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## Undertaking long-distance running: thirty years of studies in the sociology of sport in France.

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### Abstract:

This article offers a review of the literature on long-distance running, i.e. marathon, ultra-long-distance and trail running, based on French studies in the sociology of sport. The interest of such a synthesis lies, firstly, in its affording better understanding of the continued craze of runners for those running disciplines, which are now major practices on the sports scene; secondly, in its presenting to the sociology of sport in English the premises and theoretical conceptions which in France have examined “the wave which has swept the country” (Segalen, 1991, p. 21). The articles collected on the theme range over a period of thirty years and more, from 1982 to 2015, and were produced by French sociologists of sport. The majority of them have examined the phenomenon through the question of undertaking such sports. Therefore it is the question: “Why do people take up those forms of running?” which is addressed in this synthesis and round which its presentation is organised.

**Key words:** Sports engagement; Long-distance running; Marathon, ultra-long distance and ultra-trail running; Literature review; French sport sociology;

## Introduction

By means of literature review on long-distance running<sup>1</sup>, this article examines some three decades of studies conducted by the French sport sociologists on those practices. The project is motivated by three heuristic points of interest which aim at better analysis of those sports activities. The interest of this state of the art lies first in improved understanding of the success of endurance or long-endurance running, which has been steadily attracting ever more people with ever more diverse backgrounds. The second interest lies in writing and publishing a summary of the studies made on the subject in France<sup>2</sup>. This has never been done, even though the issue has been discussed in the sociology of sport in France<sup>3</sup> for over thirty years

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, the terminology leaves out track racing practices and jogging. In the former, although certain track racing practices do involve endurance, they are too strongly linked with the world of athletics to belong in the trend we mean to describe. As for the latter, jogging is a practice in which engagement in endurance is too low to compare with the practices under study, i.e. semi-marathon, trail running etc.

<sup>2</sup> In the field of the sociology of sport in English, the same intention has emerged lately with the publication of *Endurance running: A socio-cultural examination*, by W. Bridel, P. Markula, J. Denison ; Routledge, 2016 ; pp. 290.

<sup>3</sup> In the course of the last thirty years, the limits of the sociology of sports in France have moved. Although the space it occupies within French sociology is still relatively small (Collinet, 2002), it has expanded from 1980 as a result of the creation of multidisciplinary laboratories within the Sciences and Techniques of Physical and Sports Activities (Sciences et Techniques des Activités Physiques et Sportives – STAPS) departments in the universities (Collinet, Payé, 2003). In such laboratories sociologists of sports have gathered and actively worked on the subject. To date, although the part it plays within French sociology is still quite small, the space has expanded beyond the realm of studies in general sociology that incidentally spill into sports; the sociology of

now, only with varying degrees of recurrence from one period to another. The third interest lies in offering English-speaking sociologists a condensed, though as complete a view as possible, of the premises and theoretical concepts which have been or are still being used to account for the success of those forms of running. That third point is aimed at enhancing the debates on those sports by taking down the language barrier and bringing together scattered publications which are usually published in miscellaneous magazines, some of which to be found only on the shelves of libraries<sup>4</sup>; and last, by urging interested researchers to systematically take up an approach of discussion of the outcomes of those studies and, beyond the immediate benefit of presenting a survey, to set up a common space for discussion so as achieve better analysis of the phenomenon.

In France, the attention that several generations of sociologists of sport have paid to long-distance running was born first of the craze for it all over the country and the number of runners which has been steadily increasing in the last thirty years, as the following figures will show: according to the SOFRES, joggers were 2.5 million in 1980 (Yonnet, 1982, p. 2); Stat-info reckoned that there were 6.6 million out-of-stadium runners in 2000 (Stat-info, 2001, p. 3), IPSOS that there were 7.4 million of them in 2007 (Aubel, Lefèvre, Tribou, 2008, p. 28), and up to 9.7 million according to Stat-info in 2010 (Stat-info, 2011, p. 2). The latter institute also emphasised that out-of-stadium running was the fifth most practised family of sport activity in France after walking (35.6 million people), swimming (21 million), cycling (17.4 millions) and gymnastics (9.8 million) (Stat-info, 2011, p. 2).

The increase in the number of runners was coupled with long-distance running splitting up into many different forms as it grew more popular. Nowadays running forms a collection of activities which include, to mention only the best-known ones, jogging, cross-country<sup>5</sup>, semi-marathon, marathon, ultra-marathon<sup>6</sup>, trail, ultra-trail and sky-running<sup>7</sup> - an astonishing variety which has been boiled down by sports equipment manufacturers and marketing agencies to the generic name 'running'<sup>8</sup>, and by national survey agency Stat-info to 'out-of-stadium running'<sup>9</sup>; as for sports observatory FPS/IPSOS, they use an enumerative

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sports is now used for standard reference and its productions are neither questioned nor challenged by other areas of general sociology such as culture, labour, leisure etc.

<sup>4</sup> The articles were collected in two phases. In the first phase, we used a broad scan and looked up Google Scholar and specialised national (Cairn info, Persee.fr etc.) and international (Elsevier, Sage, Taylor & Francis etc.) databases. French sociologists of sports may have published in English on the subject, but we did not find any. Two families of keywords were used for the research. One included the terms 'sociology, sport, France' (*sociologie, sport, France*), and the other 'running, endurance running, long-endurance running, long-time running, semi-marathon, trail, ultra-trail, ultra-long distance, raid' (« *course à pied, course d'endurance, course de longue endurance, course de longue durée, semi-marathon, marathon, trail, ultra-trail, ultrafond, raid* »). We then combined the two families of keywords to sweep across the field to be explored, translating those combinations into English for the international databases. In the second phase, we scrutinised the bibliographies of the collected documents for references that the search engines may have failed to spot. In the course of the second phase we had to look into archives and search the catalogue of the Bibliothèques Universitaires de France. That was because a few of the publications identified were accessible only from certain libraries. Such is Jacques Defrance's 'Free running or the athletics world overturned. A sociology of the collective representations of two variants of running' (« *La course libre ou le monde athlétique renversé. Sociologie des représentations collectives de deux variantes de la course à pied* », 1985), which was published in issue number 8 of the *Travaux et Recherches en EPS* journal, of which very few copies were printed.

