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Embodied Thought of the Month (ETM) – July

Impaired sporting bodies and Father-Son Relationships

James Brighton

In April's ETM I discussed some of the embodied experiences of disabled athletes that I spent time with during my PhD research. As well as my own interrupted bodily biography, another reason for my interest in researching the lives of disabled people has arisen from my relationship with my Dad, a theme I will now explore further following on from last month's ETM where John introduced an aspect of his research that is incorporating life history methods to explore reflections of physical activity and family relationships.

As a kid I loved sport and spent all my time either playing it or dreaming about it. Just being physically active gave me huge joy and pleasure and helped me to enact my active imagination through my body. My Dad was a huge influence in this interest and my subsequent sporting career, but his earliest embodied memories were somewhat different. He has Polio, short for poliomyelitis, but also known as "infantile paralysis" in his lower right leg. As I have got older I have talked to him more and more about his experiences of childhood – which as his son I find it hard to listen to. As the World Health Organisation (2011) recognises though, "there are still polio victims living in our communities – they have stories to tell".

A couple of years ago my Dad's Mum (my Gran) died and we were faced with the poignant task of clearing out her house so it could be sold. Stepping through the front door the coldness and emptiness (which was in stark contrast to the love and warmth that I had previously known) struck me. Looking around I couldn't help but think about how much removing all of my grandparents personal belongings revealed about their lives – and the lives of their families. Amongst the boxes of books, clothes, ornaments and collectables (including letters and artefacts from the 2nd World War in which my Grandad had been a soldier) I came across the lower leg brace that my father wore as a child. I was immediately shocked by its size. It was so small, about eight inches long with rusted metal rods running down either side. Attached were dark leather buckles that kept his leg secure that were only an inch and a half in diameter. The crudeness of this contraption did not seem fit to wrap

around the delicate limb that it secured and I struggled to imagine my Dad – who I had always known as so big and strong, being so small.

Later that evening, I thought more about what life would have been like for him as a kid and how different it would have been from my idyllic and active childhood. So I asked him. He told me without any sense of self pity or unfairness, how he spent much of his young years in hospitals either recovering from surgery (of which he had many) or being imprisoned in a hospital bed due to severe pain, sickness and fatigue, all associated symptoms of Polio. Much of the time in-between was spent at home, resting or recovering from illness where my Gran would tutor him. His opportunities to play with other children were limited and he was unable to learn new sports or experience the pleasure, enjoyment or imagination that being active brings. He was never able to simply run – something he has always longed to do.

Surviving Polio (when about 3% of the population died from the disease) and growing up into his teens Dad also told me of the challenges and tensions that adolescence brought. He reminisced how at a tough inner city high school he was scared that he would be bullied by the other boys that would call him a “cripple” and was petrified that girls would not find him attractive as a result of his disability. However, having adapted to his impaired lower leg (which has no muscle and very little movement) he also told me how he had developed a love for sport and the growing importance it had in his life. Not only did he find out that he was naturally gifted and able to learn sports quickly allowing him to make up for lost time, he also appreciated the benefits that constructing an athletic and typically masculine identity had on challenging stereotypes of his disability. Initially, he took up as many aggressive sports as possible, including boxing for the school team. Later he became an accomplished Cricketer and Tennis player. He desperately wanted to play rugby, but he was simply not mobile enough around the pitch with his paralysed leg.

Sport has since been a lifelong presence in my Dad’s life, which in turn has shaped my own sporting career and provides the basis of my close relationship with him. Reflecting back now, my earliest memories are framed by not just playing sport, but playing with him. He taught me how to play cricket in the back garden and tennis at the local courts and did his best to play football with me even though he struggled. He bought me shiny new sports

equipment including new cricket bats and footballs that I was fascinated with and took me to games and training when he could. As I grew up, he taught me, but never pressured me, to find myself through sport too. Part of this was not only assisting my participation but also introducing me to the rituals and pleasures that make up what Wellard (2013) describes as the “whole package” of sport including having a beer afterwards and engaging in appropriate forms of talk. It was through my Dad therefore that I learnt about sport and what it was to be a heterosexual, able (hegemonically masculine) man.

As I became more successful in my own sports career, I wanted to use my body to do what his impaired body had prevented him from doing by competing in high level sport. Aged 19 I was well on the way to realising these ambitions and making him proud by playing junior level cricket for my county and football for a semi-professional club. However, a career ending injury initially diagnosed as a “ruptured anterior cruciate ligament and severe bucket handle tear of lateral meniscus” but resulting in long term degeneration prematurely ended these dreams. After the fifth surgery to my knee I remember Dad coming to see me in hospital. Sitting next to me on sheets covered in blood and sweat I felt afraid that I could not enjoy sport again and ashamed that it was my body that had now let us both down. Sensing my feelings he gave me hug and wrapped me up in his still muscular upper body. Exiting hospital a few weeks later, I was provided with my own leg brace that I was told to wear when possible.

I have since struggled to come to terms with my impairment as I had no storyline beyond high level sport on which to fall back on. However, like my Dad I have learnt to manage the limitations of my body and am still able to enjoy cricket and tennis at an amateur level. I have also learned to enjoy fitness and physical activity in different ways by for example pushing my body to its limits in a gym where I can mediate the pain I experience, or by busying myself with alternative physical tasks such as manual labour around the house and garden. Perhaps the symbolic importance of competing in high level sport is less significant to us both now and we focus more upon health, wellbeing and enjoyment once again along with more pressing needs to be providers for our families. Even in these new activities though, we still understand each other through our broken bodies.

References

1. World Health Organization (2011) World report on disability, Geneva: WHO
2. Wellard, I. (2013) *Sport, Fun and Enjoyment: an embodied approach* London: Routledge.

Next month: Ian continues this theme with a discussion of early sporting memories and family life.