“Tales of Addiction in Sports Life Writing”

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Abstract

My thesis addresses the lack of critical engagement with sports life writing in the literary field. It fills this gap by analysing the genre's unique and understudied presentation of addiction, both to various substances and sporting praxis itself. Working through the literature of three sporting contexts – professional football, professional cycling and ultra-distance running – I show how the life of the athlete and their writing are embedded in addiction and recovery. They embody and describe compulsive, addictive attitudes to training, cultures of performance enhancement, recreational substance abuse, alcoholism, substitutive addictions and the failed or successful rehabilitation from these factors. Thus, this thesis establishes a large sub-section of sports life writing as an integral source of literature on and about addiction. Then, specifically, it shows how the genre's presentation of addiction is mediated through the confessional and (non-)confessional modes, a structure which provides a contemporary literary catharsis upon which the sporting recovery narrative is built. Moreover, the thesis emphasises that this recovery narrative presents sport, and the continued, addictive and excessive engagement with it, as a potential rehabilitating solution to addiction issues. Like the very sporting careers described across sports life writing, the thesis frames this active recovery as a form of what I term renewal-in-depletion: an intensely consumptive mode of athletic praxis that mimics unsustainable neoliberal patterns of resource extraction. Lastly, throughout its three chapters, the thesis successfully explicates the strong bind and interrelation between the addictive narratives of professional sportspeople and the neoliberal contexts from which they arise.

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

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Introduction

This thesis interrogates the depiction of addiction in a specific confessional mode: sports life writing. Ribbingly coined the 'jockography' genre in a popular *New Yorker* article (Curtis 2007), both sports autobiography and biography have been historically derided by scholars and overlooked for incisive study. Andrew Sparkes and Carly Stewart assess why, arguing that they are perceived as:

> limited in their expressive form, predictable in their plot, formulaic in nature, superficial in content, banal and cliché-ridden, dominated by anecdote and gossip, lacking in analysis and short on human insight, and economically driven by the youth market (2015: 116).

It would be naïve to suggest that many of the texts in the genre are not demonstrative of these shortcomings. Yet, my thesis will show that such a wholesale critical dismissal of sports life writing is a missed opportunity, especially when attempting to understand narratives of addiction. Sports life writing is a vital addictive source, with addiction and the confession of addiction central to many texts across the genre. They are not only contemporary exemplars of the confessional tradition, but, in the case of my specific primary texts, also biographical, autobiographical and longform journalistic pieces that emerge from a neoliberal context. Hence, they are vital sources that explain and perform the interrelation between addiction and neoliberalism, and not just a facile recounting of athletic achievement. As a genre that shows addictive behaviours to be embedded across the professional spheres of football, cycling, ultra-distance running and beyond, sports life writing explores narratives of managerial and self-enforced obsessions with training, excessive physical outputs, illegal performance enhancing doping cultures and recreational substance abuse. As such, it should rightly sit in a literary tradition of writing on addiction, alongside works of Victorian decadence (De Quincy, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* 1821), twenty-first century urban deprivation (Welsh, *Trainspotting* 1993), and the contemporary recovery memoir (Liptrot, *The Outrun* 2016).

The thesis will analyse addiction in the context of confession and neoliberalism in the life writing of three different sports across three chapters: football, tour cycling and ultra-running. In Chapter One, my primary material will be the autobiographical texts of two Premier League footballers famed for their careers with Arsenal and concurrent alcoholism

and drug addictions, Tony Adams and Paul Merson. These are Adams' *Addicted* (1998) and *Sober* (2017), and Merson's *How Not To Be a Professional Footballer* (2011) and *Hooked* (2021). Chapter Two will move to an analysis of what I term Grand Tour Literature; that is life writing arising from cycling's premiere Grand Tours, specifically the Tour De France. The case studies are autobiographies by professional cyclists David Millar, *Racing Through The Dark* (2011) and Lance Armstrong, *It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back To Life* (2001) and *Every Second Counts* (2003), as well as a biography of fellow rider Marco Pantani by Matt Rendell titled *The Death of Marco Pantani* (2006). All three of these texts explore the addictive undertones to cycling's relationship with performance enhancing drugs (PEDs), whilst also presenting the inherently addictive patterns in a professional athlete's everyday life. Chapter Three focuses on contemporary ultra-running culture and its literary output, namely the autobiographies of three ultra-runners and recovery lifestyle influencers. These are Rich Roll's revised and updated *Finding Ultra* (2018), Catra Corbett's *Reborn on the Run* (2018) and Charlie Engle's *Running Man* (2016). Across these sports and chapters, I will argue that my examples of sports life writing use the confessional mode, revealing how addiction is embedded across sporting cultures through a range of factors including exhaustive training norms that require the repeated acquisition of energy from a state of near perma-depletion, PEDs, alcohol and drug abuse, and even active recovery processes. Moreover, they show how these addictive behaviours arise from neoliberal sporting governance: an exertive force of competitiveness that influences everything from athletic body norms and modes of on and off-field consumption to league structures and athlete work ethic. At this early juncture, it proves necessary to add that ten of my eleven primary texts are authored and co-authored by white men. That is simply because these texts cover the most prominent athletes in their field, and thus they provide the most visibly egregious, excessive examples of addiction in sports life writing.

Sport and Neoliberalism

The relationship between sport and neoliberalism has an established critical body of work dedicated to it, most prominently *Sport and Neoliberalism: Politics, Consumption and Culture* (2012), edited by David L. Andrews and Michael L. Silk. Over seventeen papers, their collection covers the cultural geographies, structures, mechanics and consumptive patterns of sport and neoliberalism, marking how they interact with and perpetuate one

another. In the second paper of the collection titled ‘A Distorted Playing Field: Neoliberalism and Sport through the Lens of Economic Citizenship’, Toby Miller makes a key claim, referring to sport and neoliberalism as ‘almost identical twins’ with many shared characteristics (2012: 23). Primary amongst these is competitiveness. Miller argues that neoliberalism imposes enterprise and competition ‘as a framework to regulate everyday life’ (Miller 2012: 24), doing so with the belief that competitiveness is humankind’s natural state and inclination (24). Sport – as a formalised mode of physical competition – is a willing and viscerally compelling performance of this competitive innateness that emboldens Michel Foucault’s claim made in his groundbreaking set of 1979 lectures entitled *Biopolitics* that society is solely governed by ‘competitive activity’ (Foucault, Burchell Trans. 2008: 310).

The essentiality of competition to neoliberal ideology is evident in the work of one of its originating thinkers, Friedrich Hayek. Throughout the 1930s and 40s, economist Hayek proposed that the government should be ‘designing and enforcing market competition’ (Davies 2012: 10), which would force the market itself to produce ‘outcomes that were unplanned and unforeseeable’ (Davies 2012: 9). It was hoped this dynamic unpredictability would spark growth in unexpected areas. This would offer the advantages of governmental dictation of the economic order, without the autocratic implications of pre-ordained outcomes. Moreover, it would reward personal virtues like hard work, intelligence, agility and adaptability, virtues that are also exercised throughout the sporting realm. Yet, as Will Davies notes, the ideal of sporadically arising inequalities proliferating purely from the virtue of strong minded, committed individuals was idealistic and unsustainable (2012: 11). From as early as the 1950s, but especially during the Reagan presidency and, afterward into the period of so-called ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (1978-2008) (Davies 2012: 9) – the very time in which the texts studied in this thesis arise – it became clear that inequalities produced from competition were increasingly *not* random (Cahill 2010: 298). Governmental backing of large corporations and conglomerates the world over created a situation in which a few select winners dominated a field of losers in predictably crushing outcomes. (Davies 2012: 11). A similar erasure of unpredictability was enacted in the sporting world during this period. For example, from the 1992-93 season to the 2000-01 season, the English Premier League was won by just three different sides (Premier League 2025). But, due to the powerful lexicon of equality and fairness attached to athletic pursuits as well as the democratising aesthetics of sport, this relative predictability retained a veneer of competitiveness.

Through its very nature, sport is well positioned to reflect the Hayekian ideal of randomly produced inequality through competition. The seeding of competitiveness as the central tenet of human life really has no better performative emblem than sport. Even during the actually existing neoliberal era, a period where professional sporting league structures sought to embed pre-existing financial inequalities[1] and the lucrative flow of sponsorship money favoured already successful institutions, on-field professional sport retains an aesthetic of fair unpredictability. Take a regulation football match. Twenty-two similarly athletic bodies compete on the same pitch, in the same division, in the same weather on a literal level playing field. This spectacle of a game which plays out a myriad of random on-pitch variables, obscures the structural inequalities underpinning the match itself. At the final whistle, sportspeople embody the shrinking, crumpled effects of defeat, and the elated, enlivening feeling of victory. This physical registering of competitiveness serves to instil the result of the fixture as a direct consequence of the strength or weakness of those very bodies and little else. Indeed, sport's very *bodiliness* is excellent at minimising critical engagement with crucial off-pitch policies and economics.

The governing ethics of competitiveness at the heart of sport is effective at arbitrating not just physical value, but moral value too. The agile, robust and strong athlete who works their way to the top through ruthless excavation of their own body and talent is seen as a clear ideal to be reflected in the world of work. Sport is unparalleled as a praxis which shows that the ability to work oneself rigorously, often foolishly so, can result in victory in a deeply competitive sphere. The traits that drive this success are then considered valuable, virtuous even, and stand as markers of moral superiority that are encouraged and reflected back into society. Davies notes that this permeable, reflectivity between sport and 'the larger "arena" of capitalism' (2012: 9) intensified in the actually existing neoliberal era in comparison to previous decades. And I would add that the exchange between the two spheres has only become more prominent post-2008. On-field competition is surrounded by off-field interests that plaster lucrative sponsorships over every piece of sporting architecture and merchandise, intensely marketise sporting spaces, and, amongst many other things, lobby for staggering building deregulation to facilitate the hosting of Sporting Mega Events (SMEs) (Graeff and Giulianotti 2024).

[1] With the restructuring of the top tier of English football in 1992 and the formation of the Premier League, founding members (clubs) were no longer required share revenue from gate receipts and television deals as was the case in the pre-1992 league structure (MacInnes 2017)

Despite these neoliberally driven changes to sport that create huge financial disparities between competing organisations, its common lexicon remains governed by fairness. Sporting parlance, with its deployment of cliché concerning fair play and equality, proves a 'mutually supportive' (Miller 2012: 25) mode of communication for neoliberal governance. Miller uses the examples of 'level playing field,' 'fair play,' 'moving the goalposts,' 'take a good look at yourself,' 'respect the ref,' 'the gaffer/coach is in charge,' 'the best side won today,' 'we just weren't competitive,' and 'you'll have to talk to my agent' (25) to demonstrate just how the language of sport constitutes moral judgements that reflect back perfectly to a neoliberally governed society premised on competitiveness.

This cliched sporting language is deployed throughout sports life writing to embolden ideals of sporting equality. Though often bound to complex confessional narratives and self-deprecation, the 'fair' sporting lexicon helps athletes to depict their success as arising from the ultimate symbolically marketised environment, namely, the playing field. Through hard work, sacrifice and commitment, they – alone or with a team acting as one – separate themselves from the competition. Communicating this breaking from the pack with neoliberalised sporting parlance underscores their achievements as legitimate and self-built, the result of fair market competition. My analysis of sports life writing will highlight this self-aggrandizing quality, but more importantly, it will show how the genre's self-venerating descriptions of success ripple with a shared focus: addiction.

This thesis will also demonstrate directly how sports life writing connects the demands of outstanding, self-driven performance and the neoliberal gospel of competitiveness to addiction and its risky consequences. For example, a dependence on recreational drugs is described throughout the primary texts I have chosen to analyse. In them, the excessive consumption of alcohol and cocaine is framed as an escapist pressure valve from a life of relentless competition, a coping mechanism that poses obvious health risks. Performance enhancing drugs and the addictive dependency on their effects also feature. They aid an athlete's performance in the short-term, but are proven to cause long-term health problems and have even been directly linked with deaths (Lopez 2012). Similar short-termism is visible in the addictive, self-mutilating training that is demanded of professional athletes to remain competitive. Particularly true in cyclists and ultra-runners, athlete training regimes condition the body for a career of intense aerobic and anaerobic performance, yet also inflict a weight of degradation that clinically damages them in retirement. This short-term bolstering of the athlete body through fundamentally addictive

means mimics modes of production in the neoliberal era. Athletes are required to repeatedly muster energy from nowhere and to constantly renew bodily resources whilst partaking in a sport that requires the frequent and total dissolution of those very same resources. This pattern of unsustainable replenishment outside the sporting realm is facilitated by the expansion of extractive operations into 'sacrifice zones' (Lerner 2010). New sites rich in mineral and oil wealth are constantly expanded into to service global demand for petroleum and precious metals essential to the contemporary way of living. With no external frontier to exploit, the sporting body is an exemplar of what Jason W. Moore refers to as neoliberal 'intensification' (2011: 134) whereby players are required to squeeze more from an ever-diminishing resource. By reading sports life writing in the context of this neoliberal compression, I will show that addiction perpetuates and is perpetuated by the self-flagellatory behaviour of athletes. Moreover, I will demonstrate how this behaviour is confessed across the genre, functioning not as something shameful, but as a marker of self-driven achievement.

Sports Life Writing, the Confessional Tradition and the Self-help Genre

The texts analysed in this thesis are all popular examples of sports life writing. The primary works are exclusively autobiography and biography, whilst supporting references are made to journalistic writings. Some of these supporting texts are book length investigations into a sporting culture or athlete and others are regular sports newspaper reports that serve to contextualise relevant events and corroborate claims put forward in the primary texts. All these genres of sports writing, excluding the basic reportage of sports results, attempt to provide a picture of sportspeople beyond their value as an athletic commodity. This behind-the-scenes depiction of the athlete is produced differently in the self-authored autobiography and externally written biography, a difference that proves essential for this thesis to contextualise.

Laura Marcus understands autobiography as 'the attempt to write a life in full, or at least in the fullness of a particular life-stage, such as childhood or early years' (2018: 6-7). Rockwell Gray offers more than this simple summative portrayal, stating that autobiography 'refers, rather, to any reflective effort made in the interest of giving or restoring meaning, purpose, and value to one's life' (1982: 33). The idea the genre is somehow attempting a more meaningful manuscript beyond the basic linear account of life events is echoed by Matthew Taylor, who claims sporting autobiography in particular is an essential 'repository

of meaning' with historical and literary merit (2008: 470). All these definitions show a desire to represent a life and its meaning in totality. An admirable but impossible task for anyone, the wholeness of it poses a unique set of difficulties for writing athletes. As Marcus again notes, the athlete's career is short, and their autobiography is typically produced at the point of retirement or even mid-career, hence 'the standpoint from which past and present are observed will often lie not towards the end of the life but at the time of its flourishing' (6-7). Thus, in sporting autobiography, we are typically not presented with a lifetime, but a whole life so far. Predictably, this early publication is not a stylistic choice but a mechanism of corporate opportunism, with publishers and sports stars keen to maximise the social relevance and economic potential of their careers.

Sporting biography shares much of the same qualities and aspirations as autobiography, with the crucial complication of writerly mediation between biographer and subject. For example, Michael Benton's definition of biographical work mirrors Marcus' autobiographical classification:

> The business of biography, so convention has it, deals with documented, verifiable facts and with deploying them to reconstruct a life story in clear, unembellished language (2015: 11)

The key difference between genres, and one which will play a prominent role in my analysis of Grand Tour cycling biographies, is the issue of what Allen Hibbard calls 'authorial intrusion' (2006: 21). With it, the biographer places themselves as a lingering presence in an otherwise objective account of the subject, a tactic that has been 'generally unwelcome' (21) by critics and readers. Within a context of addiction and corruption in sport, this biographical mediation can critically shape perceptions of an athlete. Their work can be meticulously researched and written with a talent not possessed by the athlete themselves, but it remains dependent on second-hand testimony and interpretation, constructed from a collage of research and interviews that vary wildly in depth and quality from text to text.

Sporting autobiography, despite its first-person perspective, is also not immune to issues of authorly mediation and the sub-genre is well known for using ghost writers and co-authors. Indeed, texts in this thesis are ghostwritten or co-authored, but it is not a mode of production that should exclude them from critical study. Ghostwritten texts are coalesced from an amalgamation of archival material on and interviews with sportspeople. These sources, which vary on a case-by-case basis in length and quality, are then synthesised into a

first-person narrative by a third-party writer. A particularly thorough example of ghost-writing is the work of author Paul Kimmage, who moved in with rugby player Matt Hampson for a month and undertook a four-year collaboration to produce *Engage: The Fall and Rise of Matt Hampson* (2011). Despite Kimmage's commitment, the total delegation of writerly labour that occurs in the ghostwritten text has been dismissed as a process of 'glorified ventriloquism' (Cooper 2018: 66) and a practice that is 'further contaminating unapologetically low culture' (Yelin 2015: 355). This sneering unwillingness to engage with ghostwritten sports life writing on the basis that it is, to whatever extent, written by an external partner, is a misjudgement. Co-authors and ghost writers are credited either on the cover of, or within an autobiography itself, and when entering into an athlete-author partnership, the athlete explicitly accepts and endorses what is written about them; they literally give the text their name. Because of this, I consider it their work. Moreover, the critique of sports life writing's collaborative composition ignores their commercial success. As Dawn Heinecken notes, 'Jockographies appear on best seller-lists, are reviewed by mainstream press, and constitute a popular sub-genre' (2016: 325-6). This popularity and ubiquitous presence in public literary life is precisely a reason to study sports life writing critically, and, even if the texts are hastily produced vehicles of profit – which I believe not all are – it still does not prohibit them from demonstrating essential and interesting mechanisms of autobiography and biography such as revelation, redemption and, crucially for this thesis, confession.

Confession is a central trope of sports life writing and a practice with a significant social and literary history (Pipkin 2008: 2). It is ideologically rooted in the Roman Catholic Church, where confession of all sins after baptism is a necessary act of repentance. The confession itself is directed towards a priest in a private confessional booth and the interaction functions as 'a process of reconciliation' (Petruzzello 2025) that is characterised by Chloe Taylor in *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault* (2009) as 'transhistorically cathartic' and 'psychologically curative' (1). Jo Gill builds on this definition, specifying how the witnessing and receiving of the confession by a person external to the confessor changes the process from simply 'a means of expressing the irrepressible truth of prior lived experience' to a 'ritualized technique for producing truth' (2006: 4). Literary confession, a tradition beginning in 400 AD with Augustine's *Confessions*, disembodies this ritual, with the confession mediated through text. In it, Saint Augustine of Hippo directly addresses God and recounts his various sins before adopting the Catholic faith.

This religious view of confession was famously subverted in 1782 with the publication of Rousseau's *The Confessions*. A lengthy proto-autobiography widely acknowledged as the first text of its kind, Rousseau's work sought 'radical and complete self-revelation' (Zwerdling 2017: 9), and where Augustine provided a religious mode of confession, Rousseau instead sought a 'secular examination of conscience' (Ferguson 2017: 311) in a document that strived to represent his entire life in excruciating totality. In a now famous 1979 piece, Paul De Man challenged the viability of this task, offering the following critique:

> The first thing established by this edifying narrative is that the *Confessions* are not a primarily confessional text. To confess is to overcome guilt and shame in the name of truth: it is an epistemological use of language in which ethical values of good and evil are superseded by values of truth and falsehood, one of the implications being that vices such as concupiscence, envy, greed, and the like are vices primarily because they compel one to lie. By stating things as they are, the economy of ethical balance is restored and redemption can start in the clarified atmosphere of a truth that does not hesitate to reveal the crime in all its horror (279).

De Man continues, citing inconsistencies in Rousseau's *Confessions*, questioning its accuracy and sincerity in reproducing the 'truth' (280). I am not concerned with the epistemological search for truth, but De Man's frustrated words on Rousseau are foundationally relevant to the structure of much of the sports life writing in this thesis. In confessing their addictive vices, the literature of and about addicted sports stars seeks De Man's 'economy of ethical balance' (279). It is a state that allows their texts to search for 'redemption' through a combination of acts of recovery and self-reflection on the 'horror' of their substance and behavioural dependencies (279).

The writing across the football, cycling and ultra-running texts that I will analyse are all confessional, or proxy-confessional in nature. In them, addictive lives are revealed in their extremity, resulting in either narrative tragedy (Marco Pantani), or, as is more common across the genre, a restorative arc that dips from mercurial childhood talent down to addictive nadir, then back up to recovery. Michel Foucault argues that confession is 'one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth' (1980: 58), but with neoliberal sports life writing this confessional mechanism is more complex. Confession in the texts I will be analysing does serve to accurately depict the addictive struggles of a range of athletes, but it also functions as

a key mode of reputational rehabilitation for the athlete-authors. Their confessional self-reflection allows them to occupy a space of virtuous honesty, and, in turn, this gives them a platform of 'ethical balance' (De Man 1979: 279). From this space, the athlete-authors then disseminate their methods of recovery; methods that are themselves dependent on self-discipline, personal responsibility and self-mobilisation. Consequently, confession in these texts will be revealed as an effective mechanism of neoliberal governance that facilitates and emboldens individualist norms.

In crafting redemptive, recovery narratives that are realised through self-mobilised action, much of sports life writing engages with the literary tradition of self-help, a genre which has its roots in the pioneering 1860 work by Samuel Smiles, predictably titled *Self-Help*. Widely considered the first self-help book, it championed Victorian individualism and is the historical basis for a genre that seeks to mobilise and maximalise the potential of the individual by offering advice and frameworks for personal success or progression. In the contemporary literary landscape, bestsellers include those that offer advice on financial security, relationships, grief and illness management as well as the focus of this project, addiction recovery and health and fitness in sport.

Throughout this thesis – most prominently in my work on ultra-running literature – I will demonstrate how sports life writing combines the rehabilitating qualities of the confessional narrative with characteristics of the self-help genre. Principally, my analysis will show that when sportspeople couch their recovery narrative in their own physical grit, exertion, effort and prowess, which they do frequently, they tacitly endorse a sense of neoliberal 'moralised self-governance' (Lavrence and Lozanski 2014: 77) whereby individuals are considered wholly responsible for their own wellbeing or recovery, totally detached from the socio-economic conditions they exist in. By emphasising what Larisa Honey refers to as the 'centrality of the self in the attainment of wellbeing' (2014: 7), my work will show that sports life writing centred around addiction encourages and instructs a self-mobilising recovery that serves to further atomise citizens in the neoliberal era.

Defining and Theorising Addiction

Throughout the primary texts in this thesis, the act or behaviour being confessed is addiction, and addiction to a broad spectrum of substances and behaviours. Addiction is defined by the National Health Service in the UK as 'not having control over doing, taking, or using something to the point where it could be harmful to you' (NHS 2024). It goes on to acknowledge that though the perception of addiction is most 'commonly associated' with alcohol, drugs, gambling and smoking, addiction is a malleable impulse that can be attached to 'just about any' behaviour (NHS 2024). Recognising this marks a huge cultural shift in the perception of addiction, with key models and studies in previous decades wedded to the presence of a defined addictive substance (Grant et al. 2010). In line with this broadening definition, behavioural addictions have also been included in the World Health Organisation's medical diagnostic manual, the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11). The ICD-11's sub section on addiction sketches definitions of both behavioural and substance addictions, which informs a follow-up section on the disorders that arise from them. It mentions substances ranging from socially permissible compounds, like caffeine, to psychoactive hallucinogens, cocaine and amphetamines. Currently, the behavioural list is more restrictive than the wide catchment quoted above in the NHS definition (the ICD-11 is limited to gambling and gaming addictions), but there is published evidence to suggest that this will expand in the future (Grant and Chamberlain 2017). Across both its behavioural and substance addiction definitions, the ICD-11 references 'specific repetitive rewarding and reinforcing behaviours' that cause 'distress or interference with personal functions', which lead to a variety of disorders (ICD-11). In fact, the primary remit of the ICD-11 is to identify conditions caused by addiction, which is a limitation in this context. More useful for this thesis are models that focus on the pathologies of addiction, namely that of Mark Griffiths. Specifically, he outlines six common pathologies of behavioural and substance addictions, asserting that the similarities between the two are a more valuable method of study than focusing on their differences (2017: 1716). All these similar pathologies are demonstrated in the textual presentations of addiction in my chosen sporting life writing, and they are as follows:

1. Salience
2. Conflict
3. Mood Modification
4. Tolerance

5. Withdrawal
6. Relapse

Salience is when partaking in a particular activity 'dominates' an individual's thinking, feelings and behaviour (Griffiths 2005: 193). In sports life writing this plays out, for example, in sportspeople obsessing over their training regimen, or in alcohol dependency showing itself when the sports person is being totally consumed with a need to drink, even during periods of peak athletic performance.

Conflict encompasses both interpersonal and intrapsychic conflict, and it refers to the social and internal tensions that arise from an addicted individual's decision to give excessive priority to satiating their impulses. This materialises in a compromising of personal, working and educational life (Griffiths 2005: 195) as a result of their addictive behaviour. This turbulence is a common consequence felt by addicted athletes.

Mood modification is a 'subjective enhancement' in experience (Kim 2018: 406) obtained by participation in an activity or through substance use. In the endurance running context, mood modification refers to the illusive runner's high, a 'euphoric state' (Boecker 2008: 2523) and 'neurobiological reward' (Raichlen 2012: 1331) associated with the practice. In the ultra-running autobiography, this little-understood state of mind is valorised, and descriptions of how to cultivate it are a powerful marketing device that attract widespread interest. Conversely, the alcoholic footballer's autobiography typically describes the antithesis of a high, framing mood modification as an 'escape or numbing' (Griffiths 2005: 193) sensation from reality.

Tolerance marks the increasing amount of substance or activity participation an addict needs to retain the same intensity of mood alteration. Just as the alcoholic needs more alcohol to achieve the same heightened or numbed sensation over time, so too does the endurance runner need to clock higher mileage in pursuit of the runner's high.

The next common pathology places withdrawal symptoms as an essential facet of addiction. Historically viewed through the conduit of drug addictions (Orford 2001), withdrawal symptoms are now acknowledged in a wider behavioural context, with the experience broadly comprising feelings of 'guilt, irritability, anxiety, sluggishness' (Szabo 2014: 65), as well as more acute physiological manifestations like sweating, temperature,

vomiting etc. Griffiths' pathologies inevitably conclude with relapse, defined as the inability of an individual to abstain from returning to an addictive activity or substance.

All these pathologies register and recur throughout the three literary-sporting contexts that are explored in this thesis, marking behavioural and substance addictions in footballers, cyclists, ultra-runners and endurance sport specialists. Though they will not always be cited explicitly, they are useful to keep in mind and essential to the process of analysing textual instances of addictive consumption and the behaviours that underpin that consumption. With critical terminology established, I will now contextualise and specify the way addiction is presented in each of my chosen sports life writing arenas.

Football, Line Crossing and Addiction

Chapter One, on footballer autobiographies, focuses on substance addiction. More specifically, it analyses the alcoholism and cocaine addictions experienced by Arsenal players Paul Merson and Tony Adams as depicted across their autobiographical texts. The body of the chapter uses the motif of line crossing to demonstrate how both players confess their respective addictions – Adams to alcohol and cocaine, Merson to alcohol, cocaine and gambling – as characteristically reflective of their on-field attributes. I will show how Adams, an influential club captain and central defender, places sporting praxis and addiction into a synthesising dialogue. He uses the discipline and precision required by his on-field position as first a juxtaposing mechanism to his out-of-control addictions, then as a mobilising force in his ongoing sobriety. This will be contrasted to Merson, who reflects the defensive line-breaking requirements of his attacking midfield role during his Arsenal career in his consistent addictive excesses and unstable, unsuccessful attempts at maintaining sobriety. On the field, he breaks the line, and off it, he continually violates limits of moderation.

The line crossing and line maintaining demonstrated by Merson and Adams respectively will be analysed in the context of their playing careers, a period itself subject to a significant neoliberal 'line crossing' that perpetuated addictive behaviours within English football. In 1992, as I will fully contextualise in Chapter One, the Premier League was formed, the division in which Adams and Merson played in for the vast majority of their careers. This financial restructuring of English football's top division, recent BBC documentary *Fever Pitch: The Rise of The Premier League* (2021) notes, led to inflated

wages in the sport, the growth of the celebrity of football players, and the substantial intertwining of the game with the alcohol and gambling industries. As Catherine Palmer writes of football and alcohol, 'There is little doubt that there are strong financial links between alcohol and sport or that the alcohol industry is heavily invested in the marketing and sponsorship of sport and sporting events' (2018: 114). For example, during the inaugural year of the Premier League, alcohol products accounted for eighteen percent of shirt sponsorship, second in overall market share (Simon 2019). Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, this share of advertising space grew, as did the market influence of the gambling industry within the Premier League (Wheaton 2024). The texts analysed in Chapter One thus retell tales of addiction in an intensely marketised environment where financiers who directly profit from addiction (bookmakers, alcohol distributors) were commonplace and influential in the sport.

Dozens of footballing autobiographies have been written retrospectively about this era, many of which have alcohol and gambling use as a recurrent strand in the narrative. Alongside Merson and Adams, addiction and overconsumption forms the basis of autobiographies by Chelsea's Paul Canoville, *Black and Blue* (2008) and Roy Keane; *Keane: The Autobiography* (2002), *Roy Keane: The Second Half* (2015). These texts are representative of the alcoholic confessional narrative within a footballing context, and, they demonstrate the way physical consumption and degradation occur concurrently whilst being underpinned by a neoliberal context. For example, Paul Macgrath details in his autobiography how he 'failed to appear for several international matches due to drinking binges, and either missed many club games due to alcohol consumption, or played while under its influence' (Free 2012: 46). McGrath's pattern of behaviour is repeated throughout the footballing autobiography, and through it we see that alcohol and dependence on it is used to quell performance anxiety, a sedating act that makes the demands of being a professional athlete more difficult, or impossible. Thus, the crossing of the line into excessive consumption within these texts reveals a two-fold depletion of the addicted footballer. First, by the well understood health consequences of excessive alcohol and cocaine addiction, and second, by the intense demands of elite level sport that are themselves made more challenging and damaging by substance addictions.

Cycling, Depletion, Renewal and Addiction

The combination of debilitating training, competition and substance abuse is exemplified and exaggerated in this thesis' second chapter focus: professional tour cycling. A sport renowned as physically exhausting and one synonymous with doping and performance enhancing drugs, it is punctuated with addictive consumption and behaviour, and so too is its literature. As a genre, what I term Grand Tour Literature depicts not only athletes addicted to the practice of cycling itself, but also the historically open use of amphetamines in the sport's professional infancy, the near ubiquitous blood doping of the 1990s-2000s and the pursuit of marginal gains through the questionable application of Therapeutic Use Exemptions (TUEs). Prevalent from the early-mid twentieth century, James Jung attributes the popularisation of drug misuse in the sport to their ability to alleviate the pain of a gruelling Tour schedule:

> Cyclists had been abusing speed for decades, popping pills like Pervitin — a German stimulant originally developed for Luftwaffe pilots during World War II — to fuel a taxing schedule that saw them racing upward of 140 days a year (2015).

A performance and recovery aid manifesting at every level of the sport, stimulant use was made popular and accepted practice through the infamous pot belge of the grassroots Belgian Kermesse leagues (Jung 2015). Mirroring the dual stress placed on the body of alcoholic footballers, substance use coupled with a physically demanding schedule perpetuates injury and ill health; indeed, 'constant stretch implies permanent damage' (Tempest, Starkey and Annew 2007: 1040). Over time, this use of pot belge evolved to more refined methods, namely the transfusion of erythropoietin (EPO) into the bloodstream. Allowing for rapid re-oxygenation of the cardiovascular system, EPO use was an epidemic in the 1990s and 2000s, marring the integrity of the sport and providing the narrative controversy central to most Grand Tour Literature.

Confessing the transgression of doping, and failing to confess it, as is the case with cycling's most infamous rider Lance Armstrong, will form the basis of my argument in Chapter Two. That is that the life writing of the Grand Tour, namely David Millar's autobiography *Racing Through The Dark* and Matt Rendell's biography of Marco Pantani *The Death of Marco Pantani,* serves to confess and proxy-confess individual and systemic complicity in doping as well as structural corruption throughout the sport. Millar and Rendell then interweave this confessional whistleblowing of doping with confessions of personal

substance addictions and addiction to cycling itself. I will show that their substance addictions, as in the case of Adams and Merson, are coping mechanisms for a sport that brutalises the body, whilst their addiction to sporting praxis is facilitated and sustained by the recuperative effects of doping and also symptomatic of the false and dangerous neoliberal belief that renewal always follows a cycle of total depletion. Illustrating this point of renewal following a process of energetic self-exhaustion will then be demonstrated in its extreme and critiqued with the autobiographical texts of Lance Armstrong, which frame his successful recovery from cancer as a direct result of his continued exhaustive training during chemotherapy.

Ultra-Running, Self-Help and Addiction

Ultra-running is standardised as running any distance more than the traditional marathon (26.2 miles), and typical ultra-marathon events are distances of 50 kilometres, 100 kilometres and 100 miles, and can stretch to multi-day pursuits. Races are often off-road, consisting of arduous trail and mountain running (Waśkiewicz et al. 2019: 31) with significantly more elevation gain than a typical city marathon or fun run. The practice is difficult, and participants in these races are fit, healthy and 'score high on traits such as extraversion and experience seeking, emotional intelligence, sport confidence and mental toughness' (Harman 2019: 1). Consequently, the training is intense and requires a salient attitude to running, with many participants becoming obligatory runners - those who embed a 'compulsive drive to run that pre-empts fulfilment in other areas of life' (Hoffman and Krause 2018: 212). The ultra-running autobiography is a valuable resource in understanding why individuals are attracted to this boundary pushing sport, and what thought patterns they exhibit in their preparation for and during ultra-distance events.

In Chapter Three, I will show how ultra-running autobiographies position ultra-distance running as a working mode of recovery from alcoholism and substance abuse, deploying what I term the running-as-recovery lifestyle. Addictions to alcohol and drugs that are confessed in the texts of Roll, Corbett and Engle are, consciously and subconsciously, substituted for an addiction to running and endurance activity. This active sobriety is then maintained by a lifestyle, diet and self-perception governed by perpetual training and racing. Chapter Three will demonstrate how this addictive substitution where addicts 'trade in one addiction, such as smoking, drugs, and alcohol for another' (Diaz-Gilbert 2018: 210), is,

through its focus on endurance fitness and the pursuit of an elite distance runner's body, an unfolding of neoliberal self-help narratives. Indeed, the active recoveries of Roll, Corbett and Engle and the extreme bodies they produce demonstrate a tacit endorsement of addictive behaviour, provided that behaviour is in pursuit of a body aligned with neoliberal values of healthism (Brown 2015: 785).

Chapter Three will also argue that because of its innate extremity, more than any other mode of sports life writing, ultra-running autobiography accepts the addictive, extractive norms of being an athlete. So much so that it takes them and reconditions them as a self-help mantra to live one's life by, offering extreme exhaustion and the repetitive excavation of bodily resources as a miraculous remedy to all manner of ills. Moreover, the texts then use the confessional mode to frame their self-flagellatory and boundary pushing engagement with running and physical activity as a feature of their "authentic" identity. The result is a pseudo-spiritual justification for ultra-running across the genre; one that minimises the idea that the running-as-recovery lifestyle is underpinned by addictive behavioural patterns.

Chapter One

Line Crossing and the English Premier League: Confessing Alcohol and Gambling Addiction with the Arsenal Addicts

Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, men's professional football cultivated an iconic, worldwide relationship with alcohol and substance abuse. Diego Maradona, arguably the greatest player of all time, endured decades of alcohol and drug misuse (Burns 2003) before dying at the age of fifty-six. Garrincha and Socrates, two legends of Brazil's national side during the 1960s and 1980s, respectively, had their careers and lives ended by alcoholism (Downey 2018, Castro 2013). These figures were prominent, globally recognisable examples of an endemic issue which affected the most skilful players in the English top division, too. Manchester United's dominant forward of the 1960s and 1970s, George Best and Tottenham's 1980s superstar, Paul Gascoigne – famously known as Gazza – were both as infamous for their addictions as their footballing abilities. The same is true of the players at the centre of this chapter, Arsenal legends Tony Adams and Paul Merson; the first, a club captain of nearly two decades, the second a creative midfielder and fan favourite "lad". Both experienced prolific and damaging addictions to alcohol and cocaine, and their life writing explores the effects of this consumption prior to and during the most notable neoliberalising event of the twentieth century within English football – the formation of the Premier League. With the Premier League's arrival, the elite of England's national sport was restructured. The new 'breakaway' (Webber 2024: 1) top division negotiated and concentrated wealth from lucrative broadcast contracts to position itself 'as the optimal commercial, economic, and global entity' in football (Turner and Fitzpatrick 2024: 9). With its condensation of wealth and courting of multinational media capital, the league's formation was a neoliberal tipping point not just for English football, but for professional sport more widely, and its influence has been seen in other global sports and franchise-based leagues.[2]

For Adams and Merson, this means that their stories of addiction and line crossing over-consumption of alcohol and cocaine are confessed within a sporting context that is itself crossing a new financial threshold that sees football become an agile, evolving marketplace that excels at accepting and disseminating finances from 'addictive' revenue streams, most

[2] For example, the Indian Premier League (IPL) has courted the same financial dominance exerted by the Premier League but in the context of cricket.

obviously with sponsorships deals from alcohol and gambling businesses. Their life writing is consequently dominated by lines and limitations. Their roles on the pitch are expressed with line crossing sporting parlance, and their out-of-control addictions are inherently characterised by the exceeding of safe limits. This sporting and personal focus on the violation of thresholds as both footballers and addicts embeds a critical lexicon of line crossing across their life writing.

The on-field approach to the football of Adams and Merson is reproduced *within* their respective texts, with their alcoholism, drug use and gambling presented as a mirror to their individual playing styles and temperaments. Adams, a towering central defender, co-ordinated Arsenal's back four, commanding and directing a disciplined defensive line, with himself setting a powerful example of correct footballing conduct and decision making. Merson played his career as a creative midfielder who drifted between the opponent's defensive lines, splitting them open with an incisive pass or dribble, regularly helping his team advance and score. In the autobiographies that chart his addiction and recovery respectively – *Addicted* and *Sober* – Adams establishes a compelling tension between his out-of-control drinking and his disciplined on-field ability to marshal a defence. Then, advancing the narrative into a period of sobriety, he frames his recovery as a successful mobilisation of the measured control he displays on the field. Merson's autobiographies – *Rock Bottom* (1996), *Hero and Villain* (1999), *How Not To Be a Professional Footballer* and *Hooked* – demonstrate a similar reflection of playing style, with the texts describing fleeting periods of sobriety and innumerable relapses. This flitting between abstinence and transgression is a boundary splitting fluidity that Merson performs through his incisive on-field passing and movement. This addictive-footballing synergy where the nature of sporting action and technique permeates into the consumptive habits of Adams and Merson positions the pair as particularly porous athletes. So much so that their addiction narratives, Merson's especially, closely mirror the Premier League's endorsement of and dependence on capital from addictive revenues. Players like Adams and Merson were and still are left to manage their own thresholds in a working environment where the exact substances and behaviours they are seeking to stop engaging with are the very markets that give the Premier League its solvency. Hence, life writing from addicts of the Premier League explores the pursuit of balance whilst immersed in excess.

The narratives of addicted Premier League footballers are compelling because they expose a tragic juxtaposition of ability and vice, but they also characterise a period of football

where addiction expanded beyond their bodily boundaries, registering in the financial structure of the sport and even the fans. Writing of the specific relationship between football and alcohol in the context of the Premier League in the UK, James Gornall insists the two are 'inextricably linked' (2014: 348). Essential to the fan experience (Crawford 2004) and financially embedded in the sport through years of corporate partnership and investments (Purves et al. 2022), alcohol consumption has punctuated all physical and financial areas of the British game for decades. Although consuming beer within sight of the pitch was banned in 1985 and alcohol branded shirt sponsorship has not been present in England's top division since the 2017/18 season, clubs, tournaments and leagues still retain official alcohol partners to this day. Drinking forms an essential part of the fan experience, too, with pre- and post-match pub visits bookmarking the consumption of the sport (Dixon 2013).[3] Hoping to curtail this norm that many believed constituted a public health risk, the end of stadium drinking and the cessation of alcohol shirt sponsors marked the end of replica fan shirts with visually iconic partnerships like Liverpool and Carlsberg.[4] It also created a vacuum of sponsorship seized upon by the now ubiquitous gambling sponsorships present throughout the English game.[5] This neoliberally 'agile' (Gillies 2011: 210) shift from one addictive source to another positions football as readily open to addictive revenues, a phenomenon that also manifests in the presence of ultra-processed fast food manufacturers which not only partner with teams and the league itself but also sell their products readily throughout stadiums which are now as much 'citadels of commerce' (Kennedy and Kennedy 2017: 93) as they are spectator spaces.[6]

Another central reason for studying football and its addiction narratives within the Premier League is its dominant class structures. As Jonathan Chern notes, it is a broad stroke to categorise the sport as exclusively working class. Yet, as he also points out, many clubs formed around the factories and mines of Victorian England, and the profiles of those playing the game professionally remain skewed to those of a working-class background (2020). Many boys from these communities, as Adams and Merson did, cultivate an obsessive relationship with football in the hope of turning professional and acquiring economic wealth. It is essential to note that, during the childhoods of Merson and Adams this economically driven dream was a deeply masculinised aspiration. In 1971 (Merson was born in 1968, Adams in

[3] There is an increasing evidence of cocaine use being central to these pre and post-match gatherings, too (Ayres and Treadwell 2011)
[4] This sponsorship was in place from 1992-2010.
[5] Out of 20 Premier League Clubs in the 2022/3 season, eight were sponsored by betting firms, eclipsing any market share ever achieved by alcohol brands.
[6] Coca-Cola is the official soft drink partner of the EPL, Cadbury its official snack partner, and Budweiser its official beer (Viggars 2024)

1996), women's football was emerging from a 51-year ban on competition appallingly sanctioned by the FA (Wrack 2022).[7] Thus the pair's experience of the sport was one where women were 'largely absent from dominant football culture' (Woodward 2007: 771). As a result, the transition from spheres of traditional manual labour to the relative riches of a professional football contract was made primarily by working-class male bodies.[8] This shift was and remains a destabilising one, with an abundance of money, attention and physical and mental strain making players prone to substance abuses. As Mary V. Wrenn argues, the structure in which one exists 'shapes the individual's agency through various social mechanisms, such as power relations, resource allocation and both formal and informal constraints and obligations' (2007: 255). The Premier League's neoliberal structure – one that intertwines football and the addictive industries so keenly – shapes a dissonant player agency which accepts the requirement to self-regulate against the very addictive services funding their clubs and leagues. Football, then, particularly in the era that Merson and Adams write about, is and remains fundamentally tied to addiction aesthetically, financially and consumptively.

Consumption, Addiction and the Premier League

The formation of the Premier League in 1992 was English sport's defining neoliberal moment, bringing a financial revolution to the sport that was underwritten by television capital. At its inception, the exclusive right to broadcast – a purchasing opportunity itself enabled by the widespread neoliberal deregulation of the transnational sporting media (Giulianotti and Robertson 2004, 2009) – was purchased by BskyB and valued at £38.2 million, replacing a far less lucrative broadcasting arrangement (Radan 2019). This has only multiplied in the subsequent decades, with the rights for the 2022-23 season valued at £1.1 billion.[9] Disseminating the league to a national, then international audience, this new 'decartelisation' (Telesca 2022: 506) of football media broadcasting injected capital directly into the clubs and drove the global consumption of the league. This grew the division as a

[7] Resistance to this ban was documented in the recent film *Copa 71* (2023), which followed the England Women's national side in their self-funded route to the 1971 World Cup in Mexico.
[8] Adams father was a lorry driver, Merson's was a coalman.
[9] The money from broadcasting rights is distributed like so: "Domestic rights broadcasting money is divided into three pots. The first pot - 50% of the money - is divided equally between the clubs. The second pot - 25% of the money - is divided up according to a club's position on the ladder at the end of the season. The third pot - also 25% of the money - is divided up according to the number of times a team's game is broadcast live on television." (Radan 2019)

product as well as a sport, consolidating the 'feeling of living in a world in which domains previously exempted from the calculus of profitability' are 'captured by market logic' (Telesca 504). The crossing of a threshold into worldwide markets and the revenue and wage inflation caused by the Premier League's restructure accelerated the importing of premium international players, producing a 'highly intense talent bubble' (Elliot 2022: 85).[10] The Premier League was to become the world league *par excellence,* one of football's 'central points of reference' engaging in the production and dissemination of manufactured football talent and 'football culture' (Elliot 86). Within ten years of the Premier League's inception, international recruits Dennis Bergkamp, Nicholas Anelka (both to Arsenal) and Juan Sebastian Veron (to Manchester United) had all broken the British transfer record, representing a huge rate of inflation when measured against wages and fees pre-1992.[11] The influx of this market-leading calibre of player gradually increased the technical and physical demands of play, with European teammates of Adams and Merson, namely Marc Overmars, Emmanuel Petit and Patrick Viera, helping to redefine standards at Arsenal (Welch 2021). This raising of quality and effort means that many footballers, particularly Adams and Merson, used substances as a way of sustaining and coping with the physical and mental demands of elite competition. It is addiction as both escape and survival mechanism.

