

### **Chapter III – Running Into the Wind: Conditions of Possibility**

The prevalence of disordered eating in the world of collegiate distance running suggests that elements inherent to this culture or environment foster fertile ground for the germination of pathological relationships with food. For an intimate understanding, it is pertinent to begin from the roots — starting with a discussion of how such patterns initially arise — and work upwards. Therefore, this chapter explores specific factors that may kindle these disorders as women begin their collegiate careers. What emerges from such interrogation is a set of conditions that serve as continual pressures toward unhealthy behaviors; in resisting such influences, women are running into the wind.

#### ***Expectations of Excellence Through Tough Transitions***

*I think it was...an interesting cycle. I was stressed out because I wasn't running well, I was all the way across the country, my classes were harder...you know, your whole entire world is upside down. (Participant 17)*

Each fall, as a new generation enters college, thousands of student-athletes undergo what is often the single largest upheaval of their young lives. Removed from friends, family, and the familiar, these athletes must learn to adapt to a new academic course-load, social network, and rigorous training regimen. As will be further discussed in *Chapter VI – Cultural Ripples and Resonances*, college admissions and collegiate athletic performances have grown increasingly competitive; today's athletes enter with histories of stand-out success, not only in sport but also academics. In a nation that places such strong emphasis on accomplishments, many of these individuals have adopted the high-achieving mindset encouraged by U.S. culture. Distance running, by nature of requiring long periods of discomfort to reach a given end, tends to attract individuals who have internalized values of self-discipline. Athletes have been conditioned, through their life experiences, to expect success of themselves, especially in correlation with the effort they expend; they set their sights high and are willing to work hard to achieve those goals.

The transition to college can turn those expectations on their head, in a form of what has been deemed the 'big-fish-little-pond' effect (Davis, 1966; Marsh, 1987). Athletes are surrounded by other students with academic accomplishments on par with or exceeding their own. Coming out of high school — where many athletes were not only the top runners on their

teams, but also in the section and state — assimilating into a group of their athletic equals and superiors often proves arduous.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the challenges associated with this transition make it exceedingly difficult for young collegiate athletes to meet their own expectations for performance. They must adapt to a new physical environment, learn to manage unstructured time, and navigate a higher degree of academic rigor. In this adjustment period, students often sacrifice sleep, compounding stress levels, suppressing immune systems, and impairing post-workout recovery.

Young women must face these stressful changes uprooted from their social support systems. Distance now separates them from family and friends they previously relied on when overwhelmed or under stress. Surrounded by unfamiliar faces, they must establish new social connections and maintain a heightened awareness of the ways they project themselves, for fear of generating bad impressions. In this way, one of the protective features of an athlete's life has become an additional ball to juggle.

Some of the more practical adaptations to college life may prove more difficult for athletes than the broader student population. Learning to navigate nutrition in an unfamiliar setting poses a challenge particularly for sports such as distance running, in which nutrition can substantially impact one's quality of training. Many athletes need to “acclimate” to dining halls (Participant 10). In efforts to keep options affordable for students, many college dining services sacrifice certain aspects of quality, making it more difficult for athletes to access balanced nutrients in the right quantities and ratios. One participant recalled developing a nutritional deficiency from sub-consciously steering clear of certain options:

I've found at college that my food like isn't always as well-rounded; I've run into iron troubles with the lack of meat, you know [*chuckles*] — dining hall meat — so [my nutrition] has actually changed in the sense that I didn't used to have to sit down and think about eating salmon or chicken or something every night, where now I'm more consciously aware of finding those things during the day.

(Participant 7)

In this way, nutrition becomes one more piece of an athlete's new life she must monitor; something that was once mundane now requires heightened awareness.<sup>2</sup> Whereas many women

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<sup>1</sup>Athletes experience similar disruptions in transitioning from collegiate to professional running (Participant 25; Goldman, 2018). This chapter will focus primarily on college athletes who appear more vulnerable to developing disordered eating habits as a result of the adjustment, likely because of the environment they are transitioning into.

were accustomed to meals being prepared by parents or family, eating now involves an active decision-making process. College campuses typically offer a variety of food options, easily accessible, at nearly all times. The freedom allotted by unmonitored meal plans, near-constant availability of high-fat and high-calorie foods, as well as new social obligations associated with eating can lead to weight gain among college freshman. One participant recalled her experiences with social eating and social expectations around food during her freshman year at college:

It's just a weird situation — I mean everybody talks about it — like all of a sudden there's all this food all the time, which I know is such a weird thing to say but it's just not like that at home. Now it's just so convenient to just *eat*. I especially feel like, for me, the thing was stress-eating or studying and eating out, especially freshman year. I feel like social eating was just...it sounds so weird but pretty much every time after you go out. Maybe not everyone does, but for me, that was definitely a weird thing because freshman year I would just eat more junk food. It was unnecessary I think; it wasn't like I was like hungry or craving it — it's just what people do in college, or that's what I thought. Freshman year is definitely weird to adjust to this environment compared to home. (Participant 1)

The “freshman fifteen,” as it is affectionately and often sarcastically referred, is hardly catastrophic for the average student. However, it can have much more serious consequences for a distance runner’s performance, especially if amassed over a relatively short period of time in conjunction with disrupted sleep habits and higher levels of stress. Some of the participants, almost apologetically, described periods of overeating. One woman reflected, “I think I actually fell into this pattern of eating too much, especially with the dining hall” (Participant 16).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This idea of heightened awareness of food and dietary choices will arise again in *Chapter VI – Cultural Ripples and Resonances*.

<sup>3</sup> To further complicate the discussion, it is important to note that the weight gain inciting concern is rarely as significant or severe as athletes seem to perceive. As one participant put it, “you notice changes in your body long before anybody else does” (Participant 10). The “weight gain” that many participants referred to was fairly minimal — as little as one to two pounds in some cases (less than daily weight fluctuations from water gain and loss in the body) (Participant 16). However, athletes claimed to “feel” this difference when they were running, calling into question how much of the effect is merely psychological and how much is truly physiological. Furthermore, a numerical increase in an athlete’s weight does not necessarily reflect an increase in adipose mass (Hoffman, Policastro, Quick, & Lee, 2006; Werner, Thiel, Schneider, Mayer, Giel, & Zipfel, 2013); many women experience an increase in muscle mass their freshman year due to more intense weight-training regimens. However, because the number on the scale is rising and performance may be suffering for any variety of reasons previously discussed, athletes may assume that the weight gain is to blame.

The combination of suffering performance and weight gain can become burdensome through this period of transition, as women fall out of alignment with cultural standards of success and body-type.<sup>4</sup> One professional athlete struggled to articulate the mental anguish that accompanied what felt, at the time, like a series of catastrophic failures on her part:

I was the top recruit coming in so I expected myself to be, like, top of the team, and I just...yeah, so I just couldn't do that and with gaining the weight, I just didn't...I just wasn't happy so to speak. (Participant 18)

Her description begins to reveal the ways in which athletes' mental health can suffer substantially during this period of their lives.

