of God; for some others, love itself has all the meaning without a need to find an end beyond it. For example Nesti (2007) contends that the athletes' love for their sport, all the dedication, sacrifice and courage they are willing to give in and for it, is one of the clearest manifestations of the spirit and spirituality in sport. Also aspects of subjectivity, authenticity, angst, crisis, death and freedom are given a special emphasis in the

existential framework of spirituality, because they bear significance to how persons come to understand the meaning of their being-in-the-world, which is central to spirituality (Webster 2004).

The starting point of this research is the fundamental existential assumption that humans are embodied *spiritual* beings (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962, Kierkegaard 1980). While most sport psychologists would not easily accept the spiritual dimension in sport since ‘alternative, rational explanations exist’ (Crust 2006, p. 25), we are critical of those psychological approaches, which are underpinned by positivism, that fail to study psychological phenomena *as grounded* in the person’s life-world. Studying athletic careers from the existential perspective, for example, can enhance our understanding of how the search for meaning in one’s life may manifest itself in career crisis, transition, burnout, substance abuse, desire and resilience, among other psychological issues. Few scholars of sport psychology have written about how staple psychological constructs acquire meaning, and indeed shift meaning, in various (sub)cultures or how increased understanding of meanings assigned to physical cultural practices can inform applied interventions in sport and exercise settings.

Prompted by the Finnish runners’ references to modern (Finnish) society, Western sports culture and running in the wilderness, we engaged with postmodern sensibilities, especially Pronger’s (2002) critical analysis of Western sport and exercise cultures. Pronger’s critique of technologically induced and spiritually constrained modern sports, where the technological body-as-resource approach proceeds to work on the human body primarily in terms of its user-value disregarding intrinsic and spiritual dimensions of sporting experience, resonated strongly with the objectives of this research. To employ Pronger’s terminology, in mainstream sports the human body is evaluated in terms of its external *pouvoir*, the physical measurable capabilities. The body’s *puissance*, its energy and desire to move and express its potential through movement, is rendered secondary. Moreover, the body’s *puissance* is resourced as *pouvoir* through the cultural ethos of modern sports, channelling existential aspirations of *puissance* into competitive sport practices governed by *pouvoir*. Such critical views of the mechanistic and reductionist mainstream sports culture have led to the emergence of various alternative sport cultures which may be loosely grouped as post-sport athletics. Recently, Pronger’s (1998, 2002) articulation of post-sports was vividly illustrated by

Atkinson's (2010) ethnographic account of fell running. Post-sport ideologies take a critical stance on the 'body-as-resource' cultural logic underpinning mainstream sporting practices, emphasizing instead 'moral, reflexive, community-oriented, green, spiritual, anarchic and potentially eros-filled' (Atkinson 2010, p. 112) experiences in physical cultural activities 'wherein important existential lessons about human spiritual and moral conditions are taught' (ibid p. 113).

Reflecting on post-sports' ethics and practices, we envisaged that Pronger's (2002) call for alternative approaches that may consider sport experience as '... play, liberation, a non-linear, perhaps spiritual, experience of the body that is worthwhile in and of itself, inaccessible to the reality of modern techno-scientific culture' (p. 48, see also Eichberg, 1987), may indeed be met with an existential sport psychology framework. This, of course, is not to suggest that the epistemological and political incommensurability of existentialism and postmodernism should be ignored. Building on their common critique of Western scientific-technological societies that degrade the human spirit by valuing *doing* instead of *being*, which ultimately reduces human beings to mere functions, roles and resources, we aimed to intersect psychological theory with a larger social critique in order to move beyond the individual-based mode of analysis in sport psychology.

For Noora, reviewing the critical literature for her research project gave her the means to articulate the vague disengagement she had felt from the competitive running culture, as well as sport psychology as a scientific discipline. Yet she was dissatisfied with Atkinson's (2010) assertion that although post-sport athletes often adopt similar movement patterns and techniques to those in mainstream sports, 'their individual or collective experience bears little similarity' (p. 113). She wrote in her reflexive journal, 'I challenge this idea as even though I had participated in mainstream runner culture, the narratives of the existential dimensions in fell running resonated strongly with my personal experience of running'.

