"You look like a *proper* cyclist now": Performance, health, bodies and eating cultures in competitive cycling

Abstract

Decades of social scientific research has repeatedly shown that athletes spend time socialising, training, and competing within subcultures which commonly encourage and reward an intense dedication to performance. This emphasis on performance can be, and often is, to the detriment of health. One empirical phenomenon that can flow from this social process is the enablement and normalisation of disordered eating. Drawing on data from 11 interviews with competitive cyclists, we explore this problem within road cycling in Britain. Findings shows how the cyclists' interpretive framings to make sense of food, their bodies, and athletic endeavours were rooted in performance ideologies, which was reinforced by the social networks around them. There was contestation to this, with some participants speaking to health-focused ideas and practices, but such instances were few and far between. Our participants also spoke to feeling pressures to hone and (under)fuel their bodies to look a certain way to achieve the status of being a 'proper' cyclist. In a subculture whereby the pursuit of sporting excellence is the dominant ideal, we argue that it should be expected athletes will develop narrow, performance-oriented meanings towards eating and their bodies. Conclusions stress that the socio-cultural and interactional processes in many sporting subcultures, which often enable the normative acceptance of behaviours that prioritise performance over health, need to be more readily questioned and challenged. If they are not, then health problems such as disordered eating will likely continue unabated across sport.

Keywords; athlete identity; performance ideologies; health; sporting subcultures; disordered eating; eating disorders; competitive cycling

Performance sport and disordered eating

Athletes are, in large part, products of their environment. And decades of social scientific research has repeatedly shown that the 'environment' in which athletes spend significant time socialising, training, and competing commonly encourage and enable an intense dedication to performance (e.g. Alhashmi and Matthews, 2022; Frey, 1991; Kalman-Lamb & Silva, 2024; Nixon, 1993; Hardwicke et al., 2024). Much of the extant literature repeatedly shows how the performance ideologies structuring many sporting subcultures can, and often do, lead athletes and those around them to embody a 'win-at-almost-all-costs' sensibility, wherein physical and mental health is sacrificed in the quest for sporting excellence.

Hughes and Coakley's (1991) classic symbolic interactionist contribution to the study of sport provides a theoretical framework for understanding such a phenomenon. They describe the 'sport ethic', which denotes the dominant norms, values, and meanings that typically circulate within athletic subcultures. The sport ethic emphasises that 'real' or 'proper' athletes, i.e. those that have gained acceptance and respect within a sporting subculture, are those that (a) make sacrifices for 'The Game', (b) seek distinction and excellence, (c) take risks as well accept pain and injury, and (d) never accept limits and push boundaries of what's possible. The sport ethic is reified via the social networks around an athlete – i.e. teammates, coaches, medical professionals, support staff, parents, fans, journalists etc. – placing value on behaviours aligned with it. For example, a coach may reward an athletes' dedication for training more than peers, or a teammate might celebrate another for 'toughing' out an injury to finish a game. Nixon's (1992) important work described these social networks around athletes as 'sportnets' which reproduce a 'culture of risk' whereby potentially and actually harmful practices become accepted, normalised, and even celebrated. Whilst there is a wide range of health problems that can flow from the sport ethic being taught, encouraged and embodied within athletic subcultures, our focus in this paper is on disordered eating.

Disordered eating and eating disorders[1] have long been a concern within sport (Garner & Rosen, 1991). In 1994, 22-year-old Christy Henrich, a highly-ranked gymnast and Olympic hopeful, died from organ complications due to her suffering with anorexia nervosa. The development of her eating disorder has been widely attributed to the intense performance pressures and embodied cultural norms in the elite sport world she occupied (Millar, 2002). Her death was described as a 'wake up' call for the need to reform sporting structures and organisational cultures, not just in gymnastics but across performance sports, to prioritise and promote athlete health and wellbeing (Robinson, 1994).

[1] Throughout, we use the term 'disordered eating' as something of a 'catch-all' for dietary behaviours that may be harmful to health. Clinical eating disorders are characterised as severe psychiatric disturbances that cause persistent disruption to eating behaviours and body image perception resulting in significant impairment to physiological health and psychosocial functioning, whilst disordered eating behaviours include purposively skipping meals, restricting overall energy or macronutrient-specific food intake, purging, and use of medications. Disordered eating behaviours exist on a spectrum that can range in severity, and may predict the onset of clinically diagnosed eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa.

Whether such cultural change has been achieved in the last three decades is debatable. Athletic populations continue to be described as particularly 'at risk' of developing harmful eating habits and associated disorders (Stoyel et al., 2021). A meta-analysis of 177 studies drew data together from 70,950 athletes across twenty-seven countries suggested an average prevalence rate of 19% for self-reported disordered eating via screening tools with defined cut-offs for predicting clinical eating disorder risk (Ghazzawi et al., 2024). And in 2022 the independent 'Whyte Review' revealed systemic issues with disordered eating in British Gymnastics. This work eventually lead to a ban on coaches weighing children (Sport England, 2022). Swim England followed suit in 2023 (Woods, 2023). This change in practice only came following repeated cases of former and current swimmers voicing concerns; however, the organisations policy states that children on 'talent pathways' may still be weighed (Swim England, 2025). On top of this, despite various organisational commitments and policies, athletes continue to speak out about how the culture of sport influences harmful eating habits, eating disorders, and body image concerns (for an example, see Oxley, 2024). Despite concerns for disordered eating in performance-focused sport being raised repeatedly for decades, evidence suggests progress in tackling the issue appears to have been slow and largely unsuccessful.