<sup>5</sup> In France 'cross-country' is also commonly known as '*fond*' (long-distance running).

<sup>6</sup> Also known in France as '*ultrafond*' (ultra-long-distance running).

<sup>7</sup> This discipline is a mountain race performed at altitudes over 2 000 metres, with slopes over 30% and some climbing difficulties.

<sup>8</sup> For example, agencies KantarSport and Uniteam Sport, who were commissioned to investigate the long-distance running practices among the customers of a major French bank, published a 'barometer of running' in 2013.

<sup>9</sup> The name includes jogging and the whole range from marathon to trail (Stat-info, 2011, p.2)

name – ‘footing’jogging, running’<sup>10</sup>. Those simplified names are not challenged in the literature on the subject; to a certain extent, they even seem relevant, as they describe something real in the world of runners, who regularly and freely move from one running format to another, decreasing or increasing the dose of endurance according to their objectives at a given time. Such free style, however, does impact on the tentative censuses of the various families of runners, and may entail significant discrepancies about the estimates. For example in 2013 a survey by agencies KantarSport and Uniteam Sport found that, due to that free style, 50% of out-of-stadium runners in France regularly choose trail running as their running format, which in the perspective of counting trail runners substantially increases their proportion in France, with estimates of the population rising from 450 000, as announced by the Ultra-Trail World Tour in 2015, to well above one million...

The articles and works used for this summary cover a period a little over thirty years long. The earliest is an article by Paul Yonnet, ‘Joggers and marathoners – the survivors of tomorrow?’ in 1982, and the latest an article by Romain Rochedy entitled ‘Analysis of a deceleration space: the example of ultra-trail running’, which was published in 2015 in STAPS magazine. The publications amount to a total of 25 texts<sup>11</sup>. However, they are not all given the same importance in this summary. Some, though on the subject of endurance running, were left out and will not be discussed – for example, several publications by Olivier Bessy on Ultra-Trail Running on the Mont Blanc (2010, 2011), in which the sociologist’s study is based on geography and tourism. The outcomes, which show the growing importance of such running races for the development of a territory, however innovative, are of no use in the debate round which this summary is organised, and which is on the question of the determinants in undertaking endurance running<sup>12</sup>. Conversely, I have incorporated into this summary the articles by Marianne Barthélémy (1998, 2002) on adventure raids, which examine the motivation for such ultra-marathons as the Marathon des Sables, the Silk Trails or the Jordan Desert Cup.

The majority of the texts written by French sociologists of sport on endurance running examine the question of how it has become so popular and so many people have chosen to engage in it. The question recurrently asked in all the texts cited here is: ‘Why?’ In this literature review, I have chosen to show how the question has changed in time. Thus this summary is not intended to meet the challenge of building any template on the question of engagement; nor does it suggest, as do the sociology of engagement in dangerous sports and the moderately constructivist approach it uses (Routier, Soulé, 2010), any plan of action that would gather and organise the diverse explanation contained in the texts collected for this

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<sup>10</sup>Footing and jogging here form a single word, as they are joined by an apostrophe which means ‘and’.

<sup>11</sup> These are all ‘scientific’ publications. We have left out of this selection Masters dissertations, theses and texts for the general public. On the other hand, those 25 texts were written in French by French researchers – ethnologists, sociologists or sociologists of sports, but it could have been different and we could have included in this corpus the production of a French researcher who wrote in English on those practices. For example, it would have been the case if the article by Sandrine Knobé ‘Elements for a sociological analysis of engagement in ultra-long distance running’(« Eléments pour une analyse sociologique de l’entrée dans l’ultrafond ») published in 2006 in bilingual international journal *Leisure and Society (Loisir et Société)* had not been published in French but in English. If an English-speaking researcher had written on the development of those practices in France, it would have been more difficult to decide on the case. Furthermore, these 25 texts may appear as a modest contribution if compared with the thirty years over which they were published and the number of researchers who currently represent the community of sociologists of sports in France. However, thanks to their publication stretching over a long period of time, their being regularly published and their sheer number, they form a whole distinctive enough to make up a characteristic theme of the field of the sociology of sports in France.

<sup>12</sup> Likewise the text by Manuel Schotte was left out. It is entitled ‘In the run – Building a hierarchy in action’ and was published in 2015 in the magazine *Proceedings of social science research*. It explores the way a hierarchy is built, not what determines engagement in those endurance practices.

summary. The diachronic perspective I have chosen aims at presenting in a thorough way the various premises and theoretical concepts which have fed the issue in France, and emphasising how they have structured it in the course of time.

The perspective then is different from the summary of studies in English made by Bridel *et al.*: ‘Critical considerations of runners and running’ (2016, pp. 1-15), the presentation of which is organised round two strong entry points in the cultural sociology of sports in English, i.e. (i) criticism of the media and (ii) the sense and experience of the runner’s body. However, the classification chosen by Bridel *et al.* brings to light three aspects about the studies made in French on endurance running. First, in France, no publication has made the media coverage of endurance races and its criticism the focus of its analysis. Although parts of an article sometimes may contain critical considerations on the media treatment of champions like Mimoun (Waser, 1998), on the editorial policy of an endurance running magazine like *Spiridon* (Defrance, 1985, 1989; Waser, 1998), or the design of adventure raids like the *Marathon des Sables* (Barthélémy, 1988, 2002), such criticism is scarce, certainly not enough to represent a trend. For French researchers, this is undoubtedly a field in which they should work so that they could converse with their English speaking counterparts. Moreover, those practices are given ever increasing media coverage on the social networks and convey new stereotypes relating not only to social class, gender or race, but also to the environment. The second aspect about French studies is that while, just like those in English, they use an approach based on the ‘senses’, ‘experience’ or the ‘body’ to examine the processes of engagement in endurance running, their reasons for taking up those categories do not, as Bridel *et al.* have said concerning the Anglophone world, derive from a need to complement or compete with psychology and physiology, which have been increasingly active in publishing on those forms of running (2016, p. 5). In the case of France, those categories are used sometimes as a result of the critical debate on and the proven limitations of pre-1994 sociographies (Segalen, 1994), at other times of the shared feeling, while examining the phenomenon – both by pluralistic sociologists like Paul Yonnet (1982) or ‘Bourdiesians’ like Jacques Defrance (1989) – that engagement in endurance running can no longer be studied just using the categories through which, in that period (1982-1994), sport phenomena were accounted for. Last, the third characteristic of French studies is that their results are considerably different from those written in English, although both sides used the same ‘senses’, ‘experience’ and ‘body’ approach. The flexible classification Bridel *et al.* use to define the production in English on endurance running is distributed among three themes: the body aesthetics of the runner; pain, injury and health; body experience and nature. This does not suit the studies in French, which are more inclined to deal with such themes as the weight of social belonging or of predispositions; leisure and mass culture; risk and the extreme; urban life and criticism of the time; justice...