The heightened athletic demands and sporting standards that arriving players like Petit and Viera contributed to also accelerated wage inflation, a factor that deepened public fascination with footballers' lives to an almost addictive level. The relevance of the game expanded far beyond the pitch itself, with footballers central to the lad mag culture that emerged in the 1990s. These were working-class men earning substantial wages, and a maelstrom of hyperbole, scandal and 1990s hedonism jutted against the games' increased professionalisation. Pierre Bourdieu claimed this growing culture of the sport's primary "actors" becoming vectors of profit creation off the pitch as well as on it remained obscured by the aesthetic veneer of the game itself: 'sport visible as spectacle hides the reality of a system of actors competing over commercial stakes' (1998: 17). Yet the lucrative sponsorship deals and journalistic obsessions with players are not hidden by their sporting actions, but a direct and intensely visible consequence of them. Their footballing ability and the often-addictive fallout of the associated wealth and public obsession are reported on and

[10] Indeed, by the 1994-95 season, there were seventy overseas players in the PL roster, a number that increases rapidly to the present-day figure of 235 (FBRef 2025).

[11] The average annual salary in the first division in 1991-92 was £59,904. This jumped to £77,083 in the first year of the PL (Miller and Harris 2011). By 1995-96, the aforementioned Dennis Bergkamp was earning 25k *per week* upon arrival at Arsenal (Leeks 2023).

consumed concurrently. Famously, tabloid journalist Paul McMullan admitted during the Leveson inquiry on phone hacking that over his career at *The Sun*, *News of the World* and *The Sunday Sport*, he and his colleagues did not 'treat Paul Gascoigne as a person' (Parker 2022). Footballers were spectacles on the pitch, and off it, too.

Bourdieu's vision of sporting praxis as a spectacle that hides a series of commercial transactions has much more validity when viewed in the context of the physical architecture of football. Stadium disasters and fan hooliganism – an issue that in the pre-Premier League era dominated football and its perception – were upheld as a reason to reform public sporting space. Whilst change was necessary for the safety of fans, tragedies like Heysel (1985) and Hillsborough (1989)[12] were used as grim evidence for the need to tighten the governance of traditionally working-class, male communal places. As Anthony King argues across multiple works, around the time of the formation of the Premier League, the geography of stadiums was fundamentally altered (2002, 2019), with improvements in safety and a dampening of terrace fervour and violence. This shows that the line crossing reformation of English football coupled its new broadcasting wealth with a sanitisation that signalled a tacit courting of a more bourgeois audience with greater assets. Thus, not only did the League disseminate football to domestic spaces through premium television subscriptions, they also restructured stadiums themselves as places designed for wealthier fans, and fans of a wider age and gender demographic. This would and has gradually reduced the presence of the industrial working classes – 'the traditional owners of the game' (Meehall Wood 2018) out of football stadiums. The spatial changes heralded by the Premier League recast football from what the broadsheet press, specifically the Sunday Times, cruelly perceived as 'a slum sport, played in slum stadiums, increasingly watched by slum people' (1985) into a legitimate pastime for more affluent audiences. One need only look at the commercial offerings of the average Premier League stadium – food outlets, hospitality packages, a club shop – to acknowledge that they are as much spaces of aggressive consumption as they are spectatorship.

Arsenal, Addiction and Class

Between 1987-1995, Arsenal, a club that was the creation of the industrial working classes (Ganesh 2023), was managed by George Graham. A former Arsenal player himself, Graham

[12] The Heysel stadium disaster occurred on 29th May 1985, the day of the European cup final between Juventus and Liverpool. Thirty-nine attending fans died in a crush caused by a retaining wall collapse (Chisari 2004). The Hillsborough disaster occurred on the 15th April 1989 during Liverpool and Nottingham Forest's FA cup semi-final. Ninety-seven people died in a crush.

was and remains a club legend. *The Scotsman* described him as a man from a working-class community in Lanarkshire that was defined by 'stoicism and hard graft' (2018), and Graham led Arsenal with a suave appearance and an iron fist.[13] The distilling of his grafting working-class culture into the club produced a disciplined, defensive style of play on the pitch. Off it, Graham's Arsenal were similarly tight and measured, deploying a modest recruitment model that did not bend to the financial excesses seen elsewhere in the division (Cox 2000).[14] Also inhibited by a 'notoriously tight wage structure' (Cox 2000), Arsenal's excesses under Graham instead manifested in an institution-wide permissibility towards heavy drinking. Central to this culture were Merson and Adams, and their manager encouraged the ritualised drinking. This was primarily conducted via his side's 'Tuesday Club', that being a weekly squad drinking session renowned for its excess and permitted for its apparent positive effects on team bonding. Hence, the Tuesday Club is used in Merson's and Adams' narratives to reflect on the social benefits of such institutionalised drinking and its clear enabling of alcoholism.

After Graham's departure in 1995, the club began to integrate neoliberalising facets of the Premier League. Graham's short-lived replacement, Bruce Rioch, spent £7.5 million on Dennis Bergkamp in 1995. Then, following Rioch's disappointing tenure, the club recruited the relatively unknown Frenchman Arsene Wenger from Japanese side Nagoya Grampus Eight. Lanky and bespectacled, he was cast by the English press as a "professor" of football.[15]

[13] Graham was known and Gorgeous George, whilst Anders Limpar famously referred to him as Saddam Hussein (Christenson 2012)
[14] In the 93/94 season, Arsenal bought in winger Eddie McGoldrick for £1.28 million from Crystal Palace, a fee dwarfed by the spending of their direct rivals. Blackburn Rovers signed David Batty, Tim Flowers and Paul Warhorst for just under £4 million each (TransferMarkt 2025).
[15]He later took ownership of this moniker, titling his Autobiography *The Professor* (2001).

Figure 1: Arsene Wenger Press Conference (O'Brian 1994)

In keeping with this intellectual image, Wenger heralded a culture of obsessiveness, deploying revolutionary training methods alongside a swath of supplementary nutritionists and physios. These tactics were adjoined by a threshold crossing transfer policy. In their time at the club, Adams and Merson were joined by era-defining greats signed by Arsene Wenger: Thierry Henry for £16 million and Robert Pires for £9.8 million, as well as Lauren for £10.7 million and Nwankwo Kanu for £6.25 million (all competitive market fees at the time). These players were crucial to Wenger's success and justified their expensive acquisition. Such successful business demonstrated that even though Wenger and Arsenal had a reputation throughout the 1990s and 2000s as fiscally responsible – journalist Aaron Timms uses the comical phrase 'Wengerian thrift' to describe the clubs transfer policy (2024) – they were by no means immune to the inflationary expectations that arrived with the Premier League. The texts of Adams and Merson thus narrate their way through a marked transitional phase for the club, detailing their alcoholic excesses during the financially conservative leadership of George Graham, and their continuation into Wenger's freer spending reign.

Off the field, Arsenal occupied a space of addiction and obsession in the prominent sporting literature of the era that encompassed Graham, Rioch and Wenger's tenures. The commercial success of Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch* (1992), the best-selling autobiographical work by the Cambridge-educated author that charts his 'youthful addiction' (Doward 2012) to following Cambridge and Arsenal, is often cited as the middle class's gateway to football and football writing. Hornby's educational background and the broad cultural penetration of the book is emblematic of Arsenal and English football's 'literaturisation' (Redhead 2002), a liberal intellectualising of the sport and its coverage that made it alluring to those 'outside the stereotypes of working-class men's clubs' (McGowan 2021: 43). This literary success - a factor later exemplified by David Peace's excellent ventriloquising of Brian Clough and Bill Shankley in his landmark works of historical footballing fiction *The Damned United* (2006) and *Red or Dead* (2013) –drove a proliferation of football fiction, non-fiction and zine material geared towards what Mazurkiewicz calls the middle class 'soccerati' (12), accelerating another sphere of consumption attached to the game. This pattern of middle-class consumption of football was at its apex with Wenger's Arsenal. The side's aesthetic, possession-based football ascribed to the club a suave, fashionable cultural capital simply not present during the defensive sides of Graham and Rioch, or the division as a whole.

Arsenal's increasingly bourgeois fanbase did not mirror Merson and Adams themselves, who are what Robert O'Connor (2016) and George Chesterton (2021) refer to as 'old' players – those ideologically aligned to a nostalgic vision of English football where attending matches was affordable, community-led and a far cry from the 'sedate, subdued' (Smith 2022) atmosphere prevalent in the contemporary game. Merson and Adams are also representative of what Anthony King refers to as 'Lads' (1997) – white, heterosexual working-class men who are dependent on football to forge a coherent identity, and committed to an unsanitised vision of the sport. This ladishness coexists alongside Adams' and Merson's adherence to Arsenal's club values and atmosphere, which, as Merson states himself, was 'top, top class' with the 'marble halls at Highbury' (17) conjuring an anachronistic grandiosity and formality. By balancing these two opposing personas in their texts – one idealistically calm, dignified and in control, the other raucous and insatiable – the life writing of Adams and Merson shows that each of them slips into extremity with ease.

Ghost-writing and Mutual Support Groups in the Autobiographies of the Arsenal Addicts

Making a combined total of 829 appearances for Arsenal between the late 1980s and early 2000s, Adams and Merson were central figures at the football club. A generational leader and central defender, Adams became captain of Arsenal in 1998 at the age of just twenty-one and steered his club to three league titles and three FA Cups during his nineteen-year career. He was a one-club man, only ever playing professionally for Arsenal, and turning down lucrative approaches from Alex Ferguson's Manchester United, something that solidified his status as a club legend. Merson, a winger and attacking midfielder, provided seventy-eight goals and thirty assists for the club that contributed to two league title wins and a cup double in 1993. A mercurial talent, Merson's unusual trademark ability to pass the ball with the outside of his right foot cemented his reputation as a fan favourite. Both players suffered with alcoholism during their careers, with Merson experiencing multifaceted addictions to drink, drugs and gambling that continued well into his retirement from playing. In all four of his autobiographies, but in particular *How Not To Be a Professional Footballer* and *Hooked*, Merson elaborates on this multi-layered addiction. These texts trace his alcohol dependency during his playing career to an ongoing gambling addiction in his post-retirement career as a broadcaster, where he continues to work in an environment itself beset by investment from betting firms. In contrast, Adams' two autobiographies, *Addicted* and *Sober,* depict an all-

consuming alcoholism that coincided with his playing career, before detailing a successful transition to sobriety. Each of Merson's and Adams' addictive transitions – the former from alcoholic to compulsive gambler, the latter from alcoholic to sobriety – is mobilised within the texts by mirroring their on-field attributes, specifically their approach to line and threshold crossing. Adams, a talismanic centre half, expertly controlled Arsenal's defence. Drilled by manager Graham, he set a perfectly positioned back four renowned for catching opposition forwards offside. This mastery of sporting space and margins is unpacked in Adams' texts with frequent reference to thresholds, transitions and limits. This footballing parlance and his ability to moderate his sporting domain – *maintaining* and *setting* lines – not crossing them, is then applied to his descriptions of sobriety. His disciplined on-field role and the language that accompanies it, so contrasted with his alcoholic disregard for control and moderation, is re-registered through his depiction of recovery. Merson's two texts share this mirroring. He played in the space between the lines, looking to split opposition defences with incisive passes and runs. His positional mobility is described in his texts, and, as with his teammate, is then reflected in the way he characterises his attempted recovery. Merson's on-field position between the lines – his drifting back and forth – establishes a swinging momentum replicated in his narrative's frequent flitting between abstinence and relapse.

The pattern of playstyle being inflected into textual content is a trope found throughout footballer-addict autobiographies of the same era. Irish cult hero Paul McGrath's *Back from the Brink* (2006) and Northern Irish winger Keith Gillespie's *How Not to Be a Football Millionaire* (2013) demonstrate this commonality.[16] McGrath's measured, 'progressive' and 'decisive' (McCormack 2018*)* defending – a smooth quality immortalised by a sublime man of the match performance against Italy in the 1994 World Cup –is deployed as a textual contrast to the excesses of his drinking and drug use. This genre-wide pattern of literary structure taking on the characteristics of specific sporting praxis shows the domineering power that rigorously drilled physical activities and techniques can exert on all areas of an athlete's life.

The manifestation of Merson's and Adams' differing sporting attributes is marked in their literary treatment of the sober support groups Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Gamblers Anonymous (GA). To varying degrees of success, each of them takes a 'step' into these pseudo-religious organisations. A puritanical solution in a professional context flooded

[16] The latter also replicates the self-help motif used in Merson's book title.

with riches, their engagement with AA and GA reinforces their position as holder (Adams) and regressor of lines (Merson) respectively. Throughout *Sober*, Adams details a transformative commitment to AA's sober message, a philosophy that is structured through twelve sequential steps. The book reveals his movement through these linear stages, demonstrating a mode of line crossing that embodies control, not excess. Merson's inability to replicate this measured progression shows that his playing style continues to permeate his attempts at sobriety. His line crossing is not reorientated into something balanced, and is instead manifested in new addictive outlets. Where Adams traces an arc of alcoholism to sobriety, Merson describes his predominantly alcoholic impulses morphing into a need to gamble, a pattern that correlates directly with the changing addictive capital flowing into the Premier League. Indeed, the league itself has undergone a financialising transition from heavy investment from drink firms to a near total dependence on capital from the betting industry.

This tracing of addictive capital is in, in some way, a direct product of the collaborative authorial production that Adams and Merson engage in. Their texts have been co-authored, or, to use a more cynical term, ghostwritten. Adams' all-consuming depiction of addiction and his explanation of the deeply rooted presence of alcohol and gambling in the Premier League through his charity, *Sporting Chance,* is sharpened by his ghost writer Ian Ridley. Ridley is also a recovering alcoholic, and consequently Adams' experiences and writing are not diluted or mediated through a co-writer for whom addiction is alien. This commonality and their eventual friendship give the text authenticity. The pair avoid the typical processes of co-authoring and ghost writing, which often functions as a 'money making promotional tool' for a sportsperson to capitalise on their athletic achievements and failures (McKenzie-Murray 2021). Merson's 1995 text *Rock Bottom* is, incidentally, also written in conjunction with Ridley and the midfielder's then wife Lorraine. The decentralisation of narrative voice to a partner serves to accredit the despair of Merson's addiction and is a common trope within celebrity and sporting autobiography.[17] Following this text, Merson has produced three more to date: *Hero and Villain* (1999), *How Not To Be a Professional Footballer* (written alongside music and sports journalist Matt Allen) and *Hooked* (ghosted by former *Guardian* columnist Rob Bagchi). The latest of these two texts will be my focus as they are the culmination of recycling, refining and adding to the

[17] In TV presenter Richard Hammond's autobiography *On The Edge* (2008) where he describes recovering from a life-threatening crash, his own writing is interspersed with his wife's.

anecdotes and narratives of Merson's 1990s publications. It is an overproduction that itself is evidence of addiction struggles. Given the content of Merson's autobiographies, one cannot help but equate them to an income source that supports the very addictions that form their content.

In literary terms, it is impossible to determine the level of co-operation between ghostwriter and athlete, with the process varying wildly from project to project. Richard Fitzpatrick's excellent piece in the *Irish Times* elaborates on this ambiguity. Talking to Hunter Davies, the ghost writer of Paul Gascoigne's *Gazza*[18] (2005), Fitzpatrick explains that the access he was given to Rooney amounted to eight three-hour sessions (2014). At the other end of the spectrum, as mentioned in my introduction, is biographer Paul Kimmage's four-year project with Matt Hampson to produce the book *Engage: The Fall and Rise of Matt Hampson* (2011). Thus, it is difficult to say with certainty what proportion of the texts within this chapter are the direct creations of Adams and Merson themselves, or how much they have shaped, led or determined the exact prose explanations. What remains true, though, is that they have each contributed to a narrative process and have given their consent for the texts to be published in their name, and they hold the copyright for their texts. They have sanctioned the texts as their own, and so these texts will be treated as belonging directly to the named player in this discussion, though attention will be paid to the way that the "voice" of the player is constructed and managed.

Patterns of Play: Line Crossing in the Life Writing of Paul Merson and Tony Adams

To establish the way Adams' and Merson's contrasting playing styles are each mirrored in their respective literary depictions of alcoholism and recovery, this section will analyse the most extreme instances of their alcoholic line crossing violations and their childhood recollections of addictive practices that they consider formative foundations for their excessive behaviour as adults.

Both Merson and Adams were recruited to Arsenal's academy at a young age, at sixteen and fourteen respectively.[19] Each describes how, prior to this formal recognition of their sporting talent, they had a childhood in which football was their first obsession and

[18] Paul Gascoigne's autobiography

[19] Both were signed to the club as part of the Youth Training Scheme – a Thatcherite initiative that allowed businesses to take on school leavers as apprentices, with their wage funded by the state.

something they pursued in a single-minded manner, and sometimes as a way to escape from school and a sense of isolation. In the opening chapter of *Addicted,* Adams elaborates on this in a guarded manner:

> I had next to no interest in academic subjects at that time of my life and on days I didn't like the look of, I could convince Mum and Dad I had a stomach ache, only to be in the park with a ball by the afternoon. […] Before the football really kicked in, I had always felt inadequate and a loner; I could be lonely in a crowd. […] once the game started, everyone would respect me and would want this shy, timid kid on their side. Once I was in a football environment, I was the main man (1998: 25).

Adams describes a total uninterest in school that led to absences and alienation. Football assuaged his childhood loneliness, allowing a transition from the quiet periphery of the classroom to being the 'main man' (25) on the pitch. He shifts from ambling nervously and alone through crowds – a state of spatial disorientation and displacement – to a role where he confidently commands teammates and space. Adams suggests that, from a young age, whenever he crossed the threshold of a football pitch, he moved from loner to leader. And Adams is quick to categorise this on-field transformation as compelling and addictive, framing it as the original conduit for an addictive impulse that has punctuated much of his life:

> Lots of kids just want to play a game but I wanted to practise. That also came from my Dad. When I was seven, he would be throwing balls up for me to head clear. I never got tired of it. I only got bored when there wasn't a football around. I can look back now and see how addicted to the game I was becoming (29)

The image of his younger self constructed in this passage places Adams' addictive tendencies into the context of defensive line-holding. By communicating his obsession with the game through tirelessly practiced headed clearances, the Arsenal player captures his early and seemingly addictive revelry in the physicality of football, whilst also positioning himself as a barrier, a totemic centre half who heroically guards the defensive line from aerial threat. Additionally, the tableau of Adams being patiently fed balls by his dad is a nostalgic vision of simplicity, with the bond between father and son lost in the professionalised academy experience Adams moves into at Arsenal. This description of modest beginnings and endless

hours of repetitive training serves to cast Adams' career as the product of working-class graft, whilst also gesturing towards a propensity for obsessions, particularly physical obsessions.

Adams' text also offers a hereditary explanation of addictive tendencies. He characterises his dad as a 'workaholic' and the patriarch of 'an outdoor family, a "doing" family' (24). Thus, he pointedly weaves addictive language into the portrait of his childhood and the busyness of family life. This nurtured habit of constant stimulus is given its prime conduit in football, with Adams' compulsive allure to the sport establishing an addictive lexicon which is then redeployed to describe his alcohol consumption. This is evident in his pursuit of a professional career. He stated it 'was all I wanted' and that he couldn't 'resist' the game (25). Football, it seems, *beguiles* him in childhood in much the same way drink does later. Because of his clear talent, this infatuation with the sport is encouraged and celebrated by those around him. His dad acquires football coaching badges to help hone his son's skills (24), and the young Adams kicks balls against ad-hoc painted targets on the side of his house when he isn't playing a match (24). Although monotonous and repetitive, he is keen to point out that 'I didn't need much encouraging' (24). His dedication supersedes the need for adult prompting and his obsessive interest in physical, footballing stimuli pushes him further forward to his ambition to become a professional. As I will expand on below, this willingness to cram his existence with physical stimuli and avoid the sedate nature of the classroom is a sensation common for professional athletes, but one taken to its extreme by Adams and similarly, by Merson.

In *Hooked,* Merson is candid in revealing his childhood anxieties, writing that it 'might not have been gambling that was ruling my emotions as a kid but my head was not in a peaceful place. I was not a happy-go-lucky boy' (2021: 9). Like Adams, he is also quick to frame football as an 'obsession' and 'a release from school' (12). Yet, whereas his future Arsenal captain describes the sport as an immersive distraction from a childhood isolation characterised by an absence of feeling, Merson considers playing football an escape from an overwhelming abundance of anxious energy. He recounts his youth as a period defined by fear:

> I was a nervous child, frightened of all sorts of things, absolutely petrified of dogs for one […] I suffered from separation anxiety, among other things. I'd wet the bed a lot and would suck my thumb as a comfort thing past the age of ten (10).

Thus, both players introduce addiction through the sport itself, but with different mechanisms. Adams uses football as a gateway to feel something. Meanwhile, Merson indulges his 'obsession' with football to dissociate from formative fears and embarrassing physical habits. These issues, and specifically his incontinence, are an embodied manifestation of Merson's inability to control or contain thresholds, a trait he then redeploys to characterise both his football career and substance abuse. It is Merson's sporting talent that allows him to escape such symptoms of emotional immaturity and to mask the impact of a poor academic record and general social discomfort. Because of this, and his idea that 'maintaining friendships is difficult for an addict' (14), Merson positions himself as dependent on football in a way that meant the sport itself helped pull him past the phase of infancy into adolescence.

Adams' singular drive and Merson's confessed attachment issues also register during their recruitment to Arsenal. In *Addicted*, Adams justifies signing for the club at fourteen, despite offers from elsewhere.

> It was purely for coaching reasons. When I had visited West Ham, there were 30 or 40 boys in the gym under the eye of the coach Paul Brush and it was too much for me to handle. Everyone was running around like little kids, and that was not for me. I thought I was beyond that. […] I wanted to play for Arsenal, wanted to learn my trade at a place I thought was offering the best apprenticeship. I threw everything out of the window and became single-minded (1998: 28).

The language deployed denotes an individual with a mature focus on becoming a professional. Adams' use of the terms 'trade' and 'apprenticeship' curates an image of himself as a player with a measured appreciation and understanding of the steps required to becoming a footballer – and that, for him, football will be his job in the same way that other trades become the employment domains of his working-class male peers. This is accompanied by an assuredness that his ability is 'beyond' the disorganised chaos of the West Ham trial. In decrying their academy as juvenile and without direction, Adams demonstrates his knack for recognising ordered and disordered sporting space. Drawn to clear lines, thresholds and balance, he rejects the structureless ball chasing of Paul Brush's session in search of a more disciplined mode of the sport that is demonstrated at Arsenal.[20]

[20] Arsenal are a historically more successful club than West Ham.

Merson's route to the club was less clear-cut. He signed for Arsenal from Watford's academy, but as a fourteen-year-old he was reluctant to leave his first club in the relative quiet of Hertfordshire. Relaying how Arsenal scouts tried to persuade him and his father to move to North London, he writes 'My dad was already sold on them but I remember running up the stairs to get away, crying my eyes out because I absolutely loved it at Watford and didn't want to go' (2021: 18). At the time, Watford were managed by Graham Taylor, a club legend who successfully cultivated a family-based ethos,[21] within a close-knit, supportive environment which aligned with Merson's tight attachment to his own familial network. Merson's hesitancy about crossing the threshold into a new environment with a bigger, unfamiliar club and one in London is palpable; he literally runs away from the recruiters. Additionally, describing how he eventually signed for Arsenal, two years later, through Margaret Thatcher's Youth Training Scheme (YTS), he states that the club took 'a massive punt on me' and refers to himself as 'a longshot' (21). Textually, he frames his very career as the product of a gamble, as a bet placed on his body at a young age, but a bet that came off for him and them. Even at this early juncture in his career, Merson's use of gambling parlance not only serves to embed addictive language directly into his narrative, exemplifying its pervasiveness, it also displays the player's lack of self-confidence that strikes as a stark contrast to the assuredness of Adams. The Adams-Ridley writing partnership captures Adams' addictive roots, but also succeeds in cementing his status as a model professional and leader.

The different experiences of Adams and Merson in the English football academy system resulted in a similar if not identical trajectory. Both players rose to become established professionals at an early age, with Adams making his England debut at just twenty, and Merson at twenty-three. An addictive lexicon is ubiquitous in their texts, but it is especially pronounced when each player describes their time on international duty.[22] During these sections, they blend their own confessional narratives with signposted examples of their national squad contemporaries, many of whom suffered with similar issues. The presentation of addiction in their texts is one that shows it affecting the players as individuals, but also as a common issue in their sport. This breadth registers through references to fellow England player Paul Gascoigne. A generational midfield talent, Gascoigne played for the national side

[21] Watford played with an 'attacking style' and cultivated a 'family club ethos' under Taylor (Pye 2017), both factors that gelled well with Merson as a player and person.
[22] Adams appeared 66 times for England, captaining the side 4 times. Merson scored 3 times in 21 appearances for the national side.

in three major tournaments alongside Adams and Merson during a career beset by severe and well-publicised substance abuse.

Gascoigne features heavily in Merson's *How Not To Be A Professional Footballer*, with his name adorning two title chapters. Their relationship was close, with the pair playing together for England across several years during the 1990s. In 1998, when both were playing for Middlesbrough, they even lived together in the Northeast. Merson reveals the extent of Gascoigne's alcoholism when recounting shared train journeys to morning training at the club and describes Gazza as drinking a bottle of wine whilst commuters 'sipped coffee and scoffed croissants for breakfast' (2011: 195). This violation of social norms is saddening, and Merson's response to Gascoigne's public drinking is to remind him that this behaviour will impede his international career. 'Oh Gaz, you cannot do that, mate. Not when we're training and playing. You won't get to the world cup' (195). Tellingly, the text frames football as *the* reason for Gascoigne to stop drinking, noting the incompatibility of professional sport and concurrent alcohol abuse, and highlighting Merson and Gascoigne's shared desire to make it to the England camp. Their sporting careers – their only other source of satisfactory stimulation – are dependent on being sober enough to play, and especially to play for their country. This is the crux of Merson's own narrative, too. His advice to Gascoigne applies to himself. Thus, by mediating his addiction issues through the observation and correction of his teammate, Merson shows that, like Adams, he too is capable of recognising limits and thresholds, but unlike Adams, is incapable of abiding by them in the long term.

Merson describes how his proximity to Gascoigne accelerated both their addictive practices, stating, 'The problem was, being around Gazza's demons had bought [*sic*] me closer to mine. […] When Gaz started drinking at our shared pad, I soon caved in' (198). Their most dangerous behaviour involved drinking, gambling and sleeping tablets. Merson recounts a game where the two of them would drink 'glass after glass' of wine then take a sleeping tablet, wagering thousands on who would lose consciousness first (199). He writes that they did this 'because there was nothing else to keep us occupied there' (199). This reaffirms their inability to cope with a lack of stimulation outside of physically playing football. Moreover, it underlines the parallels between their on-field and off-field approach to risk. With their on-pitch creative nous, they each played and completed risky passes that would break open an opposition's defence. This kind of boundary-breaking is apparent in their game of 'stamina' (199). As it was not an isolated incident – they played it 'a few times' (199) during their house share, the dangerous gamification of consuming wine and sedatives

represents a willingness to return to blackout, to cross the threshold of consciousness, moving back and forth.

The game where Merson and Gascoigne were tasked with monitoring each other's consciousness to claim financial reward is scarcely believable, but so too is the fact that two known addicts were placed in shared accommodation by Middlesbrough Football Club. Even if it was supposed to function as a means of mutual support, the expectation that players self-regulate is indicative of the era, and almost comically, they often had self-regulate whilst working (playing) in shirts sponsored by alcohol companies. Gascoigne himself wore a Holsten emblazoned shirt during his entire spell at Tottenham.[23] This issue of self-surveillance and addiction most famously registered on the pitch during the 1990 European Championship semi-final between England and Germany. Paul Gascoigne, the star of the tournament, received a yellow card for a challenge on Thomas Berthold, meaning had England progressed, he would have been suspended from the final. When Gazza is, famously, brought to tears in the moment by this realisation, his teammate Gary Lineker can be seen gesturing towards manager Bobby Robson, mouthing the words "Have a word with him" (BBC 1990). In this act of compassion, Lineker is managing Gascoigne's emotional fragility which was, at least in part, affected by his alcoholism.

Figure 2: Lineker gesturing to Bobby Robson with Gascoigne in the background (BBC 1990).

Gascoigne's emotional vulnerability belied his immense talent, an ability Adams captured succinctly in *Addicted* with his use of a common footballing idiom:

> He can open locked doors. The strength he had when he was on one of those diagonal runs that we tried to get him to do was second to none (1998: 192).

[23] Tottenham were sponsored by Holsten from 1983-1995, with Gascoigne at the club from 1988-1991.

The image of a creative midfielder unlocking a door is a commonly deployed metaphor for breaking a line and allowing a striker a chance to score. It positions Gascoigne as a player who is the key to breaching the opposition's defensive structure. The runs Adams describes are precisely the runs he spent his career defending against, thus, he establishes them as opposites. He uses this positional contrast to underline their difference not only in footballing terms, but addictive ones too. The quote praising Gascoigne's talent is coupled with a description of his difficulty in enduring the uneventful periods between training and matches which constitute a lot of a footballer's life. 'I don't think you cage a tiger like him. Some people can stay in a hotel without needing release for six days. I didn't used to be able to and nor can Gazza' (193). With these two passages, *Addicted* juxtaposes Gascoigne's invaluable ability to unlock space on a football pitch with his inability to cope with or combat confinement off it. Crucially, the latter is used to distance Adams from that manic energy, recasting himself as a healthier, reformed man. Adams uses Gascoigne's decline to demonstrate how he rectified his relationship with excess when such a relationship continues to consume the retired midfielder:

> I've loved him to bits. We have had similar lengths of careers both with our clubs and our country and there have been some similarities in our lives, though they have taken different paths (191).

Gascoigne is spoken about, with a respectful lack of intrusion, as a cautionary tale of addiction that Adams has successfully diverged from. Thus, his text uses his contemporary to emphasise the achievement of his sobriety.

The oppositional casting of Gascoigne against Adams is a subtext present elsewhere in *Addicted*. Opening the narrative is a description of England's semi-final defeat to Germany at Euro 1996. Adams, the self-proclaimed embodiment of professionalism, describes himself as being on the pitch and supressing rage and disappointment that accompany defeat in top-end sport. It is a stoicism opposed to Gascoigne's on-pitch capitulation referenced above:

> I managed to observe the professional stiff upper-lip rituals that had been instilled in me since making my debut for Arsenal three weeks past my 17th birthday (10)

This establishes the image of a player and leader with an acute sense of control, especially emotional control, when on the pitch. Even immediately after a devastating defeat, he retains his composure. In fact, Adams built his playing career and personal reputation on such

composure. As an astute reader of the ball and opposition forwards, Adams belonged to, and led, a back four partnership whose positional holding of the defensive line was famous as well as infamous. Writing of this Arsenal defence for *VICE*, Will Magee states:

> the sight of their arms shooting up in perfect synchronisation became an iconic image of eighties and nineties football (2017).

This movement – collective, synchronised and professional – was both admired by Arsenal fans and mocked, bemoaned or satirised by others. In fact, the action became so well known in the 1990s that the defender's signature arm raise to signal for offside was immortalised in the film/play *The Full Monty* (1997). In *Addicted*, this synchronicity and discipline are explored through Graham's training sessions:

> 'No, no, no, stop. Like this,' George would interrupt. He would stand with his arms outstretched. 'My shoulders are the centre-backs and the palms of my hands are the full backs,' he would say. And he would move his arms to show how the movement of all four components should be linked (152).

This collectivism is strengthened further on in the passage, with Adams repeatedly referring to the defensive unit as 'we' (152-3). When viewed alongside Adams' self-assigned image as an effective on-pitch leader, this drilled, faultless defensive line – one that allowed for repeated turnovers in possession – positions the centre half as an exquisite judge of fine athletic margins, catching deft forwards offside as they begin their runs and attempt to penetrate and break Adams' line. Crucially, the portrayal of Arsenal's defence as a unit regulated by four independent yet adjoined components demonstrates a co-dependent self-regulation happening on the pitch that brings into sharp relief the total lack of control enacted by Adams and many of his teammates off it.

Figure 3: "Offside!" Tony Adams, Lee Dixon and Nigel Winterburn (Colorsport 1991)

His leading ability to manage thresholds in a sporting context is, he confesses, totally absent in his drinking. When writing about the difference between moderation and addiction, he states:

> I have looked back to see where I crossed that invisible line between what some people call social drinking and the sort of alcoholic drinking those seven weeks after Euro '96 but I can't recognise it. It just crept up on me (198).

Adams' in-game line holding, so clearly defined along the topography of Arsenal's back four, is not sustained outside of the game. His fine command of an athletic domain simply does not translate to his drinking behaviours. Still, though, this crossing of an alcoholic threshold is presented through rich footballing imagery. Even the innocuous idea of Adams figuratively "looking back" mirrors the characteristics of a constantly swivelling, glancing centre half,[24] a parallel that subtly reaffirms Adams as a player of deep footballing intelligence. The sporting parlance is strengthened with the end of the quoted passage, when he writes of how his drinking 'crept up' on him (198). This phrasing is reminiscent of a perfectly bent run from a striker that allows them to allude the eye line of a defender. So, even when describing moments where he fails to replicate his on-field discipline, Adams' text still makes ample use of sporting vernacular.

Adams' inability to transpose his calm sporting persona onto his life off the pitch is observed by Merson, too. His depiction of international duty alongside his club captain strays into the realm of tragic-comic, with Adams portrayed as totally out of control of his body and strength in *How Not To Be A Professional Footballer*. The text's reporting of England training hinges on tales of excessive drink and banter, in particular the time Adams broke the door of their hotel room:

> Bang, bang, bang! He kept knocking on the woodwork, but I kept blanking him. The next thing I knew, Tone had kicked the door in. It flew off its hinges and landed in the middle of the room. The door was followed by Tone, who was legless. We both stared at it for ages, before falling about laughing […] we couldn't repair the damage, so somehow Tone just propped the door back up, balancing on its hinges (2011: 91).

[24] In the contemporary data driven game, more and more attention is being given in recruitment to players who frequently scan and glance across specific spaces of the pitch (James 2025)

The aggressive removal of a door from its hinges is a violent breaking of a threshold, demonstrative of a lack of control – Adams' main asset whilst on the pitch. Furthermore, the cosmetic method of repair is a metaphor for the addictions of both players. With their athleticism, they appear demonstrably strong and in place, but when interrogated closer, they are fragile, their alcoholism engendering a precarity akin to a hastily propped-up door. This passage also raises the idea of Merson and Adams reporting on one another's behaviour, something that happens frequently across their texts. This surveillance and recognition of each other's addictions serve to depict alcoholism not as an isolating, solitary affliction, but something present throughout top-tier football, and especially at Arsenal.

Merson's tragic-comic styling throughout is set up in the very title of his autobiography *How Not To Be A Professional Footballer.* Immediately, its overt satirising of an instructional self-help style of writing exudes a tongue-in-cheek self-deprecation that signifies the content of the book are concerned with the glaring personal and professional violations of his career and not his imperfect recovery as told in the much more recent book *Hooked*. This initial autobiography's focus on drunken escapades is formatted with much borrowed from the writing style of the tabloid press which was particularly popular within English football in the 1990s. Varying from *The Sun's* cruel dehumanisation and misreporting of events at the Hillsborough disaster (1989) to the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal which victimised numerous prominent footballers like Paul Gascoigne and David Beckham (Rawlinson 2015), the media landscape of football reporting was, and remains hungry for celebrity scandal and shame. Merson's book places itself within this commodifying tradition with a few deliberate tropes that give the text a lad mag voice. Merson, his ghostwriter and the publishing house explicitly market the text to this demographic, with publications *Zoo* and *When Saturday Comes* featured on its spine.[25]

The tabloid stylings of *How Not To Be A Professional Footballer* are carried through the text with the shocking and funny epigraphs that head each chapter. Examples range from the absurd 'do not ask Eileen Drewery for a short back and sides' (2011: 223) to the filthy 'do not wax the dolphin before an England game' (83). Their enclosed, episodic nature with chapters hinging on one key misdemeanour gives the text a journalistic flavour, with each titillating tale of alcohol and gambling reading like its own red-top exposé. This simple

[25] These lad-mags, with their content a mix of sport, "banter" and glamour models, 'signified a new wave of masculinity that aimed to raise attention of this 'other England' in which chauvinism, hedonism and vulgarity were embedded.' (Tippett 2023: 144)

structure of prefixing each epigraph with the phrase ‘do not’ and then the following chapter detailing Merson doing that exact thing, not only skewers and mocks the simplistic format of much self-help literature, it also places the mechanism of line crossing as the key device of the text, with violation of limits and social norms as its attraction. The text’s tabloid essence also serves to centre and sensationalise the confessional mode. Merson’s line crossing is not, as with Adams, presented with a tone of self-judgement and regret. Rather it is mediated through comic titles that court a type of laddish capital that views the midfielder’s antics as a series of sitcom-esque anecdotes. This commodification of self-destruction is evidence of the idea that masculine patterns of consumption sustain addictive behavioural patterns, particularly those to which Merson is susceptible.

Within chapter titles that aim to raise a laugh are more serious musings on Merson’s addictions and his wellbeing. A recurrent phrase used to gauge his various contraventions of sobriety within these chapters is ‘straight and narrow’ (163). Recalling how David Seaman saved a penalty in a major European semi-final that rendered Merson’s own missed penalty irrelevant, the phrase is used to foreshadow a potential addictive binge.

> I often wonder how my story would have panned out if we’d not got through to the final that night, especially if I’d been the villain. I would have definitely doubted all the work I’d gone through in rehab to put myself on the straight and narrow. Chances are I’d have gone on an almighty binge and ended up in the gutter (163).

The threat of relapse captures the fragility of the linear, forward-progressing state implied by ‘straight and narrow’, and its lack of breadth makes it an inherently precarious space, akin to a tightrope, which Merson can fall off very easily. Moreover, in Merson’s imagined scenario, his assertion that he would be unable to stay on the ‘straight and narrow’ were he to be a national sporting scapegoat holds a prison-bound directionality. His potential descent into ‘the gutter’ captures not just a physical collapse, but also suggests a criminal decline that is archetypal in football addiction narratives. Eventually, the transgressive language (seemingly of the villain) and gestures to the law/illegality are realised in Adams’ text with the descriptions of his imprisonment for driving offences. Adams’ addiction and its consequences are, for him a) normalised enough to drive whilst heavily intoxicated, and b) entrenched enough to violate criminal legislation as well as social norms and sporting expectations.

The phrase ‘straight and narrow’ is also used to describe one of Merson’s pre-seasons – a period of intense training and weight-loss where his approach to consumption, addiction and his sporting profession is aligned to an ‘old’ framework of football. Writing of a return from a boozy international break sanctioned by (then) England manager Graham Taylor, he states:

> I thought about getting back on the straight and narrow. During pre-season I worked my bollocks off and sweated and puked my way through all of George’s running drills. I gave piggybacks up and down the North Bank and worked myself hard in practice games. Because of my international drinking I had to work on fitness more than most of the lads, but I was sharp by the time the 1993-94 season came around (113).

Here, the terminology is used differently, denoting Merson’s warped perception of moderation. Ordinarily, it alludes to control, but here it refers to the ritualistic, feast-famine transition between off-season and pre-season training. In framing a gruelling purging and testing of his body as the ‘straight and narrow’, Merson positions himself as a sportsperson at the behest of extremity. Conceiving of excess as a valuable mode of adjustment, his solution to regaining his fitness and completing a fleeting period of abstinence is to engage in behaviour that provokes similar symptoms (vomiting, sweating) to his alcoholism itself. Thus, his very methods of assuaging the effects of alcohol on a professional sporting career are coloured by the same extremity. This concurrent excess on the body where Merson is forced to exert himself at a higher rate than fitter, sober teammates captures the accelerating effects of his position at the intersection between athlete and alcoholic. The latter deepens the physiological demands of the former, forcing an overwrought purge of sweat and vomit. Embodying a state of overreaching, Merson enacts a dualistic erosion upon himself within a neoliberal context which is ‘neither designed for nor capable of consciously inhibiting its own propensity for unsustainable growth’ (Park 2015: 189). His jerking adjustive intensity is an excessive model of (re)growth that provides the illusion of progress, when he is simply rotating between different modes of self-abuse, exceeding limits on and off the pitch.

The dual pressure of alcohol consumption and elite performance is justified in *How Not To Be A Professional Footballer* by framing drink as the seductive thread that connects Merson to the working-class, male, English community that he identifies with, especially in London and around Arsenal fandom:

> I was just a normal lad. I came from a council estate. My dad was a coal man. My mum worked in a Hoover factory at Hangar Lane. We were normal people and I wanted to live my life as normally as I could. I had the best job in the world, but I also wanted to have a pint with my mates. Along the way, that attitude was my downfall (31).

Tellingly, Merson's touchstone for normality is drinking with mates. His go-to example for what constitutes routine is a trip to the pub. Such a default marks his class position and affirms the idea that 'white masculine modes of socialisation materially take place in public spaces such as the street or pub compared to middle-class socialisation, which is primarily domestic' (Bukowski 2022: 222). Through his talent and commitment, Merson attains his dream job, economically worlds apart from the wages offered by the professions of his parents. In his desire to remain unalienated from this formative community, he continues to drink with his peers. By considering drink the primary tether to his working-class roots – his vision of London is constructed around pubs populated with dock workers and labourers (2021: 53) – Merson acknowledges that his attempt at retaining a sense of stability is itself dependent on an unstable relationship with alcohol. Unlike in the passage analysed in my previous paragraph, the section of Merson's text here does begrudgingly acknowledge the difficulty in sustaining sporting performance and alcohol consumption. This disparity in perspective weaves a narrative that itself reflects the undulations of alcoholism, with heady delusions of grandeur and bodily robustness coexisting alongside moments of sobering reality.

The desire to connect with his roots is also evidenced during his time on the pitch when Merson talks lovingly of an intoxicating transparency between players and fans:

> I loved celebrating with the Arsenal crowd. It was a completely different atmosphere at football matches back then. There was a real edge to games. Remember, this was a time before the Hillsborough disaster and the Taylor Report and there were hardly any seats in football grounds. […] The fans swayed about and the grounds had an unbelievable atmosphere. I loved it when there were terraces. Football hooliganism was a real problem back then, though. It could get a bit naughty sometimes […] You could have a bit of fun with the supporters in those days, and we often laughed and joked with them during games (37).

Although too dismissive of the problems inherent in this kind of hooliganism that was common before the Taylor report, Merson shows a genuine affection for the raucousness of his pre-1992 footballing experiences.[26] Unseated, unregulated stadia provided a space to play the game he loved, whilst also providing a sober line of communication and connection to a community he otherwise feels forcibly displaced from. He describes the fans, almost exclusively working-class men, as swaying, implying an indistinguishable mass of bodies melded together by sport and geography. By joking and communing with this organism, Merson affirms his time on the pitch as a place of permeable barriers. He moves freely between lines on the pitch, but also dissolves the threshold between spectator and player. Unfortunately for Merson, this dissolution is only for ninety minutes at a time.

Adams also failed spectacularly in cultivating a contentment outside the parameters of a football match. Due to the relative sparsity of a working professional footballer's schedule, Adams faced the challenge of peaking his focus and performance for a very short period (one or two games) across an otherwise light week. Such a working calendar juxtaposes short, intense exertion with prolonged periods of recovery. For Adams, this created 'empty' days characterised by 'anti-climax', and the text cites boredom and loneliness as factors that drove his alcohol consumption (1998: 201). Despite these pressurising factors, he maintained sobriety on pre-match days, an achievement he would use to deflect the idea he was a problem drinker. Recalling a conversation about moderation with Brian Marwood, he states:

> "How can I have a problem? I don't drink on a Friday night. I will not drink on a Friday night." I would conveniently forget about Thursdays, Saturday nights and Sundays, though (206).

His maintaining of the sober line on game nights is an effective example of alcoholic denial. Football is monolithic in Adams' life. Therefore, moderating his alcoholic behaviours in the lead up to matches allowed him to construct a delusional impression of sobriety. The reality remained that when Adams cannot play or is not in a period of immediate preparation, the emotional chasm is flooded with drink.

Such fallow periods coincided with Adams' drinking and concurrent consumption of newly televised football. Writing about the time two seasons prior to the formation of the Premier League, he recounts his weekend routine after playing for Arsenal:

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[26] The Taylor Report was undertaken in response to Hillsborough, and it argued for football stadia to be further 'surveilled, safe and sanitised' (Bale 2000).