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Regardless of whether weight gain plays a role, women often fail to live up to their initial visions of athletic success as they juggle the multitude of new demands and hurdles. Many women know, coming into college, exactly how their times and performances compare to those of their future teammates; statistics are widely available online, and some coaches are even explicit during recruitment about which athletes they have the highest hopes for. For those coming in at the top of the list, the expectations are often the highest, but the stresses of transition often divide women's energies. Riding the steep "learning curve" (Participant 10), their freshman performances often come up short of those initial high expectations. These perceived failures take a considerable toll on athletes' mental health and sense of self. One collegiate athlete recounted:

I wasn't doing that well in track and it was hard for me to even make the travel roster and things like that — I wasn't getting better at my events and that was really hard on me mentally and my self-confidence; I'm the type of person who wants to be good at what I'm doing, like most everyone on the team, you know? And I care so much about track and doing well, it was really hard not to. I feel like that really affected my self-confidence in general — in academics and just about myself — feeling like I wasn't good enough...It's hard because if you continually don't do well, then you get worse; you're harder on yourself and then once you're harder on yourself, it's harder to do better, so it's this constant cycle

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<sup>4</sup> A more complete discussion of these cultural values and Eurocentric body standards will come in *Chapter VI*.

of, ‘Oh well that made me less confident, but now because I’m less confident, how am I supposed to do well?’ (Participant 11)

Confidence acts as a powerful determinant of athletic performance; its absence can be crippling. Many of the participants who experienced these perceived shortcomings expressed frustration at feeling forced to “settle” for a level of competitiveness that felt beneath them compared to what they experienced in high school:

It’s very tough, though, to be there and accept, ‘Okay, I’m going to be here and I’m not going to be at the top. I’m not going to be my best.’ (Participant 17)

It is interesting to consider that she specifically said “my best,” rather than “the best”. While she was referring to having to give up being ‘the best’ in her sport (at least relative to the competitive field she was running against), she referred to her own personal success as though the two are one in the same. Whether or not this was intentional or accidental, it reveals the value or sense of worth that these athletes have grown accustomed to deriving from their performance.

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Even if an athlete’s running performance does not suffer and she accomplishes faster paces than she has ever run before, the higher level of competition dulls her personal feat; her individual record may still fail to distinguish her from her peers. As a woman transitions from “10<sup>th</sup> in the state to 10<sup>th</sup> on the team,” her self-confidence often falters (Participant 16). As one participant said:

You literally were the *best* in high school — top person on your team. And then when you come to college, you’re just like everyone else. It’s hard — you’re put in such a different position that you’re not used to that it’s really hard to transition from being the best to average or below average. (Participant 11)

A woman’s sense of significance begins to slip, both within her team and within her sport at large, as she loses sight of the aspects of herself that she identified with or took pride in. Standout athletic performances were previously a feature that set her apart from those around her — it made her unique relative to her peers. In moving up to the next level of competition, that distinction transforms into anonymity. As one athlete phrased it:

It was a hard transition to figure out how to race here because you’re not in the front anymore; you’re just one in a hundred people — you’re just a number. You lose your importance and confidence, I guess. (Participant 2)

Transitions between high school and college<sup>5</sup> involve a disruption of the routine and lifestyles that athletes have grown comfortable with and have tailored to facilitate their athletic success. In many ways, we may consider this passage into college as a period of rapid social change, similar to those observed by anthropologists studying the role of westernization on the rise of disordered eating (Becker, 2004; Le Grange 2004; Pike 2004; Gordon 2004). Here however, rather than a culture changing around a population, the population is instead uprooted and relocated to a new cultural context filled with echoes of the previous but marked by subtle variation. Such a major life shift forces women to redefine their expectations and causes them to lose much of their sense of command over their performance; some may turn to managing food as a means of re-establishing a sense of agency and coping with the distress that accompanies these transitions (Becker, 2004; Le Grange 2004; Pike 2004; Gordon 2004). These transitions therefore mark periods where women are increasingly susceptible to developing eating disorders; as they experience the discomfort of a major life change, they may turn to food to regain some semblance of control.

### ***Disorder in the Pursuit of Control***

*I wouldn't say I was in a very stable mental or emotional place at the time and that allowed me to maybe...for my thoughts go in that direction. That was the first time that I really had school that was hard. I was really overloading myself; I thought I could do everything and I thought I could be the best at everything. And I thought if I couldn't handle it and I was getting upset about it, then I must be doing something wrong for even being upset about it. So I think it was all kind of just progressing in a way that allowed something to go wrong. And all those things can definitely...make you feel a little bit out of control and I think that was a good mechanism to feel like, 'I can take control of this — I can take control of how my progress is going to go. This is something that will make me faster and help me improve.' (Participant 15)*

Particularly salient within U.S. culture is an ethnopsychological orientation toward control (Jenkins & Carpenter-Song, 2005). Though this theme varies in its subtler meanings

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<sup>5</sup> Again, similar patterns can be found in the transition to the professional world.

among groups or individuals, it is invariably sought after, in some form, within this cultural context. In what Arthur Kleinman (2006) refers to as the “myth of self control,” acculturation within the U.S. encourages belief in a greater degree of agency over circumstances, bodies, and opportunities than is actually achievable. Perceived loss of control, conversely, often manifests in anxiety or depression.

These observations play out distinctly in the narratives of women distance runners. As athletes make the transition into college, juggling more demanding academic work and failing to meet their athletic aspirations often produces a sense of floundering. Accustomed to deriving a sense of self from their athletic performance, they may grasp to regain a sense of agency over that area of their lives and turn and to managing food to achieve that aim. In an unanticipated paradox, however, as women seek to bring order to this single piece of their lives, it gains power over them, becoming a disproportionate priority and generating an even deeper sense of disorder.

Particularly for women who experienced weight-gain, it becomes easy to place blame for poor performance on that physical change. In many cases, the transition simply marks a period of acclimation — runners’ bodies typically return to their set points after they adjust to their college schedule and learn to navigate campus dining facilities to find foods that fuel them well. However, many women attempt to compensate for the weight-gain by dieting to rapidly drop pounds. Though weight-loss goals may begin small and manageable, this reactionary period can instill in young women lasting tendencies towards restriction. One participant described her experience as a young college student observing her teammates:

I know after freshman year, a couple of the girls noticed that they had put on a little more weight than they were used to. So then our sophomore year, girls were very aware of what they were eating — sticking to salads or whatever because of the body change that occurred our freshman year. (Participant11)

The moralization of thinness<sup>6</sup> loads this weight gain with guilt and shame, further motivating women to attempt to shed the excess weight. Nutritional restriction, therefore, becomes a tool not only of performance enhancement but also a balm for the conscience.