Within scholarship, disordered eating in sport has typically been approached from biomedical and individualistic perspectives. Various social scientists have highlighted that such potentially overly reductive approaches tend to frame disordered eating as a pathological condition with its causation rooted in an individual's mind or body (for broad critical discussions of this, see Busanich & McGannon, 2010, Papathomas, 2018; Williams, 2012). Diverging from this biomedical and individualised framing, there is growing literature that considers how the socio-cultural landscape of sport can enable an athletes' development of disordered eating (Brittain, 2026). Such approaches consider how aspects of sporting cultures can encourage, normalise and legitimise disordered eating (Papathomas, 2018). Of particular relevance is a focus on 'performance narratives' wherein a 'single-minded dedication to sport performance' (Douglas & Carless 2009, p. 215) can shape eating habits (see Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Papathomas, 2018; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2014). For example, Busanich and colleagues (2015) showed how male distance runners were guided primarily by performance narratives when making sense of food, eating, and their bodies. The lack of diversity in alternative narratives (i.e. non-performance focused and/or health-oriented) in the runners' sportnets led to the construction of reductive, and sometimes harmful, meanings assigned to eating practices and relations to their bodies as objects to be honed and fuelled for sporting performance.

Taken together, the critical social scientific literature highlights the need to consider the social context in which disordered eating manifests. Our work herein makes two main contributions to this field. First, we draw on broadly sociological concepts to unpack how performance-oriented athletic subcultures may enable disordered eating. Second, we add fresh empirical insights based on road cycling, a sport with surprisingly little research on disordered eating, and even less that draws on qualitative methodologies.

Participating in a 'weight sensitive' sport, competitive cyclists are said to be particularly 'at risk' for disordered eating (Roberts et al., 2022). Over recent years, there have been various high-profile cases of former professional

cyclists sharing their struggles in the media (e.g. Bailey, 2022; Ramsay, 2025). Saddened by this state of affairs, two of us, the last author and seventh author, have been working together to better understand disordered eating amongst competitive cyclists. This was first through a scoping review of the literature (Roberts et al., 2022). Here we found that: (a) there was limited research on competitive cycling, (b) available research appeared to outline the sport as having a high prevalence of disordered eating, (c) the distinct physical demands of road cycling encouraged preoccupations with power to weight ratio along with other performance concerns, and (d) the context and culture of the sport was frequently identified as an important factor but had not been well theorised or researched, with a particular dearth of qualitative research.

This review of literature informed a subsequent mixed-methods study including 203 competitive cyclists globally (Roberts et al., 2024). Quantitative findings indicated that competitive cyclists do appear to be 'at risk' of disordered eating, with 5.7% reporting having a diagnosed eating disorder and 16.7% scoring ≥ 20 on the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT-26) which is considered reflective of disordered eating behaviours. Qualitative findings showed participants thought there were pressures to be a certain weight for cycling, comments and preoccupations with body weight and appearance were typical, and that cultures of eating associated with the sport was shaped by performance concerns. Our conclusions called for the following:

> …greater focus needs to be placed on the social context of competitive cycling, the networks around the athletes, and the sporting 'culture' to understand how these influence individual eating behaviours and body image. A better understanding of this would help shape more effective interventions, and these partial insights offer a good starting point for further qualitative research using interview-based methods to gain a greater understanding. (Roberts et al., 2024, p.2218)

In what follows we seek to answer this call. We discuss a qualitative study furthering our investigation into eating cultures in competitive cycling. Our specific focus is on exploring the meaning-making processes and socio-cultural factors associated with eating habits amongst cyclists. Before sharing these findings, we discuss our methodological approach.

Methodology

It upsets us that disordered eating continues to be a problem in performance-sports. To our minds, this is a situation not right as it is and in need of changing, with this paper being part of our wider attempts to do something. It's not typical to share the axiological underpinnings of a project, but to not do so is to withhold key methodological information about why we did the research. We were motivated to do this work, then, not out of academic or personal 'interest', but because we think it matters. Broadly following Sayer (2011), we take 'mattering' to mean delivering work that is oriented toward reducing avoidable suffering and/or promoting flourishing.

We approached this research drawing on ideas broadly housed in social constructionism. This means that while we do not deny the material nature and dimensions of social life, in this project we prioritise a focus upon how human group life is produced in various ways through interactions between people, things and ideas. A basic assumption follows from this: much of social life is actively created and recreated by people (socially constructed), and what we may call 'reality' is not simply pre-existing and external to, nor independent from, human influence. Such an ontological outlook means we believe that social life – more precisely, the ideas, norms and practices that constitute it – can be negotiated, challenged and changed within the boundaries of various structural and physical constraints. This is an important point we return to in our conclusions.

More specifically, our research, thinking and analysis is informed by symbolic interactionist theory. Herbet Blumer (1969, P.2) outlines three key epistemological premises of this theoretical approach being that:

> 1) Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.
> 2) The meaning of such things is derived from or emerges from social interactions between peoples.
> 3) Meanings are mediated through an interpretive process used by the person when encountering a thing or things.