> When live Sunday football was introduced, it gave me an excuse to stay down the pub all day. In the 1989/90 season, for example, on the day of the FA cup semi-finals between Liverpool and Crystal Palace, Manchester United and Oldham, I was out drinking from midday right through both games. […] When later Arsenal had to play on a Sunday, my drinking was really spoiled. That became a pain in the neck. It also later became difficult if we were playing a Tuesday game because I would not be fully recovered (202).

This tableau of sustained drinking reveals the depths of Adams' alcoholism, but it also captures how the increased broadcasting of the sport (itself on the precipice of further acceleration as Adams is referring to just prior to the formation of the Premier League) drove addictive behaviour whilst dispossessing community sporting space from working-class communities. Adams' consumption of football alone in a Romford pub poignantly captures the fracturing of club communities previously organised immediately around the stadium. His image embodies the displaced fan annexed from the ground, a disintegration that isolates him, the lone alcoholic. Unlike in the stadium, the decentralised broadcast allows him to drink to oblivion, an excess banned within stadium parameters. The closing statement of the passage is noteworthy, too. It refers to the growing midweek European fixtures Arsenal had as their success grew in the 1990s. Adams' lack of match fitness for these games due to his alcoholic lifestyle can be read as an uncharacteristic failure in transition, an ill-preparedness for an increasingly globalised sport. Additionally, the tableau of Adams camped alone in the pub, an essential establishment in Britain's sporting imagination (Weed 2006, Dixon 2013), grounds him further in a particularly insular, British mode of consumption.

Sobriety and (Over) the Line

Focusing predominantly on *Sober* and *Hooked* (the latter of the two autobiography pairs), this section moves on from retellings of the heights of athletic alcoholism to analysing how both players present their transitions into sobriety, and how this step again mirrors their on-field personas. For both players, the sober transition is mediated by the pseudo-religious organisation Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and adherence to their twelve-step programme. I will show how Adams places AA's doctrine at the centre of his measured sobriety, an approach that produces a narrative voice that synthesises his footballing parlance and on-field understanding of line management with a newfound, self-help inflected spirituality that keeps

him grounded in moderation. This style is heavily facilitated by Adams' use of the terms "clean" and "pure" to describe sobriety, and "dirty" terms to characterise drinking behaviours. These antonyms demarcate not only Adams' sobriety, but also the pastimes and lifestyle choices he makes to retain his 'cleanliness'. In creating this dichotomy, Adams ascribes to his sobriety a sense of virtuous personal transformation whereby cleanliness is embraced, and dirtiness erased. This self-mobilised perspective does not, as Sharae Deckard writes of Aravind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* (2008), attempt to 'explode' the 'myth of meritocracy' by satirising self-help language (2015: 241). Rather, Adams uses his ongoing labour in maintaining sobriety – and the self-help lexicon that describes it – to position the recovery from alcoholism and drug addiction as a problem, like all others in the neoliberal era, only solvable through meritocratic hard work. In contrast, Merson's text describes a less committed relationship with AA and its sibling organisation, Gambler's Anonymous (GA). His narrative oscillates frequently and quickly between sobriety and relapse, reinforcing a fluid relationship with boundaries that, like his on-field position, proves far less certain than that of Adams.

AA is a popular mutual help group (MHG) that offers 'a spiritual programme of recovery from alcoholism and a fellowship of alcoholics living out the programme' (Swora 2001: 1-2). Often described in broad spiritual-religious terms, AA has been characterised broadly as 'a widely known and arguably religious support group for problem drinkers' (Salamanca 1996: 1093), an 'inclusive program of spirituality' (Piderman et al. 2008: 392), 'the standard bearer in the fight to combat alcohol addiction' (de la Cretaz 2013), 'a cluster of social-psychological processes, including mutual identification and altruism' (Vederhus 2017: 937) and 'deeply religious in many regards' (Weinandy and Grubbs 2021: 3). AA's obvious yet illusive religious character is evident in its formation. In 1935 in Akron, Ohio, Dr Robert Smith met with New York stockbroker Bill Wilson. Both alcoholics, they used their experiences and communications with the Oxford Group – a sober Christian fellowship that practiced 'universal spiritual values in daily living' (AA.org 2025), to frame alcoholism as a disease that can be treated through sharing and communicating with similarly afflicted individuals. After the initial group in Akron, groups in New York and Cleveland quickly formed, and in 1939 the organisation's manifesto, titled *Alcoholics Anonymous*, was published. This text established the twelve steps, a series of behaviours and realisations experienced by early members that led them to sobriety. Steps embed another tangible layer

of transition and threshold crossing to the texts, with Adams and Merson figuratively *stepping* forward in space towards sobriety. They are, according to AA.org, as follows:

1. Admit that we are powerless over alcohol [and] that our lives have become unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him.

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

6. Were entirely ready tohave God remove all these defects of character.

7. Humbly asked him to remove our shortcomings.

8. Made a list of all persons we have harmed, and are willing to make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people when possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

10. Continued to take a personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs

(AA.org 2025)

The steps arose from Smith and Wilson's co-option of the values of 'concern and discipline' established and practiced by the Oxford Group's First Century Christian Fellowship at Cavalry Church New York, an institution founded by Lutheran minister Fran Buchan. This

pseudo-religious community had their own equivocation of the steps, offering the five C's (confidence, conviction, confession, conversion and continuance) (Woolverton 1983: 155). A clear line can be drawn between these values and the step programme, embedding AA into a hinterland between spirituality and organised religion that it still occupies today. This malleable status is acknowledged on AA.org's web resources, which clarifies explicitly that "God" in the 12 Steps absolutely does not have to be a religious entity' (2025). Thus, the organisation self-identifies as a broad 'spiritual program' (AA.org 2025), albeit one whose religiosity and overt references to God are built into its central pillars. Also built into the twelve-steps is an acceptance of the premise that the alcoholic is an individual acutely sensitive to addiction. Both Merson and Adams are very attracted to and subscribe to this idea of addictive predisposition throughout their texts as it allows them to reframe their addictive issues as something other than a personal failure of will.

The writing of Adams and Merson navigates this innate pathology differently. Adams is steadfastly committed to the ideals of the twelve-steps, whereas Merson explores them in a comparatively facile manner. Consistent with the twelve-steps, Adams describes his willing surrender of himself to a 'Higher Power' at multiple junctures, most notably on pages 139 and 316 of *Sober*. This entrusting of his wellbeing to an omnipotent figure of authority has clear parallels to his football career. It recalls the image analysed in the previous section of Adams tied to his teammates with a rope, drilled aggressively by Graham. In this sporting setting, he surrenders to Graham's authority, safe in the knowledge that his training drills will refine and embed an intuitive control of the defensive line into Adams' game. He replicates this cessation and trust in authority, simply swapping his manager for AA. Both make him accountable for recognising and controlling limits, one on the pitch, the other off it. Merson's text also embraces the alcoholic disease model whereby predilection towards addiction cannot be erased and therefore must be controlled (Segal 2017).Though, whilst AA features in his writing, it is not the central driving force it is in *Addicted*. This backgrounding and occasional gesturing towards AA again mirrors Merson's drifting playstyle and fluidity between thresholds. He dabbles in the teachings, but frequently returns to booze and gambling.

Central to attending AA meetings is the share. This involves an attendee sharing with the group either something as broad as their addictive history and trauma, or as specific as their interactions and thoughts about alcohol in the last few hours. Fundamental to the organisation, this peer-to-peer mechanism helps to build a network of support and trust, not

dissimilar to the interdependence demonstrated within a football team. Merson's text, but particularly Adams' text exposes their addictive experiences, and as such function as an extension of this support network in literary form. Largely unconcerned with the physiological intricacies of addiction, *Sober* too is light on medical grounding, but liberally punctuated with spiritualist morsels and sayings that Adams uses to affirm and maintain his sobriety. Beginning a chapter on his time coaching at youth level with Dutch club Feyenoord is an indented saying from AA: 'The past is history, tomorrow is a mystery, but today is a gift. That's why they call it the present' (125). This cliché is saccharine and twee, but it is the linguistic standard for the AA handbook, and the standard for Adams' own text. AA's easily digested sayings and phrases are repeatedly deployed as headers for his chapters (six of twenty are preceded by direct quotes from the handbook). I see this as a thematic acceptance and reflection of AA's unsubstantiated stance that an alcoholic's draw towards alcohol is permanent. Take chapter thirteen, titled 'Why, Why, Why Gabala' (205). It begins with the well-known AA phrase, 'In return for a bottle and a hangover, we have been given the keys of the Kingdom' (205). However, the content of the chapter concerns Adams' experiences managing a mid-table Azerbaijani club and has no direct mention of alcoholism. The choice of heading is thus a marker, an indented, visual reminder that alcoholism and recovery punctuate Adams' existence even in periods of equilibrium. Moreover, this style of simple metaphor that evokes the grandiosity of autonomy over an entire Kingdom – implying sobriety as the ultimate freedom – is also subsumed directly into Adams' own writing style. It is both quoted directly and independently reproduced. When relaying a meeting with fellow addict and pop star Robbie Williams, Adams references an abstract higher power, invoking the murky religious overtones of AA:

> We all get scared, I said, but we have been given a talent by our Higher Power and I believe that my HP never puts me in situations that I can't handle. They maybe challenging but I do have the resources to succeed in them. […] The God of my understanding, I said, wants me to achieve and gives me the wherewithal to cope with when the time comes (139).

Here, Adams has essentially reworded the Serenity Prayer, a cornerstone saying of AA. This reproduction of 'AA speak' allows him to frame sobriety as something within the threshold of his capabilities, much like a manager entrusting him to captain a tight defence. In addition, the fact that the advice Adams offers is mediated through an acquaintance is important. It resists imparting direct advice to the readership. This softens the hegemonic relationship

between reader and author, allowing the former to remain an observer and refrain from occupying the traditional self-help role of an empty vessel primed for knowledge.

Adams' replication of AA phraseology also bleeds into general discussions of his football career. He writes:

> I had no regrets about my career, even though the underachievement with England and not winning the Champions League rankled a little. It, my career, felt pretty clean now (107).

Clean is not an obvious adjective to describe a storied sporting career, but it does denote a particular neoliberal quality to Adams' language of recovery. Giorgi and Pinkus frame neoliberalism as a 'politics of space by which "quality of life" (wealth, health, safety, beauty, cleanliness, and so forth) can be cordoned and secured in a given territory' (2006: 102). Those who designate their bodies and actions as "clean" project the neoliberal signifiers of success, the implicit suggestion being that cleanliness equates to a moral and productive good and the opposite a moral bad. Consequently, Adams' referral to his successful and ongoing sobriety as 'clean-time' (69) provides a temporal marker that separates his life into pre- and post-recovery periods. And, crucially, the terminology of cleanliness characterises Adams' moment of sober transition as a move from one mode of neoliberal excess to another characterised by self-regulating, unblemished calm characterised by 'physical wellbeing and emotional euphoria' (87).

The mediation of addiction and sobriety through the dichotomy of clean and dirty is strengthened when Adams merges it with footballing parlance, forming neat double meanings. He refers to himself as 'under new management' (106), a sporting pun that succinctly captures his sober transition, whilst also referencing the self-imposed deference essential to that sobriety. Adams frames himself as answerable to his higher power, acknowledging its parallel to football managers and shaking the phrase's association with hospitality and bars. His willing construction and adherence to this hierarchy strengthen his sober-sporting vernacular and affirm the self-managing expectations of his neoliberal sporting context. Nikolas Rose writes that under neoliberalism one becomes 'a subject for oneself' (1990: 240) and Adams' obeisance to an amorphous, self-constructed higher power is evidence of this. He is subject to an external authority that he himself creates and sustains. His keenness to self-regulate is again written with a footballing parlance with the phrase 'cleaned up my side of the street' (93). This cleverly captures the spirit of his career and calm

playing style with the comparable phrase ‘Sweeping up danger’ a common cliché in football commentary. In absorbing his footballing characteristics into his sobriety narrative, Adams’ text mobilises the restraint he showed during his playing career, morphing it into a progressive movement into sobriety.

With sobriety came a reduction in Adams’ symptoms of anxiety and depression, a relief that allowed a widening of interests and activities in his personal life. His recovery is aided by frequent visits to museums and a newfound interest in jazz classics, activities that denote a threshold crossing movement through class positions. In his 2002 profiling of Adams in *The New Statesman* Jason Cowley argues that the Arsenal captain was an anomaly in his pursuit of bourgeois activities that resisted the ‘Thatcherite stereotype of vacuous, ostentatious acquisition’ (27) – a critique frequently deployed by Cowley and the tabloid press to vilify the overwhelmingly working-class professionals in the game. Viewing Adams as the exception to a homogenised player body whose only concerns are showy, material wealth is unfair. It is a tabloid led-tone of elitism that Adams’ text rebukes, challenging Cowley’s distasteful characterisation of ‘the moneyed working class’ as ‘people who have no interest in becoming culturally middle class (27). Adams describes his new interests – interests that are in no way exclusive to the ‘culturally middle class’ – keenly, foraying into Zen Buddhism (68), acquiring a degree and attending the opera (89). He also keeps his Putney flat because of its proximity to the cultural assets of London, despite settling in Gloucestershire. In committing to these new avenues, Adams accepts that he is no longer defined as a professional footballer (87), and it is a transition that frees him of the addictive myopia of an athlete’s all-consuming playing career.

Alongside the positivity around his post-retirement life is a lingering dark humour in the text that is indicative of the recovering addict:

> I read something in the *Sunday Times* that confirmed to me that I had to do something. (Me reading the *Sunday Times,* who would have thought it? There were times when I would have been more likely to sleep under it) (70)

Adams’ tongue-in-cheek reference to a (literal) rags-to-riches story quantifies the transformative nature of his recovery – he has swapped drunken blackouts for wordy editorials – a visual marker of assimilation into the supposedly learned middle classes. There is also a self-deprecating dig at the discourse that colours Cowley’s article. Adams’ ‘who would have thought it?’ calmly puts down tabloid-driven assumptions about footballers and

their chosen intellectual pursuits. Moreover, by juxtaposing the image of himself as homeless (a fate often associated with alcoholics) with one of him consuming current affairs, Adams humorously embraces the role of the outsider. This periphery has relevance to his sporting career too, as his sobriety positions himself as an abnormality capable of cleansing himself from the boozy 'culture of the game' (14). At once, Adams' self-effacing style in this passage emboldens his own sobriety, whilst also inadvertently reproducing the slumped, drunk iconography of the 1990s footballer as a norm in the sport.

The opposite to the image of Adams as a stagnant alcoholic is found in his descriptions of skiing; a newfound passion that proves a blunt metaphor for the purification of his alcoholic past. He refers to the cloistered pistes of Val d'Isere as 'a fabulous cleansing experience. You eat well, sleep well and feel free, relaxed and healthy' (101). Here, the purifying tone of the language sits comfortably in his already established preoccupation with cleanliness, and the clarity of the scene is a classic signifier of successfully upward social mobility – it is the quintessential culmination of aspirational wealth. Additionally, the scene constructs a literal, vertiginous distance between Adams and his alcoholic past. The rarefied, sparkling air of his ski retreat is pointedly perched on a snow-covered mountain where wealthy clients are insulated from and well above everyone else. This contained bubble helps to maintain Adams' distance from crossing the line of excess – a tool in his sobriety itself earned by a lucrative career made possible through intense embodied labour.

Merson's recovery narrative lacks this aspirational clarity and is made complex due to the multiplicity of his addictions. Unlike the England centre back, he isn't resistant to substitutive or simultaneous outlets. His impulses are malleable, and satiated by alcohol consumption, as well as drug use, eating and gambling. Merson manages short and extended periods of sobriety from each of these vices, but his autobiography *Hooked* confesses years of substitutive and simultaneous addictions that to this day do not resemble anything close to the tempered equilibrium of Adams' successful ongoing recovery. Thus, Merson's descriptions of his alcoholic Arsenal days are not as focused on drink as Adams', but rather narrate a repeated multi-pathway violation of *lines* and *limits*. Hence, here, I will first establish how Merson describes his incapability of staying in sober parameters with alcohol, before moving on to Adams' presentation of Sporting Chance, the charity he set up. His insight into running Sporting Chance elucidates the evolving demarcations of Premier League addictions that Merson himself experiences.

Merson's midfield role requires a scanning three-hundred-and-sixty-degree vision, a constant spatial and bodily awareness to turn with the ball into space and play it forward. It necessitates constant focus and engagement with what is happening *now*. It gives Merson a sense of freedom, but it is always transient. He discusses his temporal inability to stay present in other contexts as a regret during his career:

> Everything I won was while I was at the height of my addictions […] all I was worried about was what I was doing next. I could not live in the moment. It was always, "Where are we going tonight, then? Big piss-up tonight! Winning that brings a big bonus. That means punting […] I would have loved to have gone home and taken it all in and savoured it […] my attitude was "Fuck that, let's get in and have a drink." I don't mean that disrespectfully but it's the truth of how I was […] I had such highs on a football pitch that when I came off it I wanted to carry on' (2021: 90)

The final line of this passage establishes Merson's fluid, transitional approach to his addiction issues. Football, his self-confessed first addiction, is a lightning rod that propels him to a dizzying headspace. Once there, his psychological momentum is focused on sustaining this high. His experiences on the football pitch are not savoured and etched to memory but quickly discarded, acting as a launchpad for a multi-sensory binge of alcohol, narcotics and gambling. The sport lubricates his transition to further addictive outlets. This gives Merson's depiction of football an interesting, contradictory duality. Initially, it provides him with a safe space insulated from his crippling anxieties and depression – a rare and engaging physical outlet. Yet, as is bound up in the final sentence of this passage, football remains the trigger, the starting gun that whets an appetite for the extreme that proves too enticing to relinquish. Football is not an end in and of itself, but the starting point in a process of hyperextension, a conduit for the satiation of other addictive practices. It is the first line crossed that leads to the violation of many more. Merson's first thoughts after winning tournaments are financial, with his win bonus (a common clause in professional contracts that is a handsome addition to a player's salary) endowing a fleeting solvency that enables his gambling. This is accompanied by an immediate desire to drink. Such a sporadic blurt of multi-pathway excess reveals Merson's struggles when unstimulated. He is consumed when playing the game, but simultaneously dissonantly aware that it will end, and its stimulus must be recaptured. Thus, his vision of transition here is focused on elongation. He repeatedly crosses multiple lines of moderation to sustain his elusive sporting high.

Merson's disregard for moderation is exemplified when he describes the notion of having a solitary, quiet pint with his teammate, England and Arsenal goalkeeper David Seaman. He views the idea as 'utterly pointless', 'a total waste of time' (36). This aggressive response to Seaman's non-confrontational offer of a drink is another example of on-field discipline mirroring off-field attitudes to addiction and substances. As a goalkeeper, Seaman's very job is to prevent the ball from crossing the goal line. The goalkeeper is a figure of control, a characteristic Seaman manifests in his ability to approach alcohol with recreational moderation. The disparity between the two causes Merson's deflective condemnation of Seaman's moderation, but the way the former frames this chasm in approach speaks to the hyper-normalisation of alcohol consumption that he himself experienced and perpetuated. Merson attempts to construct a view of alcohol in the football world of the 1990s whereby Seaman's moderate approach to alcohol was the oddity, and not his own vision of excess. And, critically, there is substance to this. Merson embeds himself as the norm, placing himself alongside teammates and within a club where excess was par for the course.

This normalised excess is carried through Merson's writing predominantly through its depiction of the tuesday club. He uses the club, and Graham's approval of it, to show that football management and institutions frequently turned a blind eye to drink binges, provided players turned up and played well on a Saturday. Merson then reproduces this logic himself, approving of its enabling effects:

> And to be fair, as long as you were doing your job you would think they had no right to have a go at whatever you got up to in the rest of your life, so long as it was legal (46).

Later in *Hooked*, Merson stretches his argument further, transitioning from advocating for a permissible culture towards alcohol, to arguing that the Tuesday Club *improved* the team's performance. He plays down its obvious negatives, arguing that the weekly gatherings endowed an immeasurable kinship in the side:

> However unprofessional it looks by today's standards, the Tuesday Club played a part in that, which is why George never cracked down on it. It was a double edged-sword. It was not ideal that some of us would get paralytic together a couple of times a month in terms of weight and fitness but it was brilliant for team spirit. You need to be a proper team to win stuff (82).

We see here the pervasive and slippery nature of Merson's addiction. His view of the Tuesday Club as integral to squad morale and spirit – a sort of holistic pressure release from the demands of elite sport, is not an exaggeration, and his teammate Adams corroborates this view of the group as a net positive. By defending it as such, Merson positions his inability to control his addiction issues not solely as a symptom of illness or a failure of personal will, but as something allowed by his employers. In valuing the benefits of these binges, Graham's Arsenal wove substance dysfunction into their title-winning success.

Although Merson recognises this loose attitude as 'a double edged-sword', he is quick to distance the Tuesday Club from any responsibility in his personal decline, writing,

> The fact that two of its leading members, Tony and me, turned out to be alcoholics, was not because we'd drink together with the lads. Both of us already had alcoholism in our nature (83).

This maybe true – Merson would have searched for and acquired highs elsewhere. What is significant, though, is that he seemingly holds no grudge against the club for institutionally approving and encouraging his alcoholic patterned behaviour. The attitude of 'if he performs on a Saturday, leave him to it' (46) is opposed to the presentation of addiction-as-illness put forward throughout *Hooked.* In not moderating Merson's proximity to alcohol binges, the club devolve their responsibilities to player health to the individual, refusing to act on the issues of a player who believes themselves incapable of controlling addictive impulse. This perspective on (un)professionalisation captures Merson as resisting one neoliberalising effect of the Premier League whilst being subject to another. Through Graham and later Wenger's more reluctant sanctioning of the Tuesday Club, Merson is tacitly expected to self-regulate against alcohol abuse.

Sporting Chance: Recovery in the Game

A pillar of Adams' recovery and recovery narrative is Sporting Chance, the charity he formed in 2000. Running an organisation committed to addicts and issues of addiction in his own professional sphere of football means his self-regulation is in constant contact with his addictive past. The charity itself is both a physical clinic and consultancy that provides a range of rehabilitation services to sportspeople, weaving elements of the twelvesteps into its services to curate 'an approach that was holistic and involved the physical wellbeing of

athletes, as well as their mental, emotional and physical health' (2017: 72). It is funded through a mix of private capital as well as the Professional Footballer's Association (PFA)[27] and Football Association investment. At its inception, Chairman of the PFA Gordon Taylor (who held the post for forty years between 1981 and 2021) agreed to refer all Premier League players with addiction issues to Sporting Chance, and sanctioned their PFA funded treatment (74). This close institutional relationship allowed Adams a unique insight into the landscape of addiction amongst Premier League footballers. This enables his autobiographical writing about Sporting Chance to highlight the substitutive and transitional patterns within Premier League addiction cases. Through its twenty-five-year existence, the charity has offered athletes support for a spectrum of addiction issues. Adams' text *Sober* marks a broad transition from alcohol abuse to gambling addiction in top division football players, a shift that mirrors concurrent changes in the financialisation of the league. Once substantial revenue from alcohol sponsorships is now partially banned[28], and the visual presence of beer branding on shirts has been replaced and intensified in the sport through ubiquitous gambling partnerships between clubs, ex-players, pundits and broadcasters.[29]

From 1993 to 2001, the principal sponsor of the Premier League was the lager brand Carling (Pitt-Brooke 2012). This relationship with alcohol, also registered in longstanding partnerships with the league's clubs[30] was then legislated against on public health grounds leaving a vacuum that was filled with betting capital. This money is present at each organisational level throughout the division. At the top, the League itself cultivated a lucrative partnership with Ladbrokes in 2016.[31] This institutional precedent has been followed by the clubs, sixty percent of which are currently sponsored by a betting company, a funding model sanctioned despite well publicised issues of player addiction within the division (Shooble 2024). Then, the primary UK broadcaster BskyB actively advertises its own betting wing throughout its coverage of the sport. Through writing about Sporting Chance, *Sober* is deeply critical of the visible transition from alcohol to betting within the Premier League. This stance will be used to illuminate Adams' deep scepticism of line

[27] The union for professional footballers.
[28] Alcohol brands were outlawed from sponsoring shirts from the start of the 2017-18 season, but clubs are still permitted to have corporate partnerships with alcohol brands (Pitt-Brooke 2017).
[29] A ban on all gambling shirt sponsors beginning at the start of the 2026-27 season has been confirmed in the Premier League. Television and hoarding advertisements remain unaffected (Austin 2025).
[30] Carlsberg sponsored Liverpool from the first PL season, with the partnership running until 2010, Chelsea were sponsored by American brewer Coors from 1994-97 (Pitt-Brooke 2017).
[31] This dissociation was alleged by many to be forced by Burnley midfielder Joey Barton's eighteen-month ban for placing 1260 bets over a ten-year period (Aarons 2016).

crossing from one addiction to another, before demonstrating how the changing financial inputs in the sport are traced and followed by Adams' charity clients and Merson himself.

Influenced by his unwavering belief in the cornerstone of AA – the acceptance that one *is* and *always will be* an addict – Adams exercises extreme caution when around any mode of substance excess. In *Sober*, he uses the word 'flavour' (231) to denote what he views as the substitutive vices of others in recovery. In Adams' writing, any substitutive addictive coping mechanism constitutes a relapse:

> People swap one flavour or behavioural pattern for another just to try to feel differently, to feel better, hoping against hope that this might work for them. An addict is an addict, however, and always be (231).

His hardline rejection of addictive substitution plays out in the text in two key scenarios, one during his playing career, the other well after it ended. When still a professional, Adams was subjected to, and largely embraced a heavily sports science-based approach to preparation, training and nutrition led by Wenger. Part of this systemic overhaul of club methods was to encourage players to take half-time caffeine and sugar tablets to sustain energy and performance levels. Concerned that the pills were coated in a gossamer film of alcohol (25), Adams refused them. He later describes having symptoms of heart abnormalities and stress-induced panic attacks during his retirement, and, when prescribed beta-blockers and anti-depressants by his doctor, he refused again:

> I was very wary. In recovery, I had always been careful not to take anything that could be mood-altering and often thought less of people who went on medication. I didn't want to swap one flavour of addiction – alcohol – for another, in the form of pills. I'd always believed that I should be feeling what I was supposed to be feeling (302).

In his refusal to take medication to aid both his performance during his career and his bodily health after it, Adams prioritises retaining his sobriety over everything. Anything at all, even a barely perceptible film of sterilising alcohol is placed past the line of acceptability. He reorientates substitutive and incidental substances and behaviours as a violation of his limits, demonstrating an absolutism that he also embodied on the pitch with his positional perfection.

Specific to the antidepressants is the idea that Adams has a desire to feel his body's natural state, unencumbered by mood-altering pills. This stance has prominent parallels to own playing career, of which he states, 'I seem to need pain as a motivation. […] I need stimulus, need defeat sometimes. […] That was my pattern.' (52). Utilising pain, whether it be the motivating emotional scarring of losing big finals or the inherent physical demands of professional sport, is common amongst athletes. As a player, when surrounded by alcohol – 'alcoholism was still besetting English football' (28) – and indulging in it, Adams commodified the physical and emotional depths of the sport as a motivator, attempting to find strength in depletion, to find a surplus from stimulating sparsity. When sober, Adams is reticent to engage willingly with this extremity. Indeed, it is through his absolutist rejection of addiction in all its guises that allows him to access the 'euphoria' (87) of moderation.

Adams' depiction of addictive "flavours" as a weakness allows him to present his model of sobriety as a synthesis of balance and extremity. Aware that he is drawn towards heightened sensations, 'For recovering addicts, emotions and reactions can be extreme' (191), Adams proffers the argument that 'somewhere between two extremes you can live' (191). This jarring sentence order, one which attempts to invoke a Buddhist influenced middle way – a path to enlightened existence that rejects excess and asceticism (Kornfield 2022) – reverses the more obvious and clear phrasing 'you can live somewhere between two extremes.' The clunky syntactical choice gives the sentence a faux-spiritual quality that succeeds in obscuring the extremity that still affects Adams' sobriety. The phrase implies that he occupies a broad central space of moderation in his recovery, whilst his writing elsewhere suggests relapse is a threshold *always* perilously close, with Adams still very much exposed to and vigilant of his past extremities. This opposition is demonstrated in the text with Adams' retired world of Cotswolds domesticity, fulfilling new hobbies and familial stability – an idyllic rural balance – jutted against a terrified scepticism of medication and an all-consuming dependence upon AA to retain sobriety. AA is vital for Adams, and, when writing about the death of a friend who drifted away from the supportive network of AA, he states definitively, 'If you stop going to AA meetings, don't keep your work, health and relationship in balance, you will remain vulnerable' (235). He lives this sentiment, too, writing of a bout of depression: 'I coped with any feelings of rejection or pain the way I always do: I went to AA meetings and shared how I felt' (191). Adams repeats sentence with this sentiment often (245, 301, 303, 305). It shows that his method of recovery, premised on the incurability of the addict, necessitates the constant referral and re-referral to AA teachings

and meetings. Thus, the very balance that he describes in his sobriety is perpetually tethered to and dependent on the facing up to and analysis of his former addictive violations. A dialogue with addiction that is made even more present with his role at Sporting Chance, Adams' cultivates balance on the precipice, just like in his sporting defending.

Adams' singular addiction is contrasted to Merson's three modes of addiction, with the midfielder threatened by relapse through drinking, cocaine and gambling. In *Hooked*, he isolates the gambling as the most prominent temptation in his sobriety. By the end of the autobiography, he expresses a competence in dealing with alcohol, but remains vigilant and vulnerable in relation to betting. This shift is a concern raised explicitly by Adams in *Sober,* evidenced by the make-up of clients attending his charity clinic. Capturing the 'gamblification' of football in the Premier League era (Purves et al. 2022: 71), Adams explains:

> Once, you could say that seven out of 10 referrals were for drink and/or drugs with maybe a couple for gambling and the other for another addiction, such as sex or food. Now, that had turned round, with these days around seven out of 10 presenting with gambling addiction […] Gambling was the silent, private addiction that could be indulged on the internet, and thus more easily kept a secret, as well as being not so immediately obvious. Plus it was everywhere – adverts on television, clubs having betting partners and being sponsored by them (231).

Anecdotally, Adams highlights the very real line crossing – from alcoholism to gambling addiction – taking place in the English Premier League. He references its ubiquitous financial and aesthetic presence within football, noting how betting firms sponsor teams – they represent a cumulative £60 million pounds of annual revenue for the eight Premier League clubs they currently sponsor (Agini and Barnes 2023) – but also embed themselves into the very broadcast streams of the sport. Sky, the primary distributor of the league, is corporately bound to their subsidiary betting firm SkyBet, with the latter zealously advertised throughout the broadcast of the former. This totally conflates the consumption of a match with the consumption of betting on the action, with Christopher Bunn et al. arguing that betting firms no longer just sponsor the team and league, they 'have become entangled with the act of consuming sports' (2018: 827).

Merson's *Hooked* is keen to show this entanglement and the aggressive visibility of betting within football obscures the fact that it is, in itself, a very clandestine practice. Commenting on a trip to a rehab centre, he remarks:

> I don't think the betting was taken seriously, because if you're not a compulsive gambler it's hard to imagine the chemical reaction in my brain that gave me a rush when I put a bet on. You can imagine changing your mood with something you put in your body from the outside, drink and drugs, and how you can get hooked on them. But gambling is invisible (135-6).

Both Adams and Merson identify the threat of gambling by its lack of external visibility. With alcohol and drug addiction, a tangible, physical line is crossed. The user ingests it, it passes their bodily threshold imparting a measurable physiological effect. A bet, though triggering similar neurological reward systems, is not consumed in the same way. It is easier to conceal and for the addiction to deepen unchecked, a characteristic explored in Merson's own BBC documentary *Paul Merson: Football, Gambling and Me* directed by Christian Collerton (2021). Another Premier League era addict, former Stoke and West Ham winger Matty Etherington makes the same point, stating in an interview with *After the Lights Go Out* that 'you can't look at them like an alcoholic or a drug addict and see that they're in trouble' (O'Brien 2020). Northern Ireland international Kyle Lafferty, a one-time attendee at Sporting Chance, echoes this concealability and references hiding his gambling for fear of press and personal reprisal (Madden 2022). Liverpool and Leeds defender Dominic Matteo too was drawn to the anonymity of betting, claiming it 'is one of the few vices footballers can have without it getting around' (Bagchi 2011). A line is crossed without leaving a visible physiological mark.

Compounding the 'silent' element of this addiction further is the popularity and continuing growth of online and mobile betting and its financial intertwining with football. Merson writes of how the gambling industry's transition from physical shops to slick online entities causes untold misery. Recounting a moment of motivating self-talk, Merson explains:

> Right, don't look at your phone for ten minutes […] But I'd look at it ten times in one minute. In your head, you're telling yourself 'Don't look, don't look.' And you can't help but look. It's madness. You've got your voice in your own head begging, 'Please don't look' and you're ignoring it and looking every six seconds (262).

This compulsive screen checking relays how betting addiction and the inherent addictive nature of mobile technology work in tandem to create an irresistible attachment between user and product. Fellow Premier League gambling addict and former Manchester United and Northern Ireland winger Keith Gillespie, who wrote about his £7m betting losses in his autobiography *How Not To Be A Football Millionaire*, and in a blog on *Chrysalis Courses*, concurs that digitised betting deepens the addiction, noting that it makes it 'even easier to put down big stakes' (2013). With the advent of in-play betting and real time advertisements offering odds on the game unfolding right before the consumer, fans and players themselves are offered an addictive shot at instant gratification.

The digitisation of sports betting makes the dopamine hit of pressing 'bet' eminently available, and Merson says that it is this mechanism that he is addicted to, rather than outcomes. 'There was no end goal as such… just to keep betting […] The process of the bet is the main attraction not the end result' (75-6). Structurally, his betting addiction is not linear. It is indulged for the very act of placing a bet. This phrasing underpins the chapter's entire focus on line crossing. It established that the addict rush is extracted from the initial crossing of a threshold, and crucially, Merson describes an indifference to the material consequences of satiating his addictive desires, he is unmoved by both financial gains and losses. In admitting the sole allure of initiating the very mechanics of his addiction, he depicts a pattern of dissociation and escapism dependent on short circuit actions that must be repeated again and again to maintain their potency. Threshold crossing itself, more than its actual consequences sustain Merson's addiction.

His palpable draw towards the line of excess forces Merson to adopt drastic preventative measures when contemplating a bet. He recalls in *Hooked* how, in a hotel room attempting to resist gambling urges, he saw self-mutilation as his only option:

> What if I broke all my fingers? If I did that, then I couldn't pick up the phone to dial the bookies. Job done. I had a picture in my head of getting a hammer and doing the fingers on my right hand, one by one' (192-3)

The passage illustrates how extremity ripples through Merson's narrative. His solution to assuaging his addictive impulse has the same drastic nature as the addiction itself. His attempts to find solace cannot be extricated from excess and moderating his behaviour does not even enter his thought process – he jumps straight to the grim physicality of self-harm. The fact that the only option he considers capable of stopping his gambling impulse is to

break his own fingers shows the depths of Merson's addictive issues. Contemplating self-mutilation and violating his own visceral bodily threshold in lieu of crossing the line back to addictive satiation shows that his method of gambling prevention is a solution underwritten by the same excess that drives his addiction.

Merson's potential self-harm occurred in his time at Portsmouth, a club whose ownership and management structure repeatedly sanctioned risky financial actions akin to Merson's own betting. In the 2002/03 season, Merson captained the south coast side to an unlikely promotion to the Premier League, amounting to an approximate £31 million pound windfall for the club.[32] Led by the investment of American-Serbian businessman Milan Mandaric, Portsmouth installed Harry Redknapp as manager. Type-cast as an East End wheeler dealer with excellent man management skills, Redknapp transformed the side. He assembled a new squad, mixing expensive signings with ageing talent and free agents with large wage demands. In poker parlance, this spending was an "all-in*"* gesture in search of a lucrative spot in the Premier League. A hyper-extension of means, Portsmouth's spending (a common tactic replicated by numerous clubs) was supposedly to be underwritten by the financial reward of promotion; by no means a certainty. Tony Adams, who acted as Redknapp's assistant manager at Portsmouth just after Merson left the club, acknowledges the consequences of this unfettered spending in *Sober,* crucially positioning its reckless excess as the status quo in football.

> Did it not occur to me that Pompey were paying transfer fees and wages to players beyond what the club was bringing in through the gate and commercially? Of course it did, but it is the nature of football (163).

Such desperate chasing of Premier League revenue and bridging the 'cliff'(MacInnes 2017) between the Premier League and the Championship/Division One embedded a gambling logic into the very management structure of Merson's club. Mandaric's ownership risked crossing the threshold deep into the red with a reckless yet, for elite football, normalised transfer policy that leveraged potentially huge debt on totally uncertain promotion revenue.

Portsmouth's culture of risk is further evident in Merson's own recruitment to the club which is described with a gambler's parlance. Recalling Redknapp's hilariously self-effacing pitch to him, Merson writes:

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[32] The Championship play off final is often referred to as the richest game in football as it gives clubs Premier League level revenues that far exceed that of the division below. Now, this figure is well in excess of £100m.

> "I want you to come down and be the captain,' said Harry. 'What are they like?' I asked. 'Oh, we're fucking shit,' he said. 'But I've got rid of virtually everyone, I've got ten players coming in, I want you to be one of them and we'll give it a right fucking go" (202).

Redknapp presents signing for the club as a swashbuckling dice role in a period of mass transition, an act of getting a new gang together to try to win a long-odds opportunity. Aided by this long-shot bet terminology, Merson further emphasises a culture of risk that adjoined his betting addiction. Moreover, the mass overhaul of players described by Redknapp also contributes to the gambling oeuvre. Five years after their famous promotion season, Redknapp and Mandaric faced criminal charges for irregular payments made to offshore bank accounts, a violation of legal statutes and limitations (Addley 2012). Entangled with this tax evasion was a clause in Redknapp's contract that awarded him ten percent of the transfer fee of any player he recruited and was able to move on at profit. Confirming a footballing culture awash with 'bonuses, bungs, kickbacks and abuse of tax shelters' (MoneyWeek 2012), this arrangement positions Redknapp as a financier-in-football, as opposed to a football manager earning a contractual wage for match results. Adams, as assistant, also writes of this contractual arrangement, dedicating a chapter to Portsmouth's financial troubles in the 2000s. He claims that the clauses are in place to prevent managers from taking a 'bung' (170) – an underhand payment as part of a transfer deal.[33] This emphasises how footballing institutions in the Premier League era have subsumed a gamified logic, actively expecting and legislating for risky transfers. Adams goes on, further characterising Redknapp as an archetypal East End geezer immersed in gambling culture. 'He told me how he'd go round his nan's from school at lunchtimes and put her bets on for her, so he was around gambling in his formative years' (170). Leading the side, Redknapp tacitly spread a gambling culture within the club.

After recounting his signing for Portsmouth, Merson's narrative switches back to a direct anecdote about his gambling debt. At a routine league match, Merson describes bringing £30,000 in cash to settle a debt (fittingly, from betting on his own team to win when they unexpectedly lost) (207). When the stadium safe was broken, Merson passed the bundles of notes to Redknapp for safe keeping during the game. He recalls the scene with a sense of comic nostalgia:

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[33] Taking a bung controversially ended George Graham's successful managerial stint at Arsenal (Lawrence 2024).

> He said he would look after it and then nearly fainted when I gave him thirty grand in readies. He stuffed the bundles down his tracksuit trousers and wrote in his autobiography that they moved about so much when he stood up to give instructions that he doubled up so one wouldn't fall down his leg, spill onto the touchline and cause a riot as everyone piled in to get a £50 note (207).

At once a funny tableau and a tragic image of betting literally *weighing down* Merson and those around him, Redknapp shows a loyalty to his player by agreeing to conceal the clear excesses of his gambling. The scene is dated by its old-fashioned cash debt collection. Merson uses Redknapp's fainting response to cast this mode of repayment as seedy. The gambling industry's deepening involvement in football and its more contemporary sleek, online methods of click and deposit bank transferrals serve to legitimise what in this scene is shamefully concealed. Although Redknapp shows kindness by shielding his player from press scrutiny, the visual power dynamics of the scene remain stark. Merson, a man who has systematically gambled his wages away, literally hands the money back to the manager, the man who employed him in the first instance. Consequently, in this moment, *Hooked* provides the perfect visual metaphor for the football club as both lucrative provider and debt collector – the prime neoliberal gesture. This dualism would go on to characterise Redknapp and Merson's post-retirement media work.

Redknapp is an occasional guest and pundit on Sky Soccer Saturday, a role that Merson has held for seventeen years, week in, week out from 2006 to the present day. Even as colleagues, Redknapp's previous and admirable concealment of Merson's betting has given way to brand ambassadorships with betting firms. Alongside fellow East End contemporary and actor Ray Winstone, they willingly commodified their status as street smart working-class grafters, projecting a hyperbolic version of their personas for prominent sports betting ad campaigns. Often featured at half-time during fixtures, as well as moving graphics on internet browsers and stadium hoardings, Winstone famously appears as a disembodied floating head offering live action odds for the gambling company Bet 365, whilst Redknapp is a voice activated tip merchant for BetVictor. This proximity to gambling after Merson's playing career had finished is not just registered through Redknapp, but *all* his colleagues on Soccer Saturday. The Sky programme is corporately bound to their subsidiary betting firm SkyBet, with the latter zealously advertised throughout the broadcast of the former. In a mirroring of the show itself, the SkyBet advertisements are fronted by Soccer Saturday host Jeff Stelling and have featured fellow pundits Phil Thompson and Matt Le

Tissier, all in a recreation of their recognisable former studio roles. This provides a seamless transition from bantering analysis and discussion of football news to betting. Often, odds are embedded in the show's news feed bar that appears around the bottom of the screen, too. Consequently, the consumption of football and the consumption of the betting industry become indistinguishable, leaving no line to be crossed between one and the other. Gambling is not distinct from football broadcasting, but embedded in it, and isolating the sport is impossible. Ian Herbert explains another of the many pitfalls in this arrangement, arguing,

> Sky runs a story. Sky Bet pops up with the odds on screen or on Sky's twitter feed. Punters throw money at the story. Sky bet cut the odds. And then Sky says the story has evaporated' (2013).

So, not only are Sky channelling viewers towards their betting services during their sporting coverage, their media platform itself wields influence over those very betting markets.

Figure 4: Sky Bet is embedded into Sky's premier Sky Soccer Saturday (Sky 2016).

Jarringly, Merson himself appeared on two of the SkyBet adverts aired between 2016 and 2018 (Davies 2019). The absurdity of representing an industry that has repeatedly caused him financial strife creates a feedback loop between Merson and his employer. They pay him, then he gambles that wage back into SkyBet creating a dependency on his role with them. This literalises the employer give-back symbolically performed when Redknapp hid Merson's cash. It means that Merson's compulsion to repeatedly violate lines of sobriety evolves into a circular, repetitious pattern whereby his salary is paid for, then lost by gambling. Despite the toxicity of this arrangement, Merson remains effusive in his praise for Sky, viewing them and his fellow pundits as an essential support network and a 'lifeline' (237) in his recovery.

> I played all my life but working for them has meant I never really missed playing because our Soccer Saturday team replicates the camaraderie of the game. We have such a strong bond and rely on each other (243).

The parallel of the studio atmosphere to a footballing dressing room speaks to Merson's desperate desire to maintain the highs he experienced as a professional sportsman. It provides a calming familiarity. Because of this comfortable atmosphere, Merson uses *Hooked* to heap praise on Sky, remarking that 'they haven't tried to change me one bit' (241). Whilst this means they treat his vulnerability and self-consciousness around language and communication with compassion whilst valuing his honesty and colloquial diction, it is also a problematic stance for his addiction. When admitting the fragility of his sobriety, which has lapsed multiple times, Merson says explicitly 'Today I'm a million miles from a bet […] It's not always the case. I can't be in the company of people who are gambling or talking about bets. It's a massive trigger for me' (278). He is employed by his trigger. His colleagues are employed by his trigger. The broadcasts he is on are punctuated with his trigger. His entire support structure is increasingly indistinguishable from his trigger. The line he crossed multiple times into intoxication as a player is always in direct proximity to him. This entrenchment, coupled with Stelling's tokenistic participation in the Gamble Aware advertisements – 'When the fun stops, stop' – is a prime neoliberal gesture. It signals to viewers and to Merson himself that it is their responsibility to self-regulate their gambling behaviours, despite Sky packaging it as an essential facet of the sporting experience. Furthermore, Merson's expressed gratitude for his position on Soccer Saturday within *Hooked* positions himself as saved by the very industry that has destroyed his life, a deference that entrenches Sky's exploitative status quo.

Chapter Conclusion

In *Addicted* and *Sober*, Adams convincingly produces a narrative of retribution, tracing his life as a footballer who for years contrasted his on-field leadership and composure with a messy, addictive off-field life. By imbuing his texts with the teachings of AA and grounding that in his Sporting Chance charity, Adams describes the reclamation and subsequent implementation of his footballing strengths into his management of addiction. He attains equilibrium whilst in constant dialogue with his own and other individuals' addictions, replicating his defensive mastery of lines and limitations in his personal life and life writing.