It is the diversity of French productions which, among other methodological considerations, has prompted me to choose periods of time rather than themes for the outline of the presentation. However, within those periods I have classified the productions in terms of ‘kinship’, dividing them into two classes: those resulting from sociology akin to genetic structuralism, and those from a pluralistic sociology which apparently belongs to no particular theoretical school, except that, as a result of modernity, it is bent on preserving the autonomy of the subject.

This summary is thus divided into two major parts. The first one retraces the debate on the question of engaging in running, based on the chronology of the publications and the successive opposition among them. Two explicative processes are then openly opposed: the one finding its arguments in a systematic analysis of the space of social classes and the relations between them; the other emphasising the weight of societal changes and the dissemination of new living standards. In the second part, the same question is addressed,

only in a partitioned way. Each side expands on their own accounting for the phenomenon by means of new or improved premises, refraining from discussing the outcomes of other studies on the same subject. In this part, the complexity of the models prevails over their capacity to supersede those previously produced by means of controversy – which makes the presentation look like an enumeration of authors rather than a discussion.

## **1- Phase One: Engagement, a matter of social condition or of new standards in community living?**

In France, what makes the specificity of the studies in the sociology of sport on long-endurance running is that from their inception they have revolved around the question of engagement and the confrontation between the proponents of pluralistic and of Bourdieusian sociology. As a result, to answer the question: ‘What is it that makes people engage in running?’ – especially the marathon in these early studies – some mentioned societal transformations and the emergence of new values related to leisure (Yonnet, 1982, 1985; Waser, 1998), exploring the internal process of such activities (Denzler, 1991) and describing in detail the intimate experience of individuals (Segalen, 1994); others, on the other hand, focused on the social space and the positions which condition the engagement, showing how it resulted from the renewed composition of the field of athletics (Defrance, 1985, 1989) and the weight of the social standing of the runners (Faure, 1987).

The debate began in 1982 with an article by Paul Yonnet, ‘Joggers<sup>13</sup> and marathoners – the survivors tomorrow?’<sup>14</sup>, in which the author examined the growing popularity of free running, which he considers to be a mass phenomenon. He emphasises that it is just the foam on the surface of deep transformations about our ways of life, and that it “*would be a major mistake to see jogging simply as a new word for an age-old activity, one way of magically denying it the right to exist, and the series of disruptions from which it has built itself as a new form for an ancient practice, i.e. running*’ (Yonnet, 1982, p. 3). Among those disruptions, the major one in Yonnet’s view is the emergence in daily life of new requirements based on free time activities. Refraining from uncovering the directive principle about them, he shows how those requirements have thoroughly changed the processes of engagement in jogging and marathon, which differ from previous athletic customs. For example, whereas the reasons for individuals to take up any form of endurance running used to be identification to a champion, a sports history, competition or objectives of sport excellence, now they pertain more to identification with an anonymous mass, “non-formal engagement in sports”, facing one’s own limits, or personal projects which may range from self-referenced performance to hygienic or aesthetic considerations. To Yonnet, those are the new aspirations born of leisure, which determine engagement in endurance running practices and account for their growing success<sup>15</sup>. If, in his demonstration, he pays little attention to the arguments of genetic structuralism, it is, he writes, because there are gaps in the way they address jogging and marathon, which are hardly mentioned at all in *Distinction* (1979) and

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<sup>13</sup> Although jogging and marathon do not call for the same engagement in endurance, P. Yonnet deals with them both as components of ‘free running’. We are taking up the same combination to present his thinking, even though jogging, as explained in the first footnote, is not part of our definition of endurance running.

<sup>14</sup>In his 1985 article entitled *Jeux, modes et masses (Games, fashion and the masses)*, Yonnet gives a verbatim account of the article.

<sup>15</sup>A.-M. Waser presents a similar argument in her article entitled: « Du stade à la ville : réinvention de la course à pied » (‘From the stadium to town: reinventing running’, 1998), as she shows how, from the 1970s, the development of leisure standards within running practices – for instance, the standards on pleasure rather than performance (p. 65) – has contributed to mass enthusiasm for the practice.

altogether missing from the typology of sports by Christian Pociello (1981), as though, Yonnet suggests, there ended the explicative power of that theory.

### **Structural critique: engagement in endurance running practices not to be accounted for through new standards in community living.**