Turning to food for a sense of control, however, is dangerous in that it can very quickly slip into something more intense than an athlete intended. Complications arise when athletes overcompensate for the weight-gain, developing obsessive tendencies regarding dietary choices,

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<sup>6</sup> Previously mentioned in the *Introduction*, this concept will be discussed further in *Chapter VI*.

portion control and calorie monitoring. As one participant put it, “It’s actually bad for your sport to gain weight you don’t need. But it’s hard to control that without...*over*-controlling, and that’s what I think I’m still having trouble with” (Participant 15). Unfortunately, what begins as an effort to make healthier choices can easily devolve into an additional stressor.

Numbers, tangible and quantifiable, drive the sport of running: training mileage, heart rates, repetitions, rankings, and, most of all, the minutes and seconds on the watch. Likewise, practices of monitoring food intake may also provide the allure of quantification.<sup>7</sup> One participant described this pattern arising at “certain times of needing control” when athletes “get really fixated on the numbers” (Participant 20). By tracking and limiting calorie consumption, and watching the numbers on the scale drop,<sup>8</sup> athletes can take charge of this single aspect of their lives when it feels as though their “whole entire world is upside-down” (Participant 17); it provides something concrete to cling to when all else seems to be slipping through their grasp.

Paradoxically, a recoil effect emerges in the context of athletes’ pursuit of control, putting them at the whim of the very thing they are attempting to conquer. As will be discussed in the upcoming chapter, the line begins to blur between opting for healthier foods and disordered eating. Athletes seeking to manage their weight and nutrition must devote increasing amounts of mental and emotional energy to their growing preoccupation with food. As one athlete said, “I’m trying not to let food have that kind of power over my life. Because thinking about food and overeating — you don’t want it to control you” (Participant 17). From her words, we catch a glimpse of the influence this abstract idea of ‘controlling eating’ has taken on. As priorities are re-allocated, concern over food expands and thus gains power; eating no longer remains a means to an end, wreaking havoc and fostering further feelings of disorder or helplessness.

Socialization to desires for control extends beyond nutrition and bodies. In seeking greater command over performance outcomes, athletes’ sacrifices for sport grow. Here, another subtle reversal emerges from the data; as athletes make increasingly important decisions on the basis of how they will affect athletic performance, their agency is in many ways removed. Attempting to optimize performance outcomes often means sacrificing other important elements of an athlete’s life. For example, an athlete may opt for a cross-training session rather than

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<sup>7</sup> One participant, for example, described a calorie counting phone application she used to follow her progress and make sure she was not “overeating” (Participant 1).

<sup>8</sup> See opening quotation from the previous section, *Expectations of Excellence*.



spending time with friends to strengthen social connections, or she might opt for a lower grade in a class so she can ensure she is sleeping enough to recover properly. This holds especially true among professional athletes, for whom there is less insulation from performance pressures as their contracts are negotiated by their athletic output. One professional participant recounted an eye-opening conversation when a close friend gently pushed her to take a step back and reconsider an important choice she was making, saying to the participant:

‘My concern is that I know where your values lie and you’re making this decision completely...It’s like a one-eighty from all your other values in life, and when that starts to happen, I’m encouraging you to check what’s in control. What is the basis of this decision? Anything you love has the power to take over you like that.’ (Participant 24)

The same participant went on to describe her realization, during her eating disorder recovery, of the craving underlying her choices and decisions: “I never understood this desire for control...In my pride, it was about willpower and image and insecurity — this idea that I wasn’t enough” (Participant 24).

### ***Carnival Mirrors of Comparison***

*You’re comparing your body to twenty girls who you see in the locker room who are the smallest people in the school. And it’s so tough. (Participant 17)*

Compounding feelings of lacking control, comparisons athletes make between themselves and their peers further perpetuate existing feelings of insecurity. Within the context of collegiate distance running, the theme of comparison emerged as one of the primary contributors to the problem of disordered eating. Women described three distinct forms or levels: comparisons of performance, comparisons of bodies, and comparisons of eating habits. As we will see, each of these forms produces distinct breeds of insecurity that increases women’s vulnerability to disordered eating patterns. I will attempt to explore each of these individually while maintaining contact with an overriding theme of distortion; like warped carnival mirrors, magnifying certain aspects of an image while diminishing others, comparisons lead an athlete to fixate on areas in which she is lesser, drawing attention away from her positive attributes or strengths. Ultimately, this convolutes her self-image and damages her confidence.

Running naturally lends itself to comparison; its emphasis on numbers quantifies differences and makes disparities in performance both irrefutable and measurable. Each athlete can compare her splits, times, and standings against those of her teammates and competitors. It is obvious when an athlete fails to meet her personal goals or falls short relative to the competitive field. Accompanying these clear differences in performance is an implicit assumption or standard that those who have trained the hardest and longest tend to come out on top. Particularly within this specific athletic discipline, in which talent plays a less significant role than training, success is often viewed as a direct product of effort invested or self-discipline exercised.

These performance comparisons are heightened by the trends of an increasingly connected world, athletes can now share and post workouts on blogs and websites dedicated to running. Race results are no longer the only ‘performances’ that matter, as athletes post splits for various workouts online. Professional athletes especially are frequently sharing details of their training and other aspects of their lives. This connects them with fans, makes them feel more “real” and “down-to-earth”. At the same time, these connections generate a hyper-visibility of bodies and performance, facilitating comparison. Whereas before, teams trained in relative isolation, modern tendencies toward self-promotion are becoming the norm. As one professional athlete pointed out:

People post their workouts, or post this-or-that, or whatever. I mean, even for us, we see all the other pros [*professional athletes*] too and it’s like, ‘Oh, this is what they’re doing.’ And not to mention the college girls too — even all the recruits now, they all follow each other; everybody is so interconnected now, whereas before, you were just in your own little bubble, like, ‘I’m doing what I’m doing, I don’t know what everyone else is doing.’ (Participant 25)

Although comparison has always been an inherent part of the sport, it is becoming even more transparent in contemporary running culture as a result of this connectedness.

The ease of access to this kind of information means that long before an athlete ever reaches her university, she may already be developing feelings of doubt surrounding her abilities relative to those of her soon-to-be peers. In the same way that the top recruits often know that they are the strongest runners in their incoming class, those at the bottom of the list are also aware of their position. The anticipation of relative inadequacy can have similar affects on women’s assurance in their habits and performances. As one participant noted regarding her

times when she was in high school, “Compared to other girls on my team here — other girls were so much faster when they were that age” (Participant 14). In some occasions, coaches may even make this apparent by telling athletes where they stand in the recruitment process. Although each school and coach has an individual philosophy when it comes to recruitment, running at the collegiate level is always a step up for athletes, often leading to fear of inadequacy:

I went into it freshman year kind of just assuming that I would be the worst person on the team and, you know, just see what happens, so I think it’s really been better than I thought it could be, although I think I still have this insecurity about not being a top recruit — [Coach] didn’t want me on the team and that’s still kind of affecting me years later. (Participant 6)

These feelings of inadequacy can damage women’s confidence for the majority of their collegiate careers, in some ways generating self-fulfilling prophecies.

