

The lived and intersubjective gendered body in sport encounters

An example from cross-country skiing

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This article is intended to develop knowledge about the relationship between athletes and sports psychologists. The theme has been extensively researched in the sport psychology and coaching literature in sport. However, there is limited knowledge about the understanding of how these relationships are played out and understood in the specific relationships between athletes and sports psychologists.

In this article, the authors use the practice of well-known sport psychologist Britt Tajet-Foxell to elaborate on and theorize about how relationships become sources of embodied and verbalized knowing. As research material they chose a sample of media texts portraying collaboration between Tajet-Foxell and the Norwegian cross-country

skier and the highly decorated winter Olympian, Marit Bjørgen.

The selected media texts were analyzed to highlight the knowledge created in the dialectic relationship between the sport psychologist and the athlete. The authors use a phenomenological approach to interpret and analyse this relationship, along with psychoanalytical ideas that situate the challenge being examined in the context of the athlete's gendered socialisation history. The combination of these perspectives provides a way of understanding the currently underexplored values expressed in Tajet-Foxell's practice, and the more general challenges involved in human encounters between athletes and sports psychologists, and beyond.

We necessarily know to some extent what we are doing because we are necessarily to some extent really doing it and hereby making our world habitable, if we have a world of experience at all. (Todes, 2001, p. 70)

Introduction

Over the past three decades, there has been a growth in the number of sports psychologists helping athletes perform at their best, which also means an increased research interest in how sports psychologists work and what kind of knowledge constitutes best practice. The situation for today's elite athletes is that they have a large team around them, including professional staff who take care of both the "mental" and the "physical" aspects of the life of an athlete. In this article we have chosen to examine the practise of sport psychologist Britt Tajet-Foxell, who is regarded as one of the best sports psychologists in the world (Bøe, 2011, Clarey, 2014).

In Norway, Britt Tajet-Foxell is portrayed in the media as "the secret weapon" when it comes to preparing athletes for major competitions such as the Olympic Games and the World Championship. Olympiatoppen¹ (Norway) has been hiring Britt Tajet-Foxell for many years. However, even though Olympiatoppen aims to build its programmes for coaching and sport psychology on research, there is little research-based knowledge on the work Britt Tajet-Foxell has conducted together with athletes. The paradox is that in spite of her popularity and high standing among athletes, her work runs the risk of being understood as "Britt's method", i.e. privatised or mystified (cf. Bøe, 2011). Being a woman and educated as both a physiotherapist and a psychologist, we find it interesting to examine and theorise examples of her work. We have chosen to approach her ways of knowing and working through secondary material in which she and her work are portrayed in the media, including how athletes report on how they have received and interpreted her work. Our research interest arose because we had followed how her work has been promoted in media and became curious about what we could discover by examining a person with such exceptional success.

Being a sport psychologist is a different profession from being a coach. However, to contextualize the article, we also searched for research lit-

¹ Norwegian sports training organisation.

erature from sport coaching, which revealed that the field is dominated by men and by qualitative interview studies, where athletes and coaches are asked about their experiences in different ways (Gearity, 2011, Cronin & Armour, 2015, Arnold & Sarkar, 2014). Instead of using interviews our interest has been to illuminate how Britt Tajet-Foxell have been portrayed in media. Our approach was to choose three secondary sources: *a TV programme, a biography and a radio programme*. We follow Sparkes and Stewart (2015), who argued that rather than interviewing busy elite athletes, “sporting autobiographies can be used as an analytical resource by researchers” (p.12). By utilizing three different sources published over a four-year period, we decided that we had enough material to analyse and discover some themes in Britt Tajet-Foxell’s practice.

We have structured this article thus: In the following we include research literature that addresses gender in the sport psychology literature. We contextualise Britt Tajet Foxwell’s position as a woman and sport psychologist in relation to previous research in the field of sport coaching. We continue by introducing our chosen theoretical perspectives for the article. We then highlight our methodological choices and our selection of the research material, which comprises mentioned media texts. We explain how we conducted the analyses and reached the findings. We conclude with how we believe the findings contribute to the field of coaching and sport psychology, including the limitations of our perspective and methodology.

