

Organizational Body Work in the Rivalry of High Performing Sports

Introduction

There is an increasing number of body-centric studies in the field management and organization studies (hereafter MOS) (see for reviews Nault et al., 2020; Akinola et al., 2019; Nofal et al., 2018; Quinn et al., 2012; Heaphy & Dutton, 2008). The body as an object of study has inspired researchers to investigate work-related processes and outcomes from the domains of attractiveness advantage at work and related biases (Nault et al., 2020), incorporating the effect of stress on creative work performance by pointing out that this critically depends on whether stress-inducing situations engender physiological states of challenge or threat for employees (Akinola et al., 2019), and reviewing the myriads of physiology (i.e. genetics, hormones, brain activities) linked to management outcomes (Nofal et al., 2018).

Despite the increasing interest on body-centric research in MOS, the enactment of human bodies tends to be taken for granted in social interactions of organizational life (Shilling, 1993; Heaphy & Dutton, 2008). This article explores the multifaceted role of the organizational body work of top athletes, who continuously work in the realms of rivalry. We will theoretically incorporate the realms of rivalry into organizational body work research in MOS which has given limited attention to the role of embodiment, particularly the use of the body for and at work. Most organizations can take an active role on shaping their inhabitants' bodies (Wolkowitz, 2006; Grimlin, 2007; Lawrence et al., 2023). From an organizational body work perspective, human bodies—our own and others—can be constructed as objects in organizational life and thus available as targets for actors to intentionally shape (Lawrence et

al., 2023). For embodiment at work people can have different degrees of agency and reflexivity in their organizational body work, which might vary over time in their appearance and experience (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). The essence of organizational body work lies in comprehending the interplay between agency and the human body (ibid.). There remains a paucity of information regarding how social practices within organizations are embodied and reliant on human embodiment for their enactment (Hassard et al., 2021), particularly within conditions of rivalry (Havard, 2020) at work. An extensive review published by Quinn and his colleagues (2012) put efforts into understanding the body for building human energy in organizations by conversating and restoring resources, activating and influencing the ego.

In the realms of rivalry, competing actors have an increased desire to win and invest in the competition, which is suggested to result in enhanced performance (Milstein et al., 2022). Rivalry can push people to perform at the highest level (Milstein et al., 2022) and boost productivity at work (Kilduff et al., 2010), yet it can also encourage them to engage in unethical behavior (i.e., unsporting behavior, use of deception, and willingness to employ unethical negotiation tactics) when competing against their rivals than when competing against non-rival competitors (Kilduff et al., 2016; Kilduff et al., 2010). In this manner, understanding organizational body work in the realms of rivalry, we aim to take into account the 'self' and the social relationships between competitors, as competitors often have at least some prior knowledge of and even affect, and relation to, each other, meaning that there is a concern also about the legacy (Converse & Reinhard, 2016).

We examine organizational body work in rivalry in the context of high performing sports. Sports arenas have long been recognized as beneficial to organizational research since many

of the core elements of organizations are exponential in sports environments (Fonti et al., 2023; Day et al., 2012). To name a few: hierarchy, teamwork, cohesion, and strategic decision-making (Fonti et al., 2023; Day et al., 2012; Kilduff et al., 2010; Wolfe et al., 2005). High performance sports offer an excellent context for our study as they are established as realms of rivalry by nature. We use the concept of organizational body work to investigate how top athletes, who are under a tailored pressure both in their professional and non-professional lives, navigate in the repeated rivalry at their work through embodiment. The study addresses two pivotal research questions concerning organizational body work within the realms of rivalry: 1) What specific types of organizational body work are elite athletes called into as part of their work roles? 2) What role does organizational body work play in either mitigating or exacerbating workplace malfunctioning?