Regardless of whether or not expectations are at work, poor performance relative to teammates and competitors may make women more malleable in their habits and actions; they are less likely to trust their bodies and what has worked for them in the past, now feeling it is insufficient at this next level of competition. Given that they already share workouts with their teammates, they look to other aspects of the running lifestyle or what it is about elite individuals that brings them success. Body type, because it is visual and easily noticeable, often becomes a first area of focus.

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In understanding this next level of comparison — that of physical form — we must first recognize the gendered aspects of comparison that are layered on top of performance comparisons. Although both men and women regularly engage in comparison, it generates much greater body disturbance among women (Schwalbe & Staples, 1991; Thompson, 1992). The objectification of the female form within U.S. culture has profound implications for body image. Women in particular are regularly bombarded with visuals, generating pressure to engage in comparison and use those comparisons as a basis for self-confidence and self-image (Wood, 1989; Striegel-Moore, McAvay, and Rodin, 1986; Thompson, Heinberg and Tantleff, 1991; Festinger, 1954).<sup>9</sup> In 1954, Festinger laid the original conceptual framework of social comparison theory. He posited that individuals use comparison to judge their standing in several

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<sup>9</sup> Further discussion of the objectification of the female body will come in *Chapter VI*.

different social dimensions. Those tendencies towards comparison are heightened during entry into a new and unfamiliar social environment, before one establishes her place in the social order (Festinger, 1954; Wheeler, 1966). In the collegiate running context, such a trend means that comparison is most common among freshman. One participant spoke to this pattern, referencing also general insecurity related to body image and self-confidence in a new environment:

There is a huge comparison with all college girls, especially with freshman coming in because you're at a new school, you're on your own, you're trying to impress your teammates, you're trying to impress your friends, you're trying to impress a ton of boys, and I think that is a big factor of probably what contributes to girl's health — mental and physical health in general — is making sure that they look good for everyone else. (Participant 11)

In theory, these comparisons serve as an adaptive response to evaluating one's standing relative to one's new peers. In practice, it means that women who are new to the team are especially prone to comparison as they attempt to find their place.

Within the world of distance running, or even the microcosms of individual teams, the comparison inherent in sport and gender amplify one another to create a potent norm of that type of thinking. One professional summarized these dual origins:

Running, essentially, is a sport of comparison right? What is my time compared to your time? Where did you place in terms of this? So I think every runner is obviously competitive, and you're so used to making those comparisons on the track. But then again, if you have a group of girls in any setting, they're probably doing similar things. So I think it's probably a combination of gender and the sport. (Participant 25)

Thus, these women are situated in a context in which gendered patterns compound athletic habits. Comparison appears nearly inevitable.

Women's tendency to compare their own size and appearance to other individuals is highly correlated with body- and weight-dissatisfaction (Striegel-Moore, McAvay, and Rodin, 1986; Thompson, Heinberg and Tantleff, 1991). Women's distance running teams are communities of intensely small individuals. Even without training, many naturally talented distance runners have fast metabolisms and slim body types, generating a sub-population of women with even lower levels of body fat than the general population. Through competition,

training, and sharing a locker room, women are almost constantly exposed to the bodies of teammates around them.

Women's close awareness and familiarity with teammates' bodies allow them to distinguish even slight variations in body type. As one participant put it:

It's funny — if somebody looked at us from the outside, they would be like 'Oh, those are all tiny girls,' but when you're in the locker room, you know who's tinier than others, and that's kind of weird. You look at bodies and you're like, 'Oh, you know, she must be a little bit shorter distance or longer distance, and, you know, it's a little bit of a weird thing to notice, but you definitely notice it. (Participant 7)

These comparisons create false standards. Not only are women situated on a college campus filled with young women, they are now surrounded by intensely fit female athletes. Many participants echoed the sentiment of one woman who said, "I was definitely *very* conscious of how tiny everybody was" (Participant 1). Women entering college teams often have to experience the sensation for the first time of feeling like "one of the bigger girls on the team" (Participants 1, 7, 9).

As a result of these new standards, a phenomena of image distortion emerged from the data. Because what would ordinarily be considered extreme has been normalized, many of the participants I spoke to seemed to have permanently altered notions about what an "average" or "normal" body looked like. Furthermore, there were instances in which teammates who would appear to most as very fit were described as "heavier" or "bigger"(Participant 5). One athlete noted the absurdity of the new norm, saying that most of her teammates looked like "tiny teenage girls" (Participant 17).<sup>10</sup> Regardless of whether these body types are achieved through restriction or conferred by metabolism, 'skinny' in this context becomes a standard not only of beauty and appearance but also success.

Women within the U.S. culture of exceptionalism are accustomed to comparison — to judging and rating themselves relative to those around them, regardless of whether that is a conscious or sub-conscious decision (Heinberg and Thompson, 1992). As will be discussed

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<sup>10</sup> Because many women begin running long-distance events prior to the onset of puberty or during puberty, natural physical changes characterizing that transition period are arrested. One participant referred to this pattern as a "delayed transition into womanhood" (Participant 13). The hormonal effects previously discussed (amenorrhea, bone reabsorption) are invisible from the outside, but other effects are more obvious; even at college-age, many distance runners' bodies appear reminiscent of adolescence.

further in *Chapter VI*, thinness and attractiveness among women in broader society correlates with career success (Bordo, 1993). Similarly in sport, athletes with the leanest, well-muscled bodies often exhibit the greatest success. Women learn from a young age to take inventory of those around them to judge their relative position. Sociologists have pointed to comparison as a major mechanism mediating the creation and maintenance of a sociocultural ideal (Cash & Smolak, 2011, p. 17). We see such a pattern play out here as the dangerously low levels of body fat that characterize many of the female athletes in the sport becomes a ‘standard’, or internalized expectation, rather than an ‘ideal’.

In some cases, comparison is a natural result of athletes’ competitive nature, even amongst teammates to some degree (Participant 27). When there are a limited number of slots on a travel roster, for instance, how a woman performs in a given race or practice may determine her standing on the team. Regardless of whether it affects team culture, this inevitably generates a tendency to judge and rank one’s ability and fitness relative to teammates. The same ranking frequently plays out in competitive environments as well (Participant 24). As athletes warm up for races, they tend to “size up” their competitors. As one professional athlete described, body types are often a marker of both discipline and training intensity.

I definitely am aware of my body and I look at other women and I see ‘Wow, they’re...’ I mean you can see on some people their skin is much more tightly wrapped around muscles and bones, and it is a fine line between making that the goal in your mind — is that an indication of someone’s training? How disciplined they are? I look at that as a marker of someone who’s really training hard. You know, ‘Am I training as hard? My body doesn’t look like that.’ (Participant 27)

When athletes notice success among especially thin runners, they may assume that the body type is not simply a by-product of training but instead an enabling determinant. One athlete admitted, “We’re all striving for that” (Participant 17). Some athletes notice this correlation at a dangerously young age, depending on how early they reach levels of competition dominated by lean body-types. One participant recounted:

When I started racing and I started seeing all these girls who are tiny racing against me, I felt like I could never be at their level if I didn’t look like that; I felt like it was a correlation that makes them faster, so yeah, I probably started dieting when I was like twelve or thirteen. (Participant 3)

Comparisons can often become explicit conversations among teammates at meets, for better or for worse. One athlete recalled, “I remember my teammates being like, ‘Look at so-and-so from another team. She looks really fit!’ or ‘She looks so small!’ — people were always comparing what people looked like” (Participant 22). When women vocalize those observations, making them explicit, comparison escalates; those thought patterns are introduced to athletes who may never have made those observations independently or validated among those who had.