Merson's texts analysed in this chapter – *How Not To Be A Professional Footballer* and *Hooked* – as well as his other life writing (*Hero and Villain, Rock Bottom*), present an altogether less definitive and linear presentation of addiction and sobriety. In fact, the very over and re-production of anecdotes and stories across four texts is itself a marker of Merson's addictive instability. This reconstruction of a career four times over – from a cynical perspective – denotes an opportunistic use of his stature as a footballer to cultivate revenue streams that, ironically, are needed to serve the very addictions detailed in his autobiographies. This publishing pattern, his tabloidesque commodification of embarrassment and shame and his literary depictions of bodily overstretching confirm Merson as a man who repeatedly crosses lines into the red – bodily, energetically and financially.

Finally, the texts of Adams and Merson depict the Premier League as a neoliberal vessel for addictive phenomena and capital. My analysis of their respective movements through the league's changes – Adams' resistance against the agile addictive structure of it, Merson's acute susceptibility to it – uncovered English football's ability to transition into different modes of addictive financialization, which is still the case to present day. Thus, the autobiographies of Adams and Merson are exemplars of how sporting parameters and lines both on and off the pitch are held and violated. And, they also establish a pattern of evolving addictive epidemics within the Premier League which are still rife in the contemporary game. For example, in the 2023/24 season, Brentford and England striker Ivan Toney was found guilty of 232 violations of FA rules, some of which involved betting against his own club and/or parent club whilst on loan elsewhere (MacInnes 2023). Toney had his original sentence reduced from eleven months due to the diagnosis of a gambling addiction, with the ban facing widespread criticism from Brentford themselves as well as pundits and journalists. This public backlash highlighted the hypocrisy of the League's financial involvement with betting. Toney plays in a Brentford side sponsored by the betting firm Hollywoodbets, their logo strewn across his midriff every matchday. Not only does the company name attribute a misplaced glamour to a destructive industry,[34] the sponsorship encourages punters, and Toney himself, to add a layer of financial jeopardy to the spectator experience. Crucially, the league and club glean capital by platforming this industry. According to sports data firm Sportcal, Brentford's deal with Hollywoodbets is worth three million dollars per annum (2023), and clubs are increasingly courting lucrative contracts with Chinese and Middle Eastern betting firms, meaning the league's entanglement with gambling is truly global.

[34] See also the firm Bet365, whose name glorifies year-round betting.

Consequently, the addictive effects of these endorsements are registered in players, and they are then sanctioned for it. Indeed, the Premier League expects its primary actors to cross the line onto the pitch *visually* representing the betting industry – as obvious an act of sanctioning as possible – whilst expecting those same actors to draw and observe their own limitations against that same betting industry.

The thread of addiction in the league is sustained through gambling, but, despite an ever professionalising approach to sports science, substance addiction issues remain. To manage adrenaline induced exhaustion and fatigue (common in athletes) and to dampen the 'fervour' of playing professionally, many players take sleeping pills (Pemberton 2023) Dele Alli recently confessed to being addicted to the tablets, stating it was common practice for club employees to freely offer and encourage their consumption to aid rest and recovery (Alli 2023). Teams are giving medication to players to cope with their job that is not only an inadequate coping mechanism, but one that actively causes addictive dependence. There is also a similarly prominent trend emerging that clubs do not sanction, the consumption of the Scandinavian tobacco product snus. The small pouch like bags placed behind the gums are reported to both 'relax' and 'lift' players before a game (Magee 2023). Used independently and not advised by clubs, they are a self-management tool to aid managing job stress and performance. Due to their nicotine content, they are addictive, with Hibernian manager Lee Johnson estimating that forty percent of players use the drug, many of whom are dependent (Taylor 2023). The sleeping pill consumption and snus use in the contemporary game summate two ends of the Premier League's neoliberal demands. The former, forced upon players, reinforces their position as club commodities whose bodies are excavated and damaged long term for short-term commercial success. Conversely, the latter demonstrates how players are also self-regulating in search of performance. But both have deep, addictive consequences. In the following chapter, I will explore the life writing of a sport at the apex of this nexus of self-regulation and institutionally forced adherence to addictive consumption. Tour cyclists, especially the elite riders I will analyse, produce life writing that at once catalogues the participatory addiction to a sport that demands unrivalled physiological outputs, and confesses the culture of performance enhancing and recreational drug use that sustains that very output.

Chapter Two

Depletion and Renewal as Addictive Practice: Revelations and the Confessional Strategies of Cycling's Grand Tour Literature.

Professional cycling is a sport with many disciplines requiring different physical attributes and skills. Sprint cycling is the sport's Olympic format, and it encompasses races of varying length and style held on a banked indoor velodrome. Despite the cachet and sporting capital held by Olympic categorisation, the canon of contemporary cycling literature focuses on a different mode of competition within the sport: the Grand Tour. This is a multistage race where riders cover thousands of kilometres over the space of three to four weeks. To conserve energy and protect their lead riders, cyclists of competing teams ride in a large group called the peloton, with those setting off independently or falling behind having to work harder to cover the distance. Groupama-FDJ team boss Marc Madiot underlines the peloton's centrality to the Tour in Amazon's documentary *Tour De France: Unchained*, stating: 'If you're in the peloton, you're alive. If you're not in the peloton, you are facing death' (2022). Madiot's dramatic phrasing animates the peloton, emphasising the interdependency of competitors during the race, an essential characteristic of Grand Tour cycling. Specialist sprinters are shielded by their teammates to preserve energy for the finish, and team leaders are incubated through stages by a roster of domestiques.[35] The peloton, an 'organic entity' (Millar 2023) of riders, is periodically broken up by time trial stages – of which there are typically two per Tour. These crucial junctures see cyclists disembark alone at set intervals, and are a key opportunity to set oneself apart.[36] The resulting composition of team and individual performance within Grand Tours produces a uniquely neoliberally-codified sporting event. The crucial time trial stages strip away support, reinforcing the view that competitive individualism (Guery and Deleule 2014: 12) must ultimately dictate success. But, more subtly, the very team structure that categorises each rider by their constituent specialism (sprinter, climber, domestique), represents a fragmentation of labour (Guery and Deleule 2014: 12) that embeds a distinct individualism into even the collective aspects of the sport.

It is the narrative of the individual separating themselves from the peloton that provides the basis for much Grand Tour literature, and the setting for this "breakaway" is

[35] A domestique is a cyclist who does not rider for personal victory, but in service of their team's lead rider.
[36] dominance of time trials typically correlates with overall race victory.

almost always the Tour De France.[37] The circumnavigation of France's mountainous topography and its flatter plains is the zenith of cycling's triumvirate of European Grand Tours, alongside the Giro D'Italia and the Vuelta D'Espana. Established in 1904, the first Tour De France had fifty-nine riders covering a total distance of 2500km (Torgler 2007: 318). Over a century, the race has evolved from this 'parochial national cycle race' (Howley 2017: 447) into a *bona fide* sporting mega event which breaks free of stadia and sporting complexes, plotting its course along the agricultural, alpine and civic spaces of an entire country (Palmer 2010: 865). Traversing such scale under one's own propulsion is *the* test for the athletic cycling body and a self-mutilating undertaking. Flat stages are ridden at average speeds of 45km/hr, and riders consistently produce a wattage power output roughly five times that of an average recreational cyclist (Abbiss 2012). Apart from two recovery days, this exertion is replicated day in, day out for three weeks, marking the Tour as an elongated endurance event that is distinct from single day efforts e.g. an ultramarathon race. The cycle of energetic renewal and depletion is thus cyclically repeated more aggressively than in other sporting spheres, e.g. those with weekly fixtures. In part because of this gruelling format, doping and performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) have been rife in Tour Cycling for decades. Taken to shorten recovery time and increase aerobic capacity, five-time Tour de France winner Jacques Anquitel stated doping was practically necessary to compete. 'You would have to be an imbecile or a crook to imagine that a professional cyclist who races for 235 days a year can hold the pace without stimulants' (Smith 2013). Such substance use was widespread in the 1990s and 2000s, and in 2008 Michael Shermer made the case that 'most of the top competitors of the past two decades have been using performance-enhancing drugs' (2008). Unsurprisingly given this ubiquity, Grand Tour Literature is steeped in the revelation, confession and non-confession of doping and its associated addictive oeuvre. Within these distinct narrative tracts, the hallmark themes of endurance sport texts – restriction, excess, over-exertion, exhaustion – are depicted as enticingly addictive, depletive behaviours. With this compulsive draw to sapping consumption, the texts explore how riders re-narrate their pursuit of rigorous physical expenditure as a counterintuitive lurch towards renewal within depletion.

The case studies I will use to demonstrate the strata of revelation, confession and non-confession of doping and addiction within Grand Tour Literature concern three totemic

[37] The Tour is a perpetual source of interest in sporting literature with new titles published every year; often they concern the addictive narratives embedded in the sport e.g. Ned Boulting's 2023 release *1923, The Mystery of Lot 212 and a Tour De France Obsession.*

figures of the sport at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, namely: Marco Pantani, David Millar and Lance Armstrong. Pantani, one of only seven people to complete the Giro-Tour double,[38] was a notoriously fiery character who rode 'on feel, on instinct' (Whittle 2019). This approach was symptomatic of his cynicism towards the science and analytics that were becoming central to the sport he loved. Practicing a 'purer' mode of racing, he did little to hide the effort he put in on the bike and exhausted his energetic resources in an excruciatingly effortful manner. It was a self-mutilative mode of exertion that was mirrored in and soothed by his crippling substance addictions, and those addictions led to his death from an overdose in 2004. British time trial and road race champion David Millar is a rangier figure who dwarfed the five-foot seven-inch Pantani. Where Pantani was built for the mountains, Millar was built for the General Classification (GC). But the Scot shared Pantani's intensity and also experienced the manifestation of competitive physical excesses in drug and alcohol addictions as well as compulsive, frivolous spending. Banned for a doping violation in the 2004 Tour De France after years of erythropoietin[39] (EPO) use, Millar's career exhibited a depletive dependence on PEDs that he sought to remedy with recreational narcotics. Since recovering from these addictions, Millar now uses his complicity in sports doping to fight against it, cultivating a reputation as a great reformist. Armstrong, arguably one of world sport's most infamous figures, has never courted such reform. After emerging from triathlon as a precociously talented teenager, Armstrong rose to prominence in Grand Touring in the early 2000s, recording six straight Tour De France titles (since revoked) after working his way up through the US Postal team. Throughout this period of crushing dominance – one that remarkably precipitated a recovery from cancer – Armstrong met all accusations of doping with total denial, emphasising his talent, hard work and concern for his remediating body as compelling evidence for his status as a "clean" athlete. Despite this, after sustained investigative pressure driven by those rightly sceptical of Armstrong's performances, Armstrong eventually confessed to systematic doping violations throughout his career in a now infamous tell-all on the Oprah Winfrey show in 2013. His previous persistent denial in conjunction with this televised revelation indelibly marked his reputation, and he went from cycling's most recognisable and successful superstar to its greatest cheat.

[38] Winning the Giro D'Italia and Tour De France in the same calendar year.
[39] A substance that stimulates red blood cell count in a user's bone marrow allowing for higher aerobic output.

The most prominent anglophone piece of Grand Tour literature on Pantani is Matthew Rendell's biography *The Death of Marco Pantani* (2006).[40] As the biographical format dictates, it is revelatory, not confessional. In it, Rendell constructs an intimate, imagined proximity to Pantani, positioning himself as the privileged accessor of the inaccessible. Inserting himself into the spaces, races and privations of Pantani's life, the author depicts a cyclist addicted to the damaging requirements of his sport, as well as cocaine, painkillers and alcohol. However, these addictions were not new information. Rendell's real revelatory assertion is that a career-long dependence on PEDs was also bound to these problems. Thus, his text exists outside the norm of the biographical genre whereby 'biographers rarely challenge the history or order of events of their subject' (Nadel 1987: 131-2). Although clearly a fan of Pantani, Rendell's work is not a plotted, hagiographic history of the Italian rider. Rather, it blends the rigorous 'archival research' (Banner 2009: 580) of good biographical practice with the more speculative, fictional aspects of the genre (Kessler-Harris 2009: 625). Thus, Rendell's revelatory reassessment of a life mired in addiction is a well-researched piece of 'authorial intrusion' (Hibbard 2006: 21) that merges fact and speculation to tie Pantani's well documented cocaine and alcohol issues to another career-long cycle of depletion through blood doping.

David Millar's 2011 autobiography *Racing Through The Dark* is a more conventional sporting autobiography where the athlete tells the story of their career in an 'up-front' manner, offering a confession that, as Thing and Ronglan note, seeks to 'provide a restoration of the narrative of the self' (2015: 280-1). In his work, there is a stark honesty typical of the genre, present to elicit a public (and perhaps private) sense of absolution. Millar describes his steady absorption into the world of doping, plotting how he made incremental transitions from a straight-edged junior cyclist to someone who rarely competed without supplementation from EPO. My use of the term absorption here is to hint at one of the key power dynamics of Millar's writing. Whilst he is confessing a complicity in the normalised doping culture present in 1990s cycling, he positions that complicity as an inevitability pressed upon him by the sport's near universal dependence on pharmacological supplementation.[41] He is subsumed by it. Consequently, Millar's text is a layered confessional piece, one which couches his personal responsibility for blood doping within a sporting environment that rejected anyone unwilling to bend to its status quo of supplementation.

[40] Another successful text was a biography by his manager, Manuela Ronchi, titled *Man on the Run* (2005).
[41] Cycling weekly, resigned to the spate of PED use in the sport, ran a darkly humourous article titled "The decade in doping" (Clarke 2010).

Within this absorbing context, Millar's text also reveals the professional expectation to repeatedly enter a zone of depletion and emerge renewed, ready to go again. He positions this as an unsustainable pattern of exertion underwritten by PEDs, the use of which maximises short-term performance at the detriment of the long-term health of the riders.[42] This, to borrow a term from Jason W. Moore, is a symptom of capitalist 'intensification' manifesting in sport, a cynical ploy to squeeze more from an ever-diminishing resource (2011: 124). Millar's text, in its open confession of simultaneous substance addictions that accompany his blood doping, shows that the degenerative pressures imposed by systemic EPO use drives similarly excavational pressure releases.

Armstrong's two autobiographical texts *It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back To Life* and its follow-up *Every Second Counts* are bestsellers, with their popularity seemingly driven, in part, by the author's spectacular decades-long denial and subsequent televised confession of doping offences. Published before this televisual revelation, they are both non-confessional pieces that deny the American rider's integral role in cycling's doping culture. As the self-assigned dominant head of the peloton, Armstrong wielded ruthless dictatorial power and was later revealed to be *the* leading influence in 'the most sophisticated doping program in sport' (McCarthy 2012). He was not only complicit in doping but set the expectation that everyone else to do the same. As one would expect, this integral complicity in EPO use is omitted from his texts to sustain his mythic reputation as a clean athlete. Yet, that is not to say Armstrong's texts do not deploy confessional traits within their non-confessional whole. He services the autobiographical genre's expectance of revelation by 'confessing' that his success was a result of self-ascribed neoliberal virtues. These virtues – hard-work, self-dependence, and a willingness to test the limits of body and mind – which act as 'an apparent celebration of free market capitalism in athletics' (Gayles et al. 2018: 16), are rooted in addictive practice. Thus, in hiding one mode of addictive dependence (EPO), he confesses others – the compulsive draw to the sensations that make up life as an elite athlete – pain, status and winning.

This concealment-as-revelation serves to unveil a disordered, addictive dependence on self-mutilative cycling praxis akin to that present across Pantani and Millar's narratives. Moreover, unique to Armstrong's texts, particularly *It's Not About the Bike*, is the way in which he applies the same idea of excavating emboldened renewal from an ever-depleting bodily resource to tackling his own cancer diagnosis. His seven Tour "victories" occurred

[42] Statistics vary, but EPO has been linked to 17-22 deaths in the sport, concentrated in the 1990s (Lopez 101)

after remission from metastatic testicular cancer which had spread to his stomach, lungs and brain. This act of physical defiance projects the ultimate message of individualistic, neoliberal self-dependence and healing.

By moving from Pantani, through Millar to culminate at Armstrong, a compelling spectrum of confessional narration within Grand Tour Literature becomes clear. Respectively revelatory, confessionary and non-confessionary, the three athletes' disparate presentations of rider complicity in doping produces distinct takes on the common peloton experience of energetic renewal being forcibly sought within bodily depletion. Armstrong, with his denial of doping and athletic, resurrectionist recovery from cancer, reframes his near hypoxic exertion on the bike as a cure-all. Treating his body as a perpetually rejuvenating frontier, the repeated depletion he subjects it to – even when already sapped by chemotherapy – endows health, victory and recovery. What's more, this objectively remarkable comeback is too sentimentally brilliant, too graftingly *earned* for Armstrong to be questioned. It, and his books, are attempts to sustain his myth. Pantani and Millar too demonstrate a pattern of uncompromising physical exertion. Yet, whereas Armstrong's narrative constructs the fantasy that his *addictive* hard work and success was grafted in opposition to doping, Millar and Rendell's texts confess and reveal that addictions to cycling itself and recreational substances were bonded to involvement in EPO use. They argue that it was the EPO and its recovery boosting effects that *enabled* aggressive, perpetual cycles of depletion. Moreover, the texts ague that PED use created an atmosphere of such stifling pressure that narcotics provided a decompressive escape that then also compounded the depletion of the professional cyclist body.

It's in the Blood: Doping, Addiction and the Tour

Cycling's own addiction to performance enhancement has a long history, and it punctuates the Tour De France with frequency and tragedy. Legislation against doping in France, and thus the Tour itself, was only introduced in 1965 (Mignon 2003: 230), with the previous six decades of the race beset by the consumption of substances meant to improve performance, suppress pain and disassociate from long days on the bike. At the societally permissive level, up until the 1980s it was common practice for riders to dismount their bikes mid-stage and help themselves to beer and wine at roadside cafes and bars. Complicit in this practice, establishments would then send the bill to the Tour organisers and be reimbursed

(Lingelbach-Pierce, *BikeMag*). At once, this is an endearing, communalising image that oozes the grassroots essence of the Tour. Still, though, it is also uneasy, hard evidence of addictive substances being explicit in the race from its origins.

The inherent amateurishness of drinking alcohol for quick calories and pain relief is, superficially at least, amusing. It would be easy to dismiss it as a mere quirk, one of cycling's historical oddities, an injection of French food and wine culture directly into the veins of the race. However, it marks the overt intertwining of professional tour cycling with alcohol, and, often, other substances. This interrelation was placed into sharp focus just two years after the banning of performance enhancing drugs in 1967 with the death of British champion Tommy Simpson. When climbing the slopes of Mount Ventoux, a spartan, lunar landscape that seems to emphasise the lack of oxygen and altitude, Simpson toppled over, arms still clasped to his bike. He was airlifted to hospital and pronounced dead with the cause of death later listed as dehydration and heat exhaustion, likely arising from the amphetamines in his system. Driven by this powerful stimulant, Simpson was heard by spectators mouthing incoherently 'on, on, on, on' just prior to his collapse (CTT 2022). It was a tragedy that encapsulated the sports' multi-layered entanglement with depletion and addiction. Simpson, like all his contemporaries, normalised the consumption of addictive substances, considering them a prerequisite for elite performance.[43] This, coupled with his self-directed cry to keep going shows the sporting synthesis of addictive substance and an addictive will, a combination that pushes the cyclist's body to lethal levels of depletion. Simpson's death provides sobering evidence of the fact that the pursuit of depletion in the neoliberal expectation of a magical, energetic renewal is dangerous, and holds an ever-present risk of life-ending over-extension. It is a bodily tragedy that shows 'while neoliberalism has seemed to be staunchly resilient in the face of the exhaustion of its promissory future' (Beckert 2020: 319), its athletic subjects are certainly not.

[43] As cited in the introductory paragraph to this chapter, Jacques Anquetil, a competitor of Simpson's in the 1960s, saw stimulants as an absolute necessity to tackle the arduousness of the Tour.

Figure 5: Tommy Simpson ascending a climb during the 1967 Tour De France (Central Press 1967).

Although Simpson's death caused a period of self-reflection, it didn't stem the dangerous patterns of consumption within cycling. Stimulants continued to ripple through all levels of the sport. Elites continued to use amphetamines and cocaine to produce a frenzy of energy on climbs, and lower down the echelons of cycling a homespun mix of stimulants referred to as pot belge was routinely consumed at less prestigious one-day events (Jung 2015). This collection of performance enhancing remedies appeared amateurish to what followed: the availability and synthesis of EPO into the bloodstream. A substance with a 'long history of abuse in endurance sports', it serves to increase red blood cell count, allowing for muscles to oxygenate quicker and more efficiently, ultimately improving a body's aerobic and anaerobic capabilities (USADA 2025). The method of injecting yields results slowly, over weeks. So, as Armstrong's former teammate Tyler Hamilton notes, many competitors re-transfused their own blood weeks after it had been initially extracted; a technique that provides a more 'instant boost' in performance (Hamilton 2023). This widespread method of extraction and reinsertion is quite literally an act of depletion in aid of renewal. A drastic attempt to manipulate energy levels, the cyclist's limits are redrawn again and again by the creation of an externally stockpiled 'biophysical' frontier (Moore 2011: 2) – their own blood.

Blood doping occurred as early as the 1970s and 1980s across a breadth of contexts. Carsten Lunby cites Finnish cross-country skiers and the American Olympic sprint cycling team at the Los Angeles games as exemplars of what was a 'transfusion era' in sport (2012: 1307). Tour cycling manifested the pharmacological norms of this era to the extreme. Throughout the 1990s, blood doping was endemic in the peloton, and its influence on the event was dramatically exposed at the 1998 Tour De France. Subsequently dubbed the

Festina affair, the race saw the Festina team dragged into disrepute after their systematic dependence on EPO was revealed during a customs investigation. The scandal provoked a reactionary response from the sport's governing body, and the following year's Tour branded itself the 'Tour of Renewal', a tagline of faux-recovery that attempted to project the image of a clean sport. Predictably, it was little more than lip service. EPO remained in the sport for decades, aiding the Tour victories of many riders, not just Lance Armstrong. Fellow American and Armstrong's one time heir apparent Floyd Landis was stripped of his 2006 title for a doping violation, as was the decorated Spanish rider Alberto Contador in 2010. As recently as 2023, Jan Ullrich – winner of the 1997 Tour and Armstrong's most prominent competitor – also confessed to doping whilst in the peloton; something that has left a legacy of drug and alcohol abuse in his personal life (Hurford 2023). Through revelation and confession, Rendell and Millar's narratives corroborate this timeline of doped champions emerging from a doped peloton. In contrast, Armstrong's texts couple his recovery from cancer and the Tour's own lexicon of renewal to great effect. His writing deploys his recovery capital, which, with his journey from life threatening illness to elite performance adds ballast to the institutional claim of a recovered sport. The result is a perpetuation of the falsity of Armstrong as a clean athlete and cycling as a clean sport.

The cultural connection between cycling and doping is strengthened by all the life writing in this chapter. In part because of them, many other contemporary Tour champions and peloton riders are – perhaps unfairly – derided as drugs cheats by sections of the media and public alike. The association between the Tour and cheating has not been eradicated and there is an undeniable air of suspicion around cycling that endures even today. It is an environment of scepticism that drove Rendell to re-evaluate Pantani's entire career in his biography, and, more generally, it places a surreal doubt in the mind of the spectators. Are they watching a race conducted under human propulsion, or a pharmacological spectacle? Colin O'Brien sums up this uncanny sense brilliantly when tackling the debate of whether Pantani systematically doped throughout his career:

> How could a clean rider humiliate a peloton of science projects? If he was clean, how was he capable of repeated, merciless acts of savagery whenever the gradient got too gruelling for the rest? How, in a sport that's taught everyone to suspect the superlative, could he be that good? (2013)

How indeed? The legacy of doping has conditioned fans of cycling to temper their reaction to remarkable performances with the sense of the unreal, the inauthentic. The magic of the immersive spectacle has been irreversibly dulled. In the post-Armstrong-era, successful Tour victors Bradley Wiggins and Chris Froome still faced significant criticism and allegations of doping which were clearly the symptom of a legacy of mistrust in the sport. Both lead riders for Team Sky, Wiggins and Froome operated under a system of marginal gains, a simple theory popularised and commodified by former Team Sky Principal Dave Brailsford. As cycling journalist Tim Lewis notes, 'The core principle was that if you made 1% improvements in multiple areas, you could reap significant rewards overall' (2019).[44] This deconstructive methodology can range from altitude training and strict diet control – Bradley Wiggins was nicknamed "Twiggo" during his Tour victory years – to painting the floor of the mechanics area to avoid dust build-up and the deployment of therapeutic use exemptions (TUEs). Defined by cycling's testing body as 'a special permission to use a prohibited substance or method for a legitimate medical condition' (International Testing Agency 2025), TUEs can be issued for something as benign as cortisone based steroid creams to treat saddle sores, to substances that could be deemed a strong respiratory aid, e.g. asthma medications like Salbutamol or Terbutaline (Stokes 2023). TUEs have a morally ambiguous reputation within the sport, and they are pushed to the limit of legality by competing teams. These marginal gains, framed by some as modes of doping in and of themselves (Ingle 2021), attempt to quantify and maximise every opportunity. They exemplify a rabid desire to find, create and exhaust new performance frontiers to make more of the same athletic bodies.

Before moving forward to the textual analysis of Rendell's revelatory depiction of Pantani's addictions and depletive renewal, I want to emphasise the Tour De France as *the* sporting environment to explore this energetic paradox. It is shot through with the physiological, topographical and emotional landscape of Tour cycling. In the simplest geographic terms, the critical stages of the Tour pass up the French Alps or the Pyrenees.[45] Performing consistently in these stages for the duration of the Tour, as opposed to seeking individual stage wins, often dictates the overall winner. Comprising a sapping climb and a subsequently treacherous descent, these mountain stages provide a very literal depletive, climbing effort followed by a restorative, if extremely dangerous, route downhill. Thus, the

[44] Brailsford has since profited immensely from the theory, launching a career as a sporting management consultant with medical-petro-chemical firm Ineos. Although valid and productive, his deployment of marginal gains principles at Team Sky and later Ineos Grenadiers ignore the primary factor underwriting their success – those teams had a budget nearly double of their competitors. Hardly a 'marginal gain'. (Lewis 2019)

[45] There is no set route for the Tour. It changes every year.

very landscape of the Tour ensnares riders into an addictive dialectic, a peaks-and-troughs model of exertion that is repeated over and over. This repetition, and its specific addictive appeal, is the life blood of Grand Tour Literature. Importantly, the jagged traversing of altitude during the race occurs over alpine peaks of Romantic reverence. The texts of this chapter thus debate the ideal of deriving energy from the rarified landscape. This filling up of the exhausted athletic body adds metaphysical significance to the notion of depletive renewal. Finally, performance at the highest level of Tour cycling is highly influenced by power to weight ratio. This equation determines success, and therefore, their texts all describe an infrastructural pressure placed upon riders to acquire a deliberate state of depletion, the 'grim culture of self-starvation in the peloton' (Bailey 2022). Of course, as with any elite level sport, athletes are expected to push themselves, to sacrifice bodily resource in the aid of performance. Yet, due to the extreme anaerobic demands of cycling, riders are often given dangerous positive reinforcement for excessive weight loss in pursuit of maximising their power to weight ratio (Weaver 2023). This unofficial practice codifies the notion that cyclists *must* find abundant bodily resource from a depleted energy input, be that through a metaphysical commodifying of nature, the pursuit of marginal gains, or, as Armstrong fails to confess, by recycling their own blood.

Marco Pantani and The Addictive Death of Cycling's Proto-Doper

Rendell's biography of Pantani, *The Death of Marco Pantani* (2006) is written from the perspective of a cycling obsessive. In it, Rendell, a keen recreational cyclist and long respected Tour journalist, seeks to re-evaluate the Italian cult hero's complex legacy. His investigative work hinges on Pantani's solitary ban from the sport – a seemingly soft two-week suspension for anomalous blood results at the 1999 Giro D'Italia. The text positions this not as a discrepancy in an otherwise glittering career, but as a glaring indicator of Pantani's prolonged dependency on doping, a dependency which itself seemed to intensify pre-existing addictions to alcohol and cocaine. Though critical of Pantani through his investigative scepticism, Rendell does temper his critique with a reverential tone that slips into hyperbole when describing the Italian's unique talent and eccentric approach to the sport. Consequently, Rendell distinguishes himself from the most significant work of scepticism within Grand Tour Literature, David Walsh's *Seven Deadly Sins: My Pursuit of Lance Armstrong* (2012). In this book, Walsh diarises his decade-long attempt at pinning doping

revelations on Armstrong, offering no flattery of Armstrong's ruthless character. It is a sustained, unequivocal condemnation of a systematic cheat at the head of a sport where doping was endemic. Rendell's culminating revelation that Pantani was a career long cheat is similarly emphatic, yet he holds a simultaneous admiration of the athlete and the person that is lacking in Walsh's text. This synthesis of exposure and reverence provokes an interesting critical discomfort as it poses a question that defines contemporary tour cycling. Does alleged complicity in doping culture penetrate and devalue the spectacle of a cyclist's talent, efforts and style? For Walsh, the answer is unequivocally yes. Rendell's view is less definitive. His narrative is at once a revelatory discreditation of Pantani's career and a testament to his ability to captivate.

Pantani was a specialist climber with a featherweight build (typically weighing fifty-seven kilograms) who rode with a fearless flamboyance. He became renowned for launching proactive and effortful solo breakaways up the most challenging of alpine cols. With a flash of lycra and a trademark yellow bandana that spawned the nickname Il Pirati, his aggressive, intuitive riding style and extroverted aesthetic spoke to an air of rebellion that inspired a loyal and wide fanbase. This was particularly true in his home nation, Italy, where he was 'revered, cherished, lionised' (Whittle 2019) by a sporting audience who adored his non-conformity. Rendell's text uses these non-conformist sartorial choices and race tactics as a way of communicating what he sees as the paradox of Pantani. That being said, the way Pantani separated himself from the peloton with his breakaways, fashions and extreme willingness to pursue bodily exhaustion did not signify a separation from the illegal performance enhancing norms of the cycling world. Pantani remained complicit in doping. In fact, the book argues for more than just Pantani's complicity. It states that he was an early adopter of PEDs, echoing the words of Bryan Appleyard who claimed Pantani 'was a pharmaceutical creation almost from the beginning' (2006, *New Statesman*). The revelation of the text thus offers more than just the fact that doping was bonded to cycling. It is that Pantani was uniquely guilty of systematic, long-term EPO use, an individual at the absolute extreme end of an out-of-control PED culture (290). Rendell's isolating of Pantani's specific individual violation of doping rules reveals a schism amongst the canon of revelatory and confessional Grand Tour texts. Other works, in particular David Millar's *Racing Through The Dark* (explored later in this chapter) depict individual riders as moreorless powerless in resisting the maelstrom of drugs present in the sport. Such texts typically argue that riders were forced into doping by a pervasive environment of 'mass euphoria' (Millar 296), and that it was necessary to remain

competitive. Rendell gives credence to this assimilative pull into doping as a driving factor of the sports' corruption. But, in still marking out Pantani's excesses – some destructive, some compelling, often both – the Italian rider is framed as a key actor in cycling's doping era, as well as the adored martyr for its many destructive consequences. Rendell's binding together of condemnation and appreciation delivers a particularly neoliberal narrative. Though cycling in a corrupted competitive environment, Pantani is still considered as an 'unattached, self-responsible' athlete (Pendenza and Lamattina 2019: 100). He is celebrated for his ability to dangerously, uncontrollably produce *more* from his body, and then condemned for his concurrent, addictive excesses used to energise and remediate this deep exertion.

I have already used the term martyr to describe Pantani, and it is true that he attracted and continues to attract Christlike comparisons. Articles on his career frequently refer to 'worship' (Pickering 2020, Sands 2019), and the cover of Rendell's 2005 edition of the biography uses a photograph of Pantani with arms wide and eyes closed, completely exhausted, as if on a crucifix.

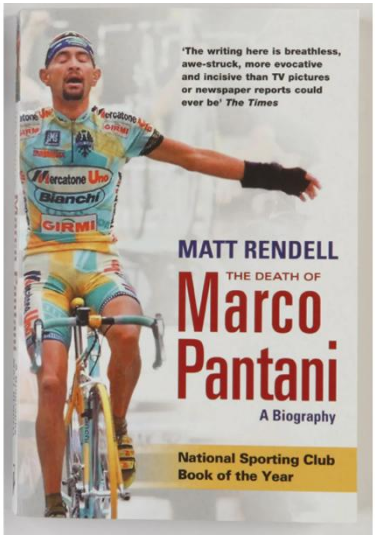

Figure 6: Marco Pantani – Les Duex Alpes. The cover photo of Rendell's text (Getty ASP 1998)

This image provokes an immediate, intimate association with biblical martyrdom, and implies the idea that Pantani not only embodied, but also absorbed the moral violations of his sport. After this knowing aesthetic signifier, Rendell using the well-trodden trope of beginning at the end, opening his biography with the grim tableau of Pantani's death which itself evokes a failed biblical resurrection. With this, Rendell immediately establishes that this is not a text of redemption. The Italian is found by a hotel porter, his body 'bloated' and 'bruised' (3) from the effects of a cocaine overdose, and, crucially, entombed in his suite in a

state of self-imprisonment. Rendell writes: ‘The room was in disarray. The fitted microwave had been unscrewed and stacked in the barricade. Shards of mirror glistened on the bathroom floor. Medicine boxes, some empty, were strewn around the apartment’ (3). The ruination of the enclosed space is a mirror of Pantani’s self-destruction, a stark, reflective image of the excess and ill-control that characterised his cycling career. But, more importantly, it speaks to his isolation. Specifically, he does not confess, but shuts himself away, insulated from the external world, literally trapped in the patterns of excess that killed him. By framing Pantani’s place of death as a pseudo-prison, the text shows a man incapable of mediating a confession about doping or addiction to the public or anyone at all. Thus, as biographer, Rendell assigns himself the revelatory role, unpicking a lineage of doping and addiction to substance that was decades long. And from the outset of this opening meditation on a tragic death, Rendell attempts to validate his revelatory credentials by repeatedly referring to Pantani informally as “Marco”. With this curation of personability between biographer and subject, Rendell reveals an invasive self-insertion into the intimate spaces of Pantani’s life on which his text depends. It is an uncomfortable familiarity, and his description of the cyclist’s death in tomb-like solitary is a hyperbolic and speculative reconstruction. He references the scene with odd specificity, e.g. shards of mirror ‘glistening’ on the bathroom floor, an air conditioning tube tied to the banister (3). This visceral closeness serves to project Rendell as an insider. The biographer’s detail and presence in the hotel room thus functions as an introductory assertion of narrative authority, a self-assigned jurisdiction which serves to solidify his later claims of career-long doping and concurrent addictions.

An assumed claim on Pantani’s private agony is replicated in several pieces of journalism as well as Rendell’s work. Most interesting is an informative yet blunt and divisive polemic by Steve Friedman, himself a recovering alcoholic. He writes in *Bicycling* that Il Pirati died because he was a drug addict, outright rejecting the idea that cycling’s culture of recreational and performance enhancing drugs made addiction and its consequences inevitable (2022). Rendell’s text is less inflammatory. It acknowledges the environmental pressures and embedded patterns of addiction within the sport (117, 298), whilst still maintaining Pantani as a uniquely extreme proponent of that culture of excess. Linking together issues of drug abuse and synthetic supplementation (283) with the physical, undulating topography of the Tour , he depicts a sport with an addictive structure that steered a generation of riders towards doping and recreational substance use. Crucially, Rendell then isolates Pantani as uniquely drawn to this environment, with even his convulsive, bursting

style of riding used to show how addiction permeates his very mode of riding a bike. His race approach mirrored the comedown of drug addiction. To emphasise this boom-bust style, Rendell first writes of Pantani's main rival Miguel Indurain. A five-time Tour De France victor, Indurain had a 'dislike of any kind of histrionic behaviour' (Fotheringham 2017) and typically appeared 'serene and effortless' (Ward 2023). His controlled manner was the conventional ideal for winning but considered by many to be robotic. With the characterisation of Indurain coming straight after the hotel room scene, Pantani's chaos is immediately intensified by the Spaniard's perpetual calm:

> Indurain won by losing nothing on the flat stages, little in the mountains, and making colossal gains in the individual time trials. His essential talent was not the jolting acceleration, the sudden, perceptible transition from one state to another, but something altogether harder to discern: sustained, unchanging speed. The pleasure in observing Indurain at work was the blissful contemplation of changelessness. Nothing astonished but the calm enigma of strength (3).

The Spanish rider smoothed the energetic pitfalls of the sport, operating within a seemingly effortless equilibrium. This style was often perceived as boring, a 'soporific' (Fotheringham 2017) approach that sucked the excitement out of a sport that is at its most thrilling during mountain breakaways and attacks. Nevertheless, distinguished as the only male rider to win five consecutive Tours, Indurain's exquisite screening of effort with ease demonstrated an unusual, admirable composure. In contrast, Pantani, as Randall notes, is the extreme exemplar of the exhaustive breakaway specialists in the peloton. A specialist climber, the text shows how he embraced and embodied oscillating, exhausting rhythms of breakaways and climbs, the antithesis of Indurain's controlled stillness.

> Marco, however, specialised in the impossible […] he'd take himself to the limit, push himself to the edge of the abyss, gauging just how far he could lurch, just how much his body could take. And that was how he won, free-diving within himself to greater depths and darknesses than others dared, surfacing barely alive, tasting blood, from the great apnoea. There was self-mutilation in these performances, a shedding of everything worldly, before that indestructible heart brought him back, as it did every time, no matter the altitude or depth, to the applause of millions (4-5).

Rendell's use of directionality in this passage – i.e. diving deeper, lurching forward – positions Pantani as someone drawn to limits, intent on extending them. The extreme

metaphor of free-diving, a notoriously deadly pursuit,[46] underlines the sheer dangerous intensity of this desire. Pantani's testing of bodily parameters also serves to foreshadow his later drug use and complicity in doping practices, all of which represent risky jumps into a rarefied unknown that could prove damaging. Indeed, though Rendell states that Pantani is always bought back from the brink of exertion-induced unconsciousness, he describes an accompanying sacrificial shedding of his body. The subtext of this muscular evaporation is that though he returns, each time Pantani visits the near hypoxic state demanded by an alpine breakaway he loses something of his material self. The sport *eats* him bit by bit, the ephemeral ecstasy of a summit paid for with a gradual erosion and shortening of his strength. Pantani's transition from a pressure-induced heaviness to a peeling lightness is given key theoretical significance by Luca Mavelli, who defines the spectral perniciousness of neoliberalism as its 'ghostly lightness' (2024: 1). It is this lightness that characterises Pantani's perma-damaged but victorious frame perfectly. In his depleted ecstasy he occupies an otherworldly space, a ghostly, part-grotesque image of effort made ever lighter by his athletic efforts.

*Figure 7: Pantani ascending though gritted teeth (*Rouleur 2013).

In a style typical of Pantani's contradictory nature, the very peaks and troughs he revelled in were often treated with disdain. Rendell quotes the man himself on his explosive climbing and its destructive capability: 'I love the mountains, but the moment of exertion fills me with deep hatred. So I try to shorten the suffering' (76). This deepens the significance of my previous point. Not only is Pantani enduring suffering climbs, he burns them, shortening them. This attempt at minimising the time spent at maximum exertion does not reduce his output, it merely intensifies it, condensing it into a shorter period. And as Moore notes in the

[46] The Risks and euphoria sought out in free diving are mapped out well in Adam Skolnick's *One Breath: Freediving, Death, and the Quest to Shatter Human Limits* (2016).

context of material extraction, ‘More out of less’ is never ‘something for nothing’ (2023: 11). As explored in my previous chapter, Paul Merson experienced a similar intensification of effort during pre-season training, but for Pantani these efforts are not an annual moment of purge to attain a baseline of fitness; they are a diminishing cycle of red zone effort that is replicated again and again over a single Grand Tour. And though Pantani’s impressive moments of accelerative consumption create a beguiling spectacle, they inflict a mode of unsustainable exertion. By shortening his breathtaking ‘lurches’ upwards into the alpine, he places greater demands on his recovery. The compressing of his suffering, though successful in the immediate moment, repeatedly drains his bodies resources, chipping away and ‘shedding’ his frame. To paraphrase a point made in chapter ten of Marx’s *Capital* (1867), a more intense day of labour will always shorten the life of the worker (2004: 340-53). The masochistic pursuit of short-term gratification also characterises how Rendell depicts Pantani’s recreational and performance enhancing drug use. In revealing the Italian’s complicity in the sport’s EPO scandal, Rendell accuses Pantani of relying on a substance that inflated the body’s access to soluble oxygen, effectively shortening the time spent “in the red zone.” Much like his hypoxia-inducing climbs, this artificial shortening of suffering also taxed the body long term, with EPO linked to multiple deaths and heart defects in the sport (Lopez 101).

A similar but unique attempt at limiting suffering also registers in Pantani’s cocaine addiction. Explaining the drug’s dopamine-boosting effects, he posits the idea that it provided ‘an emotional comfort he longed for’ (169). Widening this hypothesis, Rendell goes further, stating that ‘cocaine quickly became, more than mere substance, an idea around which Marco began to structure his personality’ (169). Taken from a chapter titled “Crisis Management” (158), this view of Pantani’s substitutive collapse into cocaine addiction as a lifestyle, a very way of being, shows a minimising of painful withdrawal through a damaging, near perpetual reliance on cocaine. So, whereas Pantani compressed his physical mode of consumption into intense, destructive bursts of energy that depleted his body, his use of cocaine expanded. His consumption an ever present.

Pantani’s reliance on cocaine was triggered by his disqualification from the 1999 Giro D’Italia. Although only subject to a relatively light two-week ban, it was imposed when Pantani was comfortably the lead rider of the Tour and, when his haematocrit level was ‘three points below the level that most sports doctors said could possibly occur naturally’ (O‘Brien 2013). Despite its insignificant length, Rendell frames the ban as striking a profound blow to

Pantani's self-perception, creating 'a background anxiety that accompanied Marco to the grave' (167). The focus on Pantani's total destabilisation as a consequence of his ban is a moment of key micro-revelation that foreshadows Rendell's full expose of Pantani's doped career. In singling out the Italian's disproportionate reaction to the ban, one that precipitated an ever-present paranoia and not the expected relief of a soft verdict that one might predict, the text hints that Pantani is a guilty anti-hero who has evaded justice since he began cycling professionally.

The looming presence of judgement, both from himself and the public clearly affected Pantani. Rendell notes his response to the 'humiliation' (167) of the ban, viewing Pantani as an introverted icon who simultaneously coveted and despised his own spectacle (9). The text depicts the Italian hero as a nervous interviewee –'media attention put him on edge' – a fact perpetuated by his drugs ban (9). Though in keeping with his embrace of contradiction, Pantani also boasted of taking 'no notice or care' (9) in his journalistic portrayal. By noting this unwanted reliance on his status as a sporting celebrity – Il Pirati, the famous son of Rimini – Rendell shows how Pantani was simultaneously sustained and destroyed by excess, again mirroring the patterns of addiction registered in his cycling technique, his doping, and his cocaine use.

Pantani's flippant and contradictory indifference to his reputation is juxtaposed to the attitude of his management team, a group of individuals who *are* heavily invested in the public perception of their client. Using their testimony, particularly that of Pantani's manager Manuela Ronchi,[47] Rendell shows how addiction is re-explained and minimised post-death to preserve an idealised image of a cycling hero. This perspective shows that the culture of denial Pantani maintained and tragically cemented with the manner of his isolated, barricaded death was sustained through those closest to him.

The denial of Ronchi begins, as with many apologists for doping do, by depicting Pantani as an innocent man in a corrupt environment, victim to a sport 'in which doping was effective' (292) and thus, essentially, a prerequisite. So, though Ronchi does implicate Pantani in the EPO scandal, she does so with such indirect language so as to maintain plausible deniability. She claims the demands of the Giro were not human, and that Pantani had 'helped himself' (255), like all his competitors, to finish races. This murky indirectness is

[47] Ronchi's own text *Man on the Run: The life and death of Marco Pantani* fails to confront his doping controversy.

a half-confession that implicates sport over individual. As covered, Rendell's text does, to an extent, cede to the argument of a corrupt sporting environment and this cannot be dismissed. Yet, Ronchi and the team around Pantani adjoin their claims of necessary supplementation with a total minimising of his cocaine addiction that amounts to denial. Rendell's text does challenge this. For him, the doping and cocaine use were simultaneously intense, driving one another on, 'there was no part of his existence that did not depend on substance' (283). This synthetic view of Pantani as an unwell man only capable of functioning on stimulants, transfusions and steroids is in turn denied by Ronchi in an interview with Rendell: 'Ronchi promised me, 'Mental illness? Absolutely not… Marco was very, very, very healthy psychologically, I can assure you' (255). Ronchi's hyperbolic insistence that Pantani had total control of his mental faculties and was not an addict reclaims an idealised vision of the man, a quasi-mythologising that, given the tragedy of his death, is understandably preferable to confronting the truth.