This study contributes to the field in several ways. Firstly, it enhances our theoretical understanding of organizational body work within the competitive landscape of high performing sports and its rivalries. By shedding light on this underexplored intersection, the research provides valuable insights into the complex co-constitutive dynamics of 'embodiment' at work and rivalry. Secondly, we extend to the literature of embodiment at work by highlighting not only conforming but also resistance to norms of performance. The contribution lies in encouraging scholars to critically examine human bodies' use (and abuse) in organization practices and the agentive role of the body in organizations and to reconsider the 'body' in the organizational facets such as performance (metrics) and remuneration (systems). Third, there are insights to learn from the contextual importance of organizational body work in high performing culture in which values, beliefs, and philosophy guide the individuals to go above and beyond their roles to achieve goals (Barker et al., 2014). Thus, we discuss a (re)embodied view of the organization providing a more plural understanding on

human body as a critical entity in organizational life. From a methodological viewpoint, the adopted narrative methodology offers a means to illustrate the navigation of the organizational body work and its manoeuvring in the realms of rivalry. Finally, we discuss how the insights gained from this study have the potential to contribute to organizational efforts aimed at moving away from de-humanized to humanized top sport organizations in the future. Next we will explain the theoretical underpinnings of the study.

Organizational body work

We use the concept of "organizational body work" by Lawrence and his colleagues (2023) to emphasize the interaction between individual agency and the physical aspects of the human body. The term highlights the central role of these interactions in organizational life, where individuals engage in activities and practices that impact both their well-being and their effectiveness within high performing environments. Like other "objects" in organizational life, the human body is a target of purposeful efforts to shape it, and these processes are constrained and facilitated by the organizational contexts in which they are embedded (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). The concept of organizational body work represents a form of social-symbolic work (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019), parallel to other forms, such as "identity work" (Brown, 2022), "emotion work" (Hochschild, 1979), and "institutional work" (Hampel et al., 2017). Through this type of organizational body work the organization's identity becomes tied to their own as a partial definition of self (Albert et al., 2000), and members embrace their role as organizational agents, enacting their identity by adopting identity-derived goals (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Haslam et al., 2003). The body is understood as "active, self-transforming subject" and the study of organizational body work requires an

emphasis on the “interpenetration and interaction among, mind, body and society” (Freund, 1988, p. 851).

Lawrence et al. (2023) identify three theoretical forms of organizational body work based on the relationship between the agent of body work (who engages in the purposeful efforts) and the target (whose body are those efforts intended to shape). These include personal, interpersonal, and systemic organizational bodywork. Personal organizational body work means that the agent and target are the same people (people working on their own bodies), which can take two different forms: efforts to shape one's bodily appearance and adapt one's bodily capabilities. The interpersonal organizational body work includes forms in which an organizational actor (individual or collective) works to shape the body or bodies of an individual or group. This category of organizational body work primarily comprises three primary forms: caring, disciplining, and training the bodies of others. Third, the systemic organizational body work includes forms in which efforts to shape bodies involve creating or transforming organizational systems that in turn affect the bodies of organizational members.

Gimlin's (2007) sociological research explains that body work is about working on one's own body, but it can be also about paid labor carried out on the bodies of others, and the reproduction of bodies through work or emotion displays. When organizational body work detracts the agent from body in its functionality, it can negatively affect organizational performance (Lawrence et al., 2023). Lawrence and his colleagues suggest some triggers for body work; and some of these are tightly connected to the human body, others are rooted in more general conditions of organizational life. These triggers lead to body work in the occasion of real or perceived disruptions of a body's taken-for-granted ability to fulfil its

organizational role or when the actor's role in the organization changes. Studies have shown that this occurred, for instance, when employees worked to regulate their own sleep patterns, often depriving themselves of the sleep necessary to meet job demands, thus decreasing organizational performance (Elmholdt et al., 2021; Rothbard & Wilk, 2011). Restricting bodily displays of emotions (e.g., avoiding frowning or smiling) have similarly been linked to decreased organizational performance due to increased employee strain and risk-taking behavior (Côté, 2005; O'Neill & Rothbard, 2017).

Rivalry in high performing sports

We situate our analysis of organizational body work within the confines of high performing sports, that offers a distinct, but highly applicable, context to understanding the interrelationships between the human body and organizational life. High performance sports cultures subject athletes to extreme forms of body work. Top athletes are engaged to train and discipline themselves i.e. muscle-building, weight-control, or aesthetic display, and that an athletic career can leave long-standing effects on body (e.g. injuries) (see e.g., Cavalliero et al., 2016; Way, 2021). However, organizational body work is prevalent for top athletes to ensure sustained peak performance and longevity in their career not only by training, but also taking care of mental health, prevent injuries, and recover effectively (Barker et al., 2014; Van Amsterdam et al., 2017). It is these aspects of body discipline and body/mind balancing that make high performance sport an important arena to inform body-organization literature. Prior research in management and organization studies has addressed how organizational members are required to engage in specific forms of body work to meet the ideals of prevailing organizational norms. This literature also acknowledges the harmful effects of