Beyond these interpersonal comparisons, women may also draw comparisons between their current and former selves; through the transition to college, particularly as performance suffers, comparisons against one’s previous body type and accomplishments easily arise. Relative to high school competition, athletes finish further back in both workouts and races, confronting on a daily basis their new status of mediocrity:

I definitely keep comparing myself to how fit I used to be under completely different circumstances – it’s completely unfair to compare but I’m like, ‘I used to be able to do this, but I would die if I tried to do that now!’ I don’t know how I ran fourteen miles! It’s not going to happen anytime soon, but it is going to be easier this time. (Participant 20)

For athletes who are competing against some of the same women they raced against in high school, the measures of their relative performance become even more obvious. As competitors they used to beat on a regular basis surpass them, their confidence in their abilities continues to fall:

What’s hard for me is like I came in with like the second fastest time — I was State Champion and very fast. You know, and I remember thinking I was going to come here and be so fast and then ended up just not having a good season at all. And having such a hard time seeing all these people who I had been faster than in the past beating me. (Participant 17)

Despite the major life changes that have occurred, women often fail to see how radical shifts in environment and physiology have altered the context they are attempting to compete within. Rather than having patience and grace with themselves to adapt, their frustration and feelings of failure grow.

This issue of comparing one’s current performance to past performances becomes especially precarious when applied to the weight gain that can often accompany the college

transition. As one participant voiced, “Since we’re already at a specific weight, you can easily see when somebody loses weight or gains weight, just because there isn’t much there or everything is already sculpted” (Participant 10). If athletes feel their performance is suffering and correlate that with the way their body changed, they may come to view weight loss as the most prudent method of returning to previous levels of attainment. Several participants recalled instances of looking back at pictures of themselves or mentioned comparing their current and previous body size. One collegiate upperclassman recovering from an eating disorder voiced this idea:

I know I’m never going to be at 110 [pounds] again and that’s okay you know, I’m at 135 and that will be fine and I will be fast enough. So I think just the stress of [my coach] knowing where I used to be and kind of comparing me to that.  
(Participant 17)

This snapshot into the way she thinks about her weight gain reveals not only the difficulty she experiences in accepting her body at this higher weight but also the embarrassment and guilt she feels from her perceptions of judgment or disappointment from her coach. She did not mention whether he had ever explicitly mentioned this to her.<sup>11</sup> One professional athlete actually expressed similar sentiments regarding the difficulty of adjusting to a healthier weight, as she noticed she looked “different” than she did in college (Participant 24). She described the shift as initially alarming or unsettling, but something she grew more comfortable with over time.

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Comparisons of body form and performance — whether against teammates, competitors, or past selves — generates feelings of physical inadequacy among women. As they look to aspects of their successful teammates’ lifestyles for guidance, a third form of comparison emerges — that of dietary choices — lending itself to help the athletes “fix” the problem. Because teammates tend to eat meals together, women can also easily compare their dietary choices to those around them. This emerged from the data as one of the primary factors contributing to cultures of disordered eating affecting entire teams. As women seek to improve their running, they may look to the eating behaviors of those around them. Participants described the pattern; “because you’re all eating together, you’re looking at what each person’s getting”

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<sup>11</sup> From conversations with her teammates and the remainder of the interview, I was led to believe he had not and this perception originated with her.



(Participants 18, 25). This seems an especially common experience for freshman, as they look to upperclassmen for guidance in becoming competitive at this next level. An athletic team is frequently a student-athlete's first social network on campus, and freshman women in particular spend an enormous amount of time immersed in the team. The same core group of individuals fills the space and time of an athlete's life not occupied by academics — namely practices and meals. This period, almost a form of initiation, is marked by strong socializing influences. Dining together increases the visibility of teammates eating habits, further encouraging comparison.

One participant described how contagious restrictive habits can be among freshmen “as soon as one girl starts it” (Participant 18). During a transition period, women are most susceptible to seeking out ways of improving in this new environment in which they are struggling by making those comparisons to those around them. One professional athlete described how close she came to developing an eating disorder in her freshman year of college, expressing surprise that she didn't:

My freshman year, actually, I started walking through the thought-life of getting into that mindset because I was really troubled by the transition into college and was seeing all these teammates who were faster and leaner and — you know — just more fit than me. And I started thinking, ‘How do I do that? How do I look like that?’ I really think it's by the grace of God that I didn't cross that line and was able to maintain healthy eating and get faster and make it through that hump in the transition and realize that I didn't need to change anything — this was just a transition period, and that speed and that strength does come and I didn't need to change my eating or my body to do that.<sup>12</sup> (Participant 21)

Beyond the dining hall and the turmoil of freshman year, many athletes choose to live together, introducing further complexity to the equation. One participant who lived with teammates battling eating disorders described the mental burden of feeling surrounded by that tension:

I didn't see it much in high school, but definitely, *definitely* here. I see girls who will not fill up their whole plate, and then not even finish their plate. And having

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<sup>12</sup> By “thought-life,” this athlete is referring to a Christian notion of an internal reality constructed by one's thoughts. The basic premise holds that one's inner “thought-life” informs one's perceptions of the world, words, actions, and relationship with God, thereby altering one's external life.

conversations with them, you know something's not right. Even just living with them in the roommate context – just being constantly aware of what they're eating and unhealthy habits. (Participant 17)

Near-constant exposure, even for those without a tendency or inclination to lose weight or monitor food, can take a significant toll over time.

The desire to imitate can be especially powerful when athletes displaying unhealthy eating patterns are having success. Several participants mentioned a pervasive mentality of, “Oh, she's not eating that much — maybe I shouldn't be eating that much” (Participants 11, 18, 25). One athlete recalled an incident where the issue had to be openly addressed on her team because it had ballooned into a significant problem. Since she was not personally struggling and had remained relatively oblivious to the dynamic through the stressful college transition, she expressed surprise:

My freshman year we had a team meeting because — and she was one of the best girls on the team and it's kind of a contagious thing. I feel like if the best girl on your team is doing something, you're going to want to do it too... I remember being shocked because I had no idea this was going on — but everybody was coming out with ‘I feel pressured to do this because so-and-so doesn't eat dessert after dinner’ or things like that... I can't really speak for how my teammates dealt with it, but it was the first time that I realized what a big problem it is, because a lot of the girls were crying and I had no idea that it was such a problem. So it definitely opened my eyes to it. It made me more aware that it was a problem I guess. (Participant 19)

The emotional weight of that memory spilled out along with her words, as ideas tumbled over each other. She failed several times to finish a thought before leaping to the next, her face contorted with recalled anxiety from the experience and concern in realizing how many teammates' battles she had remained oblivious to.