Ronchi concludes her interview with Rendell by proclaiming that Pantani's ban was little more than a 'sacrifice' (256). No structural sanitation of the sport occurred, but one athlete was there to absorb the sins of cycling's elite. This idea of Pantani as a Christlike figure is first and foremost an emboldening of Ronchi's mythologising, but it is also a continuation of a religious subtext running through Rendell's proxy confessional. Pantani's closed, barricaded hotel room is a private confessional space, a place where the sacrament of penance and reconciliation can be communed between individual and God. Here, alone, Ronchi constructs the notion that Pantani martyrs himself, porously and selflessly taking punishment for the corruption of his sport.

Rendell counters Ronchi's heroic, martyred image of Pantani with a dose of realism and some useful precision:

> Ronchi is passing Marco for the likes of Christophe Bassons, the Frenchman who rode for Festina in 1998, refused to participate in the team doping programme and was eventually hounded out of sport. Or Charley Mottet, another French rider who rejected doping but finished fourth in the Tour de France. Yet Marco was not even Alex Zulle, or David Millar or Felippo Simeoni, who doped, then repented, and accepted the consequences. Marco, in the end, made no heroic, significant, or even identifiable contribution to the fight against doping except, it might be argued, getting caught (257).

This passage tears down the attempted post-mortem coalescing of Pantani's purity. Then, later in the text, Rendell's investigative craft comprising blood tests, haematocrit graphs and doctors' records exposes the man (283, 288), confessing what Pantani failed to. Proceeding a compelling dossier of eight detailed graphs and accompanying explanation, Rendell concludes that:

> There is incontrovertible evidence that Marco's entire career was based on r-EPO abuse, which was both effective and, until 2001, undetectable by tests used in professional cycling. Is it reasonable to suggest that the most successful period of his career, from 1998 until 5 June 1999, depended on anything else? (290)

Rendell's retrospective condemnation of Pantani's entire career isolates Pantani. It categorises him not as a symptom of an addictive environment, but the excessive exemplar of that environment who was instrumental in the normalisation of doping in the peloton. As I will continue to argue in the following section, Millar, a rider belonging to a half-generation after Pantani, positions that normalising process as a more insidious governance, whereby the expectation to dope was forcefully placed upon new riders.

David Millar and the peloton: Doping and Addiction by Absorption

In his 2012 autobiography *Racing Through the Dark,* prodigious cycling talent Millar confesses his 'blindly optimistic' (81) resistance to, and eventual amalgamation into cycling's 'deep-rooted doping culture' (93). Using the full breadth of the confessional mode, Millar positions himself as both complicit in and victim of the corrupted, 'dark world' (93) of PED use on the tour. Whereas Rendell trades on the revelation of Pantani's unique excess, Millar packages his own confession of doping violations within a working environment that he claims absorbed largely powerless athletes into a world of normalised PED use. Thus, his narrative acknowledges a personal complicity in doping, but that sense of responsibility is then ameliorated by the wider, proxy confession Millar offers on behalf of the sport itself. He describes cycling teams as administering a sliding scale of supplementation that begins with legal injections of vitamins and iron, and ends with regular, illegal blood doping. Millar presents the iron and vitamin injections, referred to with the clandestine moniker 'preparation' (85) by his Cofidis team medics, as an incremental step towards his EPO use. This gradated approach reveals Millar's bit-by-bit absorption into cycling's doping culture,

one that as a straight-edged teen talent he had vowed to resist totally (69-70). In framing 'preparation' as a gateway to illegal transfusions and cortisol use, and as a practice basically demanded by his team, Millar's text positions itself as more than a simple confession in search of absolution. Its detailed recollection of widespread, management orchestrated injections (both legal and illegal) is a textbook whistle blow on the sport that makes cycling's administrators as complicit in scandal as the riders themselves. Thus, despite the inherent biases of the autobiographical genre – 'selections, omissions, enhancement, and silences' (Taylor 2008: 470) – Millar's text extends beyond his personal confession. Using a journalistic robustness that uncovers the rotting core of his sport, Millar minimises his own violations, somewhat obscuring them in the context of a compelling exposé. He clarifies from the inside what Walsh's text gleaned from the outside. Thus, *Racing Through The Dark* confesses personal guilt, but does so in the context of a sport where even riders committed to competing 'clean' are inevitably subsumed into a doping culture that not only encouraged, but expected – even required – their participation.

Millar's introductory sections in the text emphasise his acclimation to and then revelling in the exhaustive work ethic demanded by life as a pro cyclist. Writing of his time on the 'highly competitive' (51) amateur race scene in France, a precociously talented Millar accustomed to winning races effortlessly in his teens had to adjust to new levels of exhaustion as a professional:

> I couldn't count on doing what I wanted, when I wanted, with relative ease. Often my body would be telling me to stop for much of the race and this was something I didn't understand at first. It was only after pushing myself further and harder that I learned to ignore what my body was telling me. My psychological strength was increasing and I was getting tougher and more capable of managing the suffering (51).

The suppression of innate bodily warnings against exhaustion and lasting damage in search of 'strength' is demonstrative of a neoliberal rhetoric of discomfort and (over)exertion engendering a growth response.

Figure 8: David Millar, dehydrated and depleted (De Waele 2009).

To thrive as a Tour cyclist, Millar's sporting environment demanded that he 'compete and adapt' (Metcalf 2017) to this framework, one which, as for Pantani and all other riders, leads to a depletive energetic deficit and long-term bodily damage. Yet, Millar describes the realisation that his grafting work ethic and idealistic commitment to riding without supplementation is both the reason for his ascension into the peloton, and the cause of his stagnating results in his first months as a professional (68). His willingness to suppress and manage pain, to adjust to normalised suffering, shows an athlete able to produce more and more from the same body. Yet, the text reveals that despite his ability to thrive in repeated energetic deficits without the recuperative benefits of blood doping, Millar was well adrift of his competitors as a 'clean rider'. The best he could hope for, he writes, was the patronising congratulations of managers and coaches who knew his early career anti-doping stance, 'you should be happy, you're the first clean rider' (118). Thus, his initial, vehement desire to win a Tour riding clean in a field full of doping riders (118) provides the archetypal basis for a narrative fall. The rest of the text then marks out the incremental death of Millar's dream to win clean, detailing his progressive adoption of legal, then illegal supplementation. This steady absorption into doping marks the grim dominance of neoliberal norms whereby 'competition is the only legitimate organising principle for human activity' (Metcalf 2017), whatever the consequences. Also significant in a narrative sense, this compliance to doping culture provides a new literary depiction of the archetypal biblical fall. The Bible's Genesis story as well as John Milton's poetic retelling of scripture in *Paradise Lost* (1667) define the postlapsarian world by exclusion. The violation of Edenic innocence is punished with banishment. Millar's fall is defined by inclusion, a sublimation into an already corrupted dominant sporting culture. This perspective strengthens Millar's self-definition as a oncestraight-edged rider made passive by the subsuming doping structures of the sport he

loved. It is thus a confession of powerlessness. Moreover, Millar's drift into PED use is plotted as a linear progression from weaker to more potent substances. The steady, rising exposure which recalls the boiling frog apologue also oscillates outwards, with Millar's narrative concurrent addictions to sleeping pills and alcohol that were at the very least influenced by the culture of consumption in the sport.

Millar's initial fall and compromising of his 'stubbornly idealistic' (85) stance on the normalised, widespread practice of 'recovery' is justified in the text by the idea that, 'after all, this wasn't doping' (85). A concoction of iron, vitamin B, prefolic acid, Epargriseovit (folic acid) and Ferlixit, recovery injections sought to legally 'maintain' (85) the maximum oxygen carrying capacity of the blood, and were considered by Cofidis staff as necessary for riders to be remotely competitive (85). Expressing concerns that resisting this legal marginal gain was unnecessarily purist, Millar eventually concedes that 'I needed to make sure I did everything else within the rules that might help my racing' (85). He describes his first intravenous injections in visceral detail.

> The butterfly gently pierced the skin and the wall of the vein and laid its wings down upon my arm. A couple of centimetres of blood pumped up through the tube before stopping, the pressure of the tourniquet limiting blood flow. He then connected the bigger syringe to the end of the tube and deftly removed the tourniquet. With one hand holding the barrel and the other gently puling back on the pump, my blood flowed smoothly up and entered the syringe with a tiny little exploding cloud (86-7).

Gently. Smoothy. Deftly. These soft adverbs throughout the paragraph seek to give the experience an easy, controlled, clinical legitimacy. Millar is not characterising recovery as an act of aggressive, supercharged augmentation, but as an easy, painless process that routinely bookends a hard day of riding. However, elsewhere directly around this paragraph, there are signifiers that position recovery as a direct foreshadowing of EPO use. First, his description of the iron injection, the colour of which he comments upon three times in two paragraphs (86-7), is notable. It is a 'very dark brown liquid' (86) and 'darker than the blood' (87). Millar's fixation on this metallic tint gives the injection a corruptive power, a lack of clarity, and the opaqueness of the iron perfectly mirrors Millar's moral concern at the act itself. Acknowledging that 'a line had been crossed' (87), he confesses that it was not only the iron itself penetrating his body, but the questionable morality it symbolised. In the lead-up to the

injection, Millar explains how his teammates and management set-up could not comprehend his feelings of transgression.

> They could see I was a talented racer, but they also knew what I was up against. I think they thought I didn't understand, that I was naïve […] that I hadn't grasped I was now a professional in a world in which there was no room for idealism. My *soigneur* took it upon himself to explain, as he had done previously, that there was nothing 'wrong' with 'recovery'. It was not illegal, and, far from doping (85).

In these sentences, Millar initially reinforces recovery as a moral violation, something not accepted in his ideal vision of the sport. Then, actively demonstrating his dualistic confessionary narrative, he switches, adopting the voice of management. In doing so, he acknowledges that absorption into the intrusive, medicalised norms of the sport is necessary to succeed. This is facilitated fully at the end of the passage with the ambiguous use of speech marks surrounding the words 'wrong' and 'recovery'. They heavily insinuate that harder doping practices were to follow 'recovery' without providing a direct admission. Though unwritten, this is the beginning of Millar's assimilation.

Following Millar's absorption into recovery practices, he takes one further half-step prior to full-scale illegal blood doping, partaking in the widespread practice of misusing TUEs. A TUE allows for certain substances that aid performance – in the case of Tour cycling this is typically the steroid cortisol – to be used to treat a medical condition, e.g. a rash, insect bite or a friction burn sustained in a crash. Millar writes most revealingly about his own cortisone use when Cofidis were granted a TUE to treat an allergic reaction.

> I knew it was a powerful drug, but I also knew it was a catabolic drug that consumed the body. It was probably the most potent drug out there […] There wasn't any great resistance to cortisone use within Cofidis, a stance replicated by most pro teams at the time […] A few days after the cortisone injection I began to lose weight. I was skinnier than I'd ever been […] Logic would dictate that I felt weaker, and yet I'd never felt so strong (166).

The use of cortisol is an advancement in doping culture that moves beyond the enriching reintroduction of vitamins and iron to the body provided by recovery. Millar's body is not supplemented but 'consumed' by the catabolic steroid; it eats away at him, giving a paradoxical lightness that boosted his strength. Nothing is being replaced in this process. This

shows that short-term depletion in the sport, already encouraged by the consecutive stage after stage structure of the Tour, is further accelerated through a TUE process that cynically manufactures and manipulates injuries and treatments to further streamline the bodies of the riders. For Millar specifically, his embrace of TUEs as a mode of performance enhancement marks the gradual acceptance of more 'potent' treatments that go beyond legal recovery, a normalising exposure that it is the foundation for his introduction to EPO.

Another normalised medicalising of the cyclist body in Grand Tours is the consumption of and over reliance on sleeping pills for recovery. Accompanying TUE treatments and EPO use, Millar establishes sleeping tablets as accepted and institutionally encouraged, stating that they 'had been used for years in European cycling' (102). Later in the text, he marks out his own personal dependency, stating 'I'd become a regular user of sleeping pills […] I was a walking example of how troubled and confused my sport had become' (135). By clearly signposting the issue as an institutionalised problem prior to admitting his own overuse of sleeping pills, Millar's autobiography retains its balance of confessing personal failure within a sport that makes that failure inevitable. He emphasises the role of his Cofidis team, singling them out as an outfit with a particular problem with sleeping pills, claiming 'responsibility was not a characteristic of the pro scene at that time' (103). He explains how, all riders in the peloton, but particularly Cofidis riders, inhabit the same space as the contemporary Premier League players I referenced at the end of Chapter One. They are all embedded in a culture dependent on sleeping pills to ensure sufficient recovery. Millar notes, 'deep sleep is not the easiest thing to achieve when your body is as drained as that of a pro rider after a long days racing' (102). However, the synthetic rest and recuperation induced by products like Stilnox (102), Rohypnol (135) and Zolidpem (192) reveal a sport dependent on substances that sell a myth of replenishment when in fact they are in fact causing 'out of control' (103) damage to the athletic body in the name of rushed, short-term performance.

Millar provides context for the normalised acceptance of doping in the sport, an overreliance on sleeping medication and even harder drugs such as pot belge by explaining that even spectators tacitly accepted it. Citing the viewpoints of traditional French Tour spectators – those who line the narrow village roads of the route so loyally – he depicts a learned cycling crowd privy to the physical realities of the Tour's challenges.

> The elderly in France, who'd grown up with the Tour, understood that it was a preposterous sporting challenge. In their pragmatic manner, they didn't see it as humanly possible, and considered it part and parcel of the job to do what one had to do in order to survive and to perform (95-6).

Although Millar states this view is 'wrong' (96), he does not eschew it outright, acknowledging it as a 'pragmatic' take on the demands of Tour cycling (96). This contradiction in terms is Millar's own confessional non-confession. Using the sport's knowledgeable, realist insiders as a proxy, the text puts forward the idea that those who know and love the Tour consider it as not humanly possible without some form of bodily augmentation. Notably, Millar frames the fan view of doping not just as a necessary practice to be competitive in the race, but to complete it at all – 'to survive' (96). This corrupted view is not fully endorsed by *Racing Through the Dark*, but nonetheless it lingers as an idea, credited as realistic and not dismissed. By revealing his recovery and blood doping whilst simultaneously entertaining those practices not just as a norm, but as a genuine pre-requisite for the sport, Millar's confession takes on a crucial directionality. With doping as 'obligation' (157), the narrative avoids framing Millar as a lone drugs cheat seeking a unique advantage. Instead, he casts himself as an athlete absorbed into an environment of hyper-normativity. Thus, his confession, though full and detailed throughout, is tied to doping violations being totally necessary in the sport. Yes, the text confesses fully, but the violation it confesses to is one that Millar considers as forced upon him.

Millar's use of recovery, or recup (160), 'conditioned' him to syringes and injections (160), a process of familiarity that made the transition to EPO use less intimidating. His description of taking his first round of EPO reflects this comfort.

> I knew that EPO was injected subcutaneously, but I'd never had one of these injections […] He pinched my arm, pushed the needle through and under the skin and carefully pushed the EPO out of the syringe. Then he pulled out the syringe quickly and smoothly, while rubbing where he'd injected. There was a little bump where the liquid was sitting under the skin, and a prick mark like a mosquito bite. It was probably the easiest and most anti-climactic injection I'd ever had. It was less like the stereotypical idea of doping than the injectable recup I'd grown so used to (160).

Millar directly connects his participation in 'recup' to his EPO use, viewing the initial line crossed in accepting vitamin and iron injections as more significant than the illegal doping described directly above. Its easiness, again attributable to the boiling frog parable that denotes a steady acclimation, is distinctly present in this passage. The administering of EPO is described as quick, small, smooth and leaving no trace. This seamlessness denotes an athlete conditioned to the physical realities of doping – specifically, the intimate crossing of the skin barrier – through what now appears like deliberate, proprietary vitamin injections. With this ease of process, Millar's text presents professional cycling teams as a pipeline that move riders through legal marginal gains practices, normalising them in in the process, before transitioning to EPO use, which in practical administering terms is indistinguishable from recup. The institutional conflation of legal and illegal injections places further blame on Millar's employers, as if their routine use of recovery had destabilised normal sporting preparation to such an extent that EPO use and its medical apparatus were no longer taboo. Yet, of course, there are differences between recup and EPO administration, and Millar does bring to attention the fact that the former were administered intravenously, and the later subcutaneously. This latter method of injection beneath the fat layer of the skin is deeper, taking longer to disseminate through the body and take effect. The slower diffusion rate of EPO, marked by the lingering liquid bump Millar describes, denotes a longer lasting, affecting substance on the body. Hence, the process of absorption is extended.

With the threshold into EPO use crossed, Millar describes his body in the build-up to the Vuelta D'Espana as a vessel open to a cornucopia of substances.

> There was a combination of EPO, testosterone pills and, after a week, one normal dose of cortisone followed by weekly microdoses. On top of this were the legal injections for vitamins, iron, antioxidants and, on occasions, amino acids and glucose. Before long […] I was injecting at least once every day (178).

His fragile state of heightened performance, topped up daily with injections, went on to perpetuate Millar's 'obsessive' (179) nature. Precariously out of control, his substance abuse was uncovered and punished in a team wide scandal dubbed the 'Cofidis Affair' (211). A police investigation concluded with Millar receiving a two-year ban from the sport, and a lifetime ban from Olympic competition (220). The text depicts this revelation and state pursuit as flawed and unjust, catching Millar out on an old, discarded syringe not connected to his then supposed clean status (212). Slighted, he then describes how his arrest precipitated

a response of excess – a compounding of the already significant damage inflicted upon his body.

These excesses register through an almost immediate, reckless spending spree and a spiral into daily drinking. Millar, an individual with famously expensive tastes, spent unfettered post-arrest, uninhibited by consequence.

> I slept through most of the Tour de France. I was effectively running scared and became nocturnal, living in the alternative world that comes to life as the sun comes down. It was good escapism but I was refusing to face the scale of the chaos. […] I spent my salary in France on a near monthly basis, and there was money, but nowhere near enough to sustain my lifestyle for more than a few months. Yet I carried on buying the drinks, showing *largesse*. The French tax office was pursuing me, and it was inevitable they were going to freeze all my assets at some point – not that I had many. My bank accounts were drying up and my house was unfinished and the property of a Luxembourg company. I didn't really have anything else (212).

The way Millar treats insolvency reflects his modes of consumption in his cycling career. He continues to use EPO and cortisone despite the long-term catabolic consequences; he aggressively streamlines and cuts into his bodily resources, despite acknowledging that their paradoxically enriching-depleting effects caused '*too much*' (179) weight loss and that he'd 'taken it too far' (179). Financially, the same pattern of excess registers. When faced with scarcity, Millar's response is to continue overspending, meeting the threat of bankruptcy with brazen, maximum expenditure. In always trying to outreach depletion through accelerative excess, Millar is an exemplar of a neoliberal competitor and consuming subject.

Millar's depictions of financial behaviours elsewhere in the text show him avoiding personal responsibility, with the cyclist attacking what he sees as a 'draconian' (219) process of victimisation enacted by the French authorities in seeking unpaid taxes. He continues, arguing they are pursuing him with unjust vigour to retrieve funds 'that they considered to be theirs' (219). Whether true or not, Millar's holier-than-thou tone in decrying the French tax authorities – this despite owing them money – is significant for the confessional and (non)-confessional tone of the text. His words hold a victimhood. His confession of wrongdoing is bound up with the idea that he, the adopted son of Biarritz – 'Un Biarrot, a local, a part of the town' (211), is unfairly, aggressively hounded by the French administration. He gets an

unprecedented two-year ban and is ‘made an example of’ (219). With this phrase, there are undoubted parallels with Rendell’s biography of Pantani. Millar also attempts to cultivate a sense of martyrdom. This is done well, with the Scot’s accusations of mistreatment from the governors of his sport acutely reversing the direction of corruptive absorption that runs through his entire text. Whereas before he was forcibly consumed into a doped sport, here, he accuses cycling’s administrators of legislating specifically against him, framing Millar as a sacrificial scapegoat who absorbed the sins of all the Tour. His exclusion from the sport is thus rooted in an inclusive lapse; his extrication from the peloton underwritten by his reluctant adherence to its doping norms.

Millar’s forced break from cycling provoked a period of heavy drinking, again registering excess as a coping mechanism for ‘everything falling apart’ (226). He claims that ‘It fuelled indifference. It shut out the world. Nothing seemed that important when I was drunk’ (226). A textbook use of alcohol as a suppressant, Millar goes onto explain how apathy affected his previously finely tuned body.

> My body changed significantly. I was losing that athletic sensation of being in total control […] My body and mind were now operating as different entities – I wasn’t an athlete anymore. That epiphany woke me up to how much time had passed. I hadn’t done any exercise in six months, I was smoking sporadically and drinking massively. I’d discarded the one thing I always considered to be wholly mine, to be untouchable – my athleticism. It was this, more than anything else, that made me break out of the drunken cocoon I’d been calling home (228).

Millar’s text describes oscillating periods of alcohol abuse (136) and adjusting periods of ‘monastic’ (119) training throughout. Usually, it is a lack of technical sharpness that invokes renewed sobriety, e.g. a misfiring heel motion (114). In this particular instance, during a period of training marred by an excess use of ‘sleeping tablets’ and ‘booze’ (114), Millar felt his addictions exaggerating a crucial imprecision in his technique. As he states, ‘When I was riding, the heel began to kick out more, so instead of having my feet perfectly aligned they were now slightly off centre’ (114). This language of decentring breakage shows that when the metronomic cadence of the pro Tour rider – one of constant, smooth revolutions – slips just marginally, it can cause disorientation. As a fine-tuned athlete working with fine-tuned equipment, Millar’s recognition of his heel displacement then shocks him back into a state of renewed and ‘obsessively committed’ (114) effort. What is different in the passage quoted

above is that Millar's extracurricular addictions are no longer co-existing with his exhaustive cycling praxis, but supplanting it entirely. He addresses a synaptic break between his mind and body that causes his consumptive appetite – usually exhausted on the bike – to spill out into other addictive outlets. This is framed as a loss of 'total control' (228). Yet, the very idea of Millar ever possessing such autonomy runs contrary to the rest of his text. He himself asserts that he was strong-armed into synthesising his bloodstream with steroids and EPO, whilst regulating sleep with alcohol and sleeping tablets. He is at pains to depict how he was unfairly hounded by French tax officials. Control, the text insists, had always eluded him.

Unlike Pantani who never managed to sustain a physical or mental equilibrium owing to his chaotic and numerous addictions, Millar's narrative does reckon with an amelioration of his addictive desires. Though initially invoked by a mourning of his once 'untouchable' 'athleticism' (228), Millar's recapturing of autonomy is rooted in an innocent, childlike joy of cycling disentangled from the depth-drudging demands of the professional Tour. Living and recovering from his ban in the Peak District, Millar, after a year off the bike, states:

> I didn't care about where I was going, how long I was going to be out for, what speed, what power output or heartrate I was generating. I was riding my bike for no other reason than pleasure. There had always been objectives on the horizon, sponsor commitments, schedules and pressure. Now I had no obligations. Now I didn't care (243).

Here, Millar finally rejects the neoliberal perspective that 'sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations' (Monbiot 2017). His own status as an energetic commodity for his team dissolves. Marginal gains become irrelevant in their service of maximum consumption and efficiency. The horizon is pursued for pleasure, not because it signals the beginning of another consumptive cycle.

Figure 9: Millar ascending in the English countryside (Whitehead 2016).

Were Millar's mirative to end on the rider recreationally traversing the English pastoral, it would offer an anti-addictive resolution, signifying a settled conclusion to a narrative arc that flitted between excess and exhaustion. Finally, Millar-in-balance, the addictive oscillations of the text stilled. However, this is not the case. Supported by Brailsford, Millar makes a spectacular return to professional riding, the self-titled 'fallen champion' (246). His remediating break thus does not function as a moment that permanently reorients his addictive, depletive relationship with the sport. Instead, it serves as a mere appetite-whetting primer for his return to the depths of the Tour. The experience of this return is peppered with disintegrating language. Millar describes his body as 'stretching', 'empty' and 'on his knees' (266), a frame sapped and re-broken by an intensity he was liberated from just pages earlier. His most prominent textually declared motivation to do this is to return a clean rider, an ambassador for anti-doping; to compete without acquiescing to the corrupting, absorbing qualities of the peloton. Millar's invoking of redemption is a trope of what Taylor calls 'spiritual autobiography' (480) whereby the author's introspective self-analysis prompts knowledge and growth. However, though there is clear value in Millar's alleviating confessions – they help facilitate his sincere, clean return to cycling – the Scot remains stuck in an addictive bind with the sport. Though unwritten, the rides around the hills of his Sheffield home were not enough. Even towards the end of the text, he remains enthused at being 'everywhere, doing everything' (266) within the peloton, beguiled by the jostling competition. His need to thrust himself into this maelstrom is an addictive assent to the rule that 'the logic of all sport, especially professional sport, coincides with the competitive thrust of neoliberalism' (Farred 2012: 111). Riding for riding's sake simply does not compete. Moreover, Millar then emphasises the enduring dominance of this logic in the sport – one which drives doping usage – by placing his own violations in a conclusionary comparison to Alexandre Vinokourov's 2007 doping scandal. He writes, 'For the Festina affair read Operacion Puerto, for David Millar read Alexander Vinokourov' (293). With this damning equivocation, Millar's text positions cycling as stuck in an inevitable cycle of doping and addiction problems, one which though he escaped, still engenders a mode of competition that necessitates total bodily degradation. This repetition reinforces tour cycling as a neoliberally resistant sporting apparatus whose demand for repeated bodily exhaustion outweighs the wellbeing of its participants. And, no man is at the apex of the conflation of exhaustion and wellbeing than tour cycling's most famous character, Lance Armstrong.

Lance Armstrong and Confession as Hard Work

When Armstrong appeared on Oprah in 2013 to confess his role as a driving force in cycling's pervasive doping culture of the previous decade, he shocked the public with the depth of his complicity. Confirming the journalistic investigations of Walsh's exposing work catalogued in *Seven Deadly Sins: My Pursuit of Lance Armstrong,* Armstrong admitted curating, controlling and demanding institutionalised dependence on PEDs within the peloton. This shattering of cycling's *omerta* – the mafia style vow of silence enforced rigorously amongst tour riders regarding their drug use – implicated Armstrong and his colleagues in a rotted culture of cheating that undermined their sporting achievement. In literary terms, Armstrong's very public attempt at reconciliation which sits in direct opposition to Marco Pantani's private, barricaded denial – revealed his two previously published autobiographies to be scandalous, lying documents of non-confession. Both *It's Not About The Bike: My Journey Back To Life* and its sequel *Every Second Counts* explicitly respond to public accusations of doping with outright denial. He concealed what Millar's text opened up. Across both works, beginning with Armstrong's first publication, I will show that on a basic level, his non-confession was simply a cynical act that sustained the lie maintaining his career. Then, more interestingly, I will demonstrate how he packages this non-confession within a narrative that still deploys virtue cultivating confessional devices, e.g. admissions of self-flagellating strengths and a damagingly productive work ethic that underpin his success and aid his recovery. In his second work, I will then show how Armstrong uses these virtues to cultivate a wholescale branding of his body.

Figure 10: Lance Armstrong on Oprah (2013).

Across the two texts, but particularly first, Armstrong derides himself for possessing a number of character traits that just so happen to underpin his success as an athlete and in

recovery. He refers to himself as ‘a slacker’ (7), a misguided materialist (32), a temperamental father and partner (70), too hard a worker (137) and too obsessive (137). These admissions do not create an atmosphere that allows for self-reflection and redemption. Instead, they offer a facile veneer of Rousseau-esque contemplation that screens the non-confessional heart of the texts. Moreover, these “woe-is-me” confessions that signal his prolific work ethic and willingness to engage with a physical process of depletive renewal cultivate the image of the self-made, rags-to-riches athlete propelled to the top by addictive hard work. This convenient neoliberal perspective ‘legitimises and affirms a meritocracy’ (John and Macdonald 2019: 1195), concealing Armstrong’s failure to confess the doping scandal with which he later became synonymous. Also cynically deployed as a misdirecting force in the texts is his cancer diagnosis. His objectively remarkable return to the zenith of Tour cycling is an exemplary recovery arc, one that concludes in Armstrong’s prolonged dominance of the Tour De France from 1999 to 2005. This proffers a narrative that is too remarkable, too sentimentally brilliant to be questioned.

Armstrong’s first autobiography *It’s Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life* gestures to his own physical ability whilst emphasising the importance of his cancer recovery through its very title. The decentring of the bike – itself a mechanical marvel essential to performance – cheekily draws attention to Armstrong’s dominant role in the relationship between body and machine. He himself, not cutting-edge equipment, is responsible for success. More importantly though, the title bisects his life, placing his cancer recovery as an eclipsing force that renders his successes as an athlete insignificant. Yet, this humble abdication of cycling’s importance in the face of life-threatening illness does not reflect the actual content of Armstrong’s writing. Rather, the title attempts to frame an elite athlete capable of physical and mental grit that far exceeds the average person, as vulnerable and accessible. But Armstrong places this vulnerability under threat by treating his recovery with the same ruthless effort and exhaustion he sought during his cycling career. Thus, addictive training and racing becomes addictive recovery, where even in remission Armstrong seeks rejuvenation through depletion. Despite his body being severely expended due to chemotherapy treatment, Armstrong’s solution to remediating this expenditure is to compound it. He confesses that he cycles throughout his treatment, actively seeking a dualistic quintessence of exhaustion, and he writes with a knowing conviction about this method that rejects the need for remedial rest:

> Why did I ride when I had cancer? Cycling is so hard, the suffering is so intense, that it's absolutely cleansing. You can go out there with the weight of the world on your shoulders, and after a six-hour ride at a high pain threshold, you feel at peace. The pain is so deep and strong that a curtain descends over your brain. At least for a while you have a kind of hall pass (escape from boundaries and restriction), and don't have to brood on your problems; you can shut everything else out, because the effort and subsequent fatigue are absolute. There is an unthinkable simplicity in something so hard, which is why there's probably some truth to the idea that all world-class athletes are running away from something (Armstrong 2001: 88).

Here is a clear tension between the positive and negative impacts of dissociative, exhaustive training. Armstrong lauds his own ability to enter what professional ultra-runner Courtney Dauwalter refers to as the "pain cave" (Fader 2022). His depletive efforts are referred to as 'cleansing', a sort of apocalypse enacted upon the body leaving a new, unblemished self. Whilst this signals his impressive resilience, he also acknowledges that his behaviour is a deliberate act of intense suppression. Cycling and its total physical demands fill his body and consciousness, an addictive totality he uses to avoid other aspects of life. He goes on to explain that he 'didn't want to dissect' the decision to continue cycling, followed by the words, 'if I could continue to pedal a bike, somehow I wouldn't be so sick' (89). This cosmetic self-interrogation unveils an athlete incapable of finding a solution to a problem that does not lie in the pursuit of self-depletion. Indeed, Armstrong argues that this all-consuming, self-perpetuated exhaustion is the sole instigator of his notion of peace. Then, by the simple fact he cannot physically sustain a state of total exhaustion indefinitely, it must be enacted again and again. Thus, his elite recovery is a precariously remissive cycle which mirrors chemotherapy treatment itself. Like the rounds of depletive transfusions that poison the body to reset and remediate it, Armstrong's concurrent cycling seeks a freedom in the depletion and damage of one's body. This duality embeds depletive-remission-as-renewal into the text. The concept is present literally through Armstrong's fragile all clear from cancer (he is medically in remission), and it also punctuates the narrative repeatedly on a smaller scale through his self-flagellating training recovery that offers only a brief diminution of pain between long efforts.

Armstrong's mirroring and application of his cycling behaviours to his cancer recovery is treated even more directly soon after the passage above:

> The physical pain of cancer didn't bother me so much, because I was used to it. In fact, if I didn't suffer, I'd feel cheated. The more I thought about it, the more cancer seemed like a race to me. Only the destination had changed. They shared gruelling physical aspects, as well as a dependence on time, and progress reports every interval, with checkpoints and a slavish reliance on numbers and blood tests. The only difference was that I had to focus better and harder than I ever did on the bike. With this illness, I couldn't afford impatience or a lapse in concentration; I had to think about living, just making it through, every single moment. The idea was oddly restorative: winning my life back would be the biggest victory (89).

Sporting metaphor and parlance are often used in the realm of cancer, with combative language and triumph featuring heavily in survivor stories.[48] Here, Armstrong frames his cancer with the lexicon of cycling, the very structure of the sport. His illness is envisioned as a race, something to compete against and something to be won. This logic is an extreme sporting instance of 'competition as a natural moral' (Gazeres 2023: 3), whereby Armstrong considers cancer recovery as dependent on his ability to transpose his excellence as a cyclist onto an illness. He argues that he has built a career on pain endurance, that he is acclimated to its demands. More than that, by introducing the idea of feeling 'cheated' (89) by cycling and his recovery if they did not produce the depletive pain he expected, Armstrong essentially describes a fear of addictive withdrawal that is bound to both his profession and his remission. Crucially, this legacy of depletion is presented not as a cumulative force that has damaged his body beyond repair, but instead as a pattern of behaviour that emboldens his renewal. His perspective pleads that his career has not exhausted him, rather, he claims the opposite. It has conditioned him to face bodily decay, imbibed a self-belief that an endurance athlete is uniquely placed to survive an illness whose treatment itself is premised on a necessary depletion of the immune system.

Armstrong's adherence to and belief in the neoliberal maxim of individual responsibility arises from his survival mentality, itself built on willing self-mutilation. Whilst it is true that he references familial and medical support networks in his text, his narrative focus is his own transposition of cycling experience on to his illness. This self-reliant

[48] A study by Grant and Hundley showed that in sport and war were the most commonly used metaphors for cancer, far eclipsing comparisons to 'government/law, art, politics, celebration, contrast of darkness vs. light, technology, education, family, speech' (183)

remediation represents a ‘sequestering’ of ‘communal social relations and responsibility’ in favour of faith in the self (Boykoff 2011: 106). There are further neoliberal undertones to the passage, with Armstrong’s descriptions of his sport reading like a business report. His self-confessed submission to and dependence on intervals, progress reports, checkpoints and numbers denotes a heavily systematised sport where the athlete themselves is an interchangeable commodity. So, whilst Armstrong uses this rubric of data, finely detailed distances, speeds and times to place encouraging benchmarks into his cancer recovery; in doing so he also exposes the mechanics of a sport that, in opposition to the title of his text, reduces the rider to little more than an input.

Armstrong also applies his eye for detail to his weight with a remarkable passage that attempts to consider his chemotherapy-induced emaciation as a welcome mode of depletion.

> There was one unforeseen benefit of cancer: it had completely reshaped my body. I now had a much sparer build. In old pictures, I looked like a football player with my thick neck and big upper body, which had contributed to my bullishness on the bike. But, paradoxically, my strength had held me back in the mountains, because it took so much work to haul that weight uphill. Now I was almost gaunt, and the result was a lightness I’d never felt on the bike before. I was leaner in body and more balanced in spirit (224).

Obsession with weight has been an open secret in lots of sporting contexts, with many sports having prominent examples of unhealthy eating behaviours cultivated in the name of athletic success. Cricketer Andrew Flintoff catalogued his experience of bulimia in the BBC documentary *Freddie Flintoff: Living with Bulimia* (2020). Former Nike Oregen project runner Mary Cain exposed a toxic culture of weight control in her *New York Times* short film and co-released article *I Was The Fastest Girl in America, Until I Joined Nike* (2019), and in the Panorama documentary *Sports Hidden Crisis* (2020), former Welsh Olympic hurdling champion Colin Jackson explores the systemic practice of critiquing athlete’s weight and eating habits within governing bodies of UK sports. Cycling is particularly rife with the practice of deifying restriction and depletion as a method of attaining an ideal power to weight ratio. Most recently, decorated Manx sprinter Mark Cavendish has, without using the term directly, described symptoms akin to anorexia and bulimia in search for a return to form (Ling 2023). In the passage above, Armstrong does not cover restriction of food, but does pedestal his illness-induced weight loss in quite shocking terms, particularly when using the

word ‘gaunt’ as a positive. Usually deployed to denote suffering and malnutrition, here Armstrong’s flirtation with gauntness and its emaciating effect gives a renewed ‘lightness’ to his cycling performance. This approach to weight adds another layer of depth to the text’s endorsement of the restorative powers of depletion. In losing weight and proclaiming enhanced performance in the aftermath of a cancer diagnosis, Armstrong justifies his aggressive method of active recovery, whilst further emphasising that depleting the athletic body is central to unlocking its full potential.

Positioning cancer as a conduit of positive enhancement is a thread Armstrong sustains throughout his text. In the sentimental closing pages where he explains his gratitude at just being alive, he writes of cancer as a means to show strength and virtue. Dealing with its depletive effects are an opportunity.

> The one thing the illness has convinced me of beyond all doubt – more than any experience I’ve had as an athlete – is that we are much better than we know. We have unrealised capacities that sometimes only emerge in crisis (273).

In the previous passages quoted, Armstrong self-mythologised himself as uniquely capable in excelling in ‘purposeless suffering’ and plumbing the depths of ‘stamina for self-definition’ (220). He is keen to extol his impressive pain endurance abilities and frames his profession as a sort of finishing school for surviving cancer. This is compelling in its extremity. It depicts strength derived and resilience arising from a cardiovascular exhaustion few can reach and sustain. Even Armstrong’s cancer bloodwork is paralleled directly to a time trial (146), before he describes himself as in a victorious ‘breakaway’ (146) against the disease. The relentless sporting metaphor shows cycling’s domineering presence in Armstrong’s psyche; it even overlays even matters of life and death. Yet, his attempted universalising of managing this scenario – one of finding a miraculous body of crisis resources, is somewhat undermined by what has proceeded it. Much of the book isolates Armstrong as *the man* to recover from cancer; sentiments such as ‘Cancer picked the wrong guy […] When it looked for a body to hang out in, it made a big mistake when it chose mine. *Big* mistake’ (146) are frequent. Thus, addressing the reader alongside himself as a collective with great ‘unrealised capacities’ (273) feels comparatively empty. The text spends chapters explaining how Armstrong’s own unrealised capacities are tapped into from a sporting muscle memory, a bullish endurance cultivated at the height of cycling. This rarefied experience that built on an addictive propensity for pain is not available to the reading public, nor those with cancer diagnoses.

Therefore, it renders the closing sentiments of the text saccharine, repackaging his recovery as available to all when it is in fact born of a unique, extreme mode of depletion only implementable by him.

Lance Incorporated

In Armstrong's second autobiography *Every Second Counts*, the thread of renewal-within-depletion established in his first text is strengthened and built upon. Covering a period of dominant performances at the Tour De France culminating in Armstrong's fifth consecutive title in 2003, the sequel to *It's Not About The Bike* reaffirms the American cyclist's endorsement of the idea that strength and meaning is found in self-flagellation. More so than his first text, this second autobiography explicitly recognises the depletive steel and renewal born of sporting exhaustion as a lucrative, commodifiable asset. The book demonstrates how Armstrong's aptitude for physical exhaustion and self-excavation correlates directly with the acquisition of a portfolio of sporting sponsors, corporate partnerships, ambassadorial roles and speaking events. As with the first, his second text emphasises the manner of his victories as a product of grit; to use his own phrase, he just 'tried hard' (12). In emphasising this ethic over talent or the myriad other factors (one of which is glaringly illegal doping) that contributed to his success, Armstrong embeds his dominance of cycling in the neoliberal virtue of grinding, individualistic labour. Marking a transition from his first book, Armstrong builds on this already established obsession with hard work by showing how he used his status and capital as a self-made commodity to exploit the transferability of sporting and business acumen. As Ervine and Dauncey note, both worlds are defined by 'performance, measured results' and an environment 'in which individuals are evaluated in comparison to each other' (2021: 47). The text tracks this malleability, showing an evolution from Armstrong the athlete to Armstrong the brand. It is a lucrative transition marked by the self-appointed moniker 'Lance Incorporated' (9). Thus, as Millar describes being incrementally but forcibly absorbed into a corruptive doping culture as an inclusive fall, Armstrong's mode of incorporation is marked by an isolating ascension, a transition to a status that eclipsed any other cyclist.

The opening sections of *Every Second Counts* begin by re-establishing the thread of the first autobiography; that is, suffering, pain, depletion and exhaustion are all instigators of strength and provide opportunities for renewal and growth, but they also leak the idea that

Armstrong is fundamentally addicted to cycling because of these aspects of his bodily experience. The repetition of this line of argument throughout a second publication shows Armstrong's commitment to his depletive ideal, emboldening it in the process. It establishes a consistent body of work dedicated to lionising extractive effort and the remedial potential of pain endurance.[49] He describes the essentiality of suffering when detailing his second Tour victory early in the text.

> Suffering, I was beginning to think, was essential to a good life, and as inextricable from such a life as bliss. It's a great enhancer. It might last a minute, or a month, but eventually it subsides, and when it does, something else takes its place, and maybe that thing is a greater space (59).

This passage is remarkably reminiscent of Rendell's description of Pantani 'shedding' (5) his body in moments of athletic exertion, before being bought back to equilibrium by his 'indestructible heart' (5). Like Rendell, Armstrong evokes the image of the body as an almost arboreal being. The appendages (branches) of one's body are cut down in an attempt to return stronger. This is not, unfortunately, a unifying 'arboreality' (Schoene 2022) where plants are given narrative agency through Armstrong, but rather an embodied metaphor for 'capital-intensive modes of agriculture' (Harvey 2012: 153). The expectation of growth and fecundity arising from diminution and suffering positions Tour riders as commodities being sapped and sapped by their teams until the illusory process of eternally regenerating returns breaks down. In Pantani's case, this repeated cutting back of resources leads to a spate of addictive coping mechanisms and, eventually, death. Armstrong meanwhile insists his exertions invoke a 'greater space' (59). Is this space, as he claims, an enhancer, or merely a numbing exertion that bludgeons the body into a feeling of vast emptiness?

Though not tackled often in his text, there are rare moments of confession that glimpse the dangers of excess instead of venerating its alleged restorative power. Armstrong states: 'I may never be reformed, may never find the proper balance between risk and caution' (20). Introspections like this are seldom in *Every Second Counts,* and Armstrong continually fails to recognise his lack of balance elsewhere. The rarity of such confessions demonstrate his willingness to narrate a belief in the false perpetuity of the depletive-rejuvanative cycle, despite revealing an overt knowledge of its dangers. In the long concluding chapter,

[49] Armstrong has remained steadfastly loyal to this ideology even after his public disgrace, and he is a partner in the popular podcast network WEDU dedicated to conversations around extreme endurance sports (Armstrong 2024)

Armstrong ends reiterating that the exploration of 'the outermost thresholds of pain, or fear, or uncertainty' provokes an 'expansive feeling, a widening of your capabilities' (223). Always astute with spatial language, Armstrong's core message is that venturing to one's limitations then incorporating that physical and mental (over) extension into the body derives a width (223) and depth (59) of space that proves calming.

Armstrong takes pride in his ability to unearth stillness in extremity; he calls his predication for excess 'an odd gift' (137). Writing of his inability to still himself, a trope deployed multiple times (6, 136-7), he reveals how his (non)-confessional mode enables him to signal readers towards interpreting the pursuit of more as virtue. He confesses, but he confesses in a manner that highlights traits which underscore his success in the personal, financial and sporting realms, repeating a pattern central to his first autobiography:

> I live with a constant sense of being pressed for time. I have to do everything now – get married, have children, win races, make money, ride motorcycles, jump off cliffs – because I might not have the chance later. It's an odd gift, that sort of concentrated living, and perhaps I don't always apply it to the right things. I'm either going at 150 percent, or I'm asleep. When I get locked on to something, I don't hear, see, or notice anything around me (137).

Armstrong defers to an innate inability to control his intensity, confessing a desire for instant gratification. Whilst there is an acknowledgement of how his energy is perhaps misapplied, the phrase 'I might not have the chance later' exposes the belief that his manner of 'concentrated living' maximalises his experiences, accumulates wealth and personal success. Thus, he confesses not to a flaw, but the occasional clumsy channelling of an 'odd' virtue that is, in fact, integral to his success. The result is a simulacrum of introspection that serves to further Armstrong's narrative that intense, extractive praxis is not a burden, but a 'gift'. He is, it seems, *too* productive. More specifically, this paragraph's repackaging of an impatient affliction as an enduring talent is done with marked, industrialised terminology. He thrives despite being 'pressed', 'concentrated' and 'locked on' by his predisposition for restlessness. He does not break or yield despite this environment, simply remaining on or asleep. This clustered use of industrial language dehumanises Armstrong, mechanising him. When off, he is off, and when on, he fulfils the task at hand with total focus. This state echoes the 'scientistic' view of the human body whose clinical framing of the athlete-as-machine demonstrates 'precisely the myopic, self-centred, self-absorbed, self-seeking, self-interested,

selfish, narcissistic and vain attitudes' (Culbertson 2020: 24) that arise when an athlete's compulsive, addictive mindset affects every crevice of their life.