trying to live up to those demands, that subject organizational members to bodily breakdown (Michel, 2011) and embodied suffering (Burrow et al., 2024). We can thus see that the requirements on the body are similarly demanding as those in high performance sports, demonstrating the usefulness of sporting arenas to explain organizational phenomena beyond the sports context. A nuanced understanding of body work is thus essential for the development of sustainable working life. The high performance sports context offers an empirically fruitful setting to examine the dynamics of body work in a setting that requires peak performance. Sports logics and sporting vocabularies populate organizational life and MOS scholars have drawn on sporting arenas to explain organizational phenomena, such as leadership (Ryan & Dickson, 2018). Organizational body work is also shown to connect with sports, as sporting ideals are increasingly valorized in organizations. These are particularly connected to notions of ‘managerial athleticism’ as a regulative regime to attaining the ideal (Johansson et al., 2017) and heroic (Bardon et al., 2023) managerial identity and ‘extreme wellness’ to attain professional advantage (Buthcher et al., 2023) via body work. Next, we move on to explain our methodological choices and show in our results how these high-ranking top athletes engage in organizational body work in the realms of rivalry.

Rivalries in sports have been a driving force behind top athletes’ dedication and hard work (Richardson and McKenna, 2020). The intense competition between individuals or teams can fuel a desire for excellence and push athletes to reach new heights in both their physiological and mental fitness. This competitive spirit often becomes a significant part of an athlete's daily routine, motivating them to continually improve and outperform their rivals (Way, 2023). In many high performing sports, teams often have distinctive clothing, anthems, and cheers specifically designed to amplify the sense of rivalry (Butterworth, 2020). Few can forget the brutal physical attack perpetrated by Tonya Harding's ex-husband against her rival

Nancy Kerrigan in the 1994 Winter Olympics. All these activities or ‘events’ draw on the human body in the rivalry, creating a bodily and affective connection between athletes and their supporters.

Rivalry may easily be conflated with the concept of competition. However, in this study, we highlight the need to treat these as distinct notions. According to prior conceptualizations, a key differentiating factor between rivalry and competition is that rivalry is inherently embedded with relationships (Kilduff et al., 2010). Relationships are meaningful for instance in the way that competitions against archrivals are more aggressive and meaningful than against non-rivals due to past competitions and the experienced proximity (Kilduff et al., 2010, 2016; Milstein et al., 2022; Sozen, 2021). In addition to this, we view rivalry through the lens of continued, everyday conditions. While competition may often be understood as temporarily confined events (e.g. Olympic games), we view rivalry as something broader – it is the everyday life within the ongoing rivalry. Here the notion of rivalry as the micro-sociology of competition (Preda, 2023) lends itself useful. From this perspective, rivalries are “relational arrangements for experiencing and testing what social attributes are valuable in what situations” (Preda, 2023, p. 103) maintaining an eye for not only how rivalries contribute to professions but “how rivalries impact professions” also (ibid. p. 105).

In the realms of rivalry, competing actors have an increased desire to win and invest in the competition, which is suggested to result in enhanced performance (Milstein et al., 2022). Rivalry can push people to perform at the highest level (Milstein et al., 2022) and boost productivity at work (Kilduff et al., 2010), yet it can also encourage them to engage in unethical behavior (i.e., unsporting behavior, use of deception, and willingness to employ

unethical negotiation tactics) when competing against their rivals than when competing against non-rival competitors (Kilduff et al., 2016; Kilduff et al., 2010). Researchers agree that rivalry in organizations is a relational phenomenon that increases motivation and performance (Milstein et al., 2022). Group rivalry have been also connected tightly to social identities in organizations (Kilduff et al., 2010). These calls urge the prioritization of phenomena vital to the rivalry, a process enabling both organizational performance and considering its adverse effects on human behavior (Kilduff et al., 2016).

Method

In management and organization research, narratives offer a helpful way to understand how organizational members make sense of their bodily and affective experiences within a social context (Maitlis, 2022) and involve the development of a self-narrative which is an account of the relationships between different self-relevant events across time (Gergen and Gergen, 1988, p. 19) through which a person's social identity is rendered "sensible". We draw on narratives to examine how top athletes engage with body work in the realms of rivalry in high performing sports.