*'As an ex-athlete, working in the office, I realize my mind craves for running' (Timo)*

Reflecting back on the years I have been running, I recognize significant shifts in the meaning of running, which are inextricably linked to the fluidity of identity formation.

These shifts, which occurred as I was moving from ‘exerciser’ to ‘runner’ to ‘athlete’, tended to cause confusion. Being introduced as a runner or an athlete has made me think ‘are they talking about me?’ Sport was never my career choice and only recently have I constructed my athletic identity. Furthermore, within the running culture, I could identify myself as a lifestyle runner, a mountain runner, a marathoner, and/or an athlete. All of which bear significantly different meanings. What I hoped to illuminate with this example is that identities are not stable, but rather processes (Hall 1994, Slocum-Bradley 2009) that are constantly (re)constructed and negotiated in different discursive fields. For my inactive friends I am ‘the athlete’, while for the guys in the athletic club I am ‘a girl who does a little jogging’.

In a recent meta-review, Stambulova (in press) summarised the key review papers on athletes’ career development and transitions published during the past decade (i.e., Wylleman *et al.* 1999, 2004; Lavalley and Wylleman, 2000; Taylor and Ogilvie, 2001; Gordon *et al.* 2005; Hackfort and Huang, 2005; Alfermann and Stambulova, 2007; Petitpas, *et al.* 2009; Stambulova *et al.* 2009; Stambulova, 2010). In the sport psychology literature athletic career is defined as a multi-year, voluntary, goal-oriented participation in competitive sport at any level, including local, national, and international, as well as amateur and professional. Athletic careers contain a succession of stages and transitions, occurring more or less predictably (e.g., from junior to senior vs. a career-ending injury) (Wylleman *et al.* 2004). A significant body of sports research has been accumulated on career transitions and, especially in the Western discourse, on athletic retirement. This research has produced descriptive and explanatory models of the athletic career, as well as informed intervention models and career assistance programs. The main focus of career research in sport psychology is on athletes’ resources, barriers and coping mechanisms during the transitions (Stambulova, in press). Moreover, the researchers appear to be in agreement that the prevalence of athletic identity over other social identities and roles has a significant effect on the quality of the retirement process from sports, suggesting that athletes with a strong athletic identity experience more psychological difficulties during retirement (e.g., Murphy *et al.* 1996, Brewer *et al.* 2000, Lavalley and Robinson 2007). However, there is a lack of research on the existential aspects of sport and how they are (re)constructed at different stages of an athletic career. Recently, Carless and Douglas (2009) developed a promising insight into these questions by employing narrative research methodology.



For them, ‘the ways career transition affects an individual is best understood in light of earlier events in her or his life, the personal meaning of sport, and the potential impact of co-occurring transitions’ (p. 52). Carless and Douglas further asserted that exploring personal narratives is informative because people construct their identities and meanings through the stories they tell and feel part of. In exploring spiritual dimensions of sport participation, it would be important then to account for the shifts of meaning as athletes live through various stages of their careers.

From the preliminary analysis of *Juoksija* magazine and my discussions with fellow runners I quickly traced the importance of sub-culture identities as well as career stages in the meanings that were attached to running. The fell/mountain runners I met were eager to distinguish themselves from road runners, claiming to be engaging in a significantly different activity. With track and road runners, phrases such as, ‘as an ex-athlete,’ and ‘since I am not competing anymore,’ often preceded the more existentialist reflections of running. Consequently, the original research objectives were expanded to an exploration of the existential meaning of running, possibly aligned with the post-sport ideologies, which underlie and/or co-exist within dominant cultural narratives in Finland. Through discourse analysis of the runner’s magazine, the purpose of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of how distance runners negotiate dominant discourses on sport and exercise in the process of making running meaningful to them. Furthermore, we attempted to identify the ways of resisting dominant representations and what alternative narratives provide the Finnish runners with resources to (re)construct the meaning of running at different stages of the athletic career. Conceptualized in this way, the research opens up new ways of understanding the spirituality of running.