Armstrong has continued to cultivate this cyborg-esque ideal of his own body well past his cycling career, endorsing and lending his image to many endurance sport brands and formats that trade off metaphors of machine like unbreakability and strength.[50] Yet, despite the above passage's espousal of mechanical focus and an ability to singularly commit to one task, it also presents attitudes of immature multiplicity. Paradoxically, Armstrong claims to have unbreakable, myopic concentration, but also writes with immediacy about children, family, adventure, money and motorbikes. His listing of a range of life goals alongside his supposed isolating focus in the same breath is inconsistent. But it is a contradiction that works to Armstrong's textual advantage. It celebrates the malleability of his intensity, projecting the goal driven myopia of the professional athlete not as a rather obvious hindrance to normal life, but an aid to it.

Armstrong's textual embrace of contradiction punctuates his presentation of incorporation, particularly his near synthesis with his own bike. Many Marxist critics parallel 'human sporting exercise and mechanized industrial production', arguing that athletes are exchangeable inputs, mere 'human machines' (Ervine and Dauncey 2021: 55). Rather than fight against this soulless yet grimly compelling vision of sport, Armstrong frequently bends it to his narrative benefit. Foreshadowing Brailsford's mantra of marginal gains, Armstrong writes of how he searched for every advantage, no matter how seemingly trivial. The focus of this search was the precise moulding of his body to the angles and aerodynamics of his bicycle.

> I worked on strengthening my hip flexors and my lower back, until I could hold certain positions – because the smallest thing, like moving your hands on the handlebars, could make you three seconds slower over 25 miles […] A hydration system was installed, so I could sip fluids on without having to shift on the bike from the ideal aerodynamic position – it might save me another ten seconds. I tinkered with the bike incessantly. I was always changing the seat height, or the bars, a little down, or up. I talked to engineers, became personally acquainted with every pipe and tube. I'd become so attuned to the bike that I could sense the

[50] Armstrong is a prominent figure in Ironman and Hyrox events (TMZ Sports 2024)

> slightest alteration, like the princess and the pea. A mechanic might change my seat by a micrometer (159).

Butryn and Masucci state that Armstrong 'views his body as a playground for manipulation' (2003: 130), a vessel for efficient experimentation. This is true, but there is a deeper process of bidirectional incorporation happening within this paragraph. Armstrong, in deliberately strengthening his hip flexors to occupy the most aerodynamically efficient riding position, shows a deference to the technical advancements of racing bikes – he is a self-confessed 'slave to data' (157). Seeking to maximise this cutting-edge engineering, he allows the dimensions of the bike to incorporate his body, as he moulds his hip and back positions to the handlebars. The tucked in position he is describing can even be read as a kind of bow, a physical deference to his bike. In the same section, this power relation reverses. He describes tinkering with the seat and bars manually, locking in the fit. He moves the bike around, incorporating it to *his* body. The exchange between Armstrong and his bike becomes mutual. This passage accepts the mechanical athlete-as-input, with Armstrong bolted to his bike, crouched into the most efficient position to win races. Yet, through his precise, tactile adjustments, he inputs his own bodily nuances into the set-up, enacting an almost 'cyborgian boundary transgression' (Butryn and Masucci 2009: 287) where the carbon bicycle frame is bonded with his distinct dimensions and knowledge.

At other points in the text, Armstrong's merging of his bike and body is less subtle. Above, he was 'pressed' (159), responding to pressures with machine-like instantaneity. In a section that recalls a gruelling battle with his main rival Jan Ullrich, a similar mechanical lexicon is used to explore the bike/body incorporation and to present Armstrong-as-machine. He states 'Every revolution of the pedals sapped me more, and put my body at greater deficit. It was a question of fuel, of calories or the lack thereof' (50). Here, he is clearly defined as a resource for the bike itself, fitting Ervine and Daucey's categorisation. The pedals sap *him* of energy, subjugating *him* to the role of fuel, which, incidentally, he himself is depleted of. Moreover, he uses the term deficit, a state where the body no longer runs on carbohydrates and starts to metabolise muscular proteins. This dramatic, emaciating word choice hints at permanent damage being done to the body. In dangling this consequence here, and similarly elsewhere in the text – 'I got the chills. My limbs felt hollow, empty. Empty, empty, empty' (51) – Armstrong suggests an exhaustive finality, a dramatic submission to the rigours of the Tour. Then, this athlete-as-resource trope is dismissed, conveniently teeing up a conclusion of miraculous recovery and rejuvenation. Deploying the classic trope of the return, he describes

a rush of energy, 'I knew what I'd been through was more difficult than any race. I could always draw on that knowledge and power. I was never really empty. I had gone through all that, just to quit? No. Uh-uh' (54). In a sway between energetic emptiness and exhaustive renewal, Armstrong subjugates sensations of emptiness as somehow less real than those of his rejuvenation. An *energetic non-confession*, this gesturing towards emptiness whilst retaining a machine-like perpetuity on the hills writes emptiness into an illusion. Armstrong's body, mirroring the dissonant resource consumption of the age, continues to addictively, compulsively pursue exhaustion to the point of climax, holding the delusional, unsustainable notion that new energy resources will miraculously materialise.

Armstrong's commitment to the essentiality of suffering does more than reveal his complicity in neoliberal modes of production premised on the myth of abundance. Coupled with his framing of cycling as a recuperative force that alleviates his cancer, it perfectly exemplifies the extreme, uncompromising myopia of elite athletes. Writing of the Tour, Armstrong notes 'It consumed everything. There was no extra energy for any kind of stress' (188). His text draws his cancer diagnosis and treatment into this obsessive whirlpool. Barjinder Singh claims that *Every Second Counts* is an archetypal recovery narrative that presents cancer as an opportunity to 'rethink […] life from a different perspective' (2017: 37). A similar point is made more broadly about Armstrong's two autobiographies by Rachel McLennan (2013: 139). I disagree. Armstrong's text incorporates cancer into his pre-existing, narrow, obsessive, athlete mentality. Of course, he acknowledges the enduring trauma of the disease and its treatment.

> My body had been suffused with not just the scourging poisons of chemo, but also with the anaesthesia during two surgeries. Anaesthesia could linger in the cells. It was a near death experience; you were flooded with drugs, brought to a state of such deep, gassed unconsciousness that you were within a millimetre of death. And then they just held you there, chemically (87).

Yet, despite being held in this precarious, weak state, Armstrong does not, as Singh implies, describe a great change in mentality and perspective. He does not relax or slow down. Rather, as was the case in his first autobiography, fearful of his near-death stasis, he conflates the physical movement and progression of cycling with recovery. Whilst there is a body of medical studies that support the idea of *moderate* exercise aiding the body in remission (Misiag 2022), Armstrong's professional mode of cycling does not fit this manageable, steady

intensity. Instead, at the start right through to the end of the text, he frames himself as ‘congenitally unable to sit still’ (6) and fundamentally averse to the pursuit of ‘personal comfort’ (222). Cancer and chemotherapy, despite their energy-sapping consequences, do not beat his addiction to cycling. His recovery from a depleted state is itself mobilised by depletive movement. Thus, the two texts offer a veneer of epiphanic change that screens a stubborn resistance to alter the myopic patterns of exertion demonstrated by elite athletes. This doubling of depletion, although different to Millar and Pantani’s drug use, is underwritten by a similar addictive impulse. Their texts describe the consumption of alcohol and cocaine as an externalised mimicking of their excesses on the bike. For Armstrong – so obsessed with his bike – this impulse has no other outlet, so he continues to satiate his addictive desire even when critically ill.

The dominance of Armstrong’s single-mindedness in the text is pervasive even when describing his incorporation of international riders to the US Postal Team. Over a five-page section (168-173), Armstrong pays tribute to his team of domestiques, those riders tasked with the self-sacrificial responsibility of giving him the best chance at victory. Within this elegiac passage that commemorates the assembly of US Postal’s squad, Armstrong emphasises his incorporation into a successful team dynamic in both physical and cultural terms. In a racing context, he venerates his teammates, depicting them as an incubating, protective force. ‘They were formidable, stone-faced, and hard-bodied […] They protected me from 200 other riders who wanted to beat up on me, guarded me against crashes and sideswipes, chased down breakaways, ferried food and water, sheltered me from the wind’ (169). In this naturalistic phrasing, Armstrong appears like the fertile centre of a seed casing, his success dependent on the solid outer core of his teammates insulating his body and his energy resources. However, the tone of the team as a symbiotic, incorporated ecosystem across this section is inconsistent. Elsewhere, Armstrong’s writing subtly betrays this flattened co-reliance, revealing a dominant hierarchy of which he is unquestionably at the top. He writes that at the start of the 2002, he chose to forgo the tradition of wearing the yellow jersey (the leader’s jersey, initially worn by the previous year’s winner on the first stage), opting for the ‘regular, workaday blue’ kit (173) of his team. Armstrong codifies this notion of equity into a team code he calls ‘Dead Man’s Rules’, whereby ‘It was all-team, or all-nothing’ (168). Yet, woven into this woolly sentiment of team harmony is the image of Armstrong as a brutal, ruthless leader, not an equal, harmonious teammate. He writes of how the team ‘subjugate their efforts for him’, with their role purely to ‘keep everyone out of the

winner's circle but me' (169). Moreover, his teammate's energies and bodies are considered disposable beyond the sacrificial norm in cycling where domestiques ride in service to the team lead: 'The idea was to use teammates one by one, until they tired. Each served as a kind of booster rocket to get me to the finish line' (184). Whilst a lead rider being led up a climb by a rotating cast of teammates is the accepted tactical norm for the Tour, the term booster rocket externalises his team in the extreme. With it, Armstrong positions them as totally disposable, to be cast off his wheel as soon as their utility expires. Thus, he is never incorporated into the unit, instead feeding off them to exceed them – to physically separate from and surpass them. As he writes in a different chapter, 'A race is an exercise in leaving others behind' (134), and he assesses his fellow US Postal riders by their capacity to 'sacrifice' (168). Nominally, Armstrong refers to this sacrifice in reference to 'the team' (168). But, as hierarchal leader of said team, the sacrifices are de facto made for his gain. Thus, he does not as much incorporate himself into a team structure but subsume it entirely, becoming a self-proclaimed 'cold-blooded tyrant' (168) who demands exhaustive service to purpose the pursuit of his own Tour victories. To use Andrew C. Sparkes' terminology, Armstrong's teambuilding is premised on his cultivation of a 'dominating body', a frame 'against rather than for others' (409).

Elsewhere within this lengthy team-focused passage, Armstrong is also keen to emphasise the incorporated culture of his support riders. He does this at first by sketching each individual with shades of national stereotyping – the Russian Viacheslav Ekimov is characterised as a wordless packhorse, given the nickname 'nails' (170), whilst the slight Spaniards Roberto Heras and Jose Luis Rubiera are described as having a 'hyperkinetic, hummingbird quality' and 'beautifully civilised manners' (170). This incorporation of cultural sporting assets into one team, whether real or exaggerated, is an optimistic evocation of the great American melting pot. Armstrong praises the effortless, lightness of his Spanish teammates (17) alongside the broad physicality of his Russian compatriots (170), whilst simultaneously demanding the same '100 percent aggression' and lack of 'self-interest' (168) from them all. Under the banner of US Postal – predictably an all American red, white and blue – this section of Armstrong's text casts himself as the assembler-in-chief of international cyclists. He venerates their culturally specific talents, whilst also demanding a homogenising adherence to the team's host culture, one which he himself dictates. This give-and-take incorporation is summated in Armstrong's description of team communication.

> With so many different languages on the team, we ended up speaking a kind of pidgin or shorthand with each other. We swapped phrases and colloquialisms, and developed our own jokes […] We traded harmless insults, based on each other's nationalities, limitations, personalities and habits […] laughter took away the suffering of training (171-2).

The simple development of an ad hoc functioning short-hand, community and shared humour is a positive act of incorporation and projects the ideal of competitive sport as a unifying force of good. Yet, it must be acknowledged this idealistic bantering and cross-cultural exchange is a by-product of a simple, mechanical selection process. Armstrong writes, 'The Postal formula to prepare for the Tour was simple: measure the weight of the body, the weight of the bike, and the power of the legs. Make the weight go down, and the power go up' (168). Cyclists were signed to US Postal based on their performance metrics and their willingness to serve the lead lead rider, otherwise, as Armstrong states bluntly, 'you got left home' (168). So as Armstrong depicts a thriving environment rich with cultural-linguistic exchange, it is a fragile incorporated state based entirely on success.

Armstrong registers this fraternal tone elsewhere in the text, too. Again manipulating confession into self-veneration, he describes the infamous 12th stage of the 2000 Tour that summited Mont Ventoux, the scene of Tommy Simpson's death in 1967. Armstrong recalls the climb alongside Pantani, his main rival that year, claiming he eased up at the finish line allowing the Italian the stage victory. His explanation proves a succinct insight into the ethics of Tour cycling, but remains another revelatory confession crafted to inflate Armstrong's own reputation.

> I felt Pantani deserved the win. He'd had a long, hard year trying to re-establish his confidence after the drug testing affair. I thought he was one of the sport's more interesting figures, a swashbuckling sort, in an electric pink cycling suit, a bandana, and an earring. That day he'd been behind again and again, and come back. I respected his effort, and it seemed only right that a superb climber like him should win on the Ventoux, especially since I had a ten-minute lead after almost two weeks of racing, and could afford to finish second. Such a concession was unheard of in other sports, but it wasn't at the Tour. In fact, there could be a strange honour in it […] I didn't contest. A peddle stroke from the finish, I let up (45-6).

There is an element of truth and adherence to a pre-existing culture in Armstrong's words. The race has a history of riders being 'gifted' stages by others in the knowledge that the result will not impact the overall Tour. Armstrong was quoted in the immediate aftermath of the stage espousing the same sentiment, cuttingly stating 'Marco is here to win stages, I am here to win the Tour' (Nicholl 2000). And it is this expectant arrogance that is perceptible in the passage above, too. The act of letting up, of ceasing competition is a confession that emboldens Armstrong's role as chief arbiter of the Tour. In veiled terms, he writes that he decides who wins and when they win. It is a confession that sits firmly within race tradition, but still amounts to an act of neutral manipulation that signifies the American's wider dominance and control of the peloton. Moreover, it adds the illusion of subtle kindness to Armstrong's personal brand. His confession of easing up for the benefit of Pantani and his acquisition of 'strange honour' is an attempt to soften the overwhelming ruthlessness elsewhere in the autobiography. His humble surrendering of victory gives the reader the image of someone reverent of the spirit of Tour cycling. This attuning to the intricacies and mores of the peloton functions as an attempt to court the savvy French public – a population base who had held significant 'skepticism' (76) of Armstrong's performances. But, more importantly, it cast the man who set the precedent of the sports' public decay as someone who understood its soul.

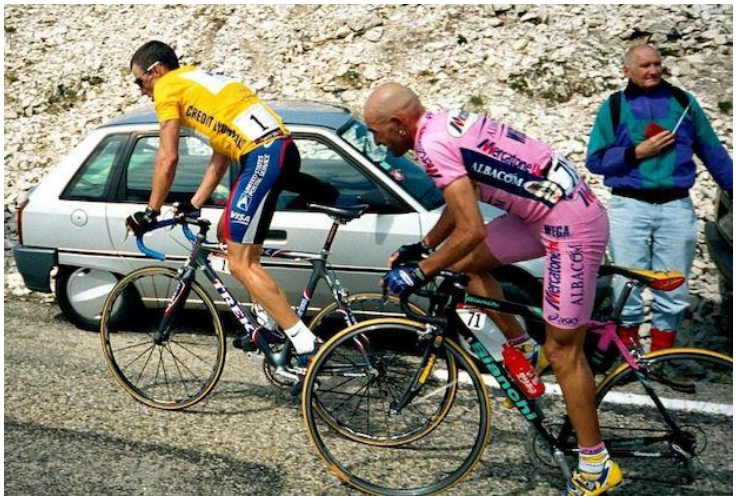

Figure 11: Armstrong and Pantani on Mount Ventoux (Nutt 2000).

Thus far, the non-confessional aspects of the text I have analysed have been neat sleights of hand. Amongst other characteristics, Armstrong confesses his obsessiveness, his intensity, his corporate greed. These self-indulgent vignettes that ultimately signal his wealth and performance are hollow musings that fill the gap of his unspoken doping violations, the

content of which would provide a much more scandalous and thrilling narrative. Only on rare occasion in the text does this non-confessional mode harden into outright denial, but when Armstrong deploys this directness, he does so by intertwining his claims of clean riding with his cancer diagnosis. He states directly: 'I would never take a substance like EPO or human growth hormone and jeopardize my health after what I've been through' (120). A calculated line of argument that Armstrong would repeatedly deploy in interviews with the press as well as his autobiographical writing, this spectacular denial cynically weaponises his cancer. It is distasteful in the extreme, but from a narrative perspective, a non-confessional masterstroke. Greg LeMond, Armstrong's predecessor as North America's premier road cyclist, famously claimed in an email exchange with Walsh that if Lance's story was true, it was the greatest sporting triumph of all time, but if false, it was the greatest fraud (2001). In line with Armstrong's indomitable persona, this denial is *the* successful risk of the book. It places detractors of Armstrong's success as critics of his recovery, as cynical agents who believe he continued to engage in dangerous blood doping mere months after rounds of chemotherapy. By incorporating cancer and making it central to his narrative, Armstrong not only makes his athletic achievements more miraculous, he also frames the very idea of doping as an altogether obvious impossibility.

Aided by a seemingly impenetrable recovery narrative, Armstrong was extremely successful in commodifying the voracity he showed on the bike into seeking corporate endorsements and sponsorships. He writes of his heady life off the bike mirroring the intensity of his life on it.

> I lived in a constant, elevated state of excitement; the air was thin and getting thinner, and compounding the excitement was the fact that Kik and I were awaiting the birth of our first child, Luke. I kept waiting for things to subside, but they never did. Bill[51] was swamped with offers and requests and proposed endorsements. He struck some handsome deals on my behalf, with prestigious sponsors like Bristol-Myers Squibb, Nike and Coca-Cola. With the deals came new responsibilities: I shot half a dozen commercials, posed for magazine ads and the Wheaties box. I earned the nickname "Lance Incorporated" and now I was a business entity instead of just a person (9)

[51] Armstrong's agent

Armstrong's corporate dealings are presented as replenishing in the same way as his cycling. A heady, sparse thinness in the air is paradoxically framed as exciting and energising; his busyness in business is not an exhausting distraction but a stimulating add-on in life. In every sphere of life, he unearths energy from constancy. As the passage progresses, he revels in his transmigration from person to entity, an *incorporated legal organisation*. He transcends his body by trading off it, using his endurance and recovery narrative to strike a plethora of lucrative financial sponsorships and endorsements. The subtle power relations of these deals and Armstrong's refusal to engage with the scholarly differences between them embed his in-text role as an institution. With an endorsement 'it is proposed that consumers infer that the brand needs the athlete's image and that it offers a monetary compensation to use it' (Carrillat and d'Austous 2014: 1071). This relationship is reversed under sponsorship (1071). Sponsors often provide equipment and investment in product research tailored specifically to the athlete, a service that implies a level of corporate causation in the athlete's success. Armstrong's ascent to the role of corporation is marked by the interchangeability of these terms. Sponsorships, endorsements and deals are as one throughout the paragraph, a simplified grouping that boasts of a unique level of agency held by Armstrong. His agent, whose very existence further legitimises Armstrong's status as incorporated, actively negotiates the sponsorships and endorsements. This proclamation of negotiating superiority – being the party striking the deal, differentiates Armstrong from being a mid-tier peloton rider dependent on a nutrition bar sponsorship for a living, marking him out as a corporate megalith whose image multinational companies are desperate to use.

Lance Incorporated mentions a portfolio of partnerships spanning industrialised food and drink production (Coca-Cola, Wheaties), sporting apparel (Nike, Carrera) and pharmaceutical research (Bristol Myers-Squibb). Before analysing the individual significance of each of these partnerships, acknowledging their variety is important. The text boasts of Armstrong's role as a standalone man-as-business (9), emphasising his status as an all-American icon who cannily exploits his sporting and recovery capital, forging relationships with behemoth, sector leading companies. The size and diversity of these financial partnerships demonstrate a man who, whilst emphasising a narrative of focused bodily performance – 'I give everything I've got' (120) – also has a disembodied corporate acuity which commodifies that very muscular intensity. Armstrong then morphs it (himself) into an agile business entity, his own 'enterprise' (9), by selling his neoliberally valued virtues of intensity, recovery and victory (read profit) to the highest bidder.

The first of his 'prestigious sponsors' (9) mentioned in the passage above is the lucrative Fortune 500 pharmaceutical firm Bristol Myers Squibb (BMS), a partnership that arose from their prominent work in cancer research. More than a token ambassadorial figure, Armstrong's relationship with BMS culminated in the organisation of the Tour of Hope (ToH), a fundraising 3500 mile cross-continental bike race from LA to Washington. This economic partnership encapsulates Armstrong's total commitment to funding a cure for cancer. In addition, the *ToH* embeds that cure in his mode of depletive recovery. Through it, his fundraising with BMS hinges on thousands more miles on a bike. It is a doubling down on his ideal of recuperative endurance. His payment, and the charitable donations no doubt yielded from his association with BMS, are themselves underwritten by the excesses that characterised Armstrong's career. Thus, the *ToH*'s processional ride incorporates sporting endurance into survivorship and recovery, a goal itself accomplished through a lucrative partnership between Lance TM and Big Pharma.

Figure 12: Lance Armstrong and the Tour of Hope (Sapp 2004).

The synergy between Armstrong's corporate partnerships and his cycling career is present in his nutritional endorsements, too. The American famously lent his image to Coca-Cola's 2003 "Be Real" campaign, a run of advertisements that sought to show the brand as 'genuine, authentic and real' (Bikebiz 2003). A grim, misdirecting attempt to court a reputation as a "natural" product, the ad obscures the synthetic artificiality of Coca-Cola products, 500 ml of which provides 53 grams of sugar, and little else of nutritional value. Armstrong's text executes a very similar misdirection. Throughout *Every Second Counts,* his

own synthetic augmentation via doping is denied, veiled by the spectacle of a miraculous comeback victory.

> There was no mystery and no miracle drug that helped me win that Tour De France in 1999. […] It was a matter of recognising the moment. It was a matter of better training and technique, and my experiences with cancer and subsequent willingness to make the sacrifices. These were the explanations (156).

In this plain, defiant statement, the invigorating, oxygenating boost of the blood doping that, in whatever capacity, did contribute to Armstrong's success, is buried beneath a self-proclaimed trifecta of virtue. That is, his talent, his work ethic, and his reorientation of cancer as an opportunity for personal and athletic growth. Like Coca-Cola washing clean their E-number rich product with images of relaxed athletic bodies supping the beverage, Armstrong too courts naturalness, a veil of authenticity with which to hide the biologically boosted artificiality of his victory.

In his boasting paragraph of wealth inflation, Armstrong enshrines his agile sublimation into "Lance Incorporated" by adding the breakfast cereal Wheaties into the list of his corporate partnerships. A General Mills product that straddles the world of sport and ultra-processed food, Wheaties have a proud company heritage built on athlete endorsement. Presenting their sweetened and fortified wheat flakes as 'The breakfast of champions', the box has featured over 800 athletes including Babe Ruth, Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods. As such, the Wheaties box is considered a valuable signifier of athletic prowess in the country and a key marker of health and sporting achievement. Such was the cereal's heft in sports marketing, baseball historian Jack Lansing claims their aggressive sponsorship of the MLB and other American sporting arenas throughout the mid twentieth-century helped establish financial relations between sporting, broadcasting and nutritional institutions as the norm (Kindy 2021). Yet, despite this historical attachment of their product to different incarnations of the prime athletic body, much like Armstrong's other endorsement Coca-Cola, Wheaties are a highly processed product high in short chain carbohydrates and sugars. By naming these endorsements in his text, particularly Wheaties – a brand so dependent on the image of the athletic champion – Armstrong tacitly signals a connection between his cycling prowess and the consumption of his sponsor's products. His diet, however, is a departure from cola and sugary cereal. In an interview with the *New York Post*, he relays how after his cancer diagnosis, he cut red meat, dairy products and coffee from his diet whilst 'completely'

avoiding processed foods (Turner 2001). Strict and evangelical about his nutritional preparation, Armstrong's text castigates teammate Floyd Landis for his caffeine intake (151-2), considering proper nutrition a key tenet of athletic performance. Thus, there is a non-confessional aspect to the flaunting of these endorsements, and a refusal to incorporate the products Armstrong is paid to represent. The cyclist happily hails Coca-Cola and Wheaties as 'prestigious' (9), but beneath this PR phrasing is an athlete fuelled on much more nutritionally dense foods. A sacrosanct view of internal health that clearly did not stretch to the dangers of EPO use, Armstrong's clean, regulated diet reveals a clear distinction between his business and his body.

Advertising and athlete insincerity is not unusual. Armstrong is not alone in hailing Coca-Cola, Wheaties and the like as 'prestigious' (9) products in search of a huge contract. The uneasy signalling of these endorsements that position soft drinks and cereals as a supercharged aid to athletic performance is a frustrating misrepresentation, but more significantly, Armstrong's associations with Coca-Cola and Wheaties crucially have a glaring addictive quality. Caffeine, a key component of Coca-Cola, is quantifiably addictive, whilst the easy palatability of processed foods high in sugar are subject to a growing body of evidence that consider them addictive too (Gearhardt 2023). Thus, the entire narrative arc of Armstrong's text is riven with addiction. His autobiographical works depict a man addicted to cycling, who harnesses the power of that addictive dint to stoke his cancer recovery. Once in remission, he then agilely deploys his recovery capital to become a hyper marketable beacon of heroic sporting health, an image of athleticism he then ab(uses) to sell addictive food and drink that his own recovered lifestyle totally rejects.

It is a flagrant attitude displayed in two further campaigns with another of his sponsors, Nike. Armstrong was a longstanding partner of the company, with Nike instrumental in the foundation and fundraising arm of Armstrong's own charity, Livestrong. It was a relationship that helped to raise over one-hundred million dollars, much of which was siphoned directly into cancer research (Rovell 2012). The now infamous highlight of their relationship was a 2001 advertisement where Armstrong tackled the murmuring atmosphere of suspicion around his post-cancer Tour successes. A visual extension of his in-text denials – 'I would never take EPO or human growth hormone' (119) – Armstrong utilised the ad to represent their brand, but more importantly, bolster his own. Filmed rising early in the morning for a training ride, Armstrong answers a question so ubiquitous in the cycling world that in in the ad it isn't even spoken. He narrates the scene with the words 'what am I on?',

followed by the response ‘I’m on the bike, six days a week, bustin’ my ass’ (2001). Trading off Nike’s endorsement, Armstrong used their sizeable platform to supplement his own textual proclamations of innocence in *Every Second Counts* and *It’s Not About The Bike* with a veneer of global legitimacy. His textual and corporately sanctioned denial expertly countered the minority (yet vocal) section of sporting journalists who were doubtful of Armstrong’s clean doping status. Walsh, the most prominent Anglophone proponent of this sceptical lobby, acknowledges in his exposé *Seven Deadly Sins* just how significant Armstrong’s role as “Lance Incorporated” was in sustaining his mythos as *the* case study in clean, exhaustive recovery. Walsh writes, ‘Lance Armstrong can be smart and very decisive. He saw the system, he understood it and played it beautifully. America was his principal market and his sponsors’ principal market’ (284). By cultivating sponsorships that allow for and actively endorse the proliferation of Armstrong as a product of unique physical graft – and readily boasting of such deals on screen and in text – “Lance Incorporated” supplements his own testimony with that of the crème de la crème of corporate America.

Armstrong’s status as an on-screen star for Nike also provided more experimental mechanisms to aid his reputation that extended beyond the standard ‘hard work reaps reward’ narrative of his 2001 advertisement. Screened simultaneously in 2000-1, Nike produced another ad where Armstrong and his team are cycling through the Frech countryside, when they happen upon a travelling circus attending to a dying elephant. Glowing as a Christlike figure, Armstrong bends down and breathes life into the animal. As the screen fades out, the words ‘Why Sport? Healthy Lungs” can be read. This miraculous image and claim that sport is not only a physical good but also a moral good tessellates perfectly with Armstrong’s recovery narrative. It reinforces cycling and the cultivation of aerobic fitness as the underpinning factor in his own resurrection from cancer. From the centre of Nike’s stage, the image is a reflexive, institutional sanctioning of the idea that elite sport produces a healthy, robust body; that intensity is *always* the answer. Armstrong is given a platform to present the serene, healthy illusion of his exhaustive recovery, whilst Nike use his body as a model vessel, gesturing their audience towards their sporting products. The ad also further synonymises Armstrong with the Tour De France. He is wearing the leader’s jersey and gliding through rural France, a setting crucial to the Tour. Small municipalities bid to the central organiser for the privilege of witnessing the peloton pass through, and their countryside locations are a bucolic symbol of the race (The Inner Ring 2013). Armstrong’s ease in these agrarian idylls denotes a calm mastery of the Tour’s decentralised landscape,

His relaxed aura emphasises the fact that he is at home in this race. Moreover, the circus workers turn to Amstrong as their saviour, a mimicking of the American's principalrole in restoring the prestige and popularity of the Tour after the PR disaster of the Festina affair. It secures his reputation as a restorative icon of the race.

Initially, Armstrong's texts' attempt to show this corporate shrewdness and appetite for capital as a relic of his pre-cancer self, a moral transgression that with his recovery, is wiped clean. When recalling a discussion with a friend about his financial portfolio, Armstrong states, 'Happiness to me was making money and acquiring stuff' (32). This confession of materialist desires precedes a section of rebirthed perspective. Armstrong, touting himself as 'Tour champion and a cancer activist' (33), attempts to show that his experience as a survivor softened his once ruthless corporate streak.

> I wanted to make money, sure, but I didn't want to be exhausted by it, or worried about brand strategies. I didn't want to see my face on a cardboard cutout at a convenience store, and I didn't want to make a movie with Tweetie Bird (33).

There is a moral loftiness to this passage that attempts to distance *Lance Incorporated* from lucrative but twee partnerships. Indeed, the Tweetie bird reference reads as a sly dig at Michael Jordan's starring role in the animated blockbuster *Space Jam* (1997). Yet, despite an avowed commitment to more 'meaningful endorsements' (33), Armstrong still ends up, at different times, on a sugary cereal box, drinking a can of cola, and reanimating a fainting elephant. Financially handsome, yes, but hardly 'meaningful'. This violation of Armstrong's sporting commitments and moral beliefs (33) reveals more than his hypocrisy. It shows an individual who is energised by and addicted to *chasing down,* be it a rival cyclist or deal. He finds recovery and vigour in relentlessly pursuing his horizons.

Chapter Conclusion

The pursuit of such horizons has in recent years taken Armstrong back to the inception of his competitive sporting career and his early success in triathlon and endurance events (Castor 2024). He has leveraged his reputation, becoming a prominent participant in distance running, hyrox and hybrid run-swim events, as well as receiving work as a cycling pundit on various American outlets. In doing so, he has positioned himself as a divisive authority on endurance sports culture, particularly in North America where his re-emergence in sporting

media has been referred to as a symptom of his 'frustrating persistence' (Simonovich 2019). He has appeared on hugely influential fitness, lifestyle and ultra-running podcasts such as *The Rich Roll Podcast* (2017) and the behemoth of the genre, *The Joe Rogan Podcast* (2024). This visibility as both athlete and analyst in keystone endurance sport fields is representative of Armstrong's prime neoliberal resurrection. The individualistic, battling cultural capital held within his addictive self-depletion has miraculously clung to its value, despite his spectacular complicity in entrenching doping practices in the Tour. Reputationally, the allure of his graft is stubbornly undying, and it is his virtuous, addictively positive pursuit of pain and exhaustive renewal that is a narrative framework taken, refined and extremified by the sport and associated literatures of ultra-running. In this genre of endurance sport culture and writing, addictive exercise praxis and the ability to pursue ever-diminishing states of exhaustion is positioned as, like in cycling, a valorous, valuable trait. But, unlike in cycling where addictive substance abuse is presented as a compounding coping mechanism for sporting exertion – a point exemplified in my analyses of Millar and Pantani's texts – ultra-running literature has a marked pattern of offering substitutive representations of addiction whereby the wrought demands of extreme distance races and training act as a proxy mode of stimulation that satiates addictive desires once fulfilled by drug and alcohol abuse. It is a sport with participants who willingly maximise the physical stress on their bodies not with the numbing and recuperative powers of drink, drugs and PEDs, but with an ultimate neoliberal will, trading substance addiction for distance addiction.

Chapter 3

Confessing the Running-as-RecoveryLifestyle: Confessional Self-Help in Ultra-Runner Narratives

Running is a broad sporting praxis that is striated into many unique, common-yet-distinct Bourdieusian fields. The fast-twitch muscle of an anaerobically focused Olympic sprinter, a casual weekend jogger, a mountain runner and a one-hundred-mile race specialist are all runners, each with their own physical and social space containing 'specific practices, [each] endowed with its own specific rewards and its own rules'; a place where a 'whole specific competence or culture is generated and invested' (Bourdieu 1986: 821). Hilgers and Mangez re-affirm this definition in their edited collection on Pierre Bourdieu, defining a field as a 'relatively autonomous domain of activity that responds to rules of functioning and institutions that are specific to it' (5). This microcosm of community and ritual is narrowed further by Neil Baxter in his excellent book *Running, Identity and Meaning: The Pursuit of Distinction Through Sport* (2021). In it, he distils Bourdieu's notion of a 'field' to frame running as a 'lifestyle sport':

> A 'lifestyle sport' is not defined as a stylistically consistent cluster of practices made up of elements from disparate realms tied together by broad underlying tastes, but rather as a coherent, living community or 'life world' revolving around a particular sport with its own distinctive culture. Lifestyle sports are strongly associated with a particular way of life and demand a large investment of time and resources to build status within them (11).

The core idea here is that running extends beyond the parameters of physical praxis, incorporating a set of (sub)cultural behaviours. These can consist of tailoring one's diet to improve running performance, speaking in a coded, running-specific lexicon or building one's life around a meticulously planned training and race schedule. Some who adopt running-as-lifestyle weave running into the rhythms of everyday life to the extent that social, familial and work responsibilities are reorientated around running, not vice versa. Such prominence is an extreme behaviour that this thesis considers a symptom of addiction, and it is the collision of addiction and running-as-lifestyle as presented in ultra-running narratives that will be the focus of this chapter. I will show how they utilise sport and its neoliberal value 'as a site from which to achieve public good' (John and MacDonald 2019: 1187) to

show how running – and specifically an exhaustive commitment to it – is presented as its own addictive outlet that helps sustain sobriety and recovery from alcohol and drug abuse. I call this trope of ultra-running literature *running-as-recoverylifestyle,* and it demonstrates an extremifying of the healthism embedded in the genre's best-selling foundational texts: Chris MacDougall's *Born to Run* (2009) and Scott Jurek's *Eat and Run* (2012). These books shifted ultra-running and ultra-running writing from relative sub-cultural obscurity to mainstream prominence, glorifying the mental and physical benefits of extreme distance running and training. *Eat and Run* tracks Jurek's journey to becoming the world's most successful ultra-runner throughout the 2000s; in it, he credits his vegan diet for his competitive dominance, and running for aiding his mental health during periods of crisis. MacDougall's text was a key driving force in the widespread popularisation of ultra-distance and trail running from 2009 to present, with his writing on the Tarahumara – a Mexican tribe known for running ultra-marathon distances barefoot through the katabatic landscape of the Copper Canyon – proposing the idea that humans are genetically predisposed to be distance runners and that running can be a powerful, preventative public health tool to help combat obesity, heart disease and high blood pressure.

Figure 13: A Tarahumara runner (Cubesare 2021).

Both Jurek's and MacDougall's texts argue compellingly that participation in ultra-distance running is, even with its innate extremity, a healthy and evolutionarily natural activity.

The autobiographical life writing of addict-cum-athletes Rich Roll, Catra Corbett and Charlie Engle – the textual focus of this chapter – capitalises on the expanding ultra-running literary genre carved out by MacDougall and Jurek. The three athlete-authors redeploy the healthism of *Born to Run* and *Eat and Run*, augmenting it by asserting that ultra-running keeps one healthy, but also holds the potential to replace, or even remediate alcohol and drug addictions. Indeed, all three texts, to different extents, track a redemptive path from substance addiction to ultra-running through addictive exercise praxis. Ultra-running as a curative

solution to addiction is central to Roll, Corbett and Engle's writing. Each of them lionises it as a mode of recovery, framing it as the crucial factor in their ongoing sobriety. By interrogating this transformational claim put forward throughout each text, I will acknowledge running-as-recovery lifestyle as a seductive, restorative trope within endurance sports writing that has helped these athletes stay sober. However, I argue that this active recovery is, in narrative terms, guilty of minimising the implications of substituting a lifestyle in service to substance use for a lifestyle in service to running. Specifically, I will show how the authors present a (non-)confessional difference in approach to this substitutive mechanism and their wider narratives. Rich Roll's *Finding Ultra* does not confess any explicit addictive quality to his running-as-recovery lifestyle, despite its clear presence textually and sub-textually. So, whilst he openly confesses his addictive past through his training obsessed childhood at prestigious sports school Landon (27-8), his alcoholism in college which derailed his professional sporting prospects (36), his workaholism during his young professional career as an entertainment lawyer (67-8) and his food addiction during middle age (96-7), his running recovery is presented as a curative solution to this past, and not a duplicating symptom of it.

Charlie Engle and his text *Running Man* present a more openly confessional view of the running-as-recovery lifestyle. Like Roll, Engle attempts to minimise to the reader his own talent, but he is the son of two college athletes and the grandson of a University of North Carolina athletics coach (5), and this athletic legacy means sport, both American football and running, were embedded in his life before his substance addictions. His home life was bohemian and largely unsupervised where he was raised by his poet mother and artist step-dad, who, unbelievably, is called Coke Ariail (6). In this childhood devoid of boundaries, Engle freely experiments with alcohol, and after a drink at the age of twelve, alcohol 'planted a little flag' (7) in his brain. Despite this explicit underage drinking, it does not precipitate young teenage binges, and Engle describes his addictive relationship with alcohol forming fully in college. It grew so severe he was forced to drop out (23), and led to a spiralling outward of addictive behaviour that resulted in a dangerous drug deal with armed gang members (48). Prior to his ongoing sobriety, Engle habitually ran marathons as penance for his addictive consumption, but that simultaneity eventually evolved into sober substitution after forming a strong relationship with the peer support group Alcoholics Anonymous. Engle, unlike Roll and Corbett, is wholly cognisant of the centrality running holds in his

sobriety, and his narrative readily confesses the substitutive quality of his distance running which he presents as an imperfect coping mechanism for his addictive impulses.

Corbett's approach to confessing substitutive addictions sits between that of Roll and Engle in her text *Reborn on the Run*. In it, she confesses addictions to meth, cocaine and alcohol that formed during chaotic teenage years where she developed anorexia, attempted suicide, lost her father and worked as a go-go dancer in order to both sell and have access to a range of different drugs (15-7). Like Roll and Engle, she presents ultra-running as a curative outlet. But she does so by dissonantly accepting the addictive characteristics of her running[52] without explicitly expressing them as an addiction. Because of this disparity in approach, the authors engage in divergent modes of self-(re)making that I will differentiate and analyse. In *Finding Ultra*, Roll recasts himself as an ultra-distance runner free of his addictive past. Meanwhile *Running Man* and *Reborn on the Run* reject such erasure. Engle remakes himself as a runner-addict who incorporates his past addictive life directly and openly into his athletic praxis, and Corbett presents her running as such a miraculous, healing solution to her substance issues that she is unwilling to fully confess the addictive impulses still functioning in her mind and body in her pursuit of ultra-running.

Addiction, Running and Confessionary Self-Help Talk

Ultra-running as a mode of self-(re)making is underpinned by a self-help discourse; specifically, one that tacitly or otherwise, encourages the production of neoliberally-coded bodies. Running – especially running excessively with addictive vigour – sculpts a lithe, thin-yet-strong athletic frame. This frame, with its ability to endure pain, adapt to race conditions and exert extreme effort when in competition with others is a prime embodiment of neoliberal value. Indeed, sport generally is an ideal environment to exercise the neoliberal valorisation of 'self-betterment and entrepreneurship' (Llamas-Rodriguez 2017). Athletes are in a physical marketplace, their success measured directly against their ability to push themselves further and faster than their opponents, and this boundary pushing is visibly extreme in a sporting discipline where races longer than one hundred miles are commonplace. Sometimes races exceed hundreds of miles at a time, requiring resilience and an ability to redraw human conceptions of depletion. This stretching of resource, of demanding more and more from a

[52] By 2013, Corbett had already run more than one-hundred races over one-hundred miles long (GVA 2013).

finite body, is an athletic performance of neoliberalism's status as 'an open-ended continuum of acceleration without foreseeable limit' (Sugarman and Thrift 2020: 810). Yet, the autobiographical literature of ultra-running presents this self-excavating praxis not as a gradual eroding of the body, but as evidence of its robust ability to endure, and push through exhaustion. And not just that, but to view the addictive cycle of pursuing such exhaustion as a mode of self-help that cures, or at least stems, addictive thought.

The lexicon of self-help and self-transformation is proliferated throughout ultra-running writing and culture, most prominently in opinion pieces that recount the common addict-turned-ultra-runner experience. Titles like "Running Can Help People Recovering from Addiction Stay Sober" (Kuzma 2017), "The Power of Running for Addiction Recovery" (Prance 2020) and "Find it difficult to resist alcohol or drugs? How running can help" (Fleming 2018) are common, and demonstrate the neoliberal stranglehold that is exercised over first-world, twenty-first century athletic culture. All such titles communicate that addicts can be literally mobilised by market agents (magazines, podcasts, books, fitness influencers) to fix themselves using the individualist, disciplined and self-transformational potential of running. Running as a curative, self-help praxis operates freely in these social media and publishing spheres, but such a position has also been absorbed and reproduced in NHS policy in the UK, and is symptomatic of the neoliberalisation of public services. For example running and participation in Parkrun – a free, weekly five-kilometre run organised by volunteers – is widely socially prescribed as a treatment for various mental and physical health diagnoses including addiction (Fleming et al. 2020). This focus on self-driven change, though broadly positive, is demonstrative of a shift in public health policy that places the responsibility of lifestyle improvements solely onto individuals.

Sandra Dolby is keen to emphasise the instructional characteristics of the self-help genre, arguing in her 2008 book *Self Help Books and Why Americans Keep Reading Them* that self-help literature has maintained its cultural significance not because of 'entertainment value but rather for their utility in various self-initiated programs of self-education' (25). Yet, the ultra-running literature in this chapter has achieved commercial success and notoriety by resisting this utilitarian assessment of the self-help genre. The subject of such writing – namely extreme athletic feats taking place in areas of outstanding natural beauty as a mode of substance addiction recovery, challenges Dolby's false dichotomy, one that sees entertainment and utility within the self-help genre as incompatible. With their glossy, spectacular photos and super-human narratives of endurance, the works of Roll, Corbett and

Engle distort the boundary between entertainment and self-help. They are ambidextrous texts, thrilling and advising at once. This duality makes the advisory components of their books less one-dimensional and more palatable even to those who are deeply cynical of formulaic self-help discourse. Indeed, an entertaining, recovery narrative of athletic exhaustion set against a philosophical and very real process of "mountain climbing" centres the efforts of the individual and their immense surroundings to such an extent that the idea of citizens having limited control over 'genes or environment or fate' (Butler-Bowden 2002: 12) is quietened.

This issue of autonomy and whether consumers of self-help material can replicate the advice they read in ultra-running life writing is a key concern in this chapter, for, as Nora Hamalainen points out, autonomy is formed around something of a contradiction in the self-help genre:

> Self-development is presented as an individual and voluntary enterprise of the responsible citizen, but to achieve this ideal the readers of self-help are expected to conform to a body of expertise represented by the self-help authors (294).