The gender issue in the research context for the article

The question of what gender means in sport psychology is often raised in the research literature. Typically, gendered and normative expectations in elite sports environments are reproduced within a Western European country’s elite sport system (Curvey et al. 2022, Lafferty et al. 2022, Levi et al. 2023, Saarinen, 2022). However, even if men dominate the field of sport psychology, there is currently an increase in the number of women in the field. As described by Lafferty et al. (2022), and Walton et al. (2022), it is essential to call for more research on women coaches and sport psychologists – particularly how women carry out their professional work to understand what led them to engage in sport psychology. The sport psychology

literature has greatly increased our knowledge of best practice regarding the most effective ways to psychologically prepare athletes and teams. One example is Arnold and Sarkar's (2014) study on the best sport psychology coaching. Three women, out of total of 15 participants, were included: Karen Cogan (Canada, psychologist with additional education in body-centred psychotherapy), Kirsten Peterson (USA, sport psychologist and meditation teacher) and Anne Marte Pensgaard (Norway, sport psychologist). As marked in parentheses, the first two have supplementary education to the education in psychology. The method used was interviews and the researchers identified five main categories, where Olympic athletes required psychological support. The sports psychology practitioners' views about what they regarded as success or failure were important, as well as top tips for neophyte practitioners, and the differences that practitioners experienced when working in diverse contexts (Arnold & Sarkar, 2014, p. 18). Related to this were themes associated with best practise, and we wondered why insights about the relationship between and the integration of mind and body were missing. Knowledge about how to work with the athletes' possible challenges in expressing their needs and wants verbally was also missing. In order to follow up on the need for more insight in the best practise research conducted by women, we took the challenge that Walton et al. (2022) called for, i.e., examining an encounter between two women: a top sports psychologist and a top elite athlete.

Returning to Tajet-Foxell, and our own research interest, some studies have been conducted. For example, Sødal (2020) asked the following question: How was the key to success in the collaboration between Tajet-Foxell and the successful skier Marit Bjørgen understood? We will come back to this relationship, but Sødal wrote that when Tajet-Foxell first met Marit Bjørgen, Tajet-Foxell had the feeling that "the skiing talent's social conscience and concern for others meant that she lost touch with herself and her own power too often" (p. 118). Sødal (2022) argued that ideas from Christian existential philosophy, which have been largely absent in performance psychology, can be applied to coaching research. Our argument, which we use in this article, is that phenomenology and psychoanalysis are more relevant positions when it comes to analysing Tajet-Foxell's practice. We start with a short presentation of perspectives on which we build the article.

Understanding sport psychology encounters with phenomenology, and vice versa

There are numerous articles that discuss phenomenology in sport science research (see, e.g., Bampouras et al., 2012, Gearity, 2011, McNarry, 2025, O'Halloran et al., 2018, Martínková, et al. 2011). There has been much research on sport psychology that uses phenomenology and, for example, O'Halloran et al. (2018) argue that “phenomenology has been used inconsistently in the sport psychology literature thus far” (p. 124). However, we believe that creating a consistent phenomenological methodology would be at the cost of developing knowledge on the diversity and ambiguity that forms part of the dialectic relationship between the researcher and those who participate in the research, as well as the dialectic relationship between the sport psychologist and athlete. Our approach to phenomenology is based on the understanding that the relationship between athlete and sport psychologist cannot be grasped as if it were an empirical fact that could easily be expressed in language. Rather, we support the premise that living and lived experience are created in a shared social world and must be dwelled upon by the researcher. It means that we base our approach to one of the major ideas that permeates phenomenological philosophy, namely, the understanding that human beings and the world are dialectically entangled and that humans are primarily embodied and living “beings-in-the-world” (Zahavi, 2019, p. 905). This means that it is impossible to talk about subjects as being isolated from the world, and vice versa. When we use such an ontological lens as a background for understanding the sport psychologist–athlete relationship, it means understanding the social world that exist as a precondition where the consciousness and bodily experiences are constitutive for relations, and specific for those involved. Another key idea that permeates phenomenological thinking is that we should go back to the “things themselves” which means to try to be aware of phenomena that show themselves in a specific way for a specific person in a social situation (Bengtsson, 1999, p. 11). Accordingly, gender ideals in society will appear as different and vary from person to person, including the situation they embody. Todes (2001) used the concept of a spatio-temporal field, which is produced by the way the body's specific structure constrains and enables an individual's coping skills. When it comes to high performance sport, the spatiotemporal field produces a unified experience of body, space and time – relevant, for example, in cross-country skiing, where the athlete is connected to the world through their equipment, the

snow and the ski track. Here, we touch upon one of the phenomena that coaches and athletes might be able to use as a tool for further developing the athlete's own understanding of being. However, as language and gender are related to the transgenerational socialisation history of the individual athlete, we have included some psychoanalytic aspects.