### 3 CONTEXTUALISING THE METHOD

We examined the Finnish runner's magazine *Juoksija* for the years 2001-2010. *Juoksija* (the Runner) is published as 10 issues per year and is the only printed runner's magazine in Finland. *Juoksija* was founded in 1971 and is the oldest independent magazine focusing on endurance sports in Europe. The magazine covers both competitive and leisure running and also dedicates space to seasonal endurance sports such as, cross-country skiing, orienteering and cycling. The magazine adopts a personalised style of narrating and has gained a reputation as the expert voice on endurance sports (Juoksija-lehti 2011). *Juoksija* attracts a wide audience of readers: athletes, coaches, sport professionals and leisure runners. A typical reader of the magazine was depicted as a middle-aged exerciser, who in addition to running also practices cycling, cross-country skiing and weight training (Juoksija-lehti 2011).

Over the 10-year span studied, we found a variety of data discussing the spiritual dimension of running, including editorials, interviews, columns and research-based popular articles. From these sources we selected 34 columns written by 17 different authors for an in-depth textual analysis. The majority of the authors of these columns were male except for three females, which also reflects the male dominance of the editorial board of the magazine. Exploring the content of the magazine over the decade it was apparent that the diversity of authors and perspectives had increased, which partially reflected the wider changes that had occurred in Finnish runner culture over this time span.

According to a national exercise survey (Ministry of Education and Culture 2010), the popularity of running has increased significantly in Finland over the last decade. Almost all cities have athletic clubs and adult education centers that provide 'Marathon schools' for beginners. Also, while the number of participants in some major running events has multiplied in recent years, the average times in the races have dropped significantly. Ordinary Finnish people run marathons, and the percentage of women in races is increasing. This shift in running culture can also be traced in *Juoksija*. In the more recent issues the content of the magazine has been targeted at a wider audience, so for example women as a 'special group' received increasing attention. Additional

investigations of internet resources and blogs, along with personal communications with runners reveal, however, that this shift was received critically by some competitive and ‘serious’ runners. Moreover, some participants in internet discussions were calling for the more philosophical, personal and critical approaches *Juoksija* had provided in earlier decades.

Our inquiry drew on discourse analysis as outlined by Gee (1999). To uncover the patterns of meaning and the running culture created in the text, we studied the situated meanings and cultural models built into each narrative. Gee argues that the meaning of words is not stable but ever changing and modified according to the specific context of use—that is the situated meaning. The situated meaning is derived from (often unconscious) ‘theories’ and ‘explanations’ of the meaning of a certain word, which Gee referred to as cultural models. Furthermore, the situated meaning is not constructed in individual minds, but negotiated between people in social interactions. The producers of a text interact with readers by constructing possible subject positions within the text that offer a preferred interpretation or meaning. It is generally acknowledged that the readers, especially with similar cultural backgrounds, will derive a common interpretation of the text (Alasuutari 1995, Locke 2004). Revealing the cultural models in use in the runners’ narratives enabled us to draw a picture of the runner culture(s) created in *Juoksija* magazine, which encompass various subcultures and constructions of the meaning of running.

In Gee’s (1999) framework the meaning in the narrative is constructed through six building tasks of the language: *semiotic, world, activity, socio-culturally situated identity and relationship, political* and *connection*. During our preliminary investigation, the significance of *connection building* in the language associated with athletic retirement and reflection on spirituality in running became a strong theme. As this theme developed to be the central finding of our analysis, we concentrated on analysing the narratives of the post-career athletes to reveal the reconstruction of the meaning of running and runner identity during the transition.

### *Runners' voices*

The polyphony of the meaning of running is expressed through the following voices. The runners whom we assigned pseudonyms Pekka, aged 41, and Timo, aged 32, have been successful Finnish middle- and long-distance runners in the past two decades. They terminated their competitive careers in sport but remain active runners. Timo also coaches. Jukka, aged 34, is a retired orienteer who continued his involvement in his sport as a coach and a recreational athlete. At the time of writing his columns he was still an active athlete. Tero, aged 71, is an endurance sport enthusiast who previously ran competitively. Pertti, a lifestyle runner, has completed 100 marathons. Jouko, who hasn't provided any information about his background, wrote a reflective column on spiritual aspects of running in *Juoksija*. Heikki, a sport journalist, who does not run himself, provided an alternative viewpoint.