Continuous awareness of what teammates are eating not only facilitates comparison but can also lead women to feel self-conscious about their own food choices.<sup>13</sup> They may begin to assume that their teammates are watching or noticing what they eat, even when this is not necessarily the case. One professional athlete described how her eating habits were disrupted her

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<sup>13</sup> The moralization of eating receives a more in-depth discussion in *Chapter VI*.

freshman year because she was embarrassed to eat at dinner. Still hungry afterwards, she would go back to her dorm room and “binge” on cereal (Participant 18). Another professional athlete criticized the team culture around food that seemed to encourage judgment and its associated embarrassment:

Especially with girls, I feel like everyone watches what each other is doing, and it's so intense, it can feel super judgmental sometimes. At least that's how it was on our team; everyone was paying attention to what everyone else is doing. <sup>14</sup>  
(Participant 25)

Another participant gave an account of much more explicit judgment from her peers, this time it was again in the context of living with another woman who was struggling:

One of my roommates was super weird about food and probably had an eating disorder and because of her...she would always monitor what me and my other roommate ate, commenting on it, and so in response to that...it made me kind of pay a lot more attention to food I guess. (Participant 6)

In this way, her teammate's preoccupations evolved into her own. Taken together, these patterns and perceptions contribute to what women referred to as “pressure to conform” to a certain team culture surrounding food — one of dietary awareness and restriction.

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In the same way that comparison and observation can trigger dangerous negative habits in women, it is also important to note the counter examples to the negative trend. When athletes observe their teammates making healthy decisions around food and modeling healthy eating, that can have a profound positive effect on their own habits. Seeing other successful runners fueling their bodies well and not restricting themselves gives women permission to do the same. This can be very powerful in undermining the negative cycles that incite pockets of disordered eating among teams. One professional athlete described her amazement at transitioning onto her professional team and finding that her teammates were not restricting the kinds of foods they fueled their bodies with. Rather than concerning themselves with calories or fat content, they were focused on eating unprocessed, “real” foods:

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<sup>14</sup> Foucault (1963) similarly describes a process of internalizing what he refers to as ‘the gaze’, arguing that individuals alter their behavior based on an awareness or perception of being under surveillance.

That was just so great, being around these girls and hanging out and eating...I mean, I'm lactose intolerant but my teammate will drink *whole* milk and we got breakfast and she gets *two* eggs. And I didn't ever really realize...I guess I was kind of like 'Oh'...Like I always put Splenda in my coffee — always trying to cut calories — that's what I thought equals skinny, so I'd get like low fat cream cheese or put skim milk in my coffee with Splenda, and it's funny because that sometimes doesn't help your fitness at all. If anything, it kind of hurts it. So it's been kind of cool just being around them and watching what they do, especially as a new person. Another teammate after workouts has this trail mix and it has chocolate and all this stuff in it, and I'm like 'Hmm, okay...' [laughing].

(Participant 18)

Seeing her teammates making those healthy decisions helped this participant feel free to do the same herself. She described the way her perspective began to shift as she realized that the types of foods she learned to avoid in college were not going to hurt her performance. Another professional athlete described the pride she took in intentionally acting as a dietary role model:

I think that was another key piece — I wasn't somebody who was modeling healthy eating and injured and not contributing to the team or running slow and not able to compete at a high level — I was able to progress and get faster. And, yeah, I think those two pieces together could be really powerful and I got that feedback from teammates, so I always had this idea of my role. (Participant 21)

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When healthy role models are present for young women to look up to and model their own behavior after, legacies of positive team cultures surrounding nutrition are possible. However, comparison appears to act primarily as a predominant factor in *igniting* eating disorders, rather than a protective factor against them. Negative comparison remains rampant at the levels of performance, body type, and eating behaviors among female runners. In redirecting attitudes from this trend, athletes must learn to trust their bodies and their training. As one professional athlete put it, "Stay in your own lane. What can you do better from this point? You have to stop measuring yourself based on everybody else" (Participant 27).

## ***Role Models and Idols***

The idealized body type of the successful female distance runner bombards young runners not only in the locker room of her university but through sports media as well.<sup>15</sup> Historically, the vast majority of elite female runners competing on a national or international stage share intensely lean frames; skin pulled tight over chiseled muscle. In the same way that women in today's society look to highly edited fashion magazines for beauty ideals, young athletes at the collegiate level and below look to idols within running as a vision of success. Thinking of these women as models of the ideal running body type, young women often derive a connection between "skinny" and fast. This can lead them to make assumptions about how that specific body type was achieved, namely by adhering to a strict diet.

In reality, the lean musculature of elite athletes comes primarily through high levels of intense training and total running mileage, a feat that alone required years to work up to. While these women certainly make efforts to eat healthy and are purposeful about their nutrition, particularly during key training cycles, their bodies are not sculpted by self-starvation. These athletes made clear that such restrictive practices are unsustainable at the professional level. However, when looking at images of these great athletes on social media or running-related publications, one only sees snapshots of the *ends*, rather than the *means*. In attempts to achieve similarly low levels of body fat, younger athletes often limit their nutritional intake. Assuming they are mimicking the professionals, they fail to realize that professional athletes often have unlimited access to nutrition advice and skills to guide them and ensure that they remain healthy while competing at that intense of a level. One woman described the trajectory of logic:

It's so easy to look at pro-athletes and think, 'Well clearly they must be limiting themselves a little bit – look at how thin they are! So it wouldn't be unhealthy for me to do that because I would just be like they are.' But then you also don't have a team of people telling you what you should and shouldn't eat, so it's very easy to cross that line into doing something that you're going to regret...that's their job and they know why they're doing it and they know what they're doing. I think for college athletes or high school athletes to try and do it, you know, we don't know what we're doing and trying to mimic them without the guidance that they have is really risky. (Participant 14)

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<sup>15</sup> The plethora of images of the female body will be further discussed in *Chapter VI*.

Indeed, young athletes typically lack the nutritional knowledge or understanding to alter their diet in a safe and healthy way. They turn to restriction in an effort to achieve the ideal runner body, oblivious to the potential consequences.

Professional athletes expressed concern that their habits and bodies were misinterpreted as dietary limitation rather than a reflection of the volume and intensity of their training. While they acknowledged that nutrition is a crucial part of performance, the participants all expressed a desire to be “strong” rather than thin:

Actually one of the reasons I picked this group — you’ll see the way that all of us look — we all look amazing. Like there’s no one on the team that you think ‘Wow, she looks like a runner!’ I’ve never thought ‘Wow, you look like a distance runner!’ Like we took a picture the other day and posted it, and we all look so healthy, you know? (Participant 18)

Those professionals expressed a great deal of concern that their lean bodies could be misinterpreted by young female runners who are looking to improve:

I feel like some of the really skinny collegiate runners — they don’t look strong, they just look really lean. And you don’t see that as much in the professional world. And I feel like these girls, who really are just really small, think that they look like the professionals. But they really just look *small*. (Participant 22)

Another athlete pointed out that, to some degree, body type is specific to each individual. Even with an intense training regimen and extremely limited diet, not all runners can achieve the body type of many elite marathon runners. One athlete echoed this sentiment, saying “Professional runners and marathoners are really thin, but some body types are just specific to different people. Like if I tried to look like that, I would just crumble and fall apart” (Participant 16).