After that opening article comes the one by Jacques Defrance, « La course libre ou le monde athlétique renversé » ('Free running or the upheaval in the athletic world', 1985), in which the sociologist gives a structural interpretation of the enthusiasm for endurance running<sup>16</sup>, which in his view is certainly not new, as the idea of including various levels of runners in one out-of-stadium race dates back to the early days of athletics in France at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Taking an opposite stand from Yonnet's who, in his view, fails to objectivise the causes of the phenomenon because he took up the indigenous interpretations and tried to account for the success using a technical approach, Defrance argues that the renewed enthusiasm is a consequence of a reshuffling process in the field of running and that the reasons for engagement in free running are to be found in its cultural value being redefined and new layers of the population gradually turning to it. The issue of engagement, which at this stage changes into the question of which social groups get involved, is thus addressed through two aspects – the way the collective representations of a given activity differ in one area and are integrated into the cultural world of each social group; and the 'ranking struggle', a symbolic and political struggle conducted by the group of leading runners and aimed at imposing a view of the social world in that activity, by means of developing habits, models and values, but also by using it to oppose other groups on the field of social relations. In Defrance's view, undertaking free running thus results from the fact that it is different from the running usually organised in athletics. By suggesting an 'inverted image' or an antagonistic definition, this kind of running gives a different image of itself; that changes its classification in the space of sports, enabling it to appeal to different social categories of potential runners. Undertaking free running, however, also depends on whether the leading group of runners can make it their own, according to their lifestyle, and impose as models their values, i.e. anti-competition, thrift, pacifism, free style, unpretentiousness; or else, impose a runner's archetype: that of an adult runner, of average level, who is not interested in submitting to the authority of some federal organisation, and runs for the fun of it. For the sociologist, the rationale for running also relates to the balance of power among the different social groups. The ruling classes (members of the professions, senior executives, lecturers) are over-represented in free running (and the *loisible* values which they impose in it); this is due, on the one hand, to that group more generally imposing those values in society as the new dominant morality, and on the other hand to the conflicts among the various fractions of the same ruling classes, with those who feel dominated wishing to take a stand through endurance running and its anti-institutional values.

In the wake of this structural interpretation, Jean-Michel Faure draws a detailed delineation of the part played by social positions in undertaking long endurance running. In his article entitled 'L'éthique puritaine du marathonien' ('The puritan ethics of marathon runners', 1987), he closely examines the social origins of 904 marathon runners and their ways while doing the sport. He highlights the over-representation of the upper social categories and their taste for ascetics and competition. Thus, undertaking marathon is presented as a question of social classes: 84.5% of the runners interviewed belong either to

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<sup>16</sup> Those interpretations he took up again in this 1989 article entitled: « Un schisme sportif, clivages structurels, scissions et oppositions dans les sports athlétiques, 1960-1980 » ('A sports division, structural divides, scissions and oppositions in athletics, 1960-1980').

professions in the tertiary, or to senior professions, as against 6% only who are workers in factories or agriculture. Undertaking such running thus specifically concerns the privileged layers of urban society – managers, professionals and executives represent 43.6% of runners although they are under 12% of the working population in France, which, as the author insists, suggests that marathon should be classified among the group of sports socially considered as most bourgeois. Faure then seeks to isolate the objectives which cause upper class runners to undertake long endurance running, since their involvement, he writes, is prompted neither by enhancement of their social success (the career of a manager, a senior executive or a doctor is not dependent on their marathon performances), nor by any aesthetic concern (such as may prompt a little jog round the Luxembourg Gardens), but rather by implementation of the ascetic ethics typical of their social group. It is primarily, according to the writer, their way of perceiving reality that prompts upper class runners to undertake long-distance running, although they may not be aware of it. To them running is a means to implement moral rules relating to their social group's idea of the correct way of living one's life, i.e. controlling personal weaknesses, scorning slackness or compromise, programming and planning one's projects, maintaining strict habits, etc. Undertaking running, on the other hand, also proceeds from those upper classes' peculiar idea of competition, for which they have strong liking. Beyond being a form of ascetic success, competition is a means to compare one's merits with other people's and objectivise them. Hence, according to Faure, the strong taste that managers, senior executives and professionals have for distance and time figures, rather than the topology of the ranking system or the course, as thanks to figures, they can situate themselves objectively (to feed the idea of excellence of which those social categories are fond) and consequently compare themselves with others, as in that economy of performance, he writes, 'surpassing oneself also means surpassing the others' (p. 41).

### **The limits of genetic structuralism: undertaking endurance running does not depend only on social position or the thirst for distinction.**

However robust the structural theses may appear to be in this debate, Romain Denzler still questions their soundness. Although in his article entitled: « Le marathon : une pratique de classe ? » ('Marathon: a class-based sport?', 1991), he recognises that executives and senior intellectual professionals are over-represented in the activity, he questions the close link between social classes and leisure and sport activities such as may proceed from Bourdieusian concepts of habitus and distinction. On the one hand, he argues, in no way does marathon correspond to the dominant taste such as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, writing on sports in *Distinction* (1979). Marathon, unlike "golf, tennis (...) or fencing, [is not] done in exclusive, dedicated places, at times of the players' own choice, alone or with chosen partners (...), at the cost of significant investment (...)"<sup>17</sup>; likewise those dominant taste sports, unlike marathon, "solely imply highly ritualised competition (...); sport intercourse looks every bit like highly refined social intercourse, ruling out any physical or verbal violence, any anomic use of the body (shouting, disorderly movements, etc.)"<sup>18</sup>. On the other hand, he notes, due to the mixing of social groups and identification with the mass that it implies, marathon cannot possibly serve the purpose of those groups at the top of the social hierarchy, as its popularity makes it *vulgar*, whereas they are after what is rare and posh so that they can distinguish themselves. In Denzler's view, yet one more argument may do away with that principle of distinction: within all three social groups (executives and senior intellectual professionals,

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<sup>17</sup>Bourdieu, P. *La distinction (The Distinction)*, Paris, Édition de Minuit, 1979, p. 239 cited in Denzler R. « Le marathon : une pratique de classe ? » ('Marathon: a class-based sport?'), in: *Sociétés contemporaines (Contemporary societies)* N°5, March 1991. Réseaux sociaux (Social networks). pp. 163-165.

<sup>18</sup> Bourdieu, P. *La distinction*, Ibidem.



office workers, labourers) the same proportions are to be found of runners who spend over 1 000 francs on 'Transport' and on 'Equipment'. This suggests that the upper social categories do not seek distinction through their consumption ways any more than the two others do. According to Denzler, it is not the effect of social position that may account for undertaking long endurance running and marathon, but that of living in urban environments: 63% of the 700 runners interviewed in his survey live in towns with populations over 20 000. That seems to be the primary incentive to undertake marathon, he argues, as it makes it possible for those city dwellers to 'recreate the social life that they have lost in the fuss of urban daily life' (p. 165).