'Things' here refers to everything that humans encounter and interact with in everyday life which serve as reference points to make sense of the social worlds around them. This includes physical objects, other human beings, social roles (friend, partner, coach, or boss, for example), institutions, and collective ideas and ideals. Our approach is informed by this epistemological framework for understanding how people make sense of and act in the world. Proceeding from this theoretical position, the central focus of this study was to seek understanding of (a) the meanings competitive cyclists learn and recreate in relation to eating, food and their bodies, (b) the social interactions that may (re)produce and/or challenge such meanings, and (c) the sources of knowledge used to construct meaning toward eating in cycling subcultures.

The authorship includes former dietetics and sports nutrition students, sports science researchers, nutritionists with experience working across a range of sports including cycling, social scientists, as well as active competitive cyclists. As a group we are multi-disciplinary, each bringing our own values, ideas, experiences and ways of thinking developed in the different academic worlds we work within. Whilst we are varied in our backgrounds, we broadly align in our commitments to creating positive, health-promoting sporting cultures and environments. We think a particular strength of this work is that, despite our academic differences, we have collectively cohered around a shared moral foundation and a mutually agreed interpretive analysis. Each authors' backgrounds will have influenced the design and development of this research, but space precludes a detailed discussion of all of us. Given the first authors (Clare) central role in the delivery of the work and undertaking the interviews, we provide a reflection on her positionality in relation to the research process.

Clare is a 25-year-old White British woman, who has recently completed a post graduate degree in Sport and Exercise Nutrition. Her undergraduate degree was in Dietetics, and her interests are in athlete health, wellbeing, and positive eating cultures in sport. She has been involved in sport as a placement student within an academy football environment as part of her postgraduate degree. As there was the potential for the research to cover sensitive topics, her background as a health practitioner helped navigate the conversations in ethically supportive ways. However, she has no prior personal or professional experience with competitive cycling. Being an 'outsider' in this way may be assumed to constrain developing understandings of sporting subcultures, and this should be considered when assessing our claims to knowledge. There is, however, some methodological benefit to this too which we return to below.

To explore our lines of inquiry we used semi-structured interviews. This decision was influenced by practical constraints, with this being a small un-funded project with limited time and resources. It was also a methodological decision, due to the flexibility and capacity to enable detailed and supportive conversations. We deemed this particularly important for sensitive topics like eating behaviours and disordered eating. In line with the broader philosophical underpinnings of this research, we were interested in understanding how the cyclists' experienced, constructed meaning, and made sense of the world around them. It was agreed that semi-structured interviews would enable the first author to explore, discuss, and reflect on these social processes with the participants.

Following institutional ethical approval, 11 competitive road cyclists were recruited. The research was advertised as exploring eating habits in competitive cycling, with no specific focus on disordered eating stated. A combination of purposeful and convenience sampling was used, with participants recruited through the authorships' personal and professional networks, and within cycling groups on social media (Instagram and Linkedin). Snowball sampling supplemented this, wherein existing participants shared study details within their networks on social media. The lead author spoke with interested individuals via email and arranged initial conversations to explain the study and procedures before prospective participants were provided with informed consent forms to complete. Here, potential participants were told some of the topics that would be covered including discussions of disordered eating and it was ensured they were comfortable with this before agreeing to participate. Following each interview, the lead author contacted participants providing signposting to professional support as well as a general 'thank you' for being involved. Participants' biographical details are displayed in Table 1.

[Table 1 here]

Our sample was predominately female, white, British, mostly university educated, and, using Savage et al.'s (2013) discussion of social class, would likely be categorised in the 'established' or 'technical' middle-class bracket. Given competitive cycling is a distinctly white and middle-class sport (Hardwicke, 2023), this representation in our sample

is unsurprising. The sample is admittedly modest, a limitation readers may wish to hold in mind when assessing our claims to knowledge. Yet more does not necessarily equal better in qualitative research and we maintain that our data provides detailed and rich accounts that align with much previous research, literature and athletic experiences. It is from this empirical and logical foundation we build out important, but nonetheless tentative, theoretical and practical contributions in our conclusions.

The interviews were completed throughout 2025 using Microsoft Teams. They lasted between 30-90 minutes, averaging 60 minutes. Each was recorded and then transcribed verbatim for analysis. Clare guided participants towards discussions of their eating habits and broad experiences in the sport. Whilst a semi-structured interview schedule was developed, Clare sought to establish a conversational approach that was led by the flow of discussion rather than being too tightly shackled to the set questions. This process allowed Clare to sensitively and care-fully navigate the interview as she explored eating habits, competing, body cultures, and typical training practices with the participants. Questioning was non-leading, open and curious (e.g. tell me about how you approach eating?).

Clare's relatively detached position from cycling subcultures perhaps guarded against taken-for-granted assumptions overlooking key empirical insights during the conversations with the cyclists. That is, during interviews she quite naturally asked participants to explain in detail about phrasings that cultural 'outsiders' may not understand. For example, being a "proper cyclist" was mentioned by a few participants. Clare would ask participants to explain this, what it means, and what it entails to be a such a person. In that regard, her lack of knowledge and subcultural 'naivety' were used as methodological tools. The sixth and seventh author both have backgrounds in competitive cycling, with the seventh author having done much research on the culture of the sport (e.g. Author). Together, they provided the 'insider' perspective throughout the analysis phases which we turn to next.