Returning to the initial idea of comparison facilitated by online connectedness and access to other athletes’ training and lives, the role of social media shone through interviews as another key factor distorting women’s understanding of reality and their place and appearance relative to others. Participants acknowledged the dangers of comparing oneself to what people post on social media, even at the professional level; one pointed out, “It’s so easy to just scroll through your feed and see all these beautiful skinny runners who are doing really well” (Participant 20). Because what gets posted tends to be the high points and perfect pictures, it can easily make

somebody living in reality feel inadequate. Another participant complained, “Social media is so fake, as people are putting these perfect portrayals of themselves out there, so now you’re comparing to unrealistic images” (Participant 25). Indeed, research has implicated social media in the rise of mental health concerns among young generations (Sidani, 2016; Ghaznavi, 2015; Perloff, 2014).

Professional athletes communicated concern over how the images their team posted could be misinterpreted or misconstrued. One participant articulated the flaws of current patterns beautifully:

That’s the trouble with social media: on social media, we are the ones who curate those images, but it’s a highlight reel for anyone. When professional photographers take pictures of us, often that’s what’s posted. We’re at the National Championships! We’re at the top of our game! We probably never look like that at any other point in the year, *ever*. And yet that becomes the idea of what we look like all the time. There are just so many different factors that strip that moment in time of it’s reality. And I think we all know that — we’re all aware of the facade that photography and those publications on social media can create, but we’re so bombarded with it that we still pray to this idea that it’s possible to look like that. (Participant 24)

Another professional athlete echoed the sentiment, expressing some degree of guilt when she said:

We have professional photographers and everything. We’re not going to post a picture of us blowing up in a workout when honestly that’s probably more of our everyday than that perfect picture is. But then that’s what people are following, and that’s what people see all the time. (Participant 25)

The professional participants I spoke with were at least conscious of this pattern and realized they are part of the problem, but also seemed unsure of how to go about making a change. Since they are sponsored, image matters. The way they appear when representing their sponsor determines how well they sell that sponsor’s product. Therefore, producing those images is a central part of their job.

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The athletic role models that women look up to in the running world, by the nature of their training, may perpetuate the image of the ‘skinny runner ideal’ already pervasive within the sport. However, the growing number of professional athletes, such as Allie Kieffer, choosing to share their stories of disordered eating should bring us hope (Goldman, 2018). By speaking out about body image, such leaders may, in many ways, mitigate these patterns. Nevertheless, there are several other important figures positioned even more centrally in an athlete’s life that help in defining an athlete’s values and views of herself. The following section seeks to demonstrate the often under-appreciated power the words of parents and coaches have in inciting or bolstering unhealthy eating behaviors.

### ***Influential Figures***

Stepping back from solely focusing on the athletes’ trajectories through college, we must also consider the influence of core individuals in their lives. Thus, we turn to the role of authority figures in contributing to disordered eating trajectories. The individuals closest to an athlete often have a profound influence on her self-concept by either undermining or reinforcing cultural messages about achievement, eating, and body type.<sup>16</sup> Coaches and family members in particular play important roles as figures from whom athletes seek approval. Seemingly innocent comments or actions from these key individuals can unfortunately have reverberating harmful effects on athletes’ confidence and relationship to food.

Firstly, athletes often internalize the dietary habits of family members at a young age. This can be a positive influence among women whose families introduce them to balanced diets, healthy foods, and teach them early on the importance of fueling their bodies for their sport. However, excessive concern with diet and healthy eating can also be passed on to young women, leaving them with very narrow ideas of what healthy eating looks like. As one woman voiced:

What you put in your body really matters to how you perform. I think everything in moderation. But that being said, when I’m in season I really try not to eat sugar or like, excessive carbs — just things that would be bad for me, and I think I learned that from my mom. (Participant 8)

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<sup>16</sup> These messages will be discussed more in detail in *Chapter VI*.



The moralization of eating — introducing dialogue about good or bad — typically leaves a lasting impact on the ways women relate to food and make eating decisions.<sup>17</sup>

To some extent, these notions of nutrition can be helpful for women in navigating unfamiliar food settings. In transitioning to college, for example, the women I spoke with who came from families that were very health-conscious seemed the most displeased with the dining services and food choices, but also appeared less likely to gain weight through that upheaval. However, if taken a step too far, athletes can easily absorb and take on family behaviors or underlying pathologies around food. When concern with healthy eating becomes especially restrictive or anxiety-inducing, it can slip into obsession. The normalization of dieting in particular may socialize women into developing negative relationships with food as early as childhood. One participant struggled to articulate this experience:

I think for me it's always been a huge, huge thing just because it was a very predominant kind of idea. My family, like my mom — not just my mom but my dad and my brothers too — it's always been a thing that we would talk about and it's always present — like dieting and losing weight and all this kind of stuff. My mom has been dieting as long as I remember so even when I was very young I had that culture kind of ingrained into my mind where you always have to be trying to be less. (Participant 3)

For young women in these types of familial environments, dietary patterns that might be considered unhealthy go unrecognized, or even supported and encouraged, by her family members. Rather than stepping in or intervening as those negative habits develop, family members contribute unintentionally to the nascent problem through reaffirmation. One young woman, in describing her sister who is currently struggling with body image, depicted this pattern:

She has more recently taken to restricting any — and she kind of denies it — but she literally will not eat like any carb. And I talked to my mom about it and she's like, 'No, no, that's healthy eating,' and I'm like, 'Mom, no it's not!' so, I don't know, she doesn't...[trailing off]  
(Participant 14)

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<sup>17</sup> The moralization of eating receives a fuller discussion in *Chapter VI*.

For parents who have deeply internalized cultural conceptions and moralizations of food, recognizing unhealthy patterns is much more difficult, and so the opportunities to address disordered behaviors in their earliest stages are missed.