Following that first decade of studies, Martine Segalen discards the sociological approaches and chooses an anthropological one which, in her view, is more suitable to capture what determines the mass enthusiasm for running. In *Les enfants d'Achille et de Nike* ('*The offspring of Achilles and Nike*', 1994), she argued that the sociographies produced thitherto had failed to account for the stability and size of the phenomenon, causing the sport theoreticians regularly to revise their hypotheses, which in her opinion are, '*by the way, markedly ideological*' (p. 14). For example, running against Faure's positional analysis, in which undertaking endurance running and marathon is a matter of social classes (1987), she offers three arguments<sup>19</sup> based on the realism of her ethnological study on long-distance runners: first, that of a certain fascination that sociologists have for the uppermost groups, which prompts them to place those groups at the heart of their analyses and see their social position as key to their conduct; next, that of viewing the bourgeois way of doing that sport only from the narrow perspective of '*an ascetic, methodical and competitive sport strongly linked to ethics*' (Faure, 1987, p. 81). That, Segalen argues, is true only during the periods of training before racing events, as field observation has shown that at other times the so-called ascetics turn into *bons viveurs* and that, depending on circumstances, the recreational and hedonistic conception of running is quite as strong among them as the puritan outlook they are supposed to hold; last, Segalen writes – although she provides no evidence for this – the middle classes are under-estimated in endurance running, even though they represent three quarters of the participants. However, what justifies the choice of anthropology, in her view, is primarily that, in the process of analysing modernity, it will produce new questionings which can break through the narrow framework used by sociologists hitherto. Although she offers a wide range of reasons for undertaking running – as usually happens in the minute description of a microcosm – and you can hardly determine the weight of each in the phenomenon, those reasons can be summarised round two poles – the self and the urban which, as this quotation illustrates, to her are at the heart of the undertaking process: "*You always run for yourself, to feel fit, but also to participate in events which are the expressions of urban modernity*' (p. 84)<sup>20</sup>. The anthropologist then explains how undertaking endurance running nowadays, on the one hand, is consequent on personal motivations: unrestricted sport sociability, the quest for corporeal well-being, paying attention to one's own subjectivity, the need to break off from everyday routine; and on the other hand, on the wish to express an urban culture: celebration of the masses and the crowds; the status of actor and spectator of an event, the non-restrictive conception of an anonymous status, ownership of the urban space, etc.

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<sup>19</sup> From that perspective, Segalen also questions Paul Yonnet's analyses in his 1982 and 1985 productions, arguing that he indulges in meta-interpretations on the question of engagement when he accounts for the success of endurance running through the crisis of a society deprived of speed, or a society going through energy conservation, or again when he interprets the enthusiasm as the sign of a new religion or religiousness...

<sup>20</sup> Or this other quotation in a similar vein: "The current enthusiasm for running [...] is an expression of the culture and urban society [...] of the staging of oneself, in short, of modernity [...]" (p. 22).

While in that first wave different interpretations for the success of endurance running are offered and recurrent disagreements make the debate look like a paradigmatic opposition, those interpretations also converge at one point, as the authors realise that the engagement is rooted in close interrelation between personal life, its daily aspects and sport<sup>21</sup>; in that perspective, undertaking those forms of running results either from a revision of living standards (Yonnet, 1982, p. 17), adoption of a new living rule (Defrance, 1985, p. 135), expression of an ethic rule (Faure, 1987, p.40), commitment stronger even than passion (Waser, 1998, p. 67), or again from a need to present oneself as though on a stage (Segalen, 1994, p. 22). Such convergence highlights a new fact, at least for that period: the issue is carried beyond the sport sphere, onto analysis of the issue of engagement which, as authors agree, can be addressed only through taking into account different purposes relating to objectives of personal construction, aspiration and self-fulfilment, in which individual subjectivity emerges.

## **2- Phase Two: Engagement, a matter of personal history rather than social condition.**

A characteristic of the studies made during the next phase, which covers the period from the mid-1990s to 2015, and concern marathon, raid, ultra-long-distance and ultra-trail running, is that they no longer systematically oppose new living standards and social status, but rather turn to perspectives of individual lives to address the question of engagement. As the scale changes, the personal experiences and intimate preoccupations of runners are scrutinised. In the case of pluralist sociology, the arguments used to account for engagement in endurance running have chosen as a generating principle the autonomy that individuals are made to feel as a requirement in our modern societies. Although it is not explicitly proclaimed in each of the articles as their theoretical background, it still runs through every one of the hypotheses expounded in them, whether those hypotheses emphasise justice (Yonnet, 1998), risk (Barthélémy, 1998, 2002), the extreme (Bessy, 2002, 2005), the leisure culture (Bessy and Laperionie, 2009; Bessy, 2011) or the times (Rochedy, 2015) as strongly constituent dimensions in undertaking those forms of running. In the eyes of the proponents of that sociology, undertaking endurance running thus results primarily from an individual preoccupation – meeting the present-day requirement of self-production. In the case of a sociology still imbued with genetic structuralism, the explicative theses on undertaking endurance running, whether they are derived from a ‘late’ Bourdieusian approach focused on the body (Faure and Suaud, 2003) or a dispositional approach intent on the variations of individual trajectories (Knobé, 2006, 2007, 2008), all pertain to positional dialectics which seek to capture the question of engagement through a double move – interiorising objective structures and exteriorising subjective ones. In that perspective, undertaking endurance running is the expression of the incorporation of an individual social characteristic which was either inherited or acquired in the course of successive socialisation processes, as well as of the meaning it gives to the situations experienced by individuals, causing them to engage in the sport, which in turn helps them activate or strengthen that characteristic.

### **A modern quest: testing oneself as an individual.**

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<sup>21</sup> Although they do not expand on that transformation in their writings, both Yonnet and Defrance do mention it: the former notes that “every aspect of life is pervaded by sports” (1982, p. 9), and the latter that “The lack [...] of any border between sport and daily life has effects on the runner’s relationship to running [...]” (1989, p. 87).