Thus, self-help authors create a de facto hierarchy between themselves and the consumer. The reader seeks to improve their own life, and that desired improvement is mediated through the rubrics, methods and advice set out by the likes of our athlete-authors. This calls for the reader to replicate a specific, individual model of self-improvement and apply it to themselves, irrespective of the chasm of differences (social, economic, educational and in terms of sporting or running experience) that may exist between them and the author. These differences raise an important point in the context of the sporting-addiction autobiography. Many of the machinations successful athlete-authors use in trading substance abuse for exercise and training addiction are accessible to them due to their wealth, or wider position within the world economy.[53] Capital, as well as race and gender, influence access to expensive equipment training locations and nutritional advice. As Christina Scharff notes, 'the resources to continuously self-invent, for example, tend to be more accessible to members of the middle-class' (2015) as their affluence affords them 'time and space to reorganise their lives' (Manavis 2021). The packaging of addiction and athletic advice from a privileged vantage point may satisfy the creative and economic goals of the authors, but it neglects issues of structural inequality. As Suzanne Moore suggests, contemporary self-help

[53] To differing extents, all three authors in this chapter have financial security. All pay to attend rehab, all attend college, and all weather periods of unemployment with support from family.

texts are operatively middle class and atomise social problems, choosing to tackle them through the vector of 'competitive self-improvement' (2019). When consumed by a readership without strong socio-economic standing, such focus on transformative behaviours contribute to a collective malaise and 'horror and shame of failing to meet the sky-high expectations we set for ourselves' (Schwartz 2018). The false equivalency of authorial and consumer experience drives self-loathing for the reader, the exact opposite of what the self-help genre seeks to achieve.

In her *New Yorker* long read, Alexandra Schwartz writes critically of the neoliberal idea that the self is 'fundamentally good and thus worthy of comfort and satisfaction' but acknowledges that this viewpoint proliferates through American and European societies and proves a central justification for the self-help genre itself (2018). In my analysis of Roll, Corbett and Engle below, I will demonstrate how this view on the self as intrinsically good is tied to the idea of 'accepting yourself as you are' (Burkeman 2019), which is in turn used as a flimsy justification for sporting and exercise addiction. All three authors exploit the idea that ultra-running is somehow their natural purpose, and their confession of this innateness and subsequent framing of it as a profound discovery is a cynical, pseudo-spiritualist trope that repositions addictive traits as authenticity.

Addiction and Running: A Substitutive Beginning

The prevalence of recovering addicts and the trading of substance abuse for running, especially within the ultra-running community and its written output is high. Accompanying the keystone texts of this chapter are numerous editorials and guest pieces in prominent running magazines, blogs and online publications that confess, justify or ponder the substitution of substance addictions with exercise addictions. In an op-ed piece in *Ultra Running Magazine,* Rachel Nypaver writes of the prevalence of recovering addicts in ultra-running, and freely admits 'I would be lying if I said I never transferred "my addiction" into exercise and running in a not-so-positive way' and that 'if I had to quit I probably would go into a slight withdrawal' (2014). This withdrawal is indicative of addiction in the context of Griffiths' common pathologies. Running, like Nypaver's previous compulsion to consume alcohol is given a salient priority, it is framed as a necessity, and anxiety and depression encroach when it cannot be undertaken. Her experience of running withdrawal is not unique. Caleb Daniloff, a former alcoholic and drug addict, writes frankly in a *Runner's World* article

that pitches the recuperative potentiality of running, 'I can tell you that if I don't exercise, I actually feel very uncomfortable. Running gives me a great sense of wellbeing and calms me down' (2017). James McWilliams in the *Pacific Standard* provides an unsettlingly absurd example of the lengths one runner goes to avoid the feeling described by Daniloff. He tells of one man who, without a safe environment outside or a treadmill, ran laps around a darkened car park to satiate his need for exercise (2017). This cyclical, almost imprisoned image is demonstrative of the sheer mobilising force of running addiction; showing that the behavioural impulse to exercise can easily match the potent need for drugs or alcohol.

This comparable extremity is a logical reason for the correlation between runner and addict, but why does it matter? Kerry McGannon explores this question in her qualitative research on Catra Corbett and Charlie Engle's autobiographies. She describes how the athlete-authors consider ultra-running an ideal incubatory space for addiction recovery. McGannon argues that the ultra-running community provides a valuable source of 'recovery capital' (1) that fulfils the social, physical, personal and cultural needs of a functioning 'recovery pathway' (1), mirroring the content of the literature she analyses. And yes, undoubtedly, the ultra-running community has helped many substance addicts with their narcotic dependence.[54] Yet, I must differentiate my position from McGannon's. Whilst I agree that involvement in the ultra-scene and lifestyle can be recuperative, the texts I cite in this chapter detail a transition from one addiction to another. The pathologies of addiction I have outlined in the introduction chapter of this thesis using Griffiths' model and the ICD-11 are re-routed in these textual examples. Running replaces substance misuse in totality, and that presents its own set of challenges. I do not dispute that trading substance addiction for an exercise addiction may well be a case of damage limitation; it is likely better for one's health to run one hundred mile training weeks than it is to be a heroin addict. Moreover, I am respectful of the strength of character demonstrated by the likes of Corbett in their use of running to subsume substance abuse. Yet, when narratives position ultra-running as *the* transformative solution to drug addiction, they create a palimpsest, plastering over a singular dependence on substance with a singular dependence on endurance running, with running becoming the all-consuming lifestyle of neoliberalism's necessary demand for self-help.

Zoe Hrom writes of the dangers of this mindset in *Trail Runner* magazine:

[54] Jenny Valentish references at least a dozen examples of addicts who stopped abusing substances primarily through running in her article, "Runner's high: the well-trodden road of swapping drugs and alcohol for exercise" (2019).

> You might *feel* that your evening jog is helping you relax, and it could, but it's problematic when exercise becomes your only coping tool for stress and intense emotion. Athletes can get stuck in a cycle of compounding stress that leads to ever-increasing activity (2020).

Hrom's words track the way running can quickly escalate from mental health aid to accumulative obsession. Her term 'ever increasing activity' reveals an innate competitiveness, a neoliberally conditioned pursuit for *more* that encapsulates Stephen Metcalf's claim in *The Guardian* that 'competition is the only legitimate organising principle for human activity' (2017). The autobiographical arcs of Roll, Corbett and Engle all detail this behaviour. They centre running in its extreme form into their recovery lifestyle; Roll covertly, Engle and Corbett openly. By presenting ultra-running as a therapeutic outlet that extinguishes addictive impulses to drink (Roll) or provides a remediating-yet-still-excessive alternative to alcohol and drugs (Corbett and Engle), these texts continue to depict extremity as a solution to extremity. In doing so, the damaging consequences of ultra-running – muscle injuries, exercise dependence, mental fatigue – are presented as an imperfect coping mechanism for unresolved addiction. Their addictions are precariously addressed, dependent on an unsustainable intensity of physical performance that is itself underwritten by a neoliberal pressure to police one's own body. Moreover, Roll, Corbett and Engle all write of their immersion in this running-recovery-lifestyle as having a calming, meditative quality. Thus, the spectacle of their active, calming recovery is given shaky pseudo-spiritual justification for excess.

Bridging Addictions: The Path from Substance Abuse to Running Recovery

In her systematic review of addiction substitution as recovery, Hyoun S. Kim draws together several theories that debate the functionality and efficacy of trading addictions. She begins by analysing those who view it as a harmful practice (Adler 1966, Mansky 1999, and Kazdin 1982). Collectively, these scholars view the substituting of addictions as, at best, an imperfect coping mechanism, and, at worst, a denial of 'the psychological need underlying the problem' central to addiction (Kim 2018: 1). She goes on to contrast this approach with the works of more contemporary addiction scholars, who are keen to acknowledge the recovery potential of addiction substitution – particularly as a mode of harm reduction (Hovarth 2006, Mattick, Breen, Kimber and Davoli 2009). Roll, Corbett and Engle all align with this post-2000s turn

in perspective. Running plays an integral role in their recovery, albeit it a recovery dependent on many of the damaging and life-limiting pathologies that underwrite their previous substance addictions. To demonstrate the different narrative methods of presenting this transition, I will first establish how Roll, Corbett and Engle describe their pre-recovery modes of addiction, beginning with Roll's *Finding Ultra,* which stands as endurance sport's magnum opus. Roll himself is now an established endurance athlete and host of the genre-leading sports, nutrition and wellness podcast *The Rich Roll Podcast*, which to date has over three million downloads (Roll 2025). In it, Roll often re-narrates aspects of his recovery journey from *Finding Ultra*, where he presents a narrative that is not a linear transition from alcoholic and drug user to redeemed ultra-runner, but one of addictive oscillations.

Roll was a collegiate level swimmer with a familial background of athletic achievement and he trained with a professional swimming career in mind from an early age. He adhered to a challenging self-imposed training schedule during his time at Landon secondary school, and though he insisted that he lacked talent (a harsh self-assessment), he bridged the natural ability gap he perceived to be present between himself and his schoolmates through sheer 'yardage and intensity' (27):

> I loved the pain, and the pain loved me back; in fact, I couldn't get enough – something that would serve me well in ultra-endurance training later in life. […] underneath it all, my daily torture sessions were an unconscious and masochistic attempt to exorcise the pain and alienation precipitated by my Landon experience (27-8)

Here, Roll confesses a psyche drawn to pain and bodily damage, a proto-addiction to exercise later replicated in his endurance sport future. He also admits to using this outlet of extremity as a balm for being alienated at Landon, his former school, a place and time of 'emotional numbness' (28). This logic, one of relentlessly seeking excess as a stress alleviator, registers again a few years later in his initial forays into alcohol abuse. He writes seductively of the ominous allure alcohol had during college parties. It gleaned away his social anxiety. After his first experience of beer at a swimming gala in his late teens, he longingly states, '*When can I do this again?*' (38). The parallel between his description of swim training and drinking is stark. They both mediate a sense of social difficulty, acting as 'a psychologically coping-orientated mechanism' (Feingold and Bitan 2022: 2). Swimming helped Roll to dissociate from a feeling of 'disconnection' (28) at Landon and similarly, alcohol provided temporary

relief from feelings of ‘insecurity and isolation’ (36). The transient highs that alcohol and exercise provide are repeated with an addictive insatiability by Roll. Once is categorically never enough. Even as a child at Landon he would conduct interval training sessions with an ‘unheard-of’ (27) intensity, completing multiple repetitions with little recovery, ‘each repeat harder and faster than the previous’ (27). This relentless appetite that manifests in his immediate desire to over-consume when first drinking – ‘Get me more. Now’ (37) – demonstrates a substitutive addictive reality that extends beyond the medical studies conducted in the field by Dr Carlos Blanco, who claims that ‘adults who recover from a substance use disorder (SUD) are often thought to be at increased risk for developing another SUD’ (2014: 1247). Roll’s transition from obsessive training behaviours to alcohol and then back again to ultra-running suggests that Blanco’s claim could and perhaps should be widened to include susceptibility to behavioural addictions.

After his college years where Roll was ‘hopelessly devoted’ (44) to both swimming and drinking – in a perpetual tandem back and forth of bodily strain – his training and drinking extremity reached its nadir in his young professional life as a graduate lawyer and alcoholic. He admits to frequent and flagrant drink driving whilst working in San Francisco’s white-collar offices:

> I’d generally stop by my favourite liquor store, where I’d pick up four large twenty-two-ounce Sapporo beers and one bottle of Sauvignon Blanc. For the drive home, I’d usually drink at least two of the Sapporos, hiding the empties under the seat’ (61).

Roll shows willingness to break the law, endangering himself and the public to satisfy his cravings for alcohol. Moreover, he consumes the beer alone whilst driving in order to conceal it from his flatmates – behaviour symptomatic of shame. As Emily Prozek writes, ‘the relationship between shame and substance abuse is complex because shame can serve as both a precursor and an antecedent to drug and alcohol use’ (2017: 127). Roll’s admission courts a confessional tone. Like the narrative of cyclist David Millar in Chapter Two, Roll owns his socially deviant behaviour and creates a rock bottom from which to unfurl a transformational narrative. Roll then trades the socially deviant associations of the alcoholic for the ‘culturally valued, thin fit’ body of the distance runner (Luna 251), and this acquisition of neoliberal body capital later serves to preserve the misnomer that his wider recovery lifestyle of healthy eating and mindfulness appear curative and not beset by extremity.

Roll's transition from the body of an alcoholic to one of an elite endurance athlete is, as you can imagine, far from immediate. After graduating college and beginning a career in entertainment law, he is immersed in the hedonistic drinking culture of corporate San Francisco throughout his twenties (95-7). Writing of an average weekend during this young professional phase, he explains:

> I'd go out drinking on an empty stomach, wanting the buzz to hit harder and faster – as it invariably did – with no food to cushion it. But the night would always end the same – in drunken gorging at whatever fast-food institution happened to be nearby and open at three o' clock in the morning (97).

Alcohol and food are in consumptive co-existence, one binge following the other. It is a pattern that Roll describes as present well into his thirties, with his concurrent pursuit of franchised fast food – 'Gray's Papaya hot dogs (by the dozen) or Ray's Pizza (five slices for five bucks)' (97) – and the work-hard play-hard drinking culture of the law sector colouring his mid, as well as early life. His dualistic consumption of homogenous junk food and alcohol whilst working in white-collar city culture positions Roll's midlife lethargy and 'bulging waistline' (97) as the culmination of distinctly neoliberal excesses. His work leads him to question 'who has time?' (97) for exercise amidst a demanding professional career and family life. He continues, posing the cliché that 'there are just not enough hours in the day' (97). The colonising demands of Roll's work, 'all-consuming – beyond intense' (66) eliminated much of his day, something economist and neoliberal work-culture critic Peter Fleming calls the 'constant imposition of paid employment' (2015). This pressure reduces time for everything, but particularly important from the perspective of the addict, it leaves little space for proper nutritional meal preparation. Consequently, Roll's reliance on fast food increases, and compounds his over-worked exhaustion.

Roll recalls an embodied revulsion tied to his consumption, writing of his 'mind and body collapsing in a sudden and awful understanding of what I'd become' (98). Weighing 208 pounds, which Roll concedes is hardly 'obese by today's standards' (97) for a man of his height, his statement of collapse feels somewhat catastrophising. But, it is significant in the way he takes ownership of his own decline, using the phrase 'what I'd become' (98). His perceived failure is thus read as a self-made one where issues of industrialised 'addictive consumption patterns of fast food' (Schorb 2022: 74) and the demands of his life, e.g. 'new family' (97) and 'ever-present financial pressures' (97) are minimised despite being

significant influences on his health. He even writes, referring directly to himself, that 'something *had* to follow' (98) his epiphanic moment of self-hatred. This italicised emphasis on non-negotiable action not only recalls the self-driven sporting discipline of his youth, but it also internalises a self-policing, neoliberal governmentality that views an untrained body as an eschewal of 'personal responsibility for physical well-being' and in violation of societal expectations (Clay and Brickell 2021: 80). Ultimately, Roll uses a personalised, confessional tone to establish that he alone – not his mode of working nor the inescapable fast-food infrastructure of the United States – is responsible for his recovery.

Corbett's metamorphosis from meth addict and alcoholic to ultra-runner is punctuated by a serious eating disorder. Where Roll's history of addiction was defined by consumption, be it of alcohol, of food, of mileage, Corbett's meth use and alcoholism fuelled a dualistic bind of consumption and deprivation as she was also anorexic. Before becoming involved in ultra-running and the endurance sport community, Corbett's teenage years and early twenties consisted of intense partying and drug taking where she 'got high and danced' and, in a damning self-assessment, she claims she 'essentially had no life' (17). During this period, her drug taking perpetuated the severity of her eating disorder. She describes how meth helped 'melt' and 'eat away at my weight' (17), an image of consumptive dissolution that willingly trades a short term energetic high for the incremental erosion of the body. She describes this concurrence of deprivation and consumption further:

> I weighed as much as 120 pounds before I took drugs, but by the time we moved into his parents' house, I was down to 110. The drugs were already starting to feed my disorder. I didn't have to try to be skinny. Your metabolism gets sped up – that's why they call meth "speed" – and when I became an addict, I'd stay up for two or three day straight, dancing and working and moving around like an electron, always bouncing around, wired and buzzed. I rarely ate when I was on a binge. The pounds just dropped off. I didn't even need to try (47).

Textually, this brief passage manages to mimic the sporadic energy of a meth high as Corbett constructs short, sharp sentences that jump around from her weight to her drug consumption and back again to her weight. Her use of the colloquialism speed is also theoretically apt. The desire to accelerate her mind and body to the detriment of her long-term health is not only an embodied manifestation of a neoliberal hegemony that is 'built on and for acceleration'

(Sugarman and Thrift 2020: 815), but also a proto-mode of deprivation and consumption that provides the basis for her excessively addictive relationship with endurance running.

As evident in the description of her bristling, electric energy described above, Corbett's meth addiction conceals and exaggerates her eating disorder by providing a synthetic high that initially assuages, then exaggerates the effects of her calorie deficiency. During her initial forays into endurance sport, ultra-running provides this same effect. It too deepens the severity of her eating disorder, as she is able to cultivate a slight, athletic frame that passes as a regulation distance runner body, an aesthetic standard that obscures her addictive patterned behaviour. When people commented on her weight, she would explain that she 'was a runner. Runners just looked that way' (49). This usage of field specific body norms to conceal disordered eating encapsulates Corbett's confessional nuance. By essentially admitting ultra-distance running is a 'leanness- and weigh-dependent sport' (Hauck et al. 2020: 1574), she is able to conceal symptoms of anorexia in plain sight and transition from drug addiction to running whilst embodying a similarly consumptive-deprived bind. Corbett's masking of undereating by successfully performing a socially accepted mode of athletic fitness is a danger noted by Susan Bordo in the genre defining work on anorexia and bulimia, *Critical Feminist Approaches To Eating Dis/orders* (2009). In it, she argues that there is a marked pattern amongst young women engaging with 'excessive' exercise in service of unrealistic and often dangerously unhealthy body ideals, a practice that leaves their sense of 'self-acceptance' hanging 'on a very slender thread' (48). This is true of Corbett, who determines her sense of self-acceptance on belonging to an ultra-running community for whom excessive exercise is essentially a pre-requisite.

As well as being mediated through her eating disorder, Corbett's substitutive transition from meth to running is not a one-step switch. During her recovery period, her social circle comprises of a ragtag group of leading Yosemite climbers and ultra-runners, and one famed young climber, Ammon, quickly becomes her fiancé. A gifted climber with speed records on El Capitan (a rock face in Yosemite national park), Corbett describes Ammon as a recreational drug user (114), writing pointedly, 'He was extreme, and I was extreme; he was crazy and I was crazy. We went together' (117). Her attraction to Ammon and the Yosemite community – a place where 'what seems natural […] may not seem that way to the rest of the world' (118) – is consistent with her addict background and is a clear link between her meth and running behaviours. By embedding herself in this microcosm, Corbett continues to colour her environs with extremity. Her running excesses are actively encouraged and celebrated,

and she retains a filament to her previous excesses by surrounding herself with a community who 'liked to drink and smoke pot' (114).

Alongside Roll and Corbett's texts, Engle's *Running Man* (2016) is another piece of ultra-running life writing that tracks the author's use of running as a transformative, therapeutic tool in aiding recovery from alcohol and cocaine addiction. Whilst Roll and Corbett (openly or otherwise) exhibit porosity in how their addictions morph from substance abuse to a 'curative' engagement with running, Engle's addictions exist totally concurrently throughout his adult life. During his brief time at college, he developed an addictive relationship with alcohol and cocaine (23), a legacy that intensified throughout his twenties and thirties. At the beginning of his autobiographical narrative, Engle shows how his post drop-out alcohol and cocaine dependence was explicitly bound to marathon running. Sam Haddad writes of this unusual collision: 'somewhat surprisingly, throughout his years of addiction Engle kept running' (2016). This is exemplified perfectly when he takes part in a marathon whilst hungover and drinks *during* the race. Engle concludes the section with despair:

> I had just run 26.2 miles. A fucking marathon. I should have been flying. Where was my joy? Where was my runner's high? As soon as I got home, I put in a call to my drug dealer (34).

Here, Engle confesses the initial inadequacy of running to placate the needs of his narcotic urges. Though it will evolve into something much more useful in his sobriety, at this early stage Engle makes the point that running is not necessarily a flawless solution to addiction. He uses it as a dopaminergic aid in his attempt to maintain sobriety, but it was clearly failing. His description reads as a manifestation of Kahneman, Wakker, and Sarin's model of predicted utility, decision utility, and experienced utility within addiction studies (1997). Predicted utility refers to the expected reward from ingesting a drug or performing a certain behaviour. Decision utility 'is the valuation of the drug manifest in choice and pursuit', and experienced utility is how pleasant the drug or behaviour is when it is taken or enacted (Robinson, Robinson and Berridge 2014: 187). Engle's predicted utility for running is high, with the experienced utility unsatisfactory. The decision utility is pertinent at the point in Engle's life when marathons and endurance races are run whilst alcoholic impulses are being voraciously satiated. He has a dualistic decision utility, seeking out running and drink and drugs, a need tied to his self-diagnosed inability to feel. He recalls a conversation he had at an

AA meeting, where he said, 'I don't feel anything […] I don't have feelings. I only pretend to have them' (38). In his pursuit of running and narcotics, Engle is desperately attempting to remedy this vacuity by through extremity. At once, he craves the cocaine and runner's high, whilst revelling in exhaustive mindlessness – he pointedly writes of his training schedule, 'I craved depletion' (63). The concurrent search for intense high and the obliteration of feeling is demonstrative of an often 'convoluted ride from addiction to sobriety' (Daddio 2017). As above, Roll and Corbett have substitutive processes that trace a common drive towards extremity, but their transition from substance to behavioural addiction is *broadly* demarcated. However, unlike Roll and Corbett, Engle's scarcely believable drinking-whilst-running demonstrates that substitutive practice in endurance narratives is not defined by a moment of finality whereby alcoholism and cocaine addiction is eschewed for ultra-running. There is room for unstable, cycling efforts at transitioning.

First Foot Forward: From Addict to Runner

Now, I will explore the culmination of Roll, Corbett and Engle's addict to ultra-runner narratives, noting to what extent each text acknowledges the curative power and flaws of the running-recovery-lifestyle. Again, I shall begin with Roll's *Finding Ultra*.

Defined in his own book as 'an influencer's influencer among top athletes, actors, authors and entrepreneurs' (220), Roll does not abuse this status, and demonstrates a rigorous understanding of addiction in his text. He espouses the commonalities of substance and behavioural addictions, openly citing exercise as one example of something 'that holds sway over the soundness of your everyday decision-making' (229). Despite holding this knowledge, it is not confessed in relation to running. Throughout *Finding Ultra,* Roll details a relationship with training that drastically encroaches upon his routines. He writes of forty mile runs and full Sundays cycling, a period of exhaustion culminating in 'saddle sores' and 'undercarriage infections that became so painful I could no longer sit on my bike' (136). Despite this pain and discomfort, Roll never explicitly moderates exercise or adjusts his lifestyle emphasis away from athletic activity, emulating the attritional approach to recovery his endurance sport contemporary Lance Armstrong also used during his chemotherapy. In fact, Roll's excessive training often stimulates yet more training. After detailing his bloodied saddle sores, he describes how the pain from a gruelling running session provoked a 'deep meditative state in which my mind became absolutely still' (138). This clarity, part of several

nebulous sensations grouped under the term runner's high[55], incites him to run a further forty miles the very next day. Such unstoppable training through limp-inducing muscle ache and difficulty climbing the stairs (137) is a clear symptom of exercise addiction (Trott and Smith 2020). Yet, the provocation of mental calm and stillness arising from extreme exertion shows ultra-running as a working, unorthodox mode of recovery. Through this acquisition of equilibrium, Roll presents his endurance practice as predominantly healing and embedded in exhaustive-energising-mindfulness, an alternative preferable to his history of alcohol abuse.

The acquisition of a kind of exhaustive yet energising stimulation through both alcohol and endurance exercise has medical precedent. Writing in the *Irish Times* on the use of running as a cross-replacement for substance use, Jenny Valentish argues:

> When a person gives up one dopaminergic behaviour, such as taking substances, they're likely to experience cross-addiction and chase the same sense of stimulation in something else (2019).

Through running, Roll achieves an altered state of consciousness, an escapism previously sought through drinking. Though the body is free from the poisoning tint of alcohol, it is introduced to the socio-cultural and bodily stresses that addictive engagement with endurance sport endows. Practically, Roll's voracious pursuit of stimulus-via-training produces a daily experience forcibly moulded around the needs of running and triathlon. He willingly acknowledges that his family and life suffered as a result, writing that 'As the training volume increased, it inevitably encroached on every other area of my life' (132). Work and livelihood suffered too, as he concedes 'Too much focus on Ultraman. Not enough emphasis on generating new business' (136-7). These confessions are interesting precisely because they are so isolated and brief. They are meaningless confrontations with the colonising effects of his training, as evidenced by Roll's response to these fleeting ponderances. He writes simply, 'The next morning I woke up and ran' (138). This uncompromisingly salient pursuit of running allows Roll to evade introspection, a mechanism mirrored in his prolific alcohol consumption during college. Writing of his use of alcohol to assuage social anxiety, he admits 'I'd found a remedy for everything that ailed me' (38), though 'one that came with a cost' (35). The cost, is of course, escalating dependence. The parallel of running and alcohol as coping mechanisms – key pressure valves for universal human stresses (social anxiety,

[55] The runner's high is defined by Fuss et al as 'a sudden pleasant feeling of euphoria, anxiolysis, sedation, and analgesia' during and after a run (2015: 13105).

familial strife etc) shows Roll's substitutive recovery-as-running-lifestyle remains a solution dependent on dependence itself.

In direct opposition to Roll, Corbett uses her text to be much more open about the direct substitutive traits displayed by ultra-runners who are recovering addicts. In clear terms, she describes running as an activity with the potentiality to fill the vacuum of withdrawal left by amphetamines. Corbett writes:

> When you're trying to quit something as all-consuming as drugs, you need to find something else you're passionate about. You have to find something else that will help you feel good. The addicts at the meetings volunteered, or helped others, or found a good job. I never found that thing that could help me quit. I had finally found my thing that would keep me off drugs. It was a painful passion, for sure, but going off drugs was painful too. I was now an ultra runner (11).

Explicit in this passage is what is slightly veiled by Roll – the idea that a predisposition to addictive behaviour is in and of itself unresolvable. *Finding Ultra*'s fleeting sentences about the excesses of his schedule are not overtly interrogated as an addictive substitute, whereas Corbett accepts that her impulses will not be eradicated and instead must be channelled into a conduit less harmful than hard drugs and stimulants. This idea is evidenced by her use of the interchangeable term 'thing' (11); it shows she is simply looking for a substitutive stimulus, an alternative channel for her addictive impulses.

After willingly admitting the substitutive mechanics of her transition from meth to running, Corbett's text then, like Roll's, attempts to semantically reframe her ultra-participation away from the term addiction. She even offers an outright denial of the word in relation to her running:

> It's something I do to keep me off drugs. However, it is not an addiction. An addiction, by definition, is an activity that you do despite the severe harm it causes. Ultrarunning is just the opposite of that for me, even with all the pain it causes (183).

Corbett directly confesses that her running imparts damaging physical and psychological toil. She also concedes that 'Ultrarunning is such a selfish sport. You have to sacrifice time with your friends, family […] all so you can focus on some weird goal or chasing some achievement' (182-3). This confession of running as a salient force that colonises one's social

and familial life – a direct parallel to the effects of drug addiction – shows that Corbett's text presents addiction and addictive substitution in a cognitively dissonant manner. Despite rejecting the term addiction in relation to her running, Corbett's very participation in the sport is fundamentally characterised by addiction. She essentially confesses a running addiction without naming it. Positioning addiction as something repeated despite the harm it poses and then expressly stating that running does in fact cause her that exact harm is clear evidence of this. Sport is an 'extraordinary interplay of exclusion and inclusion' (Miller 2008: 542) on and off the field, and this fact is a dichotomy that feels especially pertinent in this context. Corbett's confessionary contradiction and her reframing of addictive behaviour signifies her progressive exclusion from a life of substance abuse and then her inclusion into a running culture that, though the lesser of two evils, remains an environment of consumptive excess. So, though her transition is legitimised as a successful mode of ongoing recovery, self-damage and pain remain central to her life and how she treats and values her body.

Corbett's cognitive dissonance and her embracing of ultra-running as an improvement on her previous addiction is clear in her rapid and sudden accumulation of marathons. Upon hearing her mother say that now she had completed one marathon she need not try another, she writes:

> I did need to do another one, and another one after that. I needed it in a ways that most people, including my mother, didn't understand. […] I wanted to run as many marathons as I could because it made me feel good about myself. Completing marathons gave me the same kind of elation that the drugs gave me, except running was improving my life, not fucking it up (61).

This drive for completion does not lose momentum, and Corbett's will to run swells to finishing many hundred-mile endurance events. Her use of the word 'elation' (61) is particularly interesting. With it, she signals that running is an attempt to replicate the comparable, dopaminergic highs of meth use, and her desire to vehemently pursue and accumulate marathons mirrors her drug consumption that, at its worst, was so frequent she avoided withdrawal altogether (10). Her rapid ascent through conventional running distances where she haphazardly streaks towards one-hundred-mile races in a remarkably short space of time is demonstrative of an addict's dosage rising. Corbett's need for substitutive elation is, as with meth, serviced by an ever-increasing pursuit of mileage, a critically unsustainable mode of accumulation that risks severe mental and physical trauma.

Corbett's text frames this mode of accumulation as an almost ritual form of suffering common essential to the ultra-runner and the ultra-running community. Rituals, according to Mary Tod Gray, 'symbolise institutionalised habits that give structure and meaning to communal lives' (2014: 140), and with her transition into the ultra-sphere, Corbett is exposed to ritual behaviours that fetishise boundary pushing and pain. As a result, it is a space that satisfies and encourages the running manifestations of her addictive impulses, causing pain and damage. A core tenet of ultra-running, pain is an affect 'shared by and communicated between distance runners, constituting an interactional subcultural practice' (227). Pain, and its successful endurance, are viewed as a rite of passage or badge of honour in sporting communities, a valorisation that has registered throughout all the sports referenced in this thesis. Describing a period of excruciating blisters and gastric tension deep into a hundred-mile race, Corbett states:

> As other runners passed by and saw I was delirious from pain and exhaustion, something they'd felt themselves many times before, something many were feeling right now, they smiled and encouraged me […] this was the kind of support I'd been missing my whole life (7).

Corbett thrives on this communal extremity not only because it represents a sense of belonging, but also because her addictive predisposition means she is already acclimated to self-inflicted bodily degradation. Despite enduring shoes that feel like 'torture chambers' (6), Corbett's participation in this bodily self-masochism is preferable to the imminently life-threatening effects of meth. And, the text quietly leverages this fact, minimising the uncomfortable reality that ultra-running – particularly the extent to which Corbett engages with it – is an activity that, like drug abuse, has self-damage at its core. Corbett's text's downplaying of this fact is evident in the passage above, as her 'delirious […] pain and exhaustion' (7) is greeted with supportive encouragement from the crowd. Her pain is mediated through a sense of connection and wholeness she has been lacking her whole life. Whilst this confession of absence and trauma is a poignant tableau of community support and empathy, it must be noted that it is simultaneously a wholly unnecessary and reckless enabling of suffering that could cause irreparable harm to Corbett and others like her.

Self-inflicted damage is central to Engle's autobiography with his concurrent drinking and running. He abuses his body in a two-fold way, initially through substance abuse, and

then by subsequent runs that act as pseudo-penance for his narcotic excess. Describing his hungover runs whilst in the mire of alcoholism, Engle states:

> The more I had partied, the worse the running hurt. The more it hurt, the harder I pushed. When I finally stopped, I drank from the water fountain until my stomach was bloated and then vomited into the bushes until my throat was raw (22).

The need to vomit is an attempt to exorcise the consumptive excess of addiction, an exorcism itself enabled by a need to run. The addiction to substance and running are in a mutually dependent bind whereby Engle cannot live without drugs and alcohol – and simultaneously cannot live with a reality in which he does not compound/remedy his guilt with self-flagellating exercise.

As the narrative unfurls, Engle resists alcohol and cocaine, with the self-damaging running practice intensifying as a result. He exhibits an expectant desire that running can alone fill the void of substance abuse – he is *running away* from his other addictions. Such anxious, shoulder checking momentum is captured in the following passage:

> I had been running compulsively, without thought or intention – and certainly without joy. I ran when I was sick and I ran when I was injured, which seemed to be most of the time. I ran after spending twelve straight hours doing the difficult physical labour of fixing hail dents. I ran in rain and cold and heat and humidity, all so that I could give myself a gold star for the day. Missing a day of training terrified me. If my commitment to running wavered, didn't that suggest that my commitment to sobriety was in jeopardy, too, that my willpower had a dangerous chink (64).

Here we see how the anxious instability of addiction remains constant irrespective of whether it is substance or behavioural. Engle pursues running with an addict's intent, ignoring potentially damaging and dangerous scenarios in order to, rather ironically, maintain his 'commitment to sobriety' (64). Like Roll and Corbett, his very recovery is built on the same extremity that drove his substance abuse, however, unlike them, he confesses it explicitly, imbibing his daily work and running routines with the same self-destruction as his alcoholism. Quantifying the damage from running and comparing it to alcoholism is subjective, but in this passage, Engle admits to perpetual injury and exhaustion, and the same terror at withdrawal that exists with substance addiction. Moreover, the very lexicon of

addiction is engrained in the passage. He references the fact that when he completes his allotted daily run, he gives himself a metaphorical gold star. This imagined trinket has parallels to the sobriety chips given to those enrolled on the twelve-step programme, and echoes the present minded approach to maintaining sobriety.

Sobriety chips are a symbolic mechanism that recognise the time between an addict's last high and their ongoing sobriety (Recovery12 2022). Engle achieves this distance whilst simultaneously using his excessive mode of active recovery to imitate the adrenaline flooded context of his former addict days. Hence, his ultra-running recovery at once moves away from hard drugs, but willingly recreates their effects of precarious extremity. He writes:

> In recovery, I'd built a safe and comfortable life. I had two great kids, a nice house, and a supportive wife. Why didn't that feel like enough? As hard as it was to admit, a part of me missed something about those addict days – not the drugs themselves, but the pulse-jacking danger of that life, knowing that every day I could be teetering on the edge of a rusted blade. I felt happiest and most alive when I was in peril (78).

Engle describes a nagging dissatisfaction with a domesticity untainted by the extremes of substance abuse. In fact, the terms pulse-jacking and teetering encapsulate an individual drawn to boundary pushing. Engle necessitates this search for limitation, and thus uses ultra-running and adventure racing to provide a somewhat sanitised version of the 'peril' he experienced during his drug addled days. Concerned a life of sobriety would be too boring, he questions himself – 'Where would I get that kind of marrow-deep thrill? I found it first in marathon running, and when marathons became routine, I found it in adventure racing and ultras' (134). The reference to 'marrow-deep' is consistent with with the mental and physical demands placed upon the body during ultra-running, a discipline where one brutally extracts emotional and energetic resources from the bodily core. Furthermore, Engle's search to replicate the same extractive sensations of drug use with endurance activity challenges the thoughts of McConnell and Snoek, who argue that tales of recovery often oscillate 'between two incompatible networks – one moment living in the old narrative, the next trying to live according to the nascent recovery narrative' (2018: 37). Due to his deployment of running as a substitutive practice, Engle's nascent recovery narrative is not a wholesale departure from his old, cocaine and alcohol fuelled narrative. In both, he endeavours to revel in extremity. As Toomas Gross notes, Engle fits the rubric of an endurance athlete who excels in distance

running because he is 'habituated' to the practice of pushing his 'physical and psychological boundaries' (7). He does not extinguish or moderate his predisposition to excess, he confesses it clearly and commodifies it as a mode of recovery.

The Ultra-Recovery-Narrative: Confession, Self-Help and Self-(Re)Making

There are several prominent sports science publications that have explored the utilisation of exercise and sporting activity as a valuable tool in improving public health. Some are broadly in favour (for example Blair, Sallis, Hutber and Archer 2012, Smith, Broom, Murphy and Biddle 2022) whilst others are critical of the efficacy of convoluted, government mandated advice on sporting and physical practice as a preventative health measure (including Dugdill, Graham and McNair 2005). A subsection of this literature focuses specifically on the capability of exercise as a recuperative tool for addicts (Clift 2014, Landale and Roderick 2014) and a proactive vehicle for self-transformation. As established above, the three texts on which this chapter focuses are popular narrations of ultra-running and endurance sport as modes of self-help and self-(re)making. Below, I will add depth to this claim by showing how that process of self-improvement through an extreme running-as-recovery lifestyle is justified by a dangerously reductive and pseudo-spiritual desire of the runner to simply be "true to themselves", a desire which is itself heavily influenced by neoliberal obsessions with the individual.

In *Finding Ultra,* Roll presents running as almost mythically transformative, placating and justifying his dependence on ultra-praxis through a quasi-religious belief that endurance sport is his ultimate purpose:

> I wish I could say I had the answer. Compensation for my awkward youth perhaps? An effort to manifest swimming dreams unrealised? I'd like to think I was taking middle age to the mat and pinning it in submission. Taking a stand for myself to live intentionally for the first time. Maybe it was all these reasons. Or perhaps none. The only thing I knew with clarity was that a voice deep in my heart continued to chant, keep going. You're on the right track (135-6).

This internal, abstract affect is then affirmed from an external source as Roll quotes Julie Piatt, his wife, who states that an endurance athlete is 'who you really are' (138). In deploying a pre-determinist perspective, Roll reframes his addictive behaviour as an

honourable pursuit of deeper meaning, and by confessing his spiritual motivations, he demonstrates the 'belief that confession is therapeutic, and therapy is redemptive and redemption somehow equals art' (Kakutani 2009). Roll's grandiose realisation that endurance sport is his essence weaponises confession to frame problematic, addictive engagement with demanding physical activity to be reframed as an artistic and morally pure act. Consequently, ultra-running is considered entirely permissible and free from rigorous critique as it underwrites Roll's self-remaking and eschewal of substance abuse. This is to say, Roll presents 'running-as-recovery' is a totally ethical self-making or self-realising pursuit.

Writing of the post-2000s trend of self-help books and their co-option of such 'secular spirituality' (Du Plessis 2021: 33) and 'a spirit of anti-utopianism' (Burkeman 2019), Erik Mygind du Plessis argues that:

> According to popular self-help literature, the road to happiness and success is largely a matter of independence, autonomy and 'being yourself'. The subject of self-help should not be limited by other people's expectations and social norms, but rather live its life 'authentically' (2021: 33).

Roll's language in the passage above subscribes to this message, with his reference to living with intentionality fitting precisely within du Plessis's definition of self-help as self-discovery. The inward momentum of Roll spooling energy and purpose from deep within his heart constructs the image of someone searching for and attuning to their supposed "authentic" purpose. This conflation of depth and the bodily core with purpose creates an extractive synchronicity throughout the text. In a metaphysical sense, Roll is mining deep within himself towards a faint, inner voice that promises illumination, and this exploration is mediated through a process of physical exhaustion. Hence, as purpose is sought out, the body is depleted. This process parallels the message of capital in neoliberal, first world economies. Capital too is in 'perpetual movement', engaged in a state of uneven development whereby space is extracted of its energetic-resource value, leaving it degenerated (Ortiz-Moya and Moreno 2020: 746). New spatial frontiers are thus sought out, leaving behind a trail of hollowed out "extraction zones" (Lerner 2011). This process is one of driven forward momentum that accelerates decay in the geographical wake of new 'centres of capital accumulation' (Ortiz-Moya and Moreno 2020: 746). Like the system of uneven development, Roll blindly expects perpetual, energetic renewal. Recovery through athletic progress cannot happen in another body, there is no additional spatial plain upon which to outsource his

efforts. Therefore, he is reliant on the immeasurable spiritual renewal he claims running gives him to assuage the degeneration endurance sport imposes on the body. Exemplifying this duality is a section where Roll writes of a particularly difficult climb during his attempt at five Ironman competitions in five days:

> With almost 150 miles already hammered into my legs that day, it was daunting […] I recalled the inspiring *experience* that followed – call it delusion or epiphany. I'd overcome so much. I could certainly survive this. *You know what to do.* And with that, I entered a deep meditative state (143-4).

As with the text at large, Roll keenly ties an exhaustive sensation to a resulting crystalline mental clarity, implying a simple cause and effect also demonstrated by the cyclists of the previous chapter. He inflicts physical hardship upon his body, and is rewarded with an enduring, calming equilibrium. Crucially, Roll validates this model of spiritual enrichment at the expense of bodily depletion through du Plessis's perspective on the self-help genre. Not only do the references to overcoming and survival help to emphasise the retributional arc ubiquitous in narrative self-help, the italicised phrase *You know what to do* positions Roll as belonging – at home and himself in the precipitous juncture between bodily exhaustion and elation. Alex Curmi addresses the dangers of Roll's position on his own innateness, asserting that:

> "Trust your gut", "be yourself" or "less is more" are aphorisms that contain much truth, while also being prone to catastrophic misinterpretation. After all, what distinguishes instinctual decisions from impulsive ones? And what if your instincts don't always serve your best interests? (2025)

The aggressive physicality of mileage being punctured into Roll's legs is graphic, with the physical wounds and scarring of ultra-sport not just marked upon his body but sublimated *into* it. And, as Curmi notes, whilst Roll considers endurance sport a benevolent template for self-discovery, it is difficult to decipher whether the visceral bodily damage implicit in that process of self-knowing is worthwhile or simply an impulsive replication of addictive desires.

The self-help justification of being oneself aids Roll in reframing his participation in ultra-endurance sport not as an addiction, but as a hyper-normative behaviour. His substitution of substance addiction for athletics, itself an 'extremely prevalent theme' (Bridel

2013: 44) within the community, is presented as ambiguous and opaque, as evidenced in the following passage that details a rare rest period after completing Ultraman:

> I had nothing more to prove. It was time to focus on real life. *Forget all this time-sucking endurance nonsense and grow up.* Julie took one look at my forlorn expression and sized me up with a simple sentence. "It's time for you to get back on the bike." It didn't make logical sense. Yet from her unique perspective, it was the *only* solution (149).

In this quote, Roll nearly confesses the selfishness of his endurance sports addiction, but again snatches away that all too logical thought, justifying his praxis with the vague notion cycling is something he *should* be doing. Initially, the emphasised, italicised phrase concedes that Roll's triathlon pursuits held a disproportionate, colonising influence over his schedule. Furthermore, the tension between having nothing to prove, yet remaining unhappy hints that for Roll, an arbitrary goal and finish line, no matter how grandiose, will never slake his athletic desire. This echoes his school day swimming and collegiate drinking, it must be repeated, topped, engaged with consistently and endlessly. If this does not happen, he experiences a 'forlorn' (149) withdrawal, itself another textbook symptom of addiction. So, with the encouragement of his wife, he sanctions a swift return to endurance training on the grounds that pursuing 'passion and purpose without fear' (149) constitutes being *true to himself*. This reframing of a return to exercise as a calling – not a relapse – gives Roll a slick veneer of hyper-normativity that obscures the addictive traits woven into the text.

The presentation of extremity and addiction in hyper-normative terms is a process aided by Roll's curation of the direct self-help elements of *Finding Ultra*. He partners his autobiographical testimony of race and training experiences with clear instruction to the reader. The former occupies the first two thirds of the text, with the rest marking a shift in structure, with a proliferation of instruction, headings, and commands regarding diet, training methods, self-actualisation and motivation. This merging of endurance adventure narrative with much more formulaic, instructional content softens the directness of Roll's self-help points, and allows space for addiction and self-help to be placed into dialogue. In the section titled 'Sober Up' (228), Roll makes two huge claims on addiction and sobriety. First, he writes that 'it doesn't matter how many marathons you run, addiction will outpace you every time', and second, he asserts that whatever addictive substance or behaviour afflicts you, 'It does not serve you. It is a misstep in the ballet you are choreographing. Indeed, it is an enemy

on the battlefield of self-actualisation' (229). The point made is that one cannot literally run away from addiction. He confesses the very thing his actual actions contradict. Running has itself been cast as the solitary activity that *serves* him for the entirety of the book. Because of it, yes, he achieves sobriety from alcohol and a fresh mental clarity, but he also frequently ends up 'dehydrated' with 'body failing' (155) during triathlons, runs and training – consequences he endures to avoid the 'restless nights' (149) of a day without exercise. Clearly, running can be a 'misstep' (229) too. Furthermore, Roll's portrayal of addiction as a force that will 'outpace you' (229) is hugely significant. By externalising addiction, Roll effectively deflects the notion that it is in fact the very propulsive internal force that drives his ultra-human running, swimming and cycling.

The spirituality of Roll's dance metaphor is a style maintained throughout the final third of the text. This and his direct instructional moments of prose produce an interesting dichotomy. His inward-excavating narrative of self-discovery registers physically and (meta-) physically through quantifiably draining 'torture sessions' (27), a training praxis Roll participates in whilst also holding the 'deeply held conviction […] that we are not merely our bodies' (233). And, when viewed alongside the instructional phrasing of this section of the text, Roll can be seen as an evangelist for spiritual growth derived from running. He addresses the reader in a saccharine manner:

> As you venture deeper down the proverbial rabbit hole, the red pill continues to work its magic. That seed of awareness continues to germinate, quickening your connection of body to mind, and heart to soul (232).