### *Reflexivity*

Over the research period, I wrote a reflexive journal on frequent basis, as well as an occasional running log, and I struggled to find words to describe my thoughts and experiences of running. I was running on an almost daily basis during these one and a half years, except for a break due to a stress fracture, which forced me to stop running for nine weeks. With the injury, I gained more first-hand experience of the agony and suffering that many runners go through at times when they are unable to run. Even if I was active with my rehabilitation training in the swimming pool and the gym, I desperately missed the experience I could only access through running. When healthy and running, due to this research project, I became more aware and sometimes too analytical of my own experience. Even if I was more present in the moment and concentrated on the run and how I felt, the research sometimes made me lose the play and freedom of running.

Most profoundly, I engaged myself with the sport/post-sport dilemma, and explored my runner identity and participation in different running cultures. While I was excited with the sport competence and the athletic identity I was developing, the post-sport ideologies (Atkinson, 2010) resonated strongly with my values and the personal meaning I attached to running. I wanted to grasp something about the post-sport side in running. I ran some of my runs in mountains and terrains where heart-rate monitoring is

quite ridiculous since there is no such thing as steady pace or steady effort. A mountain race in complete darkness with a headlamp and uncertain distance also served its purpose in revealing to me how mechanistic the dominant approaches are in traditional distance running. My personal revelation in these experiences was that I have a certain rhythm, and so do the mountains, and if I cannot find a balance between them, I won't be able to run out there. First encounters with steep hills and muddy swamps left me exhausted, but then I slowly started to find the rhythm. In finding this balance, there was no help from strategies such as heart rate monitors or planned pacing. I only learned to run out there when the connectedness of my body and the surroundings revealed itself to me. When I came back from one of these runs, I reflected that we had finally made friends with the mountain. Becoming aware of the rhythm also changed my experience of my 'normal' runs on more 'civilized' terrains. I started to search for the connection with the flat pavement and become more respectful of the signs my body was giving me. I also became aware that to understand even a little about the art of running will be a life long journey.

To get an insight into competitive running culture in Finland, I contacted one of the columnists from *Juoksija* magazine, whose writings were included in the research data. This top national level runner lived in my home city, and in his columns and internet blog he was reflecting on topics that were of particular interest to the research. We had a series of face-to-face and e-mail discussions in which we explored the evolvement of his running career, the meaning of running for him, and the phenomena in the Finnish running culture. As he knew personally some other writers and knew stories from their running careers, his contribution was a valuable insight into the persons behind the narratives. Moreover, he read and commented on the final version of this article.

During the research project I frequently reflected upon and further explored the evolving research questions and my personal running experience with Tatiana. She guided me to existential psychology and suggested potential textual methods for our data analysis. Since I spoke Finnish, I conducted the preliminary investigation with our data. The data analysis and my reflexive journal were then written in English, which made them accessible for Tatiana. As a non-runner, Tatiana had an etic position to the investigated phenomenon, which enabled her to point out peculiarities and assumptions I had 'taken for granted' as a participant in the investigated culture. With her expertise,

Tatiana provided me with ways to navigate through the analysis and link my mundane knowledge of running with relevant theory.

#### 4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

*'It is a question of a way of living, art and poetry of movement' (Jouko)*

I started the analysis with a review of 10 years of the *Juoksija* magazine, which were altogether 100 issues. In this preliminary analysis I selected all types of writings discussing mental and spiritual aspects of running, including articles, editorials, interviews and columns. From the 100 issues studied, I found 60 issues that contained material that was of interest for our study. To narrow the data and also to get first-person accounts of spirituality, we selected the 34 columns found for textual analysis. Through content analysis I was able to find the main themes and aspects of spirituality in running.

Even during the preliminary analysis it became evident that the majority of the writers discussed spirituality from an existentialist perspective - as a discovery of a broader purpose and meaning to sport and life (Nesti 2007) - not as altered psychological states in sport performance. Consequently, this finding led us to reshape the research questions towards spirituality as meaning, not as a specific, situated experience. Moreover, since meaning is not stable but a 'continuous interpretive process' (Stelter 2007, p.192), we emphasised the processes in the discovery of the spiritual in running in our analysis.