Our analytical process was guided by Blumer's (1954, 1969) discussion of 'sensitising concepts' – which are the theoretical ideas researchers carry with them and develop when interpreting data (see also Prus, 1996, p. 132). Sensitising concepts are tentative and flexible, being open to reconfiguration, refinement or total replacement as a scholar becomes more familiar with and attuned to thinking with the data in hand (Blumer, 1954). Such concepts facilitate researchers to interpret data by providing academic ideas for empirical instances to be sensitised to; that is, we can begin to try make sense of, and give meaning to, our data by considering it in relation to concepts.

This way of approaching interpretive analysis does not follow a prescriptive path. Rather, the job of the scholar is to undertake an iterative and disciplined process of moving between theory and evidence to hone their interpretation. This epistemological process takes different forms for different people, but it is the researcher's responsibility to provide an honest account of how things unfolded for them and the intellectual journey taken to arrive at their findings (see Matthews, 2026 for a related discussion). In the paragraphs that follow, we provide

insight to key moments of our journey by seeking to objectify our process, that is, doing a relatively rational analysis of our analysis.

The first 'formal' phase of analysis involved Clare spending time familiarising herself with the data and initial coding of transcripts. Holding our lines of inquiry in her mind, Clare began making notes on the interview transcripts, highlighting certain quotes, scribbling down thoughts and regularly meeting with the last author to discuss initial thoughts, feelings, and observations on the data. During these meetings, Clare was encouraged to reflect on and justify initial groupings of data by the last author. At this point, the data was broken down into several recurrent and clustered codes apparent across the data which included: performance-related comments; references to power-to-weight ratios; lack of nutritional support; manipulating dietary intake for performance; weight consciousness; teammates, coaches and parents influence on eating habits; comments about food choice and body; and mental wellbeing.

Based on this breaking down of the data, Clare, Jack and Charlie then worked together to develop an analytical frame that 'built' the coded data back up into an over-arching synthesis. This was achieved through an iterative process involving repeated dialogue between the data, existing literature, each other, and our interpretations, as we sought to develop our analysis. Jack took lead at this point because of his background in qualitative analysis and the social scientific study of sport. He spent time immersing himself in the data, reading and re-reading all transcripts and considering the initial phases of analysis developed by Clare and Charlie. At this point he saw and felt clear alignments between the data, initial tentative coding by Clare, and 'classic' ideas from the sociology of sport, subcultures and athlete health.

Over the course of a few weeks, Jack and Charlie communicated via WhatsApp voice notes to discuss ideas and check thought processes with each other. This was a dialogue over time as we thought together about the data, the project and theory to try make sense of it all. Here's an example of one message from Jack to Charlie that gives some insight to this stage of our analysis:

> *Alright mate, I've spent the last couple of weeks reading all the transcripts, going through Clare's coding and rough write up of findings. It's really rich, there's loads going on. We're gunna to have to reduce it down but the analysis around performance stuff is where the action is to my mind. The focus on performance seems to thread through all the data, and there's a tonne of social science literature to make sense of this. I'm seeing such clear alignments with the 'sport ethic', and some other classic concepts from sociology of sport, I'll send you some papers I'm thinking of. It's interesting cus' I know Clare's not got a background in social science or knows these concepts, but her coding of data is already super aligned with all those ideas. I think that's the direction we go with this. Give me a few weeks to work on it and I'll get a draft together. I want to make sure I'm not forcing these ideas to fit the data, as I've been thinking with*

them a lot recently, so it'll be good to get you and the team to then look over it all from a more detached position. (Transcribed WhatsApp Voice Note, 18/11/25)

This moment marked a key 'shift' in how our collective analysis tightened up and took form, being a central part of our epistemological process in developing this paper. As a team, we then went about sensitising our data to concepts drawn from the broad social scientific literature on disordered eating in sporting subcultures, performance ideologies and narratives, and theoretical ideas from the sociology of sport, including the 'sport ethic' (Hughes & Coakley, 1991) and 'sportsnets' (Nixon, 1992). Knitting together a wider theoretical framework informed by symbolic interactionist theory, specific applications of this theory within sport, and literature on disordered eating in sport provided us an analytical frame to then develop this paper.

This was not a linear nor entirely smooth process. Jack shared an initial full draft which was then re-drafted several times as we collectively negotiated our interpretations of the data, and pushed each other to provide more clarity where needed. There were various 'back-and-forths' between all authors, periods of further dwelling and reflection, as well as multiple re-writes as we sought to refine our analysis. This process continued after we received collegiate and constructive comments from reviewers and editors further encouraging refinement of the analysis. What follows is the result. We crafted two thematic 'blocks' to organise and present our data. The first describes the interpretive frames and meanings the cyclists drew on when talking through eating habits, their sporting experiences and their bodies. The second unpacks the ways in which such interpretive frames were learnt and recreated within the sporting subculture and how the embodiment of such ideas can, and in some cases did, lead to disordered eating and health-compromising behaviours.

Fuelling for performance

Across all the cyclists we spoke with, being more competitive and optimising performance was the dominant interpretive framing of discussions around food, eating, and their bodies. Several participants spoke about various nutritional strategies oriented around the importance of fuelling for the 'work' required during events and training sessions, and also towards increasing power-to-weight ratio. Amelia shared that to try increase chances of winning during 'Hill climb season'[2] she'd "probably under fuel to try and weigh less" and that "the higher your power to weight, the better you are". Similarly, Mia said that "If I'm putting out the same power at 65 kilos as at 57 kilos, I'm going faster at 57 kilos and *I'll win more races*".