The inward momentum of the search for 'deeper' meanings and energy reserves spills outwards. Roll's reference to the red-pill – a phrase from the *Matrix* (1999) used in common parlance to mean awakening and a dramatically transformed understanding – positions him as a prophet who has commodified and repackaged his own advice on internal striving and presented it as a sound endorsement for the running-as-recovery lifestyle.

Corbett's narrative of running-as-recovery and rebirth undertakes a similar trajectory, with her own experience of running and sobriety presented in a self-help mode. The culmination of her running recovery is a trans-American continent crossing, organised in aid of an addiction charity. The challenge consisted of Corbett and other addict-cum-ultra-runners taking eight-hour shifts of running non-stop across the diameter of the North American continent. As awareness of their challenge rose, Corbett describes emails and

interactions with individuals that propagate the idea of running as a substitutive practice for substance abuse. She writes:

> In Georgia, a guy who ran with us said he had been in prison for five years for robbing a bank to pay for drugs. He got sober in prison and was released a couple years ago. He struggled with his desire to do drugs when he was released, so he turned to running (195).

In addition to this man, Corbett references multiple others who have had similarly miraculous turnarounds in their lives when hearing about the continent spanning run (192-95). By citing these examples and showing that they replicate Corbett's own substitutive practice – 'ultra-running is now his life, much like it is for mine' (195) – the author builds on Hamalainen's assertion that self-help books set a hegemonic relation between enlightened author and seeking consumer (294). By inserting the words of enthused disciples in addition to her own story, *Reborn on the Run* creates a palimpsest of confessional testimony. This consistency of message around the transformative potential of running for addicts is thus delivered across a range of people, a diversity that attempts to show that the running-as-recovery lifestyle does not just work for those with enough social and economic capital to publish a book on the subject, but for any struggling addict.

Corbett's inclusion of other recovering addicts' testimony is used to conclude the testimonial passage on her trans-continental crossing. She invokes a common, combative lexicon to frame the struggles of the addict-runner community, writing, 'All these people fought with me, for me, and for themselves. I'm still fighting' (195). This group fight against addiction through the physical ardour of ultra-racing courts a sense of communal struggle that is ultimately minimised by the individual. Yes, Corbett acknowledges her colleagues and fellow runners, but the sentence concludes singularly, 'I'm still fighting' (195). This short, defiant phrase lionises the actions of Corbett as an independent actor, and in doing so offers the paradox at the heart of self-help and self-transformation within the running-recovery narrative. That is, there is strength to be derived from competitors and supporters going through the same thing, but such communality is eclipsed by the punishing progress of the individual. In a sport where singular bodies are entirely responsible for success or failure, Corbett must mobilise and "fight" alone. Corbett's vision of self-help is thus one that gestures towards community members that fight with and for her, producing a woolly togetherness

that is largely irrelevant in comparison to the deeply individualistic striving through the 'haze of exhaustion' (12) induced through ultra-running.

Cross-country/continental runs have a distinct place in the ultra-running imagination, and Engle, like Corbett, completes a huge multiday charity run project, and uses it as a vehicle to explore his addiction in his text. Over a four-month period of daily ultramarathons and diplomatic issues, Engle crossed the entirety of the Sahara Desert. He writes less of the physical toil, and more of the guilt that accompanies indulging his running ambitions whilst missing key life events. In this passage, he laments not being present for his son Kevin's twelfth birthday:

> I felt sick with guilt. What was I doing on top of a sand dune in Mali? I had no choice but to believe that what I was doing was making me a better person, a better father, a better son. […] I knew my family was proud of me, but I also knew deep down they probably just wanted me to be around more (145).

Engle again displays a confessional straightforwardness that Roll and Corbett lack. Engle's run across the Sahara was in aid of a water charity for whom he raised thousands of dollars. Yet, his apparent lack of choice in believing in his own moralistic intention hints at something else. It speaks to his self-awareness. He knows that his addictive traits have migrated to running, and confronting the reality that this method of assuaging substance abuse also carries with it a comparable selfishness and familial neglect is an uneasy truth to face. Thus, whilst his behemoth charity run is objectively impressive and *good,* it provides an ideal veneer for Engle to engage with the kind of boundary pushing, masochistic environments in which he thrives. He could use this charitable remaking to simply sustain his outlet of extremity whilst self-aggrandising, but his text differs from Roll and Corbett's because he directly confronts the realities and pitfalls of his relationship with running. Roll and Corbett consider their running an essential act of self-service and indulge it excessively under the banner of staying true to themselves. Conversely, Engle acknowledges that 'deep down' (145), this pseudo-spiritual justification for ultra-running is simply a selfish act.

Despite this introspection, ultra-running is used by Engle to reform and remake himself twice. Having embarked upon a running recovery to tackle his alcohol and substance abuse, he is given a two-year sentence in state prison after what he insists is a false conviction for mortgage fraud. In keeping with the relentless self-starting mobilisation often found within ultra-running texts, Engle's non-confessional insistence of his innocence is treated not as a

destructive injustice, but as an opportunity to train hard. He laps the yard, accumulates runs of twenty-plus miles, and even completes an ultra-marathon to coincide with Badwater 135, a treasured and infamously difficult race he misses due to his incarceration. Running sustains Engle's sanity during his imprisonment, becoming a necessary outlet to cope with his loss of freedom. Moreover, it becomes a demonstrative tool of neoliberal governance and order within the prison. With his obsessive training, Engle becomes a curiosity to his fellow inmates, but many begin to follow him on his runs and yoga sessions. He writes:

> Within a few weeks, I was working out with half a dozen guys every day. Sometimes I ran with them, sometimes I gave them a plan and waited for them to come tell me excitedly about the eight-minute mile they had just run or how far they'd gone over the weekend. We used rocks and horseshoes for weights, did dips on the picnic tables and pull-ups on the bleachers (238).

Engle's commitment to maintaining his running routine and bodily strength transposes the 'running body – an expression of status in the White, middle class' (Clift 496) into an incarcerated context. An unfamiliar contrast, Engle's honed body is then maintained through a process of mutually beneficial community building, whereby he imparts his experience and knowledge to fellow inmates, those who then encourage each other to progress and improve their running abilities.[56] Additionally, he makes clever use of basic, ad-hoc training materials. Thus despite his imprisonment, he embodies neoliberal characteristics of hard-work, resourcefulness and discipline through the vector of distance running. Engle, the rubric of a white, middle-class, business owning male becomes the model of success within the prison community. Consequently, whilst aiding the mental and physical health of his fellow prisoners, he strengthens the neoliberal status quo – one which demands self-discipline and self-betterment without aid or intervention from state actors and institutions. This embeds the idea that 'the individual does not have […] any solution other than to help himself' (Pendenza and Lamattina 2019: 102). Although not actively opposed by the prison authorities, his running group and gym sessions are conducted independent of the penitentiary apparatus, a prescient reminder that even in a setting nominally geared towards rehabilitation, it remains the sole responsibility of the individual to better themselves. Engle's continuation of his running recovery whilst in jail perpetuates this reality and

[56] Distance running as a mode of rehabilitation within prison is the subject of the documentary *26.2 to Life: Inside the San Quentin Prison Marathon* (2025), which tells the true story of an annual marathon ran exclusively by inmates on the grounds of San Quentin prison.

cultivates the neoliberal, self-help ideal of being resilient to the existing system, and not an advocate for changing it.

My final point of this section is to draw attention to the commonality of Roll, Corbett and Engle's spiritual and charitable running. Though Engle does not pander to the pseudo-spiritualism of being true to oneself – a bogus proclamation I read as a weak justification for behaving selfishly – it is true that all three deploy language that places their running exploits adjacent to or within that of a pilgrimage. Coleman and Eade define pilgrimages as 'exceptional practices, irregular journeys outside habitual social realms' (2004: 5). As individuals who have cultivated a hyper-normative physical existence, our athlete-authors play with this definition that pedestals the pilgrimage as something outside the norm. With their fixation on excess, they habituate irregularity, and provide a more contemporary, 'continuous form of pilgrimage' (Jain 2016: 85). Whilst Roll does deploy progressive, searching verbs such as 'venture' (232) in the context of his running – a word that marries with the unique frontierism implied by Coleman and Eade's definition, his pilgrimage does not have a definitive end whereby 'the pilgrim returns to his former mundane existence, but it is commonly believed that he has made a spiritual step forward' (2004: 2). Instead, his running-as-recovery lifestyle is premised on a self-proclaimed conscious state that 'lives without boundaries, unlimited in scope, inexhaustible in energy, and unrestricted in its potential to shape and guides' (233). His vision of pilgrimage is not a linear before and after, but a life devoid of limitation. This unshackling of the concept simultaneously paints the running recovery as a place of edenic potential, whilst also self-sanctioning excessive, limitless running. Pilgrimage is also present in Engle and Corbett's charitable endeavours. When traversing the Sahara, Engle can't resist a stylistic point extension when recalling the time he saw a sign for Timbuktu. He writes of the city, 'a place used as a metaphor for the ends of the earth – and now we were going to go *beyond* it' (146). Like Roll, this too demonstrates an unwillingness to bookend his running and a need to exist in a state of pilgrimage in perpetuity. Even the mythical brink of the world must somehow be surpassed to sustain the running-as-recovery lifestyle. Finally, when describing her transcontinental traverse, Corbett details the logistics of running shifts at all times through the day and night:

> In the early morning you'd want to be asleep, or during the mid-morning you'd be battling traffic, or in the afternoon, you'd be battling the heat of the day. In the middle of the night, you wanted to be asleep (187).

With this casting of the day and night in its entirety as a nagging obstacle to running success, Corbett at once captures the self-sacrificial qualities inherent to a physical, moving pilgrimage (Coleman and Eade 2004: 11), whilst also inadvertently communicating the self-flagellating, non-stop demands of the running-as-recovery lifestyle.

Running-as-Recovery: Embodied Neoliberalism and Consumption

The discussion above has touched upon how substituting a substance dependence for a running addiction marks a neoliberalisation of the body. By co-opting self-help characteristics, a literary category described by Scott Maclean as 'technologies for the production of highly individualized and autonomous forms of subjectivity' (2015: 197), Roll, Corbett and Engle produce content that pushes consumers to consider themselves and their bodies as totally 'free, autonomous and rational agents' (Lee 2017: 145) adrift from the collective body politic (Delaney 2020). This self-autonomy perpetuated by self-help narratives is central to neoliberal governance. Writing in the context of sporting-health policy, Caroline Fusco succinctly identifies behaviours and edicts like 'individualism, consumerism, citizenship, personal responsibility, accountability, and individual choice' (2012: 144) as key actors in neoliberal machinations, and the narratives of Roll, Corbett and Engle all embolden these tenets with their focus on self (re)making through ultra-distance running. This section will illuminate how their demonstration of neoliberal values is specifically pinned to their sculpting of bodies that though dangerously depleted through extreme exercise, represent the dominant mode of healthism in contemporary culture.

Bodily self-discipline through running-as-recovery lifestyle is sold as the solution to transitioning away from a narcotic dependent lifestyle throughout this chapter's subject autobiographies. Within their retributional arcs, both the author's "before" and "after" bodies are addicted, it is simply that the body has been sanctioned as acceptable and desirable by the neoliberal codes of health that dictate contemporary body aesthetics, and the former is in crass violation of them.

It is this neoliberal governance of the body that allows Roll's hyper-normative characterisation of addiction to pass critique within the ultra-running community. His pursuit of a robust frame capable of enduring the pain of covering frontiersman like distances embodies Foucault's neoliberal governmentality, whereby power is disentangled from

hegemonic hierarchies, a context that pervasively crafts self-policing citizens – turning 'governance into self-governance' (Barszczewski 2021: 594). This is most apparent in an indented caption of the photographic section of the book where Roll compares two similar shots of his physique and how it has evolved, writing:

> At the time, I honestly didn't think my body could possibly appear any fitter than it did in that picture. But when you line up the two photos alongside each other, it's not hard to see how my body continues to evolve – getting leaner, stronger, and faster with each successive year, regardless of age (169).

His self-driven pursuit of bodily refinement coupled with the pathological need to 'run straight to the finish or until my body gave out altogether, whichever came first' (147), shows how his addictive, extractive practice is bound to the creation and sustaining of the neoliberal ultra-running body ideal. Furthermore, the streamlining Roll describes – 'leaner, stronger and faster' (169) – demonstrates his neoliberal 'agility' (Gillies 2011: 210) in adapting his body to the processes of aging.

Roll's streamlining of his body is achieved through aggressive training and competition. He describes 'broken and swollen knees', 'no feeling' in his lips and innumerate other injuries, and this mode of self-damage is accepted as praxis that represents 'qualities of a strong work ethic, motivation and determination' (Brown 2015: 790). Often in the text, these moments of relentless excavation of the body are met with a catharsis, a feeling of resolution that parallels the production of a functionally strong athletic frame to wider stability and progression in life:

> Each successive week I broke new ground in training, surpassing every strength and fitness benchmark I'd set the previous year. And as summer turned to fall, our fragile economic state seemed on the mend […] my law practice actually expanded. Come October, I was ready, focused, and prepared for the next opportunity to push the boundaries of endurance (152).

Roll's addictive, accumulative training is thus confessed not as a confirmation of addiction, but as a mode of self-improvement that is causally bound to the success of his business. His dutiful physical self-governance transmigrates to his socio-economic context. Again, as above, this is underwritten by the self-help maxim of finding oneself, with the acquisition of a neoliberal body miraculously heralding improvements in business. I put forward that this

cause-effect exists because whilst it is true that Roll's training colonises much of his work and leisure time, his athletic exploits also produce a stark embodiment of 'entrepreneurial identities/subjectivities' that legitimise his presence in the neoliberal sphere, and elevate him to belonging to a group of 'responsible, moral agents, and economic-rational actors but (also) socially esteemed, heroic leaders' (Bardon, Brown and Puyou 2021: 2). The forward facing, adaptive language in the passage in which Roll is always looking to forge ahead and test new ground again fits Gillies' model of neoliberal 'agility' – an ability to function individually and reactively to market *and* athletic pressures (2011: 210).

Both Roll and Corbett use photographic content in the body of their texts to visualise their active recovery. The images seen below of shredded frames taut from dehydrating effort captures the conspicuously consumptive characteristics of the running-as-recoverylifestyle, with the athletes proudly displaying the depleting effects of running excess:

Figure 14: *Corbett in the mountains* (2020)

Figure 15: *Roll competing in a Swim-Run* (2016)

This visual element to the text succeeds in perpetuating the idea of physical wellbeing and recovery grounded in consumptive extremity, and moreover, it provides the athlete-authors with an opportunity to further curate their own brand, thus diversifying revenue streams beyond the physical autobiography. The photographs used within the texts are stylistically consistent, or indeed identical to the photos that populate the athletes' social media accounts. By curating this stylistic consistency between print and visual online content, Roll and Corbett's texts signpost further readerly engagement with their personal brand. Take Roll's

pictures in *Finding Ultra*; a blend of topless exertion and race success – a pattern replicated explicitly in his Instagram account:

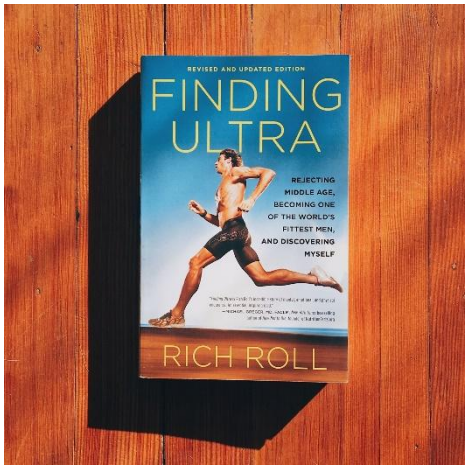

Figure 16: *Finding Ultra cover photo* (2018).

Figure 17: *Running-recovery aesthetic* (2020).

This aesthetic similarity and lineage between print, visual and social media culture allows a smooth, multiplicitous dissemination of the running-as-recovery lifestyle narrative. JP Doyle notes that athlete social media accounts are likely to have a biased towards 'backstage' content, for example shots and short monologues about the lifestyle that accompanies their sporting life such a familial outings and nutritional and promotional output (2022: 508). This, accompanied with typical 'inspiration' photos that represent a 'strong, capable, and disciplined athlete's body in practice' (Ehrlén and Villo 2020: 266), allow our athlete-authors to provide an augmented afterlife for their printed photographic content. The running-as-recovery lifestyle rubric established in the texts, one that commodifies the recovered body aesthetic, becomes useful and profitable in the social media market.

This extension into the social media realm, predominantly through Instagram, allows a palimpsest of running-as-recovery lifestyle to emerge. The core tenets of the texts are reproduced, re-written over and over again in easily consumable digital vignettes. For example, Corbett's Instagram page at times echoes her text in near exactitudes. In the following post, she writes on her profile:

> You don't get over addiction by stopping using. You recover by creating a new life where it is easier not to use. If you don't create a new life, then all the factors that brought you to your addiction will catch up with you again (2019)

The emphasis on a new recovery lifestyle; of course, paired with an active running photo, is consistent with passages from *Reborn on the Run* that reframe Corbett's propensity to run as a substitutive yet-different approach to life. As noted previously, she writes near the end of her text that ultra-running 'is the opposite' of an addiction as an addiction is something that you engage with despite the 'extreme harm' it causes (183). The book and her social media post are consistent in emphasising the running-as-recovery lifestyle as a sobriety aid that distances the individual from their previous addict existence, further embedding running as unproblematic and recuperative.

The exact same consistency is occurring between Roll's Instagram presence, with many of its themes deriving from *Finding Ultra.* In a post on April 21, 2021, Roll tackles the perspective of substitutive addiction, writing a series of oppositional pairs like 'Alcohol is a way out. Running is a way in […] Alcohol lies. Running tells the truth […] Alcohol stole my life. Running gave birth to a new one' (Instagram). This is mirrored in the autobiography where Roll describes having 'awoken something inside himself' after a miraculous run (15). Both detail a transformative rebirth. As with Corbett, Roll's dual medium approach to addiction emphasises the power of running-as-recovery. The date of the post quoted, seven years after the publication of *Finding Ultra*, shows a consistency of message and demonstrates Roll continues to adhere to the maxims of his book. This fluid coherence between the text and online persona allows both *Finding Ultra* and *Reborn on the Run* to further their narratives through multimedia intertextuality and to keep it present, a process that itself reflects the perpetuity of addict recovery.

The visual content and the intertextuality of photography in this genre is also a prime manifestation of embodied cultural capital. Defined by Bourdieu as 'external wealth converted into an integral part of the person, into a habitus' that 'cannot be transmitted instantaneously (unlike money, property rights, or even titles of nobility) by gift or bequest, purchase or exchange' (1986: 259) embodied capital punctures the Instagram aesthetic of our athlete-authors, furthering a message of self-mobilisation to their audience. The at-work, active quality of the content attempts to emphasise that irrespective of social standing, pure effort is what produces an ideal neoliberal frame resplendent with embodied capital. Foregrounding this idea through eye-catching visual spectacle obscures certain realities. Roll's solid economic standing and education as a Stanford Law Graduate is not overtly visible in his topless mountain running shot (Figure 4). His stoic grimace emphasises his individual bodily effort – which is undeniably difficult and impressive – but this lens

conveniently erases any predisposition to the accumulation of embodied capital that may porously bleed in from external familial, financial and educational contexts. A reader without such external resource is transfixed by the shot writ with grit and guts, and thus the neoliberal message of self-transformation buries that of pre-existing privileges. This obscuring of privilege is compounded by the fact that the at-work, effortful photography works in tandem with the addiction focused captions as quoted above to position recovery as something in perpetuity. This never-ending motion distilled in the photography provides a neat parallel to the shuffling constancy of ultra-running.

The Instagram aesthetic, particularly the active inspiration photo, provides a visual manifestation of the way endurance athletes perform the paradoxical balance of bodily effort and ease. In the text, Roll is at once assaulted by the physical demands of his sport and acquiesced above them with a weightlessness. At one point, he draws aspirational parallels between himself and a thermal-cruising hawk when on a training run (149). The synthesis of ease and effort is a phenomenon explored by Jessie K. Luna when she researched the performative behaviours of the running community in Boulder, Colorado – a running population notorious for its fitness and technical proficiency. She observed that participants:

> Perform hard work, drawing a boundary against people who are lazy, unfit, and thus undeserving. However, and perhaps surprisingly, many runners also engage in performances of ease, naturalness, and fun – drawing a boundary against people who appear to try too hard (2019: 253).

This simultaneity is punctuated throughout *Finding Ultra*. Roll refers early on to his training as ‘daily torture sessions’ (27), with such imagery jutted against lightness inducing runs described as ‘painlessly cruising over rolling grasslands’ (13). By sustaining this ease-hard work paradox, Roll embodies a neoliberally virtuous duality, a Bourdieusian ability to demonstrate both ‘the prestige’ of innate fitness and the ‘merits of acquisition’ (1986: 259) through hard work. Statements like ‘I was doing everything in my power to excel’ (27) underline this endorsement of hardworking, self-governing healthism. Then, his choice to describe thriving in challenging physical environments, to the extent that he repeatedly reports a state of mind akin to ‘flying’ (13) during athletic practice, demonstrates ‘a mindset of continuous renewal’ (Cheese, Silverstone and Smith 2009). Roll’s oscillation between effortful pain endurance and freeing renewal not only centres his own bodily transformations

'rather than their social or political context' (2019: 5), it also gives the text a series of energetic ebbs and flows that are always, always restored.

The juxtaposition between a system of maximisation and efficiency with the spiritualist freedom packaged together throughout Roll's training and life is ever-present in *Finding Ultra.* His professional life is ruthlessly streamlined: lower value clients at his independent law practice are dropped, showering and clothes washing between work and training sessions are ad-hoc affairs in petrol stations, and all business interactions are shifted online (avant-garde for 2008). The overhaul breeds periods of financial and familial precarity (138), but Roll remains staunchly adherent to the neoliberal mantra of opening 'every moment up to judgment when you are maximizing your life' (Bloom 2018). As Nikolas Rose argues, 'lifestyle maximization entails a relation to authority in the very moment as it pronounces itself to be the outcome of free choice' (1996: 58-9). Roll's rigorous codifying of time sits antithetical to his descriptions and experience of running practice itself – an activity he describes with a lexicon that emphasises structurelessness: 'I revelled in the simple purity of the outdoor experience that washed over me in the midst of a trail run' (112-3). In an article on free running, nature sport and the post-sport movement, Michael Atkinson explores this liberating approach to athletic and body practice, explaining how it remains subjugated by a more neoliberal model of sport:

> In the modern(ist) sport lacunae, cultural ethics of consumption, competition, and rational body perfection indeed reign supreme in physical athletic practice over ideologies of freedom and ecstasy (2012: 193).

Despite Roll's awakening running experiences where the boundary between body and environment seemingly dissipates, his text ultimately affirms Atkinson's point. Yes, Roll's addictive pursuit of training is marked by moments of spiritual release and insightful clarity. Yet, by his own admission, these pockets of actualisation are tethered to and a product of a carefully constructed scaffold of addictive practice and neoliberalising behaviour. Such ethereal sensations whilst running are fleeting highs within a wider process of graftingly curating a body of 'one of the world's fittest men' (Roll 2018).

The consumptive practices Roll codifies during *Finding Ultra* are even evident in his approach to the natural environments he trains and competes in. When contemplating a return from injury, he juxtaposes the idyllic scene of a hawk cresting a ridgeline, forming a 'perfect arc across the morning sky' (149) with the proclamation that he will redouble his athletic

efforts, ‘No longer would the goal be just to finish, but, rather, to contend’ (149). The close proximity of these statements means Roll does not always consider nature in pure transcendental terms as in other passages, e.g. the sea is seen as ‘a glorious celebration of the elements’ (219). In this instance, in archetypal neoliberal fashion, the pristine sky invokes thoughts of performance. It is a deployment of the ‘utilitarian conception of nature as a resource’ that underpins uneven development (Barszczewski 2021: 595). Hence, nature as well as exercise comprises the substitutive nexus that feeds the addicted athlete. Whilst it is true Roll holds an intrinsic Romantic appreciation for landscape – climbing hills makes him feel ‘both energetically and literally’ (14) on top of the world – such ethereality does not exclude nature from its material, source value. The trails and the Hawaiian sea are seen as beautiful, but they also exist within the framework of running and triathlon aspirations. They are amphitheatres of calf-burning altitude whose topography is traced and eroded to attune the body for endurance performance: Nature as ‘territorial resource’ (Botella-Carrubi 2019: 4). Roll’s dualistic relationship with nature as both Romantic marvel and performance aid then becomes a somewhat cynical, neoliberal interpretation of the outdoors as a holistic, energising space, it becomes a facilitatory space utilised for extreme recovery. Roll adds an uncomfortably extractive dimension to the body of self-help literature known as ‘nature cure books’ (Barkham 2020) which frame nature as a curative resource for those struggling with physical or mental health problems. To use his own phrase, consuming miles and miles in Californian brushland produces a ‘bliss in depletion’ (205), a sensation that characterises neoliberal capital in first world economies. The bliss arising from extraction exhaustion is not a mere state of satiation, but rather a luxuriation in consumption that propels both Roll himself and global commodity frontiers on towards new ground.

Roll’s utilitarian pursuit of betterment also manifests in his diet choices, with his plant-based lifestyle a key aesthetic and informational hook for his text. Commenting on the melange of stimulants, depressants, and dopaminergic substances he was consuming before his running days, he confesses, ‘Though I lacked the self-awareness to realise it at the time, I was adrift in mayhem, slowly destroying myself’ (56). Throughout the course of the book, he describes attempts at abandoning this form of consumption, rejecting hyper-processed food and drink in favour of a whole food vegan diet that supplements and supports his endurance training. In a chapter titled ‘The Nuts and Bolts of the Plantpower Diet’ (269), he evangelises on the nutritional superiority of legumes, nuts, lentils, quinoa and other whole food sources of protein, concurrently criticising the disinformation and cruelty churned out by the meat, dairy

and industrial agriculture sectors.[57] Roll's open critique of a global 'corporate food regime' (Alkon and Mares 2012: 348) is a praiseworthy show of resistance against exploitative, monocultural methods of calorie production that pervade our food systems. In his writing, he succinctly condemns the capitalist-realism of this system, referring to 'A Big Gulp for breakfast. McDonald's for lunch. And Pizza Hut for dinner' as 'a waking dream' (230). This Zizekian slant to his prose that critiques the capitalist mirage of multinational companies whose addictive UPF production dominates more nutritious options is a powerful message. Taken alone, his departure from this food system could be read as an admirable rejection of neoliberal values. Yet, this stance against neoliberal food chains does not preclude his transformative plant-based diet from also having a neoliberalising effect on the body. Roll self-identifies his diet as 'a lifestyle' (105), and, crucially, as one tailor-made to sustain the addictive excesses of his running recovery. This then sustains neoliberal bio-pedagogies of health that dictate 'a cared-for, thin body is recognised as reflecting control, virtue and goodness', whilst an obese/addicted/slothenly body is 'unruly, uncivilised, dangerous and in need of control, the result of inaction or complacency' (Francombe and Silk 2012: 231) and guilty of embodied and moral failings (Baxter 2021: 15). Consequently, Roll's propagation of the value of plant-based living is deployed not only as a societal good, but as another node of optimisation that helps to facilitate athletic performance and endurance. He draws this parallel of plant nutrition-performance explicitly, writing:

> Despite the incredibly heavy tax I impose on my body, training at times upwards of twenty-five hours per week for ultra-endurance events, this type of regimen has fuelled me for years […] I believe that eating plant based has significantly enhanced my ability to expedite physiological recovery between workouts – the holy grail of athletic enhancement (273).

In abandoning a fast-food diet for strictly plant-based meals that he claims are the foundation of his athletic performance, Roll shifts away from being the subject of a dreamlike neoliberal food system. However, his very solution to escaping that foodscape upholds the extremity and consumption of his running recovery lifestyle.

A plant-based diet is a performance optimiser for Roll. He consumes bowl after bowl of nutritional wholefoods to fuel his lifestyle. He enthuses about food, even dedicating a

[57] Fitting with the zeitgeist of behemoth, anonymous corporations, Roll refers to these actors as 'Big Food' and 'Big Ag' (270).

significant section of his book to recipes, which led to the later publication of two cookbooks co-authored with his wife.[58] For Corbett, such enthusiasm for nutrition is complicated by her diagnosed anorexia. She writes of the crippling effects it has whilst racing:

> As the race went on, I wasn't drinking or eating anything and the heat made my face hot and wet and crusty with salt. […] I still didn't want to drink anything because of my eating disorder. (68).

The image of her salt covered face does a fantastic job at capturing the dualistic damage running without fuelling does to an athlete's body. The act of running huge distances is itself exhausting, and the way her sweat crusts, crystalising her dehydrated rigidity and lack of movement compounds the effects of her malnutrition. It is a feeling of disintegration that leaves her body hunched as she 'almost crawled to the finish' (68). As Amanda Woodrow – a distance runner with issues of disordered eating notes – 'over-training and under-fuelling' (2025) is common in runners with anorexia and it is a two-fold extremity that accelerates bodily deterioration. In addition, anorexia's main symptom of 'alienation of the self from the body' (Fuchs 2022: 109) encourages Corbett's externalisation of her frame as a mere energetic conduit for her races. She 'refused to listen' (69) to her body, and her simultaneous resilience and collapse abstracts the notion of scarcity in a manner mirrored by neoliberal management of essential resources. Indeed, Jason Moore views his so-called four cheaps (labour, food, energy and raw materials) as in a state of abstracted scarcity that obscures their true measurability (2014). This mirage effect serves to prolong the extractivist status-quo, and the same can be said of Corbett's running. She may be victim of glaringly obvious malnutrition, but her very ability to complete the ultra-marathon tantalisingly and dangerously challenges that frailty, re-ordering it as resilience and strength.

Corbett is conscious of parallels between her substance use and her anorexia, proclaiming both to be addictions (76). This compounds the deprivation that characterises her narrative. Food, substances and running all marking their toll on her body. She writes: 'I was putting my body through some gritty, almost impossible things and I was not feeding it anything to recover' (76). This phrasing is stylistically consistent with the passage above that details her salt encrusted face. The word 'gritty' is key. Not only does it grasp the awkward difficulty of her running endeavours, it also further emphasises the nexus of resilience and exhaustion central to her running recovery. By its nature, grit is broken and disintegrated rock

[58] These are *The Plantpower Way* (2015) and *The Plantpower Way: Italia* (2018).

and matter. Its crumbled texture captures the extractive decay Corbett's concurrent diet (or lack thereof) and running triggers. Yet, its awkward, sharp enduring quality also reflects her own simultaneous ability to reframe extractive exhaustion as a strength. It is her very desire to dig deeper and perform better at races that prompts a slight shift in her restrictive eating habits: 'I didn't give up my vegan diet, but I learned about food like almond butter, items that had the fat and calories I needed' (77). Whilst she uses vegan foodstuffs as a way of fuelling her training and competing, her writing on the topic is brief and starkly devoid of the evangelism that laces Roll's text, e.g., his reference to plant-based foods as providing an almost baptismal 'cleanse' (98) of his body. The sparser language and the almost total absence of writing on food in *Reborn on the Run* is itself telling of Corbett's fragile recovery. A clear source of trauma, food is a utilitarian necessity still difficult for the author to confront. She writes of her eating disorder 'I wouldn't be able to train and complete a hundred-miler without beating it' (77). Hence, her narcotic and ED recoveries are inextricably tied – the former leaves a chasm which is filled by ultra-running, which is only possible when eating sufficiently. The recuperative bond here is neoliberal in nature. Corbett confronts her eating disorder primarily as a method of fine tuning and elongating her running performance. The very energy underpinning her want of recovery is accumulative performance and distance. She writes plainly of the excesses of her training and how food helped, 'During my long runs – at this point, they would last all day, up to 40 miles or more – I would feel good' (78). This conflation of a successful working recovery and health with athletic performance and exercise is a total endorsement of the neoliberal, healthism status quo that confuses obsessive excess with personal well-being.

Engle too adopts a predominantly plant-based diet, however its prominence in his narrative is limited, only unpacked later in his social media intertexts. In *Running Man*, he describes bartering in prison to sustain his vegetarianism:

> In the chow hall, I'd learned how to negotiate deals with my meat-loving fellow inmates, who eagerly traded their vegetables and fruit for my burgers and chicken. […' When sweet potatoes were served, I'd fill my bag, take them back to my unit. Then I'd scoop out their insides, put the mush into a plastic container that I'd bought at the commissary, and sweeten them with brown sugar that I'd scored from Rowdy for five stamps (229).

Even in a period of incarceration, Engle shows an adept agency at managing and sustaining his nutritional preferences in an environment that does not cater specifically for them. Ian Pirie writes that 'the neoliberal public health regime demands that each of us take responsibility for our own health and manage our consumption in a prudent manner' (850). Engle, then, is the exemplar of neoliberal healthism, sustaining his body through individualised action and thrift, even when his liberty and agency is taken from him. Moreover, he later uses stashed and snaffled foodstuffs to sustain his semi-illicit runs around the prison yard. Thus, he plays the prison marketplace not only to provide suitable vegetarian food, but for foods tailored to running performance.

The food-as-fuel approach that underlines Roll and Corbett's text is hence present with Engle. When describing the nutritional research for his Sahara crossing run, he writes:

> Nutritionists at Gatorade advised us to take in about ten thousand calories a day; most of those calories would have been eaten while we ran. To train my body to digest on the fly, I forced as much food into my stomach as possible before I ran. I hated starting out with a full belly, but I knew I had to get used to it. (129)

Loading the body and then embarking on a brutal, elongated purge of that energetic resource would be problematic for our other author Corbett, as the behaviour mirrors the feast and purgation associated with disordered eating. Her text does not elaborate much at all on her fuelling patterns, likely because confronting issues regarding food is a traumatic process. But Engle's plain, matter-of-fact language that asserts he just must acclimatise to excess – both in his running and his nutrition, is an unveiled admission that the sport necessitates an extreme engagement with a cycle of consumption-deprivation.

This is true even in relative fallow periods of training, with Engle keeping his body in a perpetual state of preparation, always anticipating the next hundred-mile adventure. When in jail, Engle attempts to run the Badwater 135 race by running laps of the yard. His training is often interrupted by spot checks, and he describes his frustration:

> The shakedown was followed immediately by a lockdown; we were stuck inside the unit until further notice. The timing was lousy. I had a fifteen-mile, hard-tempo run planned for that afternoon. Now I couldn't do it. I paced back and forth in my cell, did some push-ups and sit-ups, and hoped the yard would open again soon (240).

The collision of incarceration and running recalls Alan Sillitoe's cult novella *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* (1959) – a socialist realist tale of a teen in a borstal who is provided with cross-country as an outlet, and Alexis Tadie notes the 'productive literary paradox' (2015: 294) of setting the freeing sensations of running against a backdrop of the penal system. In this passage though, it makes Engle appear deluded. Its gritted, factual tone, scarcely dampens the absurdity of complaining that he cannot run fifteen miles whilst literally serving a sentence in a federal prison. His frustration reveals that his ideal of freedom is so entangled with running, it becomes lionised as his sole method of recovery. Such myopia emboldens Engle's running-as-recovery narrative. It also reinforces his body's neoliberalisation – with his consumptive, mileage chasing mindset proving ceaseless, even in a context designed to deprive an individual of stimulation and freedom.

The criminal charge which led to Engle's imprisonment also reflects a process of neoliberalisation. Throughout the narrative, he maintains his innocence regarding his bank fraud conviction, claiming the guilty party was in fact a broker who overstated his income without consent. Such illegality is now known to have been rife. Driven by a 'voracious securitisation chain in the global financial services sector' during the mid-2000s, mortgage and loan fraud were 'epidemic' in the US (Brown and Cloke 2011: 116) in the years leading up to the 2008 financial crash. This manner of downfall is important, as it provides a wider, neoliberal parallel to Engle's running body. At the point of his conviction, he predictably turns to running as a soothing coping mechanism and to maintain his sobriety, only to tear his meniscus: 'The pain had gotten worse, but I had run through it – until it was, at last, unignorable' (199). Much like his mortgage misdemeanour, Engle overstates his own bodies' resources – pushing to the point of exhaustion and causing serious injury. The precise simultaneity of the liar loan system collapsing and his body yielding to years of aggressive mileage is damning. The concurrence suggests the logic of neoliberal financial markets – those free from regulation and motivated by ruthless capital accumulation, can transmigrate to citizens and play out through their athletic exploits. Engle's meniscus tear is the result of reckless, unregulated athletic running-recovery-lifestyle and an insistence on running through injury with 'ferocity' (199). Such aggressive language denotes his greed for mileage and the social capital it endows. Also, it is demonstrative of how Engle's attitude to running has internalised market competitiveness. He treats his body like a whimsical loan lender, willingly draining its depleting energetic resources in order keep pushing the boundaries of

distance running, an act that both produces a demonstrably powerful yet fragile neoliberal frame and sustains a rather extreme mode of recovery.

Chapter Conclusion

The foundation of this chapter is that the athlete-authors all champion their transformative athletic exploits as a varyingly successful mode of recovery from addiction, with Engle the outlier in his willingness to accept and introspect the substitutive nature of his addictive running behaviour. I have shown that the running-as-recovery lifestyle within ultra-running literature is one that enables an individual to construct the minutia of their existence around running and endurance sport, and that it is driven and characterised by neoliberal socio-economic conditions that penetrate sporting and embodied performance norms.

I have established how the ultra-running text's vision of recovery does not eradicate excess. Instead, their focus on exhaustive physical activity provides an alternate conduit; a substitute offering the same shot of extremity as severe alcohol and substance use, without the crippling social stigma. I have emphasised that whilst this is a preferable trade, the retention of extremity through substitutive running practice is still a manifestation of addiction, and it does not remediate the excess that colours the lives of Roll, Engle and Corbett. Engle confesses and wrangles with this truth, whilst Roll and Corbett deploy confession more cynically, tying their over-engagement with endurance sport to a pseudo-spiritual notion of true identity.

All three athlete-authors still utilise neoliberal perspectives on accumulation, extraction and bodily health and aesthetics to position the running-as-recoverylifestyle as a saleable self-help narrative of wholesale reinvention. Their thematic deployment of rebirth, which in reality is the functional re-channelling of an addictive impulse, depicts accumulative behaviour such as running one hundred miles and craving more not solely as a precarious overloading of the body, but also as a proactive, ground-breaking method of maintaining sobriety.

More, it seems, is an unshakeable target for both runners as well as world-economies. The embodied consequences of this ideological commitment to a relentlessly active recovery are, as the images in the chapter demonstrate, a manifestation of healthism: the neoliberal healthcare model premised on individual responsibility. Their bodies are aesthetically

consistent with contemporary perceptions of health that are premised on being physically active and capable. Furthermore, through the self-help nature of the narratives, Roll, Engle and Corbett demonstrate that bodily transformation and ongoing sobriety are a direct consequence of individual action. By tying themselves to the strength and endurance of their own emboldened personal wills, the athlete-authors nourish a neoliberal culture that overlooks structural inequalities that heighten risk of addiction in favour of celebrating tales of remarkable transformation. It is a lionisation of the individual that absolutely serves the status quo. Finally, this individualist norm is sustained beyond the autobiographies themselves. Years after their initial publication, the books can be seen as detailed foundations for social media paratexts. Their running-as-recoverylifestyle narrative runs seamlessly from the physical book to snapshot social media morsels. It provides a platform for the athletes to further disseminate their message, image and body – all of which concur that despite its fundamentally neoliberal characteristics, running as recovery *works*.

Thesis Conclusion

In Season Five of HBO's cinematic television drama *The Sopranos*, Christopher Moltisanti – a mob captain with severe alcohol and cocaine addiction issues driven by the violence and trauma of his life in crime – offers a snapshot of his own recovery, saying 'There's no chemical solution to a spiritual problem' (1999). It is a succinct and illuminating condemnation of substance abuse as a coping mechanism and vocalises the knowing self-destruction at the heart of addiction narratives. I have analysed addiction narratives across three sporting spheres, and they have proved critically interesting because they simultaneously accept and reject the notion of self-destruction being tied to addictive practices.

Throughout all three chapters, every athlete-author has described substance abuse as having an explicitly negative impact on their lives. Their texts variously describe the addictive consumption of alcohol, cocaine, sleeping tablets, pain killers and amphetamines as a method of escapism, a consequence of the entanglement of their sport and addictive revenues, a symptom of trauma and a coping mechanism for the physical pressures of being a professional athlete. Alongside this view of substance abuse is the notion that sport itself, specifically the deeply addictive engagement with it, is often presented, I believe falsely, as a potentially curative solution to the spiritual problem of addiction within many of these texts. I have written explicitly of how Rich Roll fails to confess the clear addictive patterns embedded in his running-as-recovery lifestyle, whilst the literature of Lance Armstrong frames his addictive training as not only an aid in improving his performance, but as a strengthening force in his recovery from cancer. This defence of sporting norms is diversified by Paul Merson, who, in his most recent autobiography *Hooked*, praises the football media for providing structured employment that helps to manage his addictive impulses, without acknowledging that the financialisaton of football broadcasting is deeply dependent on betting sponsors and other addictive revenues that pose an ever-present threat to his sobriety.

It has not been my goal to criticise athletes' lived experiences of addiction and recovery, but rather to highlight how their written accounts of dependencies on PEDs, recreational drugs and sporting praxis itself can offer a frustratingly inadequate view of addiction and recovery in sport, this despite them being the primary source of information on the topic. Throughout this thesis, I have relied on three primary points to evidence this inadequacy, the first being that obsessive training and exhaustive effort outputs are inherent

to the lives of professional athletes. Sports life writing exploits this innateness, hiding addictive behaviours in plain, hyper-normative sight, recasting them as a neoliberal demonstration of strong and agile personal virtues. Across these texts, the exhaustive, self-damaging lifestyle of the athlete is rarely introspected, and is instead depicted as the culmination of willing hard work. The second strand that weakens the genre's accuracy in representing addiction is its use of confessionary tropes deployed to elicit a reputational recovery. Often, this goal of retribution within the genre goes beyond a simple desire for catharsis and forms the basis of a self-mobilising recovery narrative that emphasises the role of sheer individual will above all else in the search for sobriety. The final strand is the genre's depiction of the dominant modes of recovery and sobriety for athletes. These are the running-as-recovery lifestyle and the dependence on sporting praxis to provide a substitutive outlet for addictive impulses. These textual mechanisms often fail to fully interrogate the notion that dependence on extreme physical activity and exertion does not erase the pathologies of substance addiction, it just re-routes them, meaning they hold similar risks of unsustainable reliance and bodily damage. Then, by binding such views on recovery to self-help explicitly (e.g. Roll) and more implicitly (e.g. Adams), the genre offers and profits from a solution to addiction that itself remains embedded in addictive practices.

The other essential contribution to sporting addiction narratives that I have offered in this thesis is that the logic of finding renewal-in-depletion – itself a consumptive mode of athletic praxis that mimics unsustainable resource extraction – has bound itself to neoliberal sporting realms and individuals and is accelerating. The footballing texts I have referenced bridged *the* modernising period of English football and discussed a simultaneity of alcoholism, cocaine abuse and elite sporting performance. The way in which Adams and Merson depict this double depletion by substance and sporting demands is messy and imprecise. The process of achieving renewal-in-depletion is presented as much more refined in the cycling texts, with the added cocktail of PEDs framing each rider as an impersonal energy input whose recovery and immediate renewal from a state of depletion is synthetically managed by EPO and other renewing injections. Finally, with my analysis of ultra-running and endurance sport literature, I have shown that sporting culture is accelerating into much more extreme manifestations of addictive depletion and renewal. The texts I have referenced actively endorse the spiritual and physical benefits of seeking depletive-renewal, and, moreover, they do so of their own accord, without the extractive apparatus of a professional team and contract that demands results as with my cycling examples. This culmination of an

unsustainably depletive logic being internalised and willingly performed in extremity by individual runners and endurance athletes is, on one hand, an admirable search of human limitation, but it is also a dangerous manifestation of addictive impulse that risks warping everyday life, serious injury and an inability to cope without an extreme mode of exercise.

My thesis has provided an interdisciplinary insight into the functioning of addiction within sporting literature, and its central arguments regarding confession, depletive renewal and the atomisation of the athlete away from their social-sporting environment can provide a strong base for further research. Many other sporting literatures tell of widespread PED and addiction issues, and the frameworks I have constructed can be taken and applied to them. Indeed, I have not covered the literary representations of Olympic doping and addiction scandals, and there are many across a variety of sports like weightlifting, swimming and sprinting which would provide fascinating insight into the topic. Looking forward, I feel my research has concluded at a point in time where both behavioural and substance addictions in sport are prescient issues. Many footballers demonstrate an addictive use of snus, painkillers and sleeping tablets, whilst tour cycling and ultra-running are continually pushing the human body past limits previously thought impossible, aided by an addictive engagement with their praxis. Writing is already emerging on these accelerative addictive patterns, and I believe my research has provided a groundbreaking foundation which will prove useful in analysing them.

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