Psychoanalytical aspects relevant to working through troubling gender ideals in sport psychology

As a perspective on socialisation, psychoanalysis focuses on the one hand on relational patterns in childhood and the transgenerational ideals, norms and values that are internalised in language socialisation; and, on the other hand, in later life, on how a person communicates her or his needs and wants verbally, and the position she or he tends to take in relation to others in various situations (Frønes, 2013). The purpose of psychoanalysis as a therapeutic tool is to reduce a person's suffering which, in many cases, is seen as *representations* of something else. An example of what this representation can mean, is an athlete who adapts to the wants of coaches and sponsors, and suppresses her or his own wants in the communication of those wants to others (cf. the psychoanalytic concept of *repression*). Psychoanalysis also addresses temporal *displacement* in meaning-making. An example is values and ideals that were useful in the athlete's adolescence, which do not work in the elite athlete's current context.

Lacan's (1999) psychoanalysis highlights how the child in language socialisation adopts transgenerational gender ideals, for example on kindness and caring. These ideals may structure the person's meaning-making in the form of *master signs*, which have become embedded in the body as a habitual way to respond to other people's requests. The challenge faced by the woman athlete in our case of saying no to sponsors, journalists, fans and others, is analysed using Lacan's concept of master signs. Fink's (1997) clinical reception is our inspiration for our approach to Lacan, which focuses on overcoming the gap between the athlete's needs, wants and desires and her or his communication of those in language. We believe that Fink's approach is more relevant to enhance Tajet-Foxell's work on non-functional gender ideals than poststructuralist approaches to Lacan, which has largely influenced the Lacanian research on athletes' subjectiv-

ity (Larsson, 2015). This tradition assumes that the gap is impossible to traverse (Helstein, 2023).

In recent years, there has been an increase in the demand for elite athletes to be available to journalists, sponsors and fans. Digitalisation of the media with current sports news and the growth of social media have played a role in this (Faustin, 2022). There has been a significant amount of research on coaching women elite athletes on their use of social media (Geurin, 2017), and on coaching women elite athletes who struggle with gendered ideals of appearance and thinness (Cosh et al., 2019). However, there is a lack of research on coaching women elite athletes who are faced with the challenge of saying no to journalists, fans and others who want unlimited attention from them.² Thus, our argument is that the sport psychologist must be aware of the athlete's unique socialisation history. First, we introduce our methodology and selected research material.

Methodology and selection of research material

As already stated, there is a contrast between the lack of research on Tajet-Foxell's practice and the many articles in the media in which athletes describe how much she has meant to their performance. A review of articles mentioning Tajet-Foxell in Norwegian newspapers, radio and television, created by the Retriever media monitoring company from 2000 to 2025, shows that there have been almost 2000 articles. From this material, we have selected three sources: a TV programme, a biography and a radio programme.

The first material we analyse is an interview featuring Tajet-Foxell and Marit Bjørgen from the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation's (NRK) in 2017 broadcast in Lahti, where Bjørgen was awarded the 16th World Championship gold medal of her career by defeating Swedish skier Charlotte Kalla by 41 seconds in the 10 kilometre distance. We also draw on a one-hour radio interview with Tajet-Foxell from 2023 (NRK, 2023) and one of the biographies of Bjørgen, *Vinnerhjerte* (Winner's heart) (Stenvold, 2021). In addition, we include a short promotional video from The World Championship in Oslo in 2011, which featured Bjørgen, and some referenc-

² It does not mean that the problem is exclusive for women. It can also be a challenge for elite male athletes.

es to newspaper articles, and another biography of Bjørgen (Bøe, 2011), as well as references to conversations with athletes and coaches.

Our selection of texts is guided by the belief that our analyses of these texts offer opportunities to highlight key aspects of Tajet-Foxell's practice, and we are also able to describe some of the challenges we examined. We have chosen to interpret the texts according to Hall's (1980) concept *preferred reading*. In line with what John Hartley advocated (2002) – who has been engaged in media research since the 1970s – we have *read* the television interview, radio portrait and biography with the aim of gaining an understanding of the phenomena we explore. Hartley (2002) emphasised that “to understand the act of reading *one might read* to give the text a new meaning” (p. 6). In line with embodied and enactive approaches to knowing (De Jaeger, 2021), we read, watched and listened with the whole body: emotionally, sensorily and intellectually. This approach included making notes of what we became aware of, saw, heard, felt and associated. A few excerpts from our notes can provide a glimpse of how we worked.

