

# **Running, Identity and Meaning**

Writing as both a runner and a scholar of running, Baxter brings a unique perspective to this engaging and insightful study of running as a classed and gendered social practice, drawing out the diverse investments and identity-producing possibilities across different categories of running. This enables him to explore running's embeddedness in, and reproduction of, middle-classness, exposing the complexity of the superficially simple and coherent leisure practice of putting one foot in front of the other. The book offers a clearly and engagingly articulated account that brings empirical data into dialogue with social theory in ways that will be of interest to those working in the fields of gender, class, sport and leisure studies, health, embodiment and social theory. And it is a must-read for anyone who has ever pulled on a pair of running shoes and hit the pavement, track or fell.

–Dr Karen Throsby,  
School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds

Neil Baxter's illuminating book relates running in its different forms to contemporary self-identities, stressing the importance of hierarchies of class and gender, and highlighting what running can tell us about runners' values and individualized subjectivities, in a way that goes well beyond viewing running simply as a sport or leisure activity. Utilizing but transcending his position as an insider within the field, his book is both highly sociological in its insights, and also written in a clear, articulate and ultimately very readable way, providing food for thought for academic and running audiences alike.

–Richard Lampard,  
Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Warwick

This is a theoretically sophisticated and beautifully written analysis of the field of running which, as its title suggests, takes a Bourdieuan approach to understanding the way running is implicated in the reproduction of social identities and meanings. It tackles head on the idea that sport is somehow unworthy of serious sociological attention, showing what can be learned about contemporary social life by exploring different forms of running and how they are crucially shaped by gender, race and class. The author, who, as a runner as well as a sociologist is uniquely well-qualified to write about the field, argues that running, like most sport, is a gendered field, privileging specific (usually white and middle-class) masculinities, and that this has implications for other social groups in terms of participation. He shows that some forms of running are more open than others to those who are not privileged within the field but that they hold lower status in the hierarchy of running. This book is a joy to read. It holds intrinsic interest not only for sociologists of sport but also for those concerned with the way inequalities are reproduced and how Bourdieu's 'thinking tools' can be used to understand the way running in particular, and sport more generally, shine a light on how social processes operate at the micro level to reproduce patterns of social distinction.

–Nickie Charles,  
Professor and Director of the Centre for the Study of Women and  
Gender, University of Warwick, UK

# Running, Identity and Meaning: The Pursuit of Distinction Through Sport

By

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*For Vika, Alice and Jessica*

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I am sure I can remember someone telling me, when I was starting out as a PhD student a long time ago, that the process of taking my germ of an idea through the research process to submission and finally, to writing it up as a book would be ‘a marathon, not a sprint’. But given that the last six years of my life have been saturated with running talk and terminology, I wonder if this is some kind of false memory – a reimagining of the standard PhD pep talk embroidered with the cliché closest to hand. However, a marathon it has been, and one that I have enjoyed every step of the way. Like many a long-distance runner, I could not have reached the finish line without the assistance of a band of patient and helpful supporters. Academic guidance and advice were ably provided by Nickie Charles and Richard Lampard at the University of Warwick, two very different sociologists whose expertise dovetailed perfectly to support this multi-strategy project. Thanks also go to the reviewers who have read my manuscripts and provided helpful and constructive suggestions. With two young children at home and many other responsibilities to juggle, the support of my wife, Vika, and my parents, Andrew and Nicola, has been invaluable in allowing me to dedicate the necessary time to my academic work. And the interest and pride shown by my young daughters, Alice and Jessica, has been both hugely rewarding and quite surprising! Finally, a huge debt of thanks also goes to the interviewees who gave their time to talk to me about the minutiae of their involvement in running and to those many hundreds of mostly anonymous benefactors who took the time to complete, share and help promote the survey. Without the help of all these people, this book could never have been written.