This brief selection of interview extracts represent a pattern across the dataset of performance ideologies shaping how the cyclists spoke about their eating habits. Our findings can be weaved together with a thread of research in sport psychology that has focused on 'performance narratives' and how they can frame athletes meaning-making

[2] Hill climb season is a period typically in the Autumn whereby cyclists compete in individual time trails up an incline.

processes in relation to disordered eating (e.g. Busanich et al. 2012, 2014, Papathomas & Lavallee, 2014). Busanich and colleagues (2015) research with competitive male distance runners showed how the athlete's assigned narrowed, performance-focused meanings toward food, exercise and their bodies. A similar process was clear in how the cyclists we spoke with made sense of food being 'fuel' and their bodies being objectified as something to optimise for performance.

This interpretive framing led to a preoccupation with body weight being common across our participants. Jessica commented that cycling is "a weight-controlled sport, like it's about the weight to power. And so that's *always going to play on a cyclist mind*". Freya shared with the first author that:

> I was very good, but it's really hard now for me because I look back, I've got the same bike, I've got the same kit, I've got the same everything, and I'm not as good up a hill and it's in part because of my body. It is always on my mind, I'm always thinking like, is it just because I'm bigger now? And that's really difficult to deal with sometimes.

In some instances, this body-weight consciousness appeared to influence eating behaviours that were potentially harmful from a health perspective. Hannah told the first author that "You definitely try and skip meals before the season because the lighter you are, the better you go up hills." And Henry said:

> The reason for starting every session fasted is because I stood on the scales not long ago and I saw 70 something [kg], which was a little bit scary. I'm never ever above 70 kilos and I've got three races, one in August and then two in September.

From these examples we can see how the cyclists narrowly framed their experiences around performance-related concerns, possibly to the detriment of health. This a fairly common finding in the literature on disordered eating in sport. For example, McGannon and McMahon (2019) showed how, when elite female swimmers felt their performances were sub-standard, disordered eating practices were engaged in to cope with the disruption to their athletic identities (see also Papathomas & Lavallee, 2014). Similar interpretative processes were clear amongst our participants, whereby self-worth and wellbeing appeared intimately tied to performance.

It is important to note that a focus on performance is not 'unhealthy' in and of itself. When managed appropriately, with good support networks and within positive sporting cultures, athletes can focus on performance enhancement whilst equally focusing on maintaining and promoting their health and wellbeing. Appropriate nutritional choices can be conducive to both health and performance; for example, appropriate energy intake will likely be optimal for ensuring overall macro and micronutrient status, alongside supporting fuelling for performance. Some of our participants spoke to potentially health promoting practices. Jessica, for example, mentioned being encouraged to eat more and the importance of eating well for recovery and health, and by

extension performance. Sofia and Mia also discussed seemingly health-oriented practices within the cycling subcultures they were in – we return to this in the next section.

Despite some evidence of health-oriented narratives, it was primarily performance-oriented concerns that drove the cyclists discussions about eating habits and their bodies. This is typical of competitive athletic populations and, given the extant social scientific literature on performance ideologies dominating sporting cultures, to be expected. We therefore don't belabour the finding, but rather our attention turns toward how the focus on performance was learnt, recreated and how it shaped the cyclist's meaning-making processes, thoughts, and behaviours in relation to health.

Becoming a "proper cyclist" – Learning to fuel for performance

During the interviews, Clare sought to establish how the cyclists were learning and developing the performance-oriented meanings toward eating and their bodies. She also inquired about what sources of knowledge they had access to, mediating this process. Across most participants, there was a strong consensus that they perceived there to be limited access to credible nutrition support and resources in competitive cycling. Amelia's comment is illustrative: "I'm Part of British Cycling, I'm a British Cycling member, and I can't really remember seeing much from them". Such findings aligns with data from Roberts et al. (2024), who showed that over half of their sample of 203 competitive cyclists reported receiving no organisational nutrition support, and 88% having never consulted a dietitian or nutritionist. Similarly, Hoon et al. (2019) reported that only 27% of trained male cyclists had accessed nutrition advice from a dietician or medical doctor, instead relying on personal experience, peer guidance, and online resources.

However, our data may suggest a mismatch between nutrition support and access and/or awareness, with participants suggesting that the level of nutrition support provided is dependent on the 'level' of cycling, with elite level cyclists receiving more support. Grace, for example, told the first author that "In the Elite squad they've got, you know, they've got the S&C [Strength and Conditioning], they've got the nutritionist, but we don't have access to that at our level." James, echoing this, said:

> You know, all the stuff that the pros go through and the amount of advice and you know, they've got dedicated nutritionists and things like…I can only imagine the higher you get the more it gets like that. I suppose in amateur racing there's probably a massive variation because you'll have teams that race, and you know even in sort of cat 2-3 levels that might take that thing a little bit more seriously.