The televised sport interview is based on a certain framework I found myself in as a viewer, and I was also emotionally impacted by the interview. Seeing Bjørgen and Tajet-Foxell in the studio for the interview, I was immediately filled with this warm and comforting feeling. (From the first author's notes while working on the TV interview).

The news journalist Ingerid Stenvold, who has written the biography *Vinnerhjerte*, was a promising athlete with a gold medal in the Norwegian junior cross-country championship. She has a similar background as Bjørgen, and it seems as if she recognises herself in the gendered context in which Bjørgen grew up. (From the second author's notes while working on the biography).

In our work on the texts, we discussed our readings with each other and tried out themes and headings that allowed us to stay close to the texts, to read between the lines and reformulate using our own words and perspectives (Englander & Morley, 2003). By discovering the different layers in the texts by reading the analyses multiple times, this provided us with a deep understanding of the phenomena that the texts illuminated about Tajet-Foxell's practice, and how the analyses we have developed illuminate her approach to athletes.

We start by illuminating how the first encounter between Tajet-Foxell and Bjørgen was reported by Stenvold (2021). We continue with an encounter between Tajet-Foxell and Bjørgen in a TV interview. We then explore excerpts from the radio portrait of Tajet-Foxell, which is backed up

by some information and a citation from the biography of Bjørgen (Stenvold, 2021), which is supported by the other biography of Bjørgen (Bøe, 2011).

Britt Tajet-Foxell and Marit Bjørgen have given their consent to use the material in the article, NRK has also given its consent to use the picture that illustrates our analysis of the TV programme regarding the right of quotation. We start with a short description of the first encounter between Tajet-Foxell and Bjørgen. The description is based on Stenvold's (2021) biography *Vinnerhjerte* and we complete the presentation with biographical information about Britt Tajet-Foxell.

The first encounter

When Marit Bjørgen decided to retire from elite sport in April 2018, she was the most successful World Championship (WC) medallist in the history of cross-country skiing. She won her first WC gold medal in 2003 in Val di Fiemme. In the next WC in Oberstdorf, she was the “WC Queen”, winning three gold medals, one silver and one bronze. However, after poor results in the 2006 Olympics and in the 2007 and the 2009 WC, she considered ending her skiing career. A physiotherapist at Olympiatoppen suggested she should speak with his colleague, Britt Tajet-Foxell, who had extensive experience of working with ballet dancers and elite athletes as both a physiotherapist and a psychologist. Tajet-Foxell worked for 20 years as a physiotherapist at the Royal Ballet Company in London and transitioned to performance psychology in the late 1990s, first at the Royal Ballet and later at Olympiatoppen and the British Olympic Association. Bjørgen was sceptical about seeking help from a psychologist, but she decided to give it a go. Something happened in the encounter with the sport psychologist. Stenvold (2021), described the first encounter with the sport psychologist as follows:

The moment Marit [the athlete] entered the room, Britt [the sport psychologist] knew something was seriously wrong. She saw in her eyes that there was a loss of pleasure and a sense of sorrow. Even when she smiled – and Marit did so easily and often, according to Britt – the smile did not reach her eyes. She found no meaning, she said. No joy. Marit cried and cried. Britt met her with warmth, but at the same time she hit the most painful and vulnerable points. Marit did not have to explain that she was tired, Britt just

looked at her and embraced it. Marit had never felt so seen, so understood.
(The authors' translation, p. 125)

This encounter opened a dimension that established a perspective and understanding of their further collaboration, which was moved by love, compassion and a “model of equal expertise” (Tajet-Foxell & Booth, 1996). In 2010 in Vancouver, Bjørgen became “Olympic queen”, again winning three gold medals, one silver and one bronze. All told, in her career she has had a total of 114 World Cup individual wins, and has won 15 Winter Olympic medals and 26 WC medals.