The data for this study consists of such self-narratives with 34 top athletes who were active in their top athletic careers at the time of the interviews. The data were collected through interviews with active professionals committed for a high performing athletic career; the dominant part of the data was representative of individual sports, both winter and summer Olympic sports, some being representative of team and paralympic sports. All participant names used here are pseudonyms to ensure their participation remains anonymous. The

interviews typically lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were mainly conducted via video conferencing (two face-to-face interviews).

We used in-depth, semi-structured interviews and asked the athletes to talk about their work at sport, their performance, both physical and mental, and their mundane experiences of being professional athletes. The interviews were conducted by the authors of this paper. Key themes invited interviewees to reflect on issues, such as doing sports in the highest international sports arenas, the sporting environment as a work context, organizational support for athletes and equality in athletic careers. The interviewees were also asked about the meaning of sport in their life and as a career when the interviewees reflected upon and evaluated their performance, success, and setbacks in connection to body and affects. The research participants are introduced in Table 1.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Sport (Individual/Team/Parasport)
RP1	Female	22	Team (Summer Sport)
RP2	Female	23	Team (Summer Sport)
RP3	Male	28	Parasport (Summer Sport)
RP4	Male	30	Parasport (Summer Sport)
RP5	Male	46	Parasport (Summer Sport)
RP6	Female	25	Parasport (Summer Sport)
RP7	Female	27	Parasport (Summer Sport)
RP8	Male	21	Individual (Summer Sport)
RP9	Male	23	Individual (Summer Sport)
RP10	Male	30	Individual (Summer Sport)

RP11	Male	30	Individual (Summer Sport)
RP12	Female	23	Individual (Summer Sport)
RP13	Female	24	Individual (Summer Sport)
RP14	Female	29	Individual (Summer Sport)
RP15	Female	29	Individual (Summer Sport)
RP16	Female	31	Individual (Summer Sport)
RP17	Female	32	Individual (Summer Sport)
RP18	Female	28	Team (Summer Sport)
RP19	Female	25	Team (Winter Sport)
RP20	Female	32	Team (Winter Sport)
RP21	Male	26	Individual (Summer Sport)
RP22	Male	21	Individual (Winter Sport)
RP23	Female	23	Individual (Winter Sport)
RP24	Male	25	Individual (Winter Sport)
RP25	Male	26	Individual (Winter Sport)
RP26	Male	26	Individual (Winter Sport)
RP27	Male	27	Individual (Winter Sport)
RP28	Male	27	Individual (Winter Sport)
RP29	Male	27	Individual (Winter Sport)
RP30	Male	28	Individual (Winter Sport)
RP31	Male	28	Individual (Winter Sport)
RP32	Male	31	Individual (Winter Sport)
RP33	Female	25	Individual (Winter Sport)
RP34	Female	31	Individual (Winter Sport)

Table 1. Interview participants

Our analysis followed established conventions of qualitative research (Andrews et al., 2013; Miles and Huberman, 1994) and emphasized narrative sensemaking (Maitlis, 2022). We were interested in how the athletes narrated their personal, bodily, and affective experiences of their work. We first read each interview transcript and selected parts of their narrations that discussed their presence in sport (Why did they pursue athletic careers? What is the meaning of sport in their lives? How did they describe the rivalry?). We then organized these into sets of how they constructed agency for their bodies, and then by others and the sports system. We sought to understand how their narratives incorporated bodily/physical experiences with senses and effects in shaping the body. We engaged in several rounds of coding, comparing and contrasting the data with the theoretical ideas. In each interview, we carefully looked for insights on the body and the effects they attached to being a top athlete; we scouted all comments on the type and tone of cues occurring around and within sports performance and on the actions taken for these causes. As this step progressed, we developed and applied first-order codes on body work that denoted emerging themes. Throughout the interview the centrality of body e.g. in cases of injuries, extensive training, and the quest for a ‘capable’ and healthy body was described as essential for being a top athlete. The predominant theme of organizational body work was the metaphoric construction of body as a ‘tool’, to be shaped. The body was also increasingly under a public gaze and subject to evaluation by sports spectators and the broader public. It was evident that organizational body work also entailed the body with mind dynamics. Following the conclusion of our initial coding, we shifted to an abductive approach (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007) by exploring the data along with the literature, particularly with to achieve their performance targets of organizational body work by Lawrence et al. (2023) and searching for the empirical clues that could help us form a clearer understanding of it.