In our sample, limited awareness of, or access to, specific nutrition support from sporting organisations led some of the cyclists we spoke with to use the internet and social media for advice on dietary decisions. Several participants also mentioned artificial intelligence (AI) as a regular source of knowledge and guidance. Grace commented that

“Google's helpful, ChatGPT is helpful” and Conrad indicating that “Everyone’s now using ChatGPT” and continued with “I used it the other day for a race to help carb loading, told it my weight what my expected calorie burn would be”. Busanich and colleagues (2015) argued that the ‘sport-exercise-media complex’ – i.e. the interdependent network of sports organisations, media/marketing organisations and personnel, and transnational corporations – often promotes the performance narrative, providing athletes with a constrained set of narratives to align their lives with. Our findings suggest that the ‘sport-exercise-media complex’ must now include AI as a social force for potentially reproducing performance narratives, and this is an important line of inquiry for future research. We did not probe our participants specifically on this, so our data does not support us saying anything beyond that this is an area in need of future, targeted qualitative research.

What was clear, across all interviews, is that few of our participants had regular interactions with a nutrition specialist or any other peoples that provided a balance to the ‘fuelling for performance’ narrative which pervaded. This meant the cyclists often relied on the social and interactional networks around them to develop their athletic identities and ways of being. Conrad told the first author that, “I would say there's nothing I know of in terms of nutrition support and like I said, even with no education, *you'd learn from immersing yourself in the sport and speaking to others and stuff*.” Unpacking the sporting culture and social networks our participants were immersed in is where our attention moves next in the analysis.

How athletes, coaches, team managers, caregivers, and other sporting practitioners interact with each other shapes what ideas and behaviours are valued within sport. When taken together, these people are the ‘sportsnets’ Nixon (1993) detailed in his analysis of how certain ideas, such as a ‘performance narrative’ or ‘sport ethic’, are learnt and reproduced in sporting subcultures. The ‘sportsnets’ our participants were in influenced eating habits in several ways. This included both broadly ‘positive’ influences and, more frequently, quite clearly ‘negative’ ones in terms of detriment to health. When positive experiences around eating were discussed, it was mostly in reference to the influence of teammates. Mia shared that “Now my team is much more of a positive and friendly and supportive environment, and actually being around my teammates makes me eat more now.” Jessica spoke to similar experiences “This year, on this team, I was being encouraged to actually eat more, that was definitely a positive.” As did Sofia:

> On team camp, we're like encouraging each other to snack on the bike because some people who want to lose weight do it in the way they're like, oh, well, I'll not eat as much on the bike, but you actually need to eat more on the bikes. It's, like, trying to encourage that more.

Readers may notice these three extracts are all from female participants. Such health-promoting narratives were not discussed in detail by any of the male participants. The literature on disordered eating in sport has shown the behaviour is often gender patterned, with females having more research attention than male athletes (Busanich et al., 2015; Brittain, 2026). Connected to this, is that male athletes may face greater stigma around disclosing disordered eating and their experiences have long been overlooked and/or stigmatised by athletes, sport

practitioners and researchers (Atkinson, 2011; Papathomas, 2014). Harrison, one of our male participants, for example, told the first author that "I remember talking to people about having an eating disorder and the first thing that they would say to me is like, 'are you gay?'". The use of homophobic language to demean and downplay a serious health condition is a concerning finding. This example, and wider context of male athletes experiencing disordered eating being stigmatised, may explain, in part, why the only significant discussions of health-oriented eating practices was present in the conversations with our female participants.

Whilst there was some evidence of positive health-oriented eating practices being encouraged, these were few and far between. The cyclists more readily spoke to practices, beliefs and experiences that were potentially, and in some cases actually, harmful to health. Like Harrison above, many of our participants made recurrent references to language use and its role in reinforcing and/or enabling disordered eating. Much literature on disordered eating in sport has documented the power comments from a coach or other athletes can have on a sportspersons' mental health and wellbeing (Scott et al., 2022). Several of our participants' spoke to harmful comments personally received or that they'd heard within the cycling environment. Hannah's comment is particularly illustrative:

> I remember before that I wanted to starve myself but I enjoyed food too much, like, I remember the turning point was, I was at a track session at the Velodrome and they do hold starts, so like they hold your saddle and then you go. When I rolled up and one of the dads grabbed my saddle and was like, whoa, you're a bit heavy or something. I never told anyone about it. I just went home, didn't eat my tea and didn't eat my breakfast. And I remember that, like, six years on.

Here we see how just one comment from a parent had a lasting impact on one of our participants. Previous research indicates that comments about body weight can cause significant and lasting harm (Murry et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2022). Our findings reinforce this and highlight the importance of continued efforts to educate all those involved in sport to be sensitive in their use of language. Grace also spoke to experiences of insensitive language use, sharing a memory that "She [a teammate] was just called the fat girl that can't climb, so she just got written off because she's she doesn't look like she would do the climbs as fast as some other girls did, so that was what she got named." Mia recalled similar experiences, sharing that "I know in other teams there are comments, like I know people who have left teams because there's been bullying around their weight and how they look."