Stenvold (2021) situated Bjørgen's upbringing in an environment in which kindness and assistance were valued – at home, in school, and in her local sports team. Although winning in the sports in which she engaged, she supported other athletes by providing care and embracing responsibility (Bøe, 2011, confirms this). This made her well-liked and further reinforced her way of being in relationships and in the world. While there were many positive sides to this, this gendered ideal made it difficult for her to say no to sponsors, journalists, fans and others who wanted her attention. As a result, many people sought her attention – especially after she became the WC queen in 2005. This made her exhausted (Bøe, 2011, pp. 40–45, Stenvold, 2021, pp. 7–10). Tajet-Foxell saw and felt this when she came to her for the first time, and she identified the athlete's internalised gendered ideals of kindness and caring that prevented her from saying *no* to most of them who wanted her attention, even when her body needed rest. Body and language communicated different things, and Tajet-Foxell encouraged Bjørgen to listen more to her body, and less to her internalised ideals of kindness and caring. We return to this theme when we analyse the radio interview, but first we will analyse the material from the TV interview.

Material from the TV interview

Tajet-Foxell rarely gives interviews, and this is the only television interview we have found in which she is interviewed together with Bjørgen. Seeing Bjørgen and Tajet-Foxell in the studio together, we are immediately filled with a warm and comforting sensation – they pique our interest by engaging in a synchronised dialogue, showing both openness and a sense of connection. And despite their synchronicity, they also maintain their distinct individuality. When watching the interview, we became aware of

their openness towards each other, while still appearing as distinct individuals.



Marit Bjørgen and Britt Tajet-Foxell. (NRK 2017)

In this official televised context, the two women began their dialogue with Tajet-Foxell admitting that she seldom watches Bjørgen compete. However, on this day (28 February 2017) she made an exception. Tajet-Foxell says ‘Today my heart was pounding’, and she touches her heart with her hands to reinforce and embody her feelings. Her reason for not watching Bjørgen’s skiing races (even as one of her closest supporters) is that she needs to maintain a distance with regards to her own feelings. She describes wanting to keep a “neutral” position because she knows that she tends to be happy when Bjørgen is happy, and sad when Bjørgen is sad:

We evaluate³ on a clean slate. It’s important to me. I know Marit very well and love her very much. I’m happy when she’s doing well, and if things don’t go so well, I’m sorry for her. When we evaluate, it’s important that I’m emotionally neutral. Then I can get information from Marit [that] we can use to prepare for the next race. (The authors’ translation)

³ Tajet-Foxell use the verb “evaluate” to describe the processes the leaders and team do after a big competition, to find out about “failures & success” in the preparation and relationship with the athletes.

However, on this particular day she made an exception. Tajet-Foxell says she was very nervous. Bjørgen responds by telling her that she appreciates Tajet-Foxell for “getting those little things from me that allow me to climb all the way to the top. We’ve been working ahead of the season, ahead of every race. And she’s always available on the phone 24 hours a day. She always texts back immediately”. Bjørgen acknowledges that Tajet-Foxell has a share in her gold medals, and Tajet-Foxell replies: “Marit also makes me improve my performance. After working with Marit, I work even better with the next athlete.” When describing Bjørgen, Tajet-Foxell states that she is a person with integrity, humanity and passion. Meanwhile, Bjørgen describes how, when she first met Tajet-Foxell (and vice versa), everything changed. “Everything was all right.” Bjørgen had never felt so seen and understood as she did after meeting Tajet-Foxell. She describes an inventive and creative way to work together with the athletes.

To further analyse this interview, we included the phenomenological concept that is relevant for our project of developing knowledge on Tajet-Foxell’s practice, i.e. “embodied affectivity”, which we relate to competence in the subsequent analysis of the following two themes: (a) helping the athlete to be in harmony with their circumstances, and (b) letting the athlete be. These themes could serve as potential pathways for further goal achievement in a relational coaching practice context that is also sensitive to gender issues.

Helping the athlete to be in harmony with their circumstances and situation

When athletes feel that others understand them, a kind of unification and harmony between themselves and their circumstances occurs. According to Todes (2001), in understanding this phenomenon he wrote: “*we know* what is happening because we are aware of ourselves as making it happen, as responsible for it happening because what we are doing is *self-evident*” (p. 62). Sometimes, however, athletes do not know what they are doing, which was much the case for Bjørgen before she met Tajet-Foxell. She was in a situation in which her movements felt uncoordinated, clumsy and disorientated. Such situations are precisely what sport psychologists are supposed to help athletes figure out. However, in such situations with the

athletes⁴ knowing what was going on in the encounter was not something immediately graspable. The concept of *the not-yet-conscious* from Fuchs (2024) indicates that part of the communication

unfolds spontaneously and without plan; it is not directly anticipated or aimed at but rather comes to awareness in such a way that the subject is, as it were, surprised by itself. Thus, it gives rise to phenomena such as the striking, the coincidental, the new, and the improvised, which are particularly important for understanding creative and therapeutic processes. (p. 717)