The spiritual dimensions of running were described from mainly humanistic, but also religious worldviews. A strong theme of running as a connection referred to the self, the world, the nature, or the transcendent, depending on the writer's existential framework. The often mentioned spiritual aspects of running as presence, a mystery, and a way of finding meaning and value in life may similarly be interpreted from purely humanistic frameworks. The few explicitly religious wordings emerging from the narratives considered running as the purpose and gift of Creation and running as the nurture of the soul. Running was also depicted as the human being's natural way of moving, a continuum of nature. Existential values in running such as, freedom, authenticity, will, hope, creativity and faith emerged in the majority of examined narratives.

In tracing the process of the construction of meaning in running, we detected a connection between discovering existential aspects in running and a decline from peak competitive performance from the language used. For ‘recreational’ athletes this did not necessarily imply great changes in their runner identity and training routines, while for more serious athletes the regression in performance often bore significant implications for their athletic careers. However, the inevitable performance deterioration due to aging forced competition-oriented runners at all levels to re-evaluate the meaning of running. In our analysis, the shifting and deepening of meaning in running in athletic retirement became the central theme and finding. The ex-athletes who shared their personal narratives in *Juoksija* had maintained a strong runner identity after the transition and continued running despite the lack of competitive outcomes.

For post-competitive runners, running had a value in itself beyond the outcomes attached to running in dominant sport and exercise cultures (such as, good health, performance, fitness, appearance). Moreover, the themes of running as presence, freedom, ‘the loved one’, ‘my own thing’, ‘beyond rationales’ and manifestation of a ‘rich inner world’ emerged from the ex-athletes’ narratives. We concluded that for these runners the career transition was the most significant life situation for reflection on the spirituality and existential dimensions of running. Their stories drew an alternative narrative of running as *being* instead of *doing*, which resisted the dominant performance- and body-as-resource narratives of Western sport and exercise cultures (Pronger 2002, Carless and Douglas 2009).

Other powerful, interconnected themes emerging in the texts were how running experience was hidden from significant others, the building and separation of subculture identities within the broader running culture (jogger vs. runner; exerciser, recreational athlete, athlete, ex-athlete; orienteer, trail runner, marathoner, ultramarathoner), running as an alternative lifestyle and critique of modern (Finnish) society, critique and evaluation of the Western sport culture, and the effect of running on relationships (spouse, family). Some writers cited creatively religious and philosophical sources (the Bible, Kierkegaard, Hus) and depicted running metaphorically as a woman, a relationship, wine and their life, as well as giving it more negative connotations such as an addictive drug.



*Running as a loved one*

I cannot say for sure at which point my relationship with running evolved into love. In the beginning, the most important aspect was the competition against other kids. A little later the focus was on testing my own limits in training and competitions. At some point, the outcomes attained through running were possibly directing my actions too much. Now I am starting to feel that the records are over on my part, unless new racing distances are introduced. The profane goods no longer play a big role for me either. Despite this, this year I will probably still go out for more than 600 runs, approximately 10K each. You have a good reason to ask me why. [...] The answer is very simple. I just happen to be physically and mentally hooked on running. We may call it love. I've surely run more than 80 000 kilometres, but still I enjoy every stride. (Pekka)

The athlete's love for his sport as the strongest manifestation of spirituality in sport (Nesti 2007) was the central theme in Pekka's narrative. The process of how the meaning in running had shifted at different stages of his athletic career was strongly built into the language. The initial reasons to start running were quite different from the ones that kept him running after athletic retirement. The existential dimensions of running were hidden and not discovered easily, and he reflected that few adults would start running simply because it was 'fun'. Similarly, Timo recalled from his youth how 'at the beginning I hated running. I could not understand why it fascinated people'. However, after his athletic retirement and transition to post-sport life, he discovered how he had a deep longing to run. 'I am never going to stop running.' Both runners had realized that their loving relationship with running was often incomprehensible to their significant others.

While in athletic career research retirement is usually treated as a transition to post-sport life, where multiple personal identities have been shown to facilitate the retirement process (Stambulova, in press), Pekka and Timo constructed a different narrative where runner identity and practice of their sport continued to be central parts of their lives. Both had continued running, and Pekka even did speed work and strength training similar to that undertaken by active athletes. Also Timo, while he had significantly

downgraded his mileage, maintained that ‘for the Sunday long run you always have to go’. Thus, both runners continued to draw on running subculture narrative resources (Allen Collinson and Hockey 2001, 2007), and the practices used in competitive running culture continued to be significant for them, even if the dominant performance narrative was no longer relevant.