On the other side of the issue, family members may also make comments that incite unhealthy thoughts regarding food. High volumes of miles that women put on their bodies as athletes, in addition to high intensity training, both contribute to huge calorie burns and voracious appetites in athletes. For parents or families unfamiliar with the sport, the sheer quantity of food required to sustain high levels of training can be alarming. Remarks on the quantity of food young women are consuming, however, can make them deeply self-conscious. One woman poignantly described the influence her family members had on her eating habits. When I inquired farther about why she referred to them as “unhelpful” when it came to her relationship with food, she responded:

When I started running, fifty or sixty miles a week, obviously I needed to start eating more, and this was when I was getting a lot better too, but [my mom] was like, ‘God, you’re eating so much all the time! Do you really need that much food?’ And so that was what I was talking about; my brother and my mom —my brother was the one who knew about [the eating disorder] and was just very unhelpful, and my mom didn’t, but was unknowingly very unhelpful. (Participant 15)

Another athlete similarly described her father’s comments as negatively impacting her self-image and making her embarrassed about her food consumption. She recounted him making fun of how much she was eating:

‘You know the diet — six peanut butter sandwiches a day!’ and I was just thinking ‘Excuse me Dad! That is extremely uncalled for and very rude!’ My stepmom agreed with me that that was just so rude. And not at all...and after you tell him its kind of like...like now when I’m home it feels like he’s watching my eating habits even though I’m eating fine, and he’d say like, ‘Oh, I have noticed that you always have the munchies,’ or he’s like, ‘Try to snack a little bit more between your meals.’ (Participant 17)

Such comments may leave athletes feeling as if they are constantly under surveillance by loved ones, further increasing their close attention to food choices and discomfort with eating.<sup>18</sup>

While it is easy, in these cases to point fingers at those close to the athlete, condemning them for their lack of sensitivity or obliviousness to an underlying problem, it is important to note that restrictive behaviors may accompany athletic success, making it appear unlikely that there is anything amiss. Many parents or family members mistakenly believe that athletes could not be performing well if they were not eating enough – they would expect complaints of exhaustion or failed workouts. Instead, women are running personal records and winning races. When I asked some of the women who had struggled with eating disorders whether or not anyone had questioned their behavior, one participant responded with an immediate, emphatic “No,” and another echoed:

No, actually, not at all. It was the opposite. I was...encouraged by my parents and my coach, when I was young especially, so I think...sorry [*swallowing emotion*]... I think that's what made it hard. (Participant 3)

Another participant recounted her discussion with a teammate who was, at the time, struggling seriously with an eating disorder. She expressed disappointment that the girl's parents initially failed to recognize the issue and then also did not push her towards recovery:

I was kind of bummed out too because she was like, ‘Yeah, my mom noticed I’d lost a little weight,’ but she was the same weight when she came back to school... just talking to her about that and telling her that what she was doing was not okay...because no one told her that. (Participant 10)

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In the same way that athletes can deeply internalize these comments from close family members, they can similarly interpret comments from coaches in problematic ways. Coaches, similarly to parents, represent figures that young athletes seek to please.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, women typically take their comments, criticisms and feedback very seriously. When it comes to weight, body type and performance, these comments, though well-intended, can wreak devastating consequences. Thankfully, only a few of the women I spoke to had ever experienced a coach who explicitly encouraged weight-loss:

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<sup>18</sup> Here, we might make the connection once again to Foucauldian internalization of ‘the gaze’.

<sup>19</sup> *Chapter V* contains a more in-depth discussion of the gendered dynamics of the coach-athlete relationship that further complicate this already-difficult issue.

We've had coaches in the past who almost encouraged eating disorders... I really didn't realize it until the spring and then thinking back I was like, 'Wow there were some issues.' I really wasn't aware enough to pick up on it at the time; it was more thinking back after, like, 'Wow, our coach kind of did kind of like almost encourage it and wanted people to be thinner.' I feel lucky to have come in not really knowing about it and kind of being naïve, but also having my own plan. (Participant 8)

Another participant recounted the experience of her teammate in talking with their coach; though he did not actively say anything to make the athlete believe that she should lose weight, he gave his agreement when she voiced her concerns about her weight.

She was saying, you know, 'If I could lose ten pounds, I think I could be a lot faster,' and he kind of hinted that, you know, 'yes.' I mean she's still pretty normal — average size — but she was *very* thin before and had been very fast in high school, so I think that might have been correlated with her success specifically. (Participant 13)

By and large, these accounts represent anomalies in this research; most participants did not experience a great deal of explicit pressure from coaches to be thin. However, there were several participants who directly knew women on teams where the actions or comments of coaching staff bred problems. One participant described her friend's experience at a top running school where her coach monitored everything she ate (Participant 7). This kind of close observation can cause athletes unnecessary concern with their food choices, strictly forbidding themselves from eating anything deemed unhealthy or off-limits by the coach. Such patterns of thinking facilitate the development of "fear foods".

Other participants recounted instances they knew of in which coaches actively monitored or made comments about athletes' weights. One participant described this coaching dynamic:

It wasn't very hard to maintain my weight — that's why the pressure wasn't really there because it wasn't hard, but I've seen cases where my fellow teammates — girls — were pressured to go at a certain weight because the coach basically thinks they're fat, which...it's just not the case. (Participant 26)

These coaching practices often go unquestioned because, as one athlete put it, "You just want to do what your coach says" (Participant 27). The perceived importance of pleasing coaches

became clear, in talking with athletes in both the collegiate and professional running worlds. Athletes defended their coaches' comments that could be considered triggering and focused ever more closely on their positive feedback:

He will tell me — you know — he'll say when he can see that I've gained weight, you know, 'You don't look so great,' but then he'll also tell me, 'You look awesome.' Like this summer, I think I did an even better job of being healthier and eating even more fruits and vegetables and that first day back, he said to me, 'You look phenomenal,' you know, 'What have you changed about your diet?'  
(Participant 16)

This participant actually repeated her account of her coach's compliment three separate times during the interview, reemphasizing just how much it meant to her that he had recognized her weight-loss. One professional athlete summarized the delicate issue well:

I think a lot of it comes down to the coach and what the coach says. I know there have been issues at some schools telling their athletes they need to look a certain way or be a certain weight, and we like to pretend that doesn't happen but it definitely does. I've heard very honest stories where that does definitely happen, and I think that's when some of the biggest problems arise. And again, I think that starts with the coach; they're praising the athletes who are doing really well instead of doing things correctly — a lot of college athletes are just looking for praise from their coach — I really think they are. (Participant 22)

As young women search for security in themselves and their developing identities, the approval and affirmation from individuals they respect play a large role in reinforcing cultural values surrounding food, eating, and bodies. Therefore, when criticisms are made or pressures, explicit or implicit, are present to change their appearance or lose weight, athletes regard them with the utmost degree of seriousness. As athletes then actualize the cultural values buttressed through these interactions, they may unknowingly erode healthy relationships that they have with food. In addition to other factors, well-intentioned comments from these individuals can help foster patterns of disordered eating.

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The preponderance of eating disorders in the world of distance running stems from a number of different sources. Some of these relevant factors are specific to individual athletes,

some are related to the peers or authority figures in an athlete's life, and others are inherent characteristics of the competitive environment of athletic teams and the world of sport more broadly. Once patterns of disordered eating have been ignited, they can easily slip into negative, self-perpetuating cycles that damage athletes' mental health, long-term physical health, and running careers. The following chapter will seek to explain how athletes become trapped in these cycles and construct a framework for understanding the experience of living and competing through this kind of challenge.