We examined the different forms of rivalry in our empirics. Our interviewees described rivalry within their own team (e.g. some athletes gaining a leading position, and having a rivalry to match their level). There was also rivalry in the form of continuous competition between oneself (rivalry with own previous achievements, earlier peak performances) that included not only the physical aspects of the athletic performance but the mind/body linkages. What in these manifestations we focused rivalry as socially constructed in relation with history, past and present situations, and past and present relationships not only with teammates, other high performing athletes, but also in relation to ones' agentic body and the malfunctioning of the workplace. Central to our analysis was to be attentive to the body's agentic role as the athletes navigated rivalry at their work.

Results

We now turn to disciplined, empathetic and aesthetic forms of organizational body work all that plays out differently for workplace malfunctioning.

Disciplined rivalry

Disciplined rivalry constituted the predominant form of organizational body work carrying the notions of extreme competition and 24/7 devotion to rivalrous lifestyle. The role of the body is to tune up and out to both to the intrinsic and extrinsic demands and norms for high performing body in the realm of rivalry. It naturalizes the bodily discipline and silences for example injuries and the mental challenges athletes may face such in maintaining focus, managing stress, or overcoming setbacks. Disciplined rivalry constitutes through

organizational body work, where the most often the athletes themselves engage with an action to shape own bodily appearance and performance. In addition to formal training activities, eating, resting and sleeping are equally harnessed in the quest to achieve and maintain the ultimate ‘performing’ body. The disciplined rivalry is embraced with organizational body work that unfolds in the nuanced storytelling showing the complex interplay between physicality, emotionality, and the profound balance required in the pursuit of performance in the highest level of top athleticism. "I eat, I sleep, and I train" symbolizes the foundational tenet of individual body work and is pivotal for intersecting body and mind, emphasizing the profound symbiosis between physical exertion and affective states. An interviewee (RP18) illustrates that the body is centrally ascribed as a tool in this rivalry: "Of course, if your mind wants to play a lot, but your body can't, then it will affect your performance. That's why it's so important to take care of your body and your muscles so that you can get the most out of yourself." Moreover, the interviewee's comment reveals the characteristics in particular self-discipline related to the expectations to work in the highest level of sport. In practice this means, that living a high-performance rivalry is present and expected at all times and spaces as illustrated in by one of the interviewees (RP14): *"I go out with my friends and then we walk somewhere, like, let's go to a museum, and then suddenly I notice that my lower back is getting tired and that's when my alarm goes off, that (oh) no, I should go and sit down. And then you start thinking that I should go home because it was too hard, or suggest that we go for a coffee, let's sit over there with the coffee. So you kind of listen to your body, that's one thing. It comes really quickly, that my body starts to pinch a little bit somewhere, then I have to move, take another position, sit down. When we go to training, it is the same thing; when it starts to pinch, then we start to think whether this is ok pinching or whether this is not ok pinching."*

Within disciplinary rivalry, the athletes constitute an unconditional acceptance of the extreme form of rivalry, as is illustrated by the above storying. The disciplined rivalry is all about organizational body work that is done by the athlete to enable her/his capable and performing body. As the interviewee explains, living up to the demands of this type of work requires excluding any distractors that might prevent athletic outcomes. The disciplined rivalry animates the body as a tool or as an instrument, where performance assumes the guise of potential failure, with rivalry manifesting as a self-directed pursuit of continuous personal development for top athletes. The athlete body transcends its physicality, evolving into a narrative thread intricately woven through emotions, discipline, and the perpetual quest for improvement. Eating, sleeping, and resting cease to be perfunctory routines but transform into strategic pillars of a top athletic existence.