The point is that people know what is true at a particular level which language, as a general communication medium, does not necessarily convey. With this in mind it could be said that “true knowledge” must be connected to a first-hand embodiment with others and the situation. This is unlike the effects of will or argument, but rather what is achieved *immediately* with the intentions of the activity concerned. Bjørgen describes this experience as follows: “When I go skiing, I am one with what I am doing, it makes me feel calm and this calmness allows me to perform at my best” (Engelsrud & Standal, 2012, p. 149).

Her experience of skiing is closely connected to being poised and being one with her movements; there is no separation before she finds herself again making up her mind about being in poise, which is different from pose, as pose is separating yourself from an object and thinking of achievement as being the effect of your decisions or will. According to Fuchs and Koch (2014), poise is what animals do when they examine whether a tree is “climbable” and whether water is “drinkable” (p. 2). This is also true of people: Before a word is even spoken, people experience each other through being spoken to, or ignored, and perceive these interactions as important, attractive, expressive, elusive, and so on. Without these interactions or other emotions as part of embodied learning, the world lacks meaning, and people lack the ability to act. Applying this to athletes, their emotions and energy are understood as driving forces that must be directed and investigated, which in turn is again related to what Tajet-Foxell talked about every encounter being unpredictable and magic. By having movement and the body at the core of learning, coaches have profound opportunities to guide their athletes’ perceptions of learning. The expressions that athletes use on days when “everything functions” and “it feels like flying” – and similar expressions athletes use to describe when they have been successful in

⁴ Tajet-Foxell also told us in a phone call (12 September 2024) that this was sometimes the case in her work.

competition, are worth bearing in mind. Another theme that we became aware of in the interview was the deep respect between the women. We suggest that this phenomenon might relate to MacLaren's interpretation of *letting be*.

Letting the athlete be

In her article 'Intercorporeality, Intersubjectivity and the Problem of "Letting Others Be"' (2002), MacLaren discussed what it might mean to "let the other be". She stated that it can be challenging at first to understand others valuing themselves. The expression "letting the other be" may also seem like it involves not caring about others, but the concept is quite different. Caring about both yourself and others is about being concerned with understanding and acknowledging the athlete's bodily experiences and thoughts, regardless of their skills. It is about noticing, responding to and being in touch with your own ways of acting: for example, when you withdraw, or when you are active, when you show effort in an expected way or even lash out and would rather fight than listen.

MacLaren (2002) argued that succeeding in "letting the other be" depends on learning how to reset one's own habits: for example, becoming aware of habits such as holding your breath, tightening your muscles, controlling your body's emotions, or the difficulty of saying no when someone addresses you in social situations. The meaning of "letting the other be" is here that athletes should be allowed to feel exactly what they are feeling in the moment, to feel the differences in the way their body feels different feelings, and become aware of their performances and negative thoughts, without placing their feelings, thoughts and behaviour within the context of a diagnosis. As we will return to in the analysis of the radio portrait, Tajet-Foxell tells the interviewer that, had she done this in her first encounter with Bjørgen, "I would have lost her". To be met and seen in the way that Tajet-Foxell met and saw Bjørgen constitutes a learning context. Athletes can then learn to appreciate who they are, what they feel and think, and we interpret what Tajet-Foxell expressed here as an awareness of her understanding that the situation claimed presence and prioritizing being together with Bjørgen.

In the subsequent analysis of the TV interview, we cited Tajet-Foxells expression: "we evaluate on a clean slate." In each interaction, there are opportunities to learn about yourself and others. This requires dialogue.