*The meaning of a Soul in human life*

As a young man and often in one’s 40’s and 50’s a naturally strong person feels himself to be immortal, and believes he will still keep going until he is 100 years old. In reality, everyone slows down at some point, and it is not always easy to accept that. If a runner is suffering a difficult menopause syndrome, the evil elf of sport, the Age, will come to him and take him out asking: ‘You have five stacks in front of you. At the left there are your friends, then your health, competitive abilities, soul and in the far right the stack of your property. According to the Laws of menopause, one of the stacks has to be cut down by more than a half. What would you cut down?’ (Tero)

In this story of the visit from the evil elf of sport - Aging - going over the peak of physical performance was constructed as a culmination point for existential reflection. Tero’s reflection supported the hypothesis of the performance narrative as the dominant meaning in sport (Carless and Douglas 2009), where ‘many very competitive runners would, without any consideration, throw away their friends, health and then their souls’. In this runner culture, the meaning of running culminated in *pouvoir* (Pronger 2002) and strivings for peak performances in races. Tero, then 64, wanted his readers to know that the ‘evil elf’ would inevitably catch all runners. He was frustrated with the absence of deeper reflections in the dominating achievement runner culture, where most runners ‘obviously do not have a faint idea of what a soul means in human life’.

‘The older I get, the more sensitively I am in touching and analysing life. The eye of the soul is searching to see and sense the beauty and meaning of life. [...] There, your inner being is peaceful, your fatigue is treated, and you are in harmony with your life. It is a question of finding the true being of movement.’  
(Jouko)

Jouko and Tero both constructed a connection between aging and the search for deeper meaning in life and also in running. Interestingly, these older writers used the word ‘soul’ in their narratives, while it was absent from the younger runners’ writings when exploring spirituality. This might partly reflect demographic change in society where the role and visibility of religion, as well as the use of religious vocabulary, is decreasing.

*‘What’s wrong with these people?’ (Heikki)*

The runner’s invisible inner world was a strong theme in the narratives. The rationale for running often remained hidden to others, whether they were the runner’s family, friends, or the ones who saw them running on the streets. Running in the rain, slush, wind and temperatures of -20 degrees in the Finnish winters (of which I have plenty of personal experience) were enough for others to consider these runners crazy. However, even if a run in extreme weather and slippery conditions ‘might not develop anything other than *sisu*’ (a special Finnish word for mental toughness), the runner still had to get to his ‘loved one’ (Pekka). Timo maintained that it was difficult to answer why, but continued to explain that, ‘there is no need to. The runner does what he does.’

The runners themselves acknowledged the contradiction of their subjective passion and the visible reality of running. Pekka asserted that ‘runners are often seen as ascetic self-torturers’, and Tero remembered how in the first years of *Juoksija* magazine ‘the only runners were the *very* humorless individuals like me’. A non-runner sport journalist commented, when watching an endurance race, ‘I am bored, but impressed!’ (Heikki). Endurance running was something he respected, but could not grasp emotionally; obviously the runners had to have ‘a huge inner world’, but ‘why is it that they can’t share this with anyone?’ (Heikki). Similarly to one of the fell runners in Atkinson’s (2010) research, Timo and Pekka maintained that the realms of running were beyond description in words and could not be understood without personal experiences. For Tero, the boredom of monotonous movement was actually a facilitator to free the mind and the spirit, which enabled the outer to become quiet and the inner to manifest more strongly.

Pekka and Pertti moreover acknowledged the discourse of exercise addiction in relation to their running. As an active athlete it was culturally acceptable ‘to train the amount that the people close to you would consider insane’ (Pekka), while in his post-career years Pekka noted that significant others had frequently demonstrated a lack of understanding about his running. However, as noted in previous research findings on running addictions, this labelling of the serious runner as ‘negatively addicted’ (Leedy 2000) or ‘exercise dependent’, was transmuted to the positive, and valorised by subcultural insiders (Allen Collinson and Hockey 2007). This was illustrated by Pekka: ‘For me personally, it is enough to be accepted by very limited circles’.