In order to account for engagement in long distance running, plural sociologists have described by turns the imperatives in a society whose project consists in ‘*compelling individuals to build themselves as individuals all along their lives*’ (Martuccelli, 2009, p. 20). Although the idea does not feature in the foreground in Paul Yonnet’s works, it does appear to run through his accounting for the ever growing engagement in long endurance running. In his 1998 and 2004 works<sup>22</sup>, in which a few pages are on an examination of that sport phenomenon, the idea of individualisation is borne by that of ‘*a maturing democratic feeling of equal worth*’ (p. 152), which he identifies as a major cause of the mass engagement in endurance running. For the sociologist, the success of those forms of running is concomitant with transformation of the equality principle which rules our Western modern societies and encourages a more pronounced form of individualism. By moving from a similarity type of equality, which seeks to shape virtually equal individuals by reducing the gap between them, to a form of equality in which their equal worth is recognised beyond their difference, our contemporary societies have changed the canons for individual evaluation: difference becomes both a factor for integration (the common trait from which a new definition for equality evolves) and a fundamental existential dimension, since it is a means for people fully to achieve a status of equals (i.e. of individuals). Endurance running, inasmuch as it turns difference into the very spring of competition, meets that new equalitarian sensibility. The self-referencing and the challenging of oneself that it implies have meaning “*only if everyone has full self-awareness*” (p. 126), in other words only if everyone perceives their individuality in terms of self-differentiation, not of comparison with others. To Yonnet, the success of *single file sport* (p. 117), which he calls ‘*a procession of unequals*’ (p. 153), thus corresponds to a strong individual expectancy born of our new democracies: using one’s difference and self-staging to test oneself as an individual, as he describes it in the following words: “The democratic feeling of equal worth is checked against and made deeper by the action-show staging the greatest inequality” (p. 154).

The same need for individualisation is to be found in the works by Marianne Barthélémy, although in a different guise: that of the need to control one’s own destiny. In her article entitled ‘The enthusiasm for adventure-raids or the risk society transfigured by destiny’ (2002), Barthélémy argues that the success of those raids and of ultra-endurance races such as the Marathon des Sables, the Foulées de la Soie, the Jordan Desert Cup, etc., lies on the one hand in a marketing combination of tourism, expedition and sport; and on the other hand in a process of increased meritocratic value in which risk has been symbolically and feignedly brought back into favour, making individuals feel as though they were in control of their lives. There is something ‘exceptional’ about the sport, she writes, which more than risk or adventure causes individuals to undertake it. True, what runners are after obviously results from the need to escape from ordinary life and break off from their daily physical and human environment; but it is due primarily to their need to elicit evidence of their own personal capacity to overcome unusual ordeals and thus to reap the certainty that they do hold the reins of their own lives. It thus appears that individuals undertake endurance running less as a result of their taste for risk than to meet a democratic ideal which requires that ‘*everyone proves capable of producing themselves and taking their lives into their own hands*’ (p. 86), thus showing self-fulfilment to be a regular quest for one’s capacity to control one’s destiny.

A similar view is presented in Olivier Bessy’s works, except that to him, the individualisation requirement leading to engagement in long endurance running is not the result of risk or destiny, but rather of the extreme and a quest for one’s identity<sup>23</sup>. In his article entitled ‘The sociology of extreme sportspeople. The case of the participants in the Grand

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<sup>22</sup>*Systèmes des sports et Huit leçons sur le sport (Sports systems and Eight lessons on sport)*.

<sup>23</sup>In a previous article he wrote in collaboration with B. Lapeyronie, he defined it as a quest for personal fulfilment (2000, p. 163).

Raid de La Réunion' (2005), the writer, based on the results of a series of surveys on the Grand Raid de La Réunion, proves that long endurance races are socially diverse<sup>24</sup>. New categories of participants are joining those races, such as women, runners under 35 years old and those over 50, runners from the working classes, as well as people with unusual backgrounds, who are seldom members of a club, or participate in similar events; who practise a variety of physical and sport leisure activities. This, Bessy argues, is due to the extreme norm recently getting integrated into the mass culture. At the heart of his demonstration is the notion of 'mass extreme'. On the one hand, the extreme is an answer to the quest for identity required by an increasingly individualising society which no longer offers landmarks to individuals: "*Questioning my own self, what I am, what I would like to be, what I could be or what I could experience in our society, is what spurs me into the extreme*" (p. 59). On the other hand, mass extreme is less demanding than the elite extreme, and urges everyone to build their own challenge; "*You challenge yourself, only yourself, in your leisure time*" (p. 61). To Bessy, undertaking those long endurance races then proceeds primarily from an identity vacuum which individuals seek to fill in by exploring their physical limits; but it is also the result of the 'variable geometry' of those races which he calls *new models of sport events* (p. 62) and which, unlike the usual sport events, make it possible for large numbers of individuals to adapt that extreme standard to their own needs. The author argues that what determines the success of those forms of running is that every runner, whatever their sport worth, can build their own arena for the challenge and move from the status of an anonymous runner to that of a hero, as their performance, however small (finish the race, be "a finisher") is enough to prove their individual merit.

However, in a second article entitled « Culture des loisirs et diffusion sociale du sport. L'exemple des marathoniens » ('The leisure culture and the social dissemination of sport. The example of marathon runners', 2009), Olivier Bessy, in collaboration with Bruno Lapeyronie, once more raises the question of the social dissemination of marathon and gives it a somewhat different interpretation: the mass enthusiasm for endurance running, though still resulting from a social and historical transformation which rules our societies, is seen no longer as a result of the mass notion of the extreme, but of the leisure culture, the latter term having superseded the former among the forces at work in mass culture. To support their argument, Bessy and Lapeyronie compare the evolution of the social categories present in the marathon races over a twenty-year period, based on four sociographies from 1979 to 1998 (Gilbert, 1979 on the Essonne marathon; Faure, 1985 on the Paris marathon; Bessy, 1994 on the Médoc marathon; Lapeyronie and Bessy, 1998 on the fourteen marathon races which took place in that year). From that they drew two major outcomes – that executives and senior intellectual professionals are still over-represented in marathon races; and that the intermediate and working class social groups are taking a more significant part. The latter outcome encouraged the authors to insist on the societal character of the dissemination of marathon running and to examine in the present day its growing success among social categories which were not participating in the 1970s and 1980s. In the authors' view, the growing enthusiasm among the intermediate and working classes for endurance running proceeds from a phenomenon of '*mass acculturation to leisure*' (p. 93), in which they distinguish three major dimensions: establishing a new social model based on leisure and free time, in which the individualistic norm of self-construction is a primary existential objective; equalising (or averaging) living styles, which leads to democratisation of the leisure culture and dissemination of sport at every level of the social pyramid; weakening class-based