Our participants accounts reflect research showing sporting subcultures often have strongly policed and enforced body ideals (e.g. Porter et al., 2012). These subcultural pressures were reflected in the cyclists we spoke with being conscious of teammates eating behaviours around them. Mia and Jessica told the first author:

> When you're having communal meals, you can't be sat there, or you feel like you can't be sat there, eating, what, like 100 grams, uncooked weight of rice or something when they're [teammate] literally there with

> like a piece of bread and a salad and you're doing the same race the next day. Like it just like it makes you feel, I guess, inferior. (Mia)

> I was sort of looking for them [teammates] for confirmation for how much I could eat and when we'd sort of like load up our plates at dinner, I'm like, checking to make sure I'm not putting any more rice on than anyone else. (Jessica)

Bodies and behaviours not aligning to athletic ideals may be subject to ridicule, control or social ostracism within sporting subcultures (Murry et al., 2022). Findings from our sample suggest that cyclists, should they wish to be accepted into the subculture, may feel that they ought to look a certain way: thin and lean. Brittain (2025) details the structural-cultural pressures in road cycling subcultures for athletes to be lean as humanly, and often inhumanly, possible. Aligning with other previous research on cyclists (Roberts et al., 2022, 2024), our participants felt and spoke to these pressures. Amelia commented that:

> I used to weigh quite a bit more, urm, and then when I lost weight, the same club were like oh, *you look like a proper cyclist now*. So there was that attitude of to be a *proper cyclist*, you have to look a certain weight, and obviously weight is linked to how much food you eat. So that does sort of like have that impact of wanting to look a certain way to fit in.

Hughes and Coakley's (1991) sport ethic is a useful heuristic here to make sense of this account, which was reflective of our sample and previous research in cycling (Roberts et al., 2024). The sport ethic describes how it is often typical practice in sport for athletes to be culturally expected to strive for distinction, competitive excellence, and constant performance improvement (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). When this cultural norm is lived out in athletic bodies, it can manifest in potential disordered eating being symbolically normalised as a sign of commitment and dedication as opposed to a practice harmful to health (Williams, 2012). For Amelia, losing weight made her a 'proper cyclist'. She had embodied the sport ethic and was thus rewarded with the authenticity claim of being a 'real athlete' (Hughes & Coakley, 1991, 307). This finding echoes accounts by Hardwicke and colleagues (2024), who showed that competitive cyclists also used this term when describing ways to deal with pain and injury. They described how to overcome, ignore, or 'ride on' through injury were symbolic markers of being a 'proper cyclist' (see Hardwicke et al., 2024). Whilst our focus here is on disordered eating, the findings converge around how behaviours and practices that prioritise performance as opposed to promoting health appear to be of greater value within the cycling subcultures studied.

The line between being a 'proper', dedicated and committed athlete making 'sacrifices' and a person engaging in disordered eating behaviours can become blurred in sporting subcultures (Williams, 2012). Across our participants there were various references to the line being crossed toward the latter. Freya told the first author that, "there are still a lot of very disordered eaters in cycling that really think that lighter is better". Other participants'

comments attested to the general sense that disordered eating was prevalent in the sport. Grace told the first author:

> *There's anorexia everywhere, it's so rife, like with my age group, it's horrible.* Do you know what I mean? You'll see girls, like, they'll come, they'll be a size one season, you see them after winter, the next season, they look like a different person.

We cannot quantify or verify what 'anorexia' being 'rife' means with our methodological approach. However, literature does support why our participant may hold such a belief. Road cycling disciplines are well documented as having high prevalence rates for eating disorders (Koppenburg et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2024). Amelia also commented how "poor mental health in cycling is very prominent". Hannah had particularly intimate experiences of the health problems that can be attributed to disordered eating in cycling. They described, with emotional difficulty, that they "had an eating disorder years ago and I'm still not 100% with it". She also spoke about experiences with others close to her:

> My best friend at uni [university] is also a cyclist. I knew her before uni, urmm, she couldn't finish her exams because she had to leave uni because she's so underweight and [pause] like she's seriously ill…Yeah, she's not allowed to do more than 10 minutes of exercise a day. She's not allowed to run. She's not allowed to ride. (Hannah)

These stories are sad but they are not unique. There is much literature documenting the prevalence (e.g. Ghazzawi et al., 2024) and brutal personal experiences (e.g. Papathomas & Lavelle, 2010) of disordered eating in sport. Following discussions around body image, mental health and disordered eating, the cyclists were asked how they perceived available support for such issues. Participants described both limited access to, and awareness of, mental health support within cycling. For example, Jessica shared that "We would have had a squad night earlier this year on like mental health and resources, but that will have literally probably been it. I'm not having somebody regularly ask me how my mental health is". James commented that:

> I'd say it's pretty poor, mainly because I'm not aware of it. But having not had to go and search for it, I don't know how accessible it would be if you did, but it's not in your face. It's not, you know, advertised. As far as I'm aware.

Inadequate mental health provision in women's cycling, specifically, has been suggested to negatively affect wellbeing and career longevity, with unaddressed psychological struggles contributing to premature retirement (Colangelo et al., 2023). The 2022 Cyclists' Alliance survey of 124 professional female riders found that 22% cited mental health as a reason for retiring (The Cyclists' Alliance, 2022). This ongoing issue led Colangelo et al (2023) to advocate for stronger regulatory frameworks, proactive interventions, and increased mental health literacy within the sport. Our findings support the need for this shift in practice.