The discourse of running as an addiction was constructed as a complex phenomenon. For Pertti running was a form of addiction similar to alcohol abuse, while Pekka constructed the addict label as a faulty observation from people who did not understand the sport. Both referred to alcohol addiction as a strong discourse in Finnish culture, which was also related to Finnish sport culture. Finnish sport narratives include several stories of crisis career terminations, where alcohol abuse replaced the space of sports. Interestingly, in Finnish culture alcohol abuse seemed to be a more culturally accepted addiction than sport: ‘peaceful smoking and drinking red wine or whiskey in an armchair, reading a good book, is probably considered more civilized than strenuous running in the wet snow with snot on the cheek’ (Pekka).

*‘Cruel official man, sense of reality ice cold, without heart, conscious blindness for the inner core of being’ (Tero)*

Construction of running as a counterculture with a critical stance on dominant Western lifestyles and sport cultures was a re-emerging theme in many narratives. The depicted characteristics common to long-distance runners such as, commitment, endurance, humility, toughness and tolerance of discomfort were constructed as counter values to the modern ‘All-immediately-to-me-now society’ (Pekka), which was characterized by ‘the citizens spoiled by the wellbeing’ and ‘indifference, tiredness and relative values’ (Tero). Among young Finnish men starting their service in the army, ‘from the physical attributes only the weight is increasing’ (Pekka). According to Tero, ‘the increased wealth is becoming a barrier that separates us from good fitness, endurance, will to fight and wolf-like state of happiness’.

Despite some criticism of the dominant sport cultures and coaching practices, both active and ex-athletes constructed their participation in competitive running in profoundly positive tones. Autobiographical narratives of traumatic experiences in competitive running do exist in Finnish sport literature (Vettenniemi 1994), but they were absent from the magazine. Several authors in *Juoksija* construct their sport participation as a means of learning important life skills and an access to experiences inaccessible in other areas of life. Timo and Pekka both maintained they had a strong competitive instinct which was satisfied in their athletic careers. However, during those careers they had also developed meanings in running that had proven significant beyond the competitive context. Timo had realized that a runner's greatest misery was 'not the defeat, but the situation where one is not able to run at all.' Pekka reflected on how 'at some point the things achieved through running possibly affected my actions too much', but in contrast to Atkinson's (2010) claim of profoundly different experiences in mainstream and post-sport cultures, Pekka did not construct the competitive and the existential as exclusive. For him the existential dimensions had developed during his active career, and had subsequently become the dominant meaning of running after the career termination.

## 5 CONCLUSION

*'One has to learn to enjoy not only the destination, but also the journey of getting there!'* (Pekka)

I have a long journey ahead in searching for the runner's wisdom. It is that deep knowledge of oneself in all levels. The stress fracture revealed me that the most important is to be able to run, to be there, no matter with the performance. Now that I have started again after the break, I get tired more quickly and the small muscles in the feet get sore from the impacts... I also sometimes feel I've lost the feeling of the Earth and my strides are not in harmony with the terrain. If I can get this connection back I think I will learn to run again. Others would probably call my 'connection' a proper running technique... We give our own meanings to our experiences, and we create our realities. But, if we are not open for the possibility of dimensions beyond our rational, scientific explanations, we are running blind. (Noora's running log 6.2.2011)

This research, which traversed runners' narratives and critical research on Western sport cultures, was also a personal journey to my own running. Exploring the post-sport ideologies as an alternative vision of sport gave me words to connect with my vague contradictory feelings concerning my runner identity. I realized how powerful the cultural narratives were in defining for us what was 'normal' behaviour within a specific culture, what were 'acceptable' meanings, and how difficult it is even to try to imagine the realities outside our discursive cultural resources. In the mainstream road running culture, one's competitive abilities as measured by personal records are the hegemonic narrative, and runners locate and identify themselves and others with their times (Sands 1995, Smith 2002, Allen Collinson 2003). With my own running, after the injury and a later slight overtraining syndrome, I became more critical on the *why* of my running. An improved performance in the summer's races was not an unquestioned rationale for me anymore. This research enabled me to find new narrative resources from post-sport athletics and ex-athletes' stories, which resisted the dominant discourses and enabled me to critically read the culture in which I participate. Moreover, since we actively construct our meanings in the stories we communicate (Smith and Sparkes

2009), I realized that by telling my story to my fellow runners, I can affect the experiences and meanings of running that we create and share together.

