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Embodied thought of the month (ETM) – August 2015

Understanding past sporting experiences in the present.

Ian Wellard

Historians will always tell us about the importance of understanding the past. I agree with this, but when I think about things that have happened in the past I understand them in terms of my present state of mind and my predictions for what might happen in the future (or what I would like to happen). In June and July's ETMs, John and James demonstrate the significance of what has happened in the past and how we can as individuals (and academic researchers) gain a deeper understanding of the impact of previous experiences and relationships upon our orientation to the world or, in this case, our engagement with sport and physical activity (or even our bodies). While John focussed upon the methodological aspects of employing life history approaches, James reflected upon how his relationship with his father was instrumental in his subsequent engagement with sport. In doing so they both highlight the importance of past memories in terms of how they shape the ways in which we act or are able to act in the present. Here though, it is not just a recollection of 'what happened' but a much more reflexive process in the way that Jean-Paul Sartre outlined when he suggested that we need to look backward in order to understand the future by adopting a 'progressive-regressive' approach to the way we think about the present and how we act upon it.

I want to continue this train of thought so that I can also look back at some of my early experiences of sport and physical activity and reveal similarities and differences in the way that those foundational experiences shaped my orientation to sport in my adult life. Like James, I have fond memories of my early experiences of sport and physical activity and my relationship with my father was pivotal in my subsequent continued love of sport and physical activity throughout my life. However, unlike James, sport was never considered for me as a potential career and neither do I think that I have ever wanted it to be as such. I have written elsewhere (Wellard 2009, 2013) about the importance of childhood experiences of sport and physical activity and in my case these were gained within the immediate context of my family and with friends outside school. School sport and PA did not cater to my interests and I consider myself lucky that I was able to flourish because of

the opportunities that my parents provided and the experiences that I gained with friends and external clubs.

In James's ETM he portrayed the strong relationship he had with his father and this was obviously the focus for this piece. This is not to suggest that he did not have equally meaningful relationships with his mother and siblings. Nevertheless, it seems apparent that James's relationship with his father was also central in the formation of his love of and orientation towards sports and his subsequent decision to pursue a career in it. One thing that stands out when I try to remember my earlier experiences of sport was the importance of weekends as a time and place to do sport and be with my dad, my brothers and my friends. I describe in the introduction of my book, *Sport, Fun and Enjoyment*, how Saturday mornings were devoted to my dad taking me swimming at the local pool. This was a regular occurrence and something that I looked forward to throughout the week. But it was not just about swimming it was about being with my dad and a time of the week which was very much about having fun with my dad as well as my mum and my brothers. Dad was never around in the week because of his work commitments, and looking back now I feel that he felt a need to make the most of the weekends with his family. As he loved sport, family activities were very much based around some form of physical or sporting activity. Consequently, I see connections between the resilience (and maybe stubbornness) displayed by James's dad and mine in terms of the way that they were determined that their children should be able to experience sport positively and in ways that would be enjoyable. However, whereas James's dad had to overcome the barriers of physical disability, my dad had to overcome the barriers of work constraints and time. Nevertheless, in both cases they were able to find ways to work around the barriers.

In presenting some of these 'thoughts' I am not trying to portray an idyllic version of a childhood. To an extent, the relationship that I had with my dad was less than ideal (if there is an ideal) in that his role could possibly be viewed as part-time, much like the experiences of many other children. Weekdays I hardly saw him and when I did he was usually tired or grumpy and less willing (or able) to engage with us. It is also interesting to note the 'absence' of my mother (and James's). My mother loved sport too and was a good tennis player but the 'structure' of our family imposed roles upon her that made it equally as difficult for her to engage in maybe the way that she would have liked. At the time we

accepted this as normal family life and when my dad wasn't around during the week, there were many other things available to occupy us, such as school, playing with friends and going to sports clubs when I got older.

The point I am making here relates to the importance of recognising the influence that early experiences within the family have upon subsequent orientation to sport. The memories that I describe are undoubtedly subjective but, nevertheless, can on further examination be seen to connect with other (individual's) narratives of early sporting experiences. So, rather than being merely subjective accounts that can only be understood as one-off, indulgent personal stories, these narratives help us understand the complexities and intricacies of early forms of socialisation to everyday life as well as orientation to sport. Above anything else, these narratives help us to NOT fall into the trap of making sweeping generalisations that certain forms of family life are necessarily always better than others and that sport is always a panacea to cure all the ills of modern life - something which politicians and sport development proponents tend to do so again and again.

References:

1. Sartre, J-P. (1968) *Search for a Method* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.
2. Wellard, I. (2009) *Sport, Masculinities and the Body* New York: Routledge.
3. Wellard, I. (2013) *Sport, Fun and Enjoyment: an embodied approach* London: Routledge.

Next month – John looks at the notion of wellbeing in relation to physical activity