However, building on Poucher et al. (2023) study on Canadian Olympic and Paralympic athletes, several participants in our study noted that even when, or if, support was available, subcultural pressures may still prevent uptake from cyclists. Grace described how cyclists may fear asking for help as it could jeopardise their selection for competitions or place in the team. They told the first author that "I think the problem is like a lot of riders won't come forward because they're scared…like what if I get kicked off? like what are the repercussions?". Grace suggests that if cyclists did not live out the sport ethic, by showing 'weakness' and not giving all to 'The Game' (Hughes & Coakley, 1991), then they may face repercussions such as constrained opportunities. Hannah spoke to this too: "I also think you've got to be careful because mental health could be a reason for them to try and kick you off the team". Mia also discussed how experiencing mental health struggles was often perceived as a sign of weakness, stating "I think you're kind of deemed as weak if you're struggling." These findings suggest that performance narratives and ideas aligned to the sport ethic appear to dominate how mental health and athlete wellbeing is (mis)understood in cycling subcultures our participants were part of.

Across the interviews, the cyclists referred to the interplay of subcultural norms and the interactional networks they socialised, trained and competed in as key influences on learning, recreating and reinforcing an over-focus on performance when considering eating habits. This, according to stories from our participants, can lead to health being compromised through disordered eating and unhealthy meanings being developed toward eating and the body.

Concluding remarks

We have shed further empirical light on the social and cultural dimensions to eating habits and disordered eating in an under-researched sport. Our findings have shown how the cyclists we spoke with mostly assigned narrow, performance-focused meanings toward food, their bodies, and athletic endeavours, aligning with research from other sporting subcultures (e.g. Busanich et al., 2015; McGannon & McMahon, 2019; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2014). This meaning-making process was reinforced by an athletic subculture whereby norms, values and performance narratives aligned with the sport ethic were encouraged, enabled and celebrated – sometimes to the detriment of health.

We readily acknowledge our use of one-time semi-structured interviews as a limitation. Our data has afforded empirical glimpses into important reflections from cyclists about the eating culture in the sport, but our methodology means we cannot detail these social processes unfolding in practice. Therefore, future qualitative research, in cycling and other sports, would be well placed to draw on more immersive and long-term methods, particularly combining participant observation, to extend the tentative findings offered here. Given the emotional layers and sensitive nature of this research topic, echoed in our data herein, there is also scope for future research to use a wider range of qualitative methodologies to better enable athletes to represent these dimensions: for

example using photovoice, audio and visual diaries, story completion and other creative and sensory means to generate knowledge.

Our findings have also highlighted some important lines of inquiry for subsequent research around the influence of AI now being part of the 'sport-exercise-media complex' that shapes cultural scripts (Busanich et al., 2016). This was not a central focus of our analysis nor interviews, but we suggest scholars should take up this focus to better understand the role AI may be playing in how athletes learn about, and give meaning to, eating and their bodies. Moreover, whilst we expect there to be social, experiential and cultural commonalities across the globalised subculture of road cycling, our focus on Britain, and our sample representing only White British cyclists, means caution is required when considering how social processes around disordered eating unfold in different countries, communities and social spaces, and how stratifications may shape this. In this regard, future research adopting an intersectional lens, and focusing specifically on social stratifications within road cycling subcultures, would be well placed to build on and extend our work.

By approaching this topic from a broadly social constructionist perspective, our overall analysis emphasises the socially rooted nature of athletic behaviours. Importantly, this way of thinking and theorising holds that social life can be challenged, changed and re-constructed. To that end, a key implication from our work is for greater focus and efforts to be placed into challenging, changing, and re-constructing cultures in sport to prioritise health and wellbeing above, or at least equal to, performance. This would go some way to developing more balanced eating habits whereby, if asked, athletes may more readily speak to 'fuelling for health' as opposed to performance and that a 'proper cyclist' is one who values their personal wellbeing over and above sport.

For those concerned, like we are, with actively constructing sporting cultures which centre health, fun, and enjoyment alongside performance enhancement, the job that needs doing is clear: to challenge, question, and decentre performance narratives and practices aligned with the sport ethic. This is not easy. Most governing bodies and professional sport organisations existence (and profits) rely on performance outcomes, and thus a culture that prioritises performance, often to the detriment of health, is structured from the top down. It must, then, be a collective effort to create new sporting cultures which enable healthier and more holistic approaches to performance. There is a responsibility here for all those involved in sport to reflect on how they are contributing to sporting cultures in their practice.

Sport nutritionists should prioritise athlete health and wellbeing, alongside the acknowledged importance of performance outcomes in competitive sport. The support staff conducting body composition assessments should reflect on their practice, consider the rationale for measurements, and ensure protocols are followed for treating any body composition testing and data in an ethical, health-oriented manner (Mathisen et al, 2023). Coaching staff, support practitioners, athletes, and others within the athletes' social network, such as caregivers and friends, should critically question and monitor their use of language regarding bodies, food and performance. Those that are untrained, uneducated and inexperienced in working sensitively with athletes regarding eating habits,

performance and health should not offer unsolicited 'advice' (see Beckner and Record 2016 for the damage this can do). Governing bodies must do more to provide support and information regarding eating disorders (see Feng & Duncan, 2025 for recent review in Canadian sport).

Underlying all the above and the main thrust of our overall argument is the continued need to reconsider and question what matters and what is valued in sport. While ever performance ideologies shape sporting subcultures, the issues of disordered eating will likely continue largely unabated. Any approaches wishing to address this problem must consider actions needed to shift the culture of sport to be primarily structured around a combination of health, human development, enjoyment, and sport-specific requirements and strategies. Such a focus, when considered together, would complement and support optimisation of performance, without need to make performance a sole focus to the detriment of more virtuous elements of sport.

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