The movement – between athlete and sport psychologist – consists of sensory interaction and the processing of information. Without this, the dialogue will fade or fail. Something must be felt and sensed in the body before it becomes a “motor” action, whether this is snow under your skis, rain striking your body, another person’s friendly smile, the screeching of tram tracks, heat on your head, or a teacher’s whistle. Allowing yourself time “to be” is a relatively underexplored theme in coaching and sport psychology. As a sport psychologist, Tajet-Foxell encourages both herself and Bjørgen in the exploration of own actions, feelings and thoughts, specifically around what moves a person, as well as in building dialogue by allowing people to get to know themselves as part of what needs to be achieved in order to perform. When a sport psychologist describes an athlete as a person they are fond of and as a person who affects them – for example, when Tajet-Foxell says in the TV interview: “When she’s happy, I’m happy, and when she’s unhappy, I’m unhappy”, she is expressing an “embodied affective relationship” and is relating to the athlete as a person who is particularly valuable to them. The emotions are shared and mutually exchanged. Thus, sport psychology coaching based on contact with your own bodily state and the bodily state of others allows an ontological understanding of the body as a “being-in-the-world” to come to the fore, in which experiences, feelings and energy are exchanged and flow through, inside and between bodies. There is vibration and energy in the breath, skin and touch that serve both as an entrance to and exit from understanding yourself in a situation. In the following we continue with analysing excerpts from the radio interview.

Material from the radio interview: When gender ideals became “gremlins”

At the start of the radio portrait, the interviewer states that he has tried to secure an interview with Tajet-Foxell for two years. Tajet-Foxell replies that *she* is not interesting; it is what she *does* that is interesting. And what she does is adapted to the individual athlete. Thus, in order to talk about what she is doing, she must also talk about the individual athlete, and she has a duty of confidentiality towards each athlete. She explains that now she has agreed to the interview, she has received permission from the athletes she is going to discuss.

The interviewer then addresses her background: first as a physiotherapist and then as a performance psychologist. He wonders whether there is any connection here. Tajet-Foxell responds by saying that, as a physiotherapist at the Royal Ballet Company in London, she found that some of the ballet dancers who were injured returned to performing quite quickly, while others struggled to do so, often fearing that they would be injured again. The interviewer points out that embodied experiences and psychological issues are connected. Tajet-Foxell expands on this by stating that when elite athletes get injured, “their life changes from A to Z” (NRK, 2023). It is therefore necessary to not only focus on the injury, but also on the athlete’s new experience of their life. This change may be so profound that it can lead to additional challenges, which clinical psychologists sometimes refer to as “mental disorders”. However, Tajet-Foxell states that she does not use this term when she talks with athletes. Instead, she meets them where they are, as elite athletes. Tajet-Foxell states how elite athletes and artists care about what they do to the point that it can sometimes consume their identity, rendering them especially vulnerable to issues such as self-doubt and perfectionism. The interviewer points out that elite athletes are surely among those individuals most in need of some form of psychological tool kit. Tajet-Foxell agrees, saying:

Performing artists are extremely passionate about their work. It is always about pursuing excellence. One of the things I have come across is that most of them are perfectionists. People think that you need to be that way to become the best version of yourself. That is not true. Perfectionism can be very damaging, and it traps you in your own anxiety. I would be wary of it. I promote the idea of pursuing excellence: taking small steps towards always being better. The emotion around *that* is a sense of freedom, freedom to develop. It gives you a map with lots of different potential directions towards improvement. If you feel “I must be perfect”, the feeling around that is quite arresting and inhibiting. It doesn’t tell you what to do. (The authors’ translation)

In this excerpt, Tajet-Foxell emphasises that her role is to deconstruct ideas about this long-standing belief that athletes must achieve perfection – a way of thinking that may inhibit their end goal. Indeed, the desire to strive to always achieve more does not come with a blueprint on how to actually achieve this. Instead, she advocates for freedom for athletes to take those small steps that will give them multiple opportunities.

As already mentioned, when Tajet-Foxell met Bjørgen for the first time in 2009, she saw that Bjørgen was exhausted and depressed, but she did

not use those words. As she explains to the radio interviewer, “I would have lost her”. Instead, she encouraged Bjørgen to reflect on what had helped her to perform so well in 2005, before her decline. While Bjørgen worked on that, Tajet-Foxell worked on her exhaustion.

Bjørgen has been portrayed by Stenvold (2021) as part of a family with conventional gender roles, where one of the key expectations for young girls was to be kind and assist others. At the farm where Bjørgen was raised, four generations lived and it was assumed that she would help both inside the house and outside with the farm’s tasks.