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<sup>24</sup> The series of surveys includes 500 questionnaires administered to the participants during the 2000 Grand Raid as well as a number of semi-directed interviews. The same data and their analysis are to be found in O. Bessy's general public work entitled : *Le Grand Raid de la Réunion : à chacun son extrême et un emblème pour tous* (*The Grand Raid de la Réunion: each to their own idea of the extreme, an emblem for all.* 2002).

identity sense of belonging, which prompts individuals to define themselves independently from their social position. Those are the social forces which drive increasingly large numbers of people to undertake endurance running, as they find in the activity the opportunity to build a personalised mode of engagement which meets their expectations of pleasure, self-exploration and performance (externally or internally referenced, depending on everyone's sport level), stimulated by a mass leisure society which endlessly fans the need to assert oneself as an individual.

Last, Romain Rochedy also emphasises that self-determination project, as he examines the success of endurance running. However, in his article entitled 'Analyse d'un espace de décélération : l'exemple de l'ultra-trail' (« An analysis of a decelerating space: the example of ultra-trail running », 2015), the author takes up a posture which, without minimising the weight of a Weber-like approach to the actors' reasons for action, also seeks, by means of a critical approach and a sociology of time, to reach better understanding of the causes of engagement in ultra-trail running. That attention he pays to time enables him to emphasise how ultra-trail running, an extremely time-consuming sport, to runners is a way of fighting the aggravated temporalities of an urgency society which harms their individualisation. First he proves, based on a questionnaire, that people undertake ultra-trail running because it makes them feel impervious to the pressure from the capitalistic notion of time saving. He sees three major determinants in people taking up the sport: the aesthetic dimensions of risk, self-knowledge, and collective experiences, which in his view correspond to 'ephemeralisation' of experience, dissolving of the Self, and individualisation of daily life – all of which contribute to placing ultra-trail running outside the social sphere. Then, using a series of clinical interviews, he describes the forms of inertia taken by such resistance to modern time pressure and typifies them into four ways of engaging in ultra-trail running: total commitment in which ultra-trail running is a way of life, with the runners making the sport top priority over all their other engagements, both professional and personal; a strategic commitment in which ultra-trail running is a tonic in daily life, and regenerates zest for facing professional or personal challenges in daily life; a therapeutic commitment in which ultra-trail running is a resilience sport which enables the person to mend their self-esteem; and a self-sufficient commitment in which ultra-trail running is an '*island of deceleration*' (p. 106), a social and cultural nook which was spared the acceleration process in modernisation. To Rochedy then, if individuals undertake ultra-trail, it is first and foremost to decelerate an oppressive modern temporality and try not to let the cult of urgency dispossess them of themselves; engagement in the sport is then a way of buttressing their autonomy against abusive societal standards.

### **Asserting yourself in your body: reinforcing your dispositions.**

In this second period, the studies on endurance running conducted by sociologists in the wake of genetic structuralism also chose to examine the existential dimension of those engagements and, by means of biographies, the runners' courses of life. Although the engagement premise remains the same – the result of social characters inherited or acquired in the course of successive socialisation processes – the space for description moves from a symbolic fight between social classes to the body or the variations of individual itineraries. In the article entitled 'Des marathoniens à la poursuite du temps' ('Marathoners in pursuit of time', 2003), Jean-Michel Faure and Charles Suaud remark that the runners' obsession with the chronometer is a sign of strong corporeal preoccupation, whose purpose is to shape their bodies in accordance with the rules of their social group. First of all, the authors mention the bourgeois form of marathon running, presenting two arguments drawn from their surveys. On the one hand, the majority of the runners (78%) already have sport activities, most of which are usually considered as practised among privileged groups: 35% of marathon runners ski,

play golf or ride; 26% play tennis, 28% football or rugby; and 11.6% only, the authors remark, are in athletics; on the other hand, the chronometric technicality of marathons, which is characteristic of the sport and attractive to runners, is typical of the ruling classes, who have an obvious taste for time control. Secondly, Faure and Suaud examine the personal dimension of that engagement and remark, based on interviews on the life courses of the runners, that it is founded on a self-building project. However, contrary to the arguments supported by pluralist sociologists, the project aims not at self-determination, but at emphasising the traits characteristic of the social group to which the marathoner belongs. The rationale behind undertaking endurance running is then for runners to transform their bodies thanks to running, with a view to imprinting on them the rules of ascetics, self-discipline and self-control which make up the style of the upper social categories. To Faure and Suaud, what determines engagement in endurance running is still a ‘matter of class’, but it originates in the runners’ conscious or unconscious wish to build a class *ethos*<sup>25</sup>, in other words to turn moral standards into movements and attitudes, as social position is first and foremost a certain way of being a body.

