

Beyond “Embodiment” in Sport

Sport

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How weightlifting involves relations between tools and bodies.



Gym in Gldani, Georgia before a youth competition in April 2012. Photograph courtesy Perry Sherouse

Anthropological writing on sport often describes how political, economic, or social values are “inscribed” on the body. “Embodiment,” the term that refers to this process of inscription, has become a central rubric through which anthropologists have framed inquiries in sport and physical culture. Training reconfigures the body through repetitive, technique-focused drills that instill new conceptual ideals and physical proficiencies. Repetitive action sculpts the athlete’s body and self-perception. But embodiment tells only part of the story. I suggest that we take a fresh look at the technical dimensions of training in sport that coordinate and mediate forms of physical practice. These include the material tools and the built environments of body culture. By grasping beyond embodiment in sport, we can get a firm hold on the forms of engagement among words, tools, and bodies.

Let me provide an example from the training hall in Tbilisi, Georgia, where I lifted weights and observed the training and coaching of athletes from 2011–2012. Vili has long thumbnails. Like mine, his palms are calloused in the places where he holds the barbell’s textured knurling, an inset cross-hatching lathed onto the bar to increase the grip. Weightlifters use something called the “hook grip” (Russian, *khvat* “v zamok,” lit. grip “in lock”), wrapping fingers around the bar and then cinching them down on top of the thumb,

which lies parallel along the bar. Unlike Gilles Deleuze, who grew his fingernails long in order to protect and isolate himself from the world, Vili’s long thumbnails enable more effective tool use. The reason athletes hold onto their own thumbs in this way is that plate-loaded competition barbells are designed to allow the shaft to spin freely, even when loaded with weight. Rotating sleeves at each end of the barbell enable athletes to fluidly execute the competitive lifts (the snatch, and the clean and jerk) without injuring their wrists. An unloaded bar weighs 20kg. Athletes load calibrated weight plates onto the smooth sleeves at each end of the bar, anchoring them with a 2.5kg metal collar. In training, weightlifters use cloth or nylon straps (Georgian *liamk’ebi*, from Russian *lyamki*) to preserve their grip, particularly during assistance exercises such as heavy pulls. On heavy attempts, weightlifters put chalk on their hands to keep them dry. Vili’s hands have changed over time. In this way, the athlete’s hands are like those of other performers, such as musicians, whose intimate and repetitive encounters with the instrument create “outward sign[s] of the required human-instrument symbiosis” (Sherouse, Braxton 2014).

In scholarly and popular literature on strength athletics, equipment and forms of training knowledge often fade into the background as incidental to training rather than constituting its very core. In the training hall in Tbilisi, however, the central object of training was what James Wertsch has termed “mediated action.” Mediated action highlights the “irreducible tension between agent and mediational means,” and as such, Wertsch posits it as the key unit for social analysis (Wertsch 1998, 27). Wertsch introduces the example of pole vaulting, in which one cannot understand the action of the agent or the mediational means (the pole) separately. This may seem like a trivial point, but many studies of sport look past the mediational means in order to privilege the body as the site of action.

One practical way into the relationships among word, tool and body is to center the figure of the coach as a professional mediator of human-instrument relations. Attending

to the coach provides an analytical grip on sportive realms in a way that integrates social relations, aesthetics, and technology. Besides at times manifesting what Susan Leigh Foster has called the demonstrative body, weightlifting coaches coordinate training in ways beyond instructing technique or providing motivation. Coaching interventions focus on altering the athlete-barbell relationship. Training cues and other directives coordinate attention and embodied learning. Centering the relationship between athlete and equipment as object of anthropological inquiry is therefore motivated by the way that participants themselves approach the practice of training. The athlete, in time, adapts to the barbell, and in doing so, develops the strength and efficiency to lift increasingly heavy weights. The athlete increases his or her capacity to perform within the competition rules of the International Weightlifting Federation. What coaches instruct, in other words, is a new kind of harmony between self and object. Coaches discipline mediated action. Mediated action can anchor us to the tangible: the realm in which fist clenches barbell, where strength is built.

Many studies of sport powerfully demonstrate how bodily forms manifest elements of sociopolitical and economic organization. In weightlifting, as in other sports, athletic engagement ramifies into the flesh in many ways. Many athletes have injuries. One coach told me that every weightlifter has something that hurts. Bodies hold the traces of training: callouses, muscles, scraped shins and new movement patterns. Vili's thumbnails tell us little about politics, bodily or otherwise. They do, however, draw us towards a more symmetrical account of the athlete-equipment interface. It is this interface that is the focal point for training efforts. Further, by focusing on the relationship between body and tool, one sees athletic practice beyond the individual agent and the representational body. The sociotechnical realm of barbells, chalk, callouses, and clocks provides a point of entry in sportive realms that holds the potential to integrate questions of aesthetics and technology—elements that scholars too often consign to separate, incommensurable domains. Fateful moments of action in sport always take place within and through material means. The coach, as expert coordinator of mediated action, enskillment, and sportive enculturation, deserves our scholarly attention.

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