Considering that what are the outcomes of such organizational body work at the workplace is the athlete's exhaustion, and a complex balancing act of training the body 'on the edge', yet not too much for being overly exhausted. As a result, exhaustion becomes a paradoxical companion in the sports workplaces. The delicate dichotomy of pushing physical limits while cherishing moments of repose unfolds, acknowledging the fragility intrinsic to the (de)humanized experience at work. This openness to life, to performance, and an unflinching acceptance of failure embody not only resilience but also a nuanced humility intrinsic to the 'work ethos'. The disciplined rivalry for athletes can also have far-reaching effects on the non-work lives of athletes. For instance, many of the female athletes said that they decided to postpone starting the family to the post-athletic career. One of the interviewees (RP34) puts forward that she and her husband have decided to postpone having a child until after her sporting career by saying: "Well, certainly, if I weren't an athlete, we would have tried (to have a baby) much, much earlier, but in a way I say that 2022 year is like my goal (to have a

baby)." This vividly illustrates the effects of disciplinary rivalry as any other sphere of life is secondary to athletic goals.

Empathetic rivalry

Empathetic rivalry examines and constitutes rivalrous conditions through the lens of empathic relation to the extensive demands on the body. Organizational body work here is constituted by the athlete but also in interpersonal relationships such as with coaches and medical staff. The organizational body work is done together with robust network that also transforms adversity into an opportunity for growth meaning an embodied symbiotic relationship between vulnerability and resilience. As the disciplined rivalry is animated by the constant the requirement to operate at the highest top performing level of disciplinary, empathetic rivalry constitutes rivalrous relations as affective and situated phenomena. Empathetic rivalry builds on the notion that the body is not only to be monitored, evaluated and controlled by the athlete and the athletic network, rather, the body is an affective agent in the social relationship constituting embodied rivalry as illustrated by the interviewee (RP15):

"Others say that the body is a tool in this sport, but... But that sounds a bit harsh, I think, to say that... That somehow you think of it more as a partner, or someone you're doing sports with. And I've been spared quite a lot from injuries or stress injuries, so I can be grateful to my own body that has endured the sport". (RP15)

Within the realms of empathetic rivalry, the body is constituted with gratitude and praise which is interpellating this agentic body is not only as an instrument for work but as an affective 'partner' one is 'doing sports with', and hence the body is listened and cared for by

giving an agentive role in the social relations determining how one endures within the high performing sporting rivalry.

Especially in athletics, it's often spoken, when former athletes or people from the association tell you very strongly how a top athlete should be, what they can do and what it one is not allowed to do and following (these kind of) imaginary boundaries is really heavy. And thus, I have tried to get away from these, because this is my career and no one has done this (my career) before and only I can know what I want to do in my career. And thus, I have decided that the pursuit of happiness is the best possible direction and of course it involves sports and that it is going well and I have goals in it (RP 13).

In the above narrative, when the empathy is present in the rivalry the athlete is willing to contests the systemic organizational body work requirements that sets boundaries for athletes' participation to everyday social activities. In her view, this norm requires a disembodied 'robot'. Her narrative calls upon an embodied view to treat athletes as 'whole' and referring to her 'intuitive' ability, she ties in the importance of cognitive aspects of being an athlete. In this way, the narrative sustains an empathic, rather than disciplined, view of rivalry, where means to an end (maintaining one's competitiveness within the sporting rivalry) can also be attained through 'intuitive' processes of with careful listening to the body what it 'really' needs. In this type of rivalry the agentive body elucidates the relational approach where more 'capable' athletes' bodies within the team take on additional responsibilities to support their teammates in times of physical adversity. Navigating health adversities becomes an integral facet of the athlete's meaning making.

The role of a coach transcends traditional disciplinary functions, extending into a strategic reshaping of the athlete's performance. One of the respondents (RP28) emphasizes that the coaches place is to give feedback in this affective space, and she is emphasizing that in a high-performing culture characterized by ambitious objectives, receptivity to critique is imperative. The ability to embrace and learn from negative feedback becomes an integral component of sustained success and continual improvement. She continues: "But I think that then it's just about every nasty saying or something like that, we do not need to get upset, that no, it cannot be that coaches are afraid to give feedback to athletes on the basis of whether it will be said wrongly".

Important part of empathetic rivalry is a conduit for emotional expression, providing an avenue to discuss controlling and grievances. This is done both with professionals like psychologist but also with other close colleagues or team members. The communicative aspect is highlighted, emphasizing the athlete's need for external (mental) support beyond the realm of physical training. In the realms of this type of rivalry organizational body is working with capable and at times to times also with dysfunctional 'body' with a platform to express concerns, complaints, and 'work' on affective states challenges. This component adds a relational, psychological dimension to athlete's workplaces, highlighting on the nuanced interactions that shape the holistic well-being with complexities involved in caring, disciplining, and training the bodies of athletes in high performance sport.

