"I am a Runner": Early Motivators and the Development of Sport Identities

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The presence of sport identities may have important consequences for understanding sport behaviors. Research has shown that people with sport identities are more likely to be loyal to an activity, sport organization or sport event, or consume related services or products than those who do not possess sport identities (Green, 2001; Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004; Kyle, Kerstetter & Guadagnolo, 2004; Laverie & Arnett, 2000; Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2005). Although the connection between identity and behavior has been well established, the origins of those identities have been under-researched. Some research exists that seeks to understand the antecedents of sport identities, and related constructs, through cross-sectional survey designs (e.g., Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2004; Kyle, Absher, Hammitt, & Cavin, 2006). However, these approaches are limited in that they do not fully capture the dynamics of identity development because they correlate current motives with existing identities. Motivations to initially engage in an activity may indeed proceed the development of identities (e.g., Funk & James, 2001, 2006), but present motivations may have little resemblance to earlier ones. Thus, there is a need to examine the development of identities in a longitudinal manner. Building on Snelgrove and Havitz’s (2010) suggestion, the present study explores, from a retrospective perspective, initial motivations and experiences when participating in long distance running to the development of a runner identity. Funk and James’ (2006) Psychological Continuum Model which emphasizes the processual aspects of identity development serves as the theoretical framework for this study.

Method. Data were collected via open-ended survey responses from 60 competitive distance runners associated with a historically successful cross country program at a large Midwestern university. They represent the first wave of 75 potential participants from an estimated population of 600 living program alumni. The majority of first wave respondents were members of NCAA and/or conference champion teams though, at an individual level, competitive success levels varied widely. Respondents currently range in age from 21 to 90 but the majority are over age 60 as the first wave of data collection focused primarily on older runners. Consistent with the length of the questionnaire, which included both open-ended and quantitative response questions, survey completion times ranged from 45 minutes to over six hours. Both on-line and hard copy versions were made available and the data collection timeline was relatively open-ended affording adequate time to reflect retrospectively on experiences. Techniques suggested by Snelgrove and Havitz (2010) were employed to increase accurate recall and reduce reconstructions of the past. Outright refusals account for less than five percent of contacted first wave respondents. The two questions most salient to this paper include: (a) "Thinking back to before college, what motivated you to run?" and (b) "When did you become, in your mind, a runner?" Data were analysed using constant comparison methods in order to construct overarching themes that described running experiences early in their careers.

Findings and Discussion. Respondents began running between the ages of 6 and 20, nearly all in organized track and field or cross country contexts. Both positive and negative motives played roles for various respondents, though usually independently in the sense that few reported both positive and negative themes. Positive motives included emulation of significant others and enjoyment derived from participation, whereas negative motives included variations on coercion, punishment, or fear. Whereas positive motives mirror those in sport and leisure motivation studies more broadly (McDonald, Milne, & Hong, 2002), negative motives have not been adequately addressed in the literature.

Two major emergent themes explain early continuance in running after initial experiences: experiencing early competitive success and body image comfort. Early success as a motivator is consistent with research on the power of emotions and self-efficacy in sport continuance (Adler & Adler, 1998; Lee & Bobko, 1994). Although extant research addresses the constraining aspects of body type and body image comfort (Frederick & Shaw, 1995), respondents in this study suggested that body issues may also be viewed as an affordance. That is, participants who had limited success in other sports often found a connection with running. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that adolescents are drawn to activities consistent with self-image (Haggard & Williams, 1992; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000; Shaw, Kleiber & Caldwell, 1995).

The time frame in which respondents self-identified as "a runner" varied considerably. A plurality identified a specific episode (e.g., the 16th lap of a 4 mile training run with cousins and friends), date (e.g., November 4, 1944) or meaningful time (e.g., a 5:02 mile at age 13). These instances are typically described in lucid detail even though all first wave respondents initially ran sometime prior to 1970. Another group described their identification as runners in terms of an evolutionary process, most often spanning several weeks or months, but occasionally taking several years. In sum, the data suggest that the development of sport identities may have multiple origins and develop in various ways.