The findings of our discourse analysis supported notions of the dominance of body-as-resource approaches and performance narratives in Western sport cultures (Pronger 2002, Carless and Douglas, 2009). The runners, who discussed running as a spiritual activity, built their identities on alternative voices within their subculture. These aspects of running were on the margins of the overall content of the magazine, but at the heart of the research. Even if the magazine was in the process of shifting its focus to serve wider audiences (leisure runners, multisport athletes) with various reasons to run, the dominant trend was on the physiological and psychological performance enhancement, drawing from the findings of dominant approaches in sport and exercise sciences.

Importantly, the narratives with existentialist considerations mostly emerged from more mature runners and ex-athletes, which directed us to investigate how meaning is reconstructed and negotiated during and after the runners' careers. Our analysis revealed that the dimensions of spirituality and encountering the existential were mainly revealed after the dominant performance discourse lost its meaning due to career transition and/or aging. This negotiation and reconstruction of meaning in running as spiritual activity enabled those runners to maintain a strong runner identity and continue active running.

The ex-athletes constructed their own sub-culture identities within the running culture, where the meaning and values of running were significantly different from the mainstream running and, more generally, sport and exercise cultures. A central motive for running in this post-career runner culture was the intrinsic experience and value of running itself. These narratives bore similarities with post-sport experiences depicted by Atkinson (2010), which revealed that there are multiple, including existential, meanings in sport participation also in mainstream running culture. In the reflective and critical post-career discourses, as in post-sport ideologies, running was constructed as a way of *being* instead of *doing* (Pronger 2002).

While in career transition research the focus has been on the shift to post-sport life where the importance of multiple non-sport related identities has been a central

emphasis (Stambulova, in press), our research revealed narratives of successful transitions where athletic identity remained central after the competitive career. In contrast to participants in a study by Lavalley and Robinson (2007), these ex-athletes did not need to distance themselves from their sport and develop a new sense of self. Running is significantly different from many other competitive sports since it can be practised almost anywhere and at all levels, without a need for a team, facilities or equipment. Runners of different levels can train together, and ex-athletes can continue running together with their still active runner friends. Thus, continuing participation is less problematic than in team sports for example. Since these ex-athletes found running meaningful beyond the performance narrative, they continued their sport participation and maintained a strong runner identity.

We suggest that the discovery of personal, existential meaning in running was a protective element in these athletes' career transition. It is important to note that these narratives in *Juoksija* were stories of successful transitions, and the voices of athletes with unsuccessful transitions were absent from the magazine. As a popular magazine, which operates to promote running for a wide audience, we conclude that *Juoksija* is unlikely to share stories of traumatic running careers and career endings. Moreover, the columns in the magazine were written in a limited space with a specific audience in mind, namely the mainstream running culture, which we assume might limit the promotion of alternative running cultures. In future research there is a need to find and give voice to these ex-athletes who did not find any deeper meaning in their sport career and may, for example, have suffered traumatic career ending injuries.

Our study revealed how discourses of the existential and spiritual dimensions of running were constructed as marginal in the dominant Finnish running culture. Similarly to Pronger's (2002) critique we conclude that dominant Western sport cultures may provide limited narrative resources for reconstruction of meaning in sport in athletic retirement. From our findings we suggest that with available non-performance related narrative resources, the athlete (runner) identity may potentially remain central in a successful retirement.

This study was one of the few that have explored spiritual meanings in sport in athletic career perspective. Moreover, in Finland there is a general lack of athletic career



research, even if Finnish sport history has several stories of unsuccessful career transitions where the retiring athletes have struggled (and failed?) to find a meaning in their post-career life. In future research there is a need to explore the critical moments of athletic career from existential perspectives, and how athletes tap into their cultural narratives in reconstructing the meaning of sport in transitions and in retirement. Moreover, making the alternative narratives available already during the active career may significantly increase athletes' wellbeing, enjoyment and sense of meaningfulness in sport participation. Revealing and promoting these alternative narratives, such as the spiritual dimensions of sport, may also provide retiring athletes with discursive resources that enhance their coping and wellbeing in the transition and enable them to continue their sport in post-career years. Pointing out that most athletes have a great number of active years ahead when they end their competitive career, Tero concluded: 'That is why I gave in to Age my competitive ability but not my soul!'

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