In the research data it is evident, that when coach-athlete dynamics are scrutinized in detail, the organizational body work instances where coaches employ "coaching" actions, might leave athletes without a defined role. An illustration from an athlete (RP27) put forward how

the organizational body work is co-created by coach reminding him for "the little things" that could be done more thoroughly at work and he feels that it is important from the coach is a kind of background person who looks at it in the big picture, but then in the 'right' moment, he is able to support and encourage. Furthermore, the involvement of medical professionals, referred to as physicists, in providing treatment and support underscores the comprehensive nature of care and caring in an affective, situated way.

Aesthetic rivalry

Finally, we identify a new type of embodied rivalry, that views rivalrous relations via aesthetic organizational body work. While body aesthetics in terms of bodily movement, artistic expressions, body measures, have traditionally been seen as an essential part of certain sports (such as figure skating and rhythmic gymnastics), aesthetic rivalry constructs a bodily capital that transcends beyond athletic realms (to be deployed in realms such as social media). Typically, sports place emphasis on rivalry realms built upon physical performance and efficiency, whereas aesthetic rivalry carves rivalry spaces through marketized self-image and habitus. We offer the following narrative to illustrate this:

“In this, in this sport of ours, style and creativity and things like that really affect it, which don't quite fit into the athlete mold, or if you take it too seriously. If I think about this as an athlete, then it's all about being able to do the most difficult tricks and we spin in different directions as much as possible and do technically really difficult things. But (when I consider myself) as a skier, I think that I am here for self-fulfillment, you look good on the hill and you do what you want in a way.” (RP 27)

The above quotation shows how this athlete finds justification for his being as an athlete through sensuous and aesthetic experiencing. He differentiates himself from notions of 'work' and even from 'sport', and seeks alternative ways of making his sporting life sensible, particularly through passion and particular aesthetics of his sport. Yet, this aesthetics also constitute a realm of rivalry, where one strives to develop the aesthetic display and a sense of 'looking good' as one performs. The organizational body work that is constituted through aesthetics is prevalent in the era of social media. The social media accelerates the visibility of the athlete body and them being under constant social evaluation for the public audiences.

“So there are a lot of athletes who do certain things through social media, but it's mentally quite, quite tough in the sense that, not all people are naturally social media type of persons and it's, really... you have to put yourself in it. I myself belong to that group, which is not very active in that social network. I don't find it so natural, but because I think it's easier to earn a living by working normal jobs than to do constant self-marketing and sales. I don't really think it's on a very sustainable basis, social media I mean”. (RP5)

The aesthetic rivalry constitutes also sport bridges sports with other realms of society. Aesthetic rivalry requires the athletes the organizational body work to be develop in conjugation with new kind of relationships with their competitors but also with public audiences. For some, as the interviewee in the above narrative, engaging with aesthetic rivalry is not compatible with how they view themselves (in this narrative, the interviewee considers that to do social media requires to be a social media type of person). This form of rivalry shows how professional sports requires and invites organizational body work to be done not only in the augmented reality but also in virtual reality.

Conclusion

This paper explored the multifaceted role of the organizational body work of top athletes, who continuously work in the realms of rivalry. We theoretically linked the organizational body work to existing research on rivalry, which has given limited attention to the role of embodiment, particularly the use of the body for and at work. The findings here confirm and extend our understanding of the link between embodiment and high-ranking individuals working in the rivalry context. Our study shows how top athletes engage in multifaceted practices to ‘work’ with their bodies to perform, and distinctions between personal, interpersonal, and systemic organizational body work provided a comprehensive understanding of the intricate rivalry dynamics involved.