In her 2006 and 2007 articles<sup>26</sup>, «Éléments pour une analyse sociologique de l’entrée dans l’ultrafond» (‘Elements for sociological analysis of undertaking ultra-long-distance running’) and «Dépassement et transformation de soi. Comment devenir pratiquant d’ultrafond ?» (‘Setting new targets and transforming oneself: How to become an ultra-long-distance runner’), which explicitly aim at examining the issue of engagement in endurance running, Sandrine Knobé also uses a positional premise, except that she drops all references to social categories. The determined character of engagement processes in her view is not a ‘matter of social classes’, but an agreement between disposition- and context-related processes whose rationale is rooted in the agents’ primary and secondary socializations, as well as in the situations and sociabilities they meet with in daily life. Having analysed the biographical trajectories of fifty Marathon des Sables runners, she concluded that as far as engagement in ultra-long-distance running is concerned, there are no typical courses, nor accounting for it through a single cause or any cause circumscribed within the boundaries of a routine sport activity<sup>27</sup>. However, elements characteristic of the engagement do exist. Beyond the diversity of individual cases, she singled out two processes of engagement in the sport – the one continuous and the other disrupted. Both correspond to particular configurations that can be identified by bringing to light certain dispositions and social contexts. What brings about embracing ultra-long-distance running is then a combination of people’s sport histories – i.e. whether the individuals are expert runners, no-sport beginners, have shifted from one sport to another, or are taking it up again after a break – and the social situations they are experiencing in their own context of life, when a training partner, a running friend, a member of the family, a friend or a colleague, or a traumatic event like the loss of a spouse or a serious health issue triggers off the individual into undertaking ultra-long-distance running. One condition, however, is that the individuals, in the course of their family or sport education, have acquired the dispositions necessary for this type of effort. Likewise, the meaning that runners give to their own engagement is determined by that combination. Thus, depending on which point on the axis of their sport life and of their life context they are situated, runners

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<sup>25</sup>The meaning of the term, which means a way of being, of looking and of self-representing, is explained by Bourdieu in *Questions de sociologie (Sociological questions, 1984)*: «The word *ethos* [...] refers to an objectively systematic set of dispositions with an ethic dimension, of practical principles [...]» (p. 133), and may be seen as the merging of a practical system and an axiological one, in which «[...] values are movements, ways of standing, walking, speaking» (p. 134), and we could add: running ...

<sup>26</sup>Knobé takes up again a few elements from those two articles in a later publication on performance: «La performance au regard de l’effort sportif: quelques réflexions» (‘Some thoughts on performance from the viewpoint of sport effort’, 2008).

<sup>27</sup>The undertaking implies such important dimensions of life as human adventure or seeking new challenges.

will have different expectations with respect to ultra-long-distance running. On the one hand, the more expert ones are probably after performance and assertion of their own disposition for sustained effort; on the other, beginners will seek to have that disposition confirmed. In the latter case, effort and ascetics become a referential point which governs a new identity cycle in their existence.

In the view of those positional studies, engagement is the outcome of a conditioning process in which the social characteristics of individuals play a primary role. It is those characteristics that shape them – by inculcating in them ways of perceiving, of feeling, doing and thinking – and tell them the meaning of the situations they experience. Consequently, when certain individuals embrace endurance races, it is primarily because they perceive the latter to be a suitable social world for them to express or assert the characteristics previously inculcated into themselves.

### **3- Conclusion**

This review of the literature has presented some thirty years of French research in the sociology of sport on the question of motivations for undertaking endurance races. The purpose was to bring out some outstanding elements which could serve as points for comparison and fuel exchanges with the studies in English on the same theme. In that respect, the summary has achieved, at least in my opinion, satisfactory characterisation of the French studies on embracing endurance running. Two trends of rationale have been identified.

One examines engagement in endurance running from a socio-historical transformation of the principles that rule our society. Those principles relate to individual aspirations born of new frameworks for community living such as leisure time, urban life, caring for oneself or new ways of asserting oneself as an individual, full access to which requires testing one's worth, individuality or autonomy. That trend yields two major contributions. First, it thinks of engagement without reducing it to a single model. It shows that the engagement results from a variety of motives and highlights elements which escape the positional model. Next, it examines the way how individuals, aware as they are of the requirements from those new frameworks for community living, do their best to meet them in an acceptable way. Engagement in endurance running then can be viewed as a choice to lessen the tensions imposed by those frameworks. That trend, however, has its limits. It seldom questions the models from which it operates and all but never challenges the premise of the weight of societal transformations nor the concept of individualisation.

The other trend identified accounts for engagement in endurance running based on the social particulars of individuals. In such a perspective, engagement results either from a symbolic struggle between different social groups eager to impose their own values in the discipline, or from an incorporated social heritage which urges the protagonists to engage in those practices with a view to giving expression to certain aptitudes which they feel can best be asserted in the social space offered by such running practices. The main contribution of that trend is that it highlights the underlying causalities which urge individuals to engage in those endurance practices, although they may not be fully aware of them. Its contribution is then in revelation, in that it unveils the symbolic violence between the world of athletics and that of free running, or among the social fractions which make up the population of runners, that symbolic violence hidden behind the ideals of freedom and non-competition which endurance runners spontaneously bring up when describing their engagement. It also reveals the role of the incorporated structures which urge runners unawares to engage in the physical activity which they feel is most appropriate for self-assertion. That positional approach, however, has a limit: it fails to take into account the social transformations which change the

internal coherence of the activity and reshape the motives of the engagement: the principle of self-referencing, in which individuals become the only ones to decide on which criteria to apply to their own performance, means that engagement in those running practices may be prompted by a wider variety of motives, which in turn leads to reassessment of the part they play, or at least, to refraining from considering the force of expression of aptitudes as the only cause for the engagement.

The two trends, in our opinion, offer a strong tension and highlight a national particularity. Perhaps the tension is to be found elsewhere, not just in French research; perhaps it is also in the production in English, but to prove it a thorough literature review would have to be available. It is certain to happen in the future<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> For the time being, I hope that this presentation of the studies in French on the success of endurance races will cause the English speaking researchers interested in the subject to turn their eyes this way; that they find in the tension presented here and the various premises which support it food for enhancing their perspectives and taking on new questions; that they may find in the 'comparing discrepancy' (Cefaï, 2003, p. 468) thus created a resource to sharpen their reflexivity and refine their judgment on the success of those races. I also hope that this presentation will inspire Francophone and Anglophone researchers into conducting joint projects. As yet, no French sociologist of sport has made a study on the question of endurance running in collaboration with an English speaking counterpart. And yet importing or exporting premises or theoretical concepts into national contexts other than that in which they were developed is one sure means to assess their scope and improve them, particularly when those premises and concepts are based, as they are in the plural sociologies of the second period, on moments and conditions different from those of present-day democracies. Last, I hope that this literature review will serve to start discussions between authors and that in the process a precious breeding ground for categories, questions and answers, arguments and counter-arguments will be created, which will foster ever more minute examination of those forms of running and their success.



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