Female long-distance runner’s imaginary

ABSTRACT: With the rapid and significant rise of female long-distance runners in function to the results achieved over the last two decades, these athletes have gained recognition in the worldwide sports scene. However, this path has been paved with a lot of human toil and sweat, self-denial and many tears. Therefore, we felt motivated to investigate the meanings that running has for these women, which have led them to doggedly keep at their aims, and to know why they have not been satisfied with their achievements, and yet, kept in search of breaking records. The study, which is of a qualitative nature, has been carried out under the umbrella of knowledge of Social Ideal aiming at: a) investigating some meanings which are present in these athletes’ discourse; b) evidencing imagery, symbols and myths which are in it. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Brazilian elite female long-distance runners. Among the myths these long-distance runners brought to mind, we could identify Artemis, Athena and Narcissus. It was identified that, in spite of appearing homogenous, the group formed by these athletes could fall into two subgroups: The former runs FROM, which resorts to running as a means of overcoming differences, and the latter runs TOWARD, which resorts to running in search of the pleasure of victory. The method used for interpreting the discourse was the Discourse Analysis of Eni Pulcinelli Orlandi. The mapping of linguistic marks, which emerged from the discourse, allowed the explicitness of the following meanings: enjoyment, profession, individualism, talent, the dream and the ideal, presented with polysemic meanings.

Keywords: Athleta performance, Motor activity, Exertion

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SPORTING PRACTICE ACHIEVEMENTS

It’s known that, for a long period, female Brazilian athletes had their image only associated with beauty, gracefulness, morbidity and maternity, in which their main functions were that of conception and housekeeping. They had no choice, but abiding by the ruling system, i.e., the patriarchal system, in which the male figure holds power, knowledge and politics. All this supremacy has been gradually defeated, as we will see later. However, we are not postulating that the patriarchal system is over, yet it has been weakened in the long race, mainly regarding sports.

For women to be inserted in the physical activity context, it was not so easy a task. Everything commenced in the second half of 20th century, when the practice of this activity was allowed, up to that time exclusive for men. Women were allowed to take part in it, aiming at facilitating the conception process. The common belief was that the healthier there were the healthier would be their babies. Nevertheless, several restrictions remained, in the mist of them brusque movements, jumps, and racing. This belief has prevailed until the early 20th century, when many women in Europe and USA had started to do sports, such as cycling, golf, tennis, swimming, riding, for their own pleasure. Still, they had not been satisfied, so they wager a huge and long battle for their presence and participation in several sporting modalities, which were only part of the masculine setting.

During this period, the reestablishment of the Olympic Games of the modern age occurred in 1896, in Athens, the cradle of the worldwide sports. Pierre de Frédy, Baron de Coubertin held the 1st Olympic Games, however with the male participation, for he did not favor the female sports practice. He believed that this was harmful to such fragile bodies. Relegated to the role of simple spectators, they were merely entitled to applaud. Hence, it settled the idea that the sports practice was not recognized and legitimated for women. Women themselves had contributed to maintain this view, for believing that the sports meant an aggression to femininity. In Brazil, the valorization of physical activities spread at the same time, but still the distinction between the genders was present, the sporting practice remained under the masculine domain.

Only in the 1930’s, the first signs of the female Brazilian participation in the physical activities has appeared unobtrusively. It is important to highlight that they needed family and finance support. Overcoming all these types of prejudice (but they have not disappear), the Brazilian women start to take part in it timidly slow, in the context of the physical practice. In 1932, the first Brazilian women would participate in Olympic Games, with the swimmer Maria Lenk. It is noteworthy that she was born into a family of athletes, and thus she has the family support.

Maria Lenk’s deeds encouraged other Brazilian to keep at their aims for entering Brazilian and worldwide sports setting. From this achievement, women started to participate in several sports modalities, however, the athleticism had been under the male domain, and consequently few women practiced it. The absence of women was so big that, in 1964, in the Tokyo Olympic Games, the first expressive female Brazilian participation in the athleticism

RESUMO

O imaginário de corredoras de longa distância

Com a rápida e expressiva ascensão das corredoras de longa distância no que tange aos resultados alcançados nas últimas duas décadas, essas atletas conquistaram o reconhecimento no cenário esportivo mundial. Contudo, essa trajetória foi percorrida com muito esforço, suor, lágrimas e renúncia. Fomos então motivados a investigar os sentidos que a corrida tem para essas mulheres, sentidos estes que as levam a continuar obstinadas em seus propósitos, e saber por que elas não se contentam com suas conquistas, por que continuam em busca de records. A pesquisa, de natureza qualitativa, se deu no campo de conhecimento do Imaginário Social e teve dois objetivos: a) investigar alguns sentidos que se apresentam nos discursos das corredoras de longa distância; b) evidenciar as imagens, os símbolos e os mitos que emergem nesses discursos. Foram realizadas dez entrevistas semi-estruturadas com corredoras de elite de longa distância do esporte brasileiro. Dentre os mitos que desprotaram de forma significativa nos discursos das corredoras de longa distância identificamos Ártemis, Atena e Narciso. Identificou-se que, apesar de parecer homogêneo, o grupo formado por essas atletas se encontrava dividido em dois subgrupos: o que corre DE, isto é que utiliza a corrida como um meio para vencer as diferenças, e o que corre PARA, que busca com a corrida o prazer da vitória. O método utilizado para a interpretação dos discursos foi o Análise do Discurso, de Eni Pulcinelli Orlandi. O mapeamento das marcas lingüísticas que emergiram dos discursos permitiu a explicitação dos seguintes sentidos: o gosto, a profissão, o sonho, o individualismo, o