In rivalry, confronting perceived failure can evoke all forms of organizational body work towards athletes, mirroring the logic of high performance sports outlined by Barker et al. (2014). Athletes, much like academics, grapple with setbacks such as unexpected outcomes in competitions, unproductive training phases, or the perception of not achieving the desired success or impact. For example, failing to secure sponsorships, garner sufficient coaching support, or underperforming in critical competitions can jeopardize an athlete's chances in the rivalry setting. Moreover, the failure to promptly extrude results from intense and emotionally charged training sessions, unlike in other of professions, this can leave athletes vulnerable and to missing crucial performance milestones or deadlines for participating in key events. This may hinder their progress and success in the sports arena, having an impact on how they are evaluated, such as performance metrics, and what kind of compensation is available for their work. The three forms rivalries with organizational body work underscore the complexity of athletes' perceptions and capture the body work on their own bodies,

interpersonal interactions with teammates, coaches and other personnel, and the broader influence of organizational system and these play out in workplace malfunctioning.

Much of the previous work organizational body work sheds light on how body is affected by the financial considerations and control mechanisms within sports organizations (Barker et al., 2014; Van Amsterdam et al., 2017). Athletes face the challenge of financial strain during injuries, and the power dynamics between clubs and athletes impact the athletes' choices, commitments, and daily routines. Observing and naming those bodies subject to organizational body work helps us to disrupt the taken-for-grantedness of body work and how the vulnerability of bodies can be considered at workplaces (Lawrence et al., 2023). More understanding could be offered on more profound analysis of how organizational body work is triggered, the forms it takes on intensified rivalry (Vroom, 2006; Sozen, 2021), and the temporal consequences for (de)humanizing work.

The complex interrelations between body, agency, and identity dynamics are often difficult to reach and underexplored in a high performing environment such as sport (Harding et al., 2021; Way, 2023). It is somewhat surprising that that unlike previous studies the gendered body in our data was less visible, in the realms of rivalry and sports, considering that the top sport is highly masculinized context which has a long history of the formal, cultural, and symbolic exclusion of women not only from sport itself, but the exclusion also from top leadership posts is common and long-standing (Pape, 2020; Knoppers et al., 2022). Organizational body work in relation to “sexualized” bodies (Daniels et al., 2021) and “maternal” bodies (Gatrell, 2019) could be an interesting future vantage point to study in high performing contexts.

The findings provide a foundation for future research and interventions aimed at optimizing the experiences in working of high performing cultures. The study encourages further exploration into the complexities and challenges faced by athletes, with potential applications in diverse environments such as the military and surgery (Sookermany, 2020; Sergeeva et al., 2020). Understanding the intricacies of organizational body work contributes to organizational effectiveness in the competitive realm of high-performing working cultures (Kilduff et al., 2010). Recognizing the impact of personal, interpersonal, and systemic dynamics on athlete performance is crucial for sports organizations aiming to create supportive and thriving environments. More understanding could also be offered as to how bodily memory is repeated at workplaces until it becomes habitual (Ball, 2005; Slutskaya et al., 2008).

This study is not without limitations, particularly when assessed through the critical offerings of narrative study. Even with the focus on organizational body work, the meanings extracted from the narratives are inherently intertwined with the specific context in which they were articulated, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between interviewee and researcher roles (Andrews et al., 2013). The interpretative stance taken by the researchers, rooted in their identity as academic organization and management scholars, introduces a distinct narrative framing and research predisposition, unlike that of sociologists and sports scientists. An alternative team of scholars, guided by different interpretative frameworks, might yield diverse insights from the same dataset. This accentuates the subjectivity inherent in narrative research and the significance of maintaining transparency and rigour throughout the research process (ibid.). The narrative research perspective further invites contemplation on how organizational body work unfold within the realm of sports narratives (Butterworth, 2020).

Specifically, there is a call for exploration into the impact of 'heroic' sports stories on the construction of 'winning' and 'losing' bodies.

In summary, the conclusions drawn from this study offer valuable insights into the organizational body work of top athletes, highlighting the need for a holistic perspective and acknowledging the interconnectedness of physical and organizational well-being. As we move forward, acknowledging and addressing the intricacies of organizational body work in high performance sports becomes imperative for fostering athlete well-being, enhancing organizational effectiveness, and contributing to the broader understanding of embodiment in other type of high performing environments (e.g. top CEOs and political leaders). Our study provides a foundation for future research and interventions aimed at optimizing the experiences of top athletes and organizing in this field (Wagstaff et al., 2016). The study underscores the interconnectedness of physical and organizational well-being, urging stakeholders to consider the holistic dimensions of bodily performances in the pursuit of excellence.

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