

## **Chapter VII - Conclusion**

The diverse narratives of the young athletes documented within these pages share layers of complexity and nuance, but all have made contact with a motif of silent disquiet coloring the sport of distance running. Their accounts capture, both directly and tangentially, only one of many shadows cast from the spotlight of elite athletics. With both severe short- and long-term physical consequences, disordered eating carries the capacity to destroy not only athletic careers, but individual health and well-being long after those careers have ended. As athletes push their bodies to their limits, they inevitably brush up against the potentially pathological.

Though many athletic disciplines cultivate attitudes of sacrifice and self-denial that appear unhealthy, distance running stands apart in fostering particularly intense proclivities and a predominance of disordered eating. The competitive advantage conferred by small size adds an additional draw to behaviors already encouraged by cultural and societal ideals. If we are ever to effectively combat these issues, we must first recognize the larger themes at play, both within and surrounding distance-running culture. Furthermore, rather than treating these illnesses as an anomaly among the very few, we must begin with an exploration of the events, perceptions and pressures in athletes' lives and subcultures that logically lead to these outcomes.

The dual nature of this work draws from the lived experiences of both collegiate and professional female athletes to explicate these patterns. As a piece of engaged scholarship, this thesis includes macroscopic themes of U.S. culture to expand the current models of disordered eating as constructed by existing academic approaches. It seeks a point of entry for change by exploring the multitude of influences on these unhealthy attitudes, attempting to map the foundation upon which such pernicious behaviors are built in order to identify potential disruptive solutions to a self-perpetuating issue. As a psychocultural phenomenon, a complete understanding is necessarily predicated on an anthropological exploration of both the macro- and micro-contexts these behaviors are situated within (Sapir, 1994).

Ultimately, the findings detailed here leave us to question how we can go about initiating change moving forward. The anthropological approach taken in this work helps us to expand the explanatory framework for eating disorders employed by other disciplines (Garner & Garfinkel, 1980). However, no single field can paint a complete course map for navigating all intricacies of this problem. In addition to their experiences, many athletes shared suggestions for change; though no clear solution emerged, they raised a multitude of methods for addressing these issues.

If implemented in combination, viable options may begin to undermine the foundations of these well-established patterns.

Certain individuals emerged from this work as models to follow in moving forward; they are powerful counterexamples, flying in the face of overwhelmingly negative patterns and trends. It is these individuals — athletes and coaches leading the charge at the front of the pack — who we must emulate if we are to make steps in the direction of positive change. In looking forward, they may help us to envision a ‘finish line’ for this area of sport — team cultures that emphasize openness over pride, well-being over ‘well done’, and community alongside success. To reach this ‘finish line’ requires a path that will look much like the true course maps of the sport; we will loop and double back many times and likely make a wrong turn or two somewhere along the way. Though the trek is long and arduous, however, reaching this projected endpoint will be well worth the effort. We must run the race set before us; this is a challenge our sport must grapple with and face head on. Each individual within and surrounding our sport should seize each opportunity that arises, as each interaction serves to either reinforce or erode the predominant patterning of stigmatization and concealed suffering (Sapir, 1994). When the gun goes off, we have to hit the ground running.

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Culture is constructed and reinforced by the actions and interactions of constituent psychologies (Sapir, 1994; Jenkins & Carpenter-Song, 2005; Biehl, Good, & Kleinman, 2007). After burying deep into the subjective experiences of a small subset of individuals, we can reorient out examination outward, using the psychopathology of a few to reflect on the U.S. culture we ourselves are situated within — our assumptions, values, idols — a larger psychocultural patterning that, regardless of our awareness, guides our decisions and priorities. In this way, the behaviors we once recognized as deviant become a lens with which to better understand ourselves.

The study of extraordinary embodied experiences offer windows into what is most at stake in a given social or cultural setting (Kleinman, 2006); reaching far beyond individual psychopathology, these outcomes are embedded within, and help to reproduce, key cultural forces at play. Athletes represent an acute example of such attitudes played out in a visible arena, but the same acculturation and socialization guides much broader attitudes. Though the idols we chase may differ, these experiences resonate in all those adopting this psychocultural stance. We

convince ourselves of the illusion that by reaching some great aim, we can somehow transcend ourselves and imbue our fleeting lives with a permanent significance, but are repeatedly met with the realization, at each finish line, that it was not quite enough (Kleinman, 2006). For in the end, the meaning comes not from the achievement itself but in the striving required to attain it — not from immortal legacy but precisely from the finite, chaotic, and limited life that we have.