Marit changed the beds before her mother was due to come home from the hospital with a newborn sister. She was then only six. Her father was a bit at a loss, he couldn’t find bed linen that fit, but Marit knew what to do (...) Marit raked grass from early morning to late afternoon or stood alone in the silo and lifted grass when her brother gradually started working with the tractor. (Stenvold, 2021, p. 23; the authors’ translation)

While there were many positives to her ideal of kindness and helpfulness, it made it difficult for her to say no. After she became the WC queen in 2005, many people sought her attention, and she became exhausted (Bøe, 2011, p. 41, confirms this). Lacan (1999) points out that internalised ideals of gender function as master signs, which give meaning to other signs in our meaning-making in relations and in society. Tajet-Foxell calls dysfunctional internalised ideals, norms, demands etc. “gremlins”. In the fictional world, “gremlins” refer to mythical beings who suddenly appear and create chaos.

Tajet-Foxell did not attempt to scare away Bjørgen’s “gremlin”, since it represented an ideal Bjørgen holds dear. Instead, she encouraged Bjørgen to make the ideal more flexible and better adapted to the context of an elite athlete from whom “everyone” wants attention. One of the tools they used was the image of the kindly tiger, with which Bjørgen identified. This tiger was skilled at marking the boundaries of its own territory, which was a crucial skill for Bjørgen to develop. This issue of marking boundaries is especially relevant in coaching elite athletes, who are in high demand by so many – from sponsors wanting them to be as visible as possible in the media, social media and at events, to sports managers hoping they can inspire children to participate in sports, and to fans on various social media platforms (Faustin, 2022).

The example of Tajet-Foxell’s work with Bjørgen’s ideal of kindness shows the relevance of considering the individual athlete’s gendered his-

tory of socialisation, and not just considering the attitudes coaches and managers have towards gender, and attitudes towards gender in sport in society (cf. Markula & Knoppers, 2024). The body's knowledge may be overwritten by master signs, which prevent the athletes from "doing the right thing". It can be difficult for a sport psychologist to see such master signs because they can manifest in various ways from person to person. However, it is worth the effort to see them, when the goal is to help athletes reach their full potential. From a psychoanalytical point of view, master signs play a crucial role in the habitual way of being in encounters with others and in society. The Lacanian view on master signs supports the idea that understanding language and self-expression might become tacit and not (yet) conscious.

Conclusion

Through a phenomenological attitude towards relationships in sport psychology coaching, we have focused on the relationship and the kind of world that is being presented to us. When Tajet-Foxell talks about her heart pounding when she watched Bjørgen's race, she achieves a sense of being deeply engaged, of being deeply involved in the action herself. These feelings between coach and athlete occur in shared moments of "embodied affectivity". Tajet-Foxell says: "Marit also makes me improve my performance. After working with Marit, I work even better with the next person" – and when she uses the words "integrity", "humanity" and "passion" to describe Bjørgen, it is a passionate and true statement.

When we examined the appreciation that athletes have for Tajet-Foxell in the media, we noted that she is portrayed as someone the athletes cannot live without. The statement "I don't know how I could cope without her" expresses a relationship that "is everything" to them⁵. It is therefore a paradox that the most appreciated sport psychologist (coach) in Norway as well as internationally, has been under-researched in sports coaching research. However, we have tried to examine the relations with human knowing, embodied affectivity, poise and gendered master signs as sensitising concepts. We have highlighted the intimate knowledge that comes from being in the moment, being in harmony with your circumstances,

⁵ Had been finished without help – NRK Sport – Sports news, results and broadcast schedule. <https://www.nrk.no/sport/xl/luften-av-gull-1.14786289>.

and feeling absorbed in experiencing the moment, as Bjørgen says in the aforementioned video promoting the 2011 skiing WC in Oslo.

Our goal was to create an understanding of Tajet-Foxell's practice, combining phenomenology with ideas from Lacan's psychoanalysis. Due to our reading of Lacan based on Fink (1997), the difference between phenomenology and psychoanalysis has become smaller than it appears in much of the research. Notwithstanding this, there are disparities, notably concerning the key notion in psychoanalysis: the idea of the unconscious.

In conclusion, it should be noted that our material is limited and selective, as are our perspectives. We have worked with phenomenological and psychoanalytical perspectives, highlighting the importance of considering that both athletes and sport psychologists are bodily, emotional, existential and meaning-making, gendered beings. We have also shown that cultivating warm feelings and compassion towards each other are core qualities that are visible in the material we have analysed. We regard the knowing processes that circulate between Bjørgen and Tajet-Foxell to be a sophisticated form of knowledge created when people engage with each other and become involved in an engaged epistemology: human knowledge rooted in a fundamental trust between athletes and sport psychologists, where we have concluded that Tajet-Foxell's best practice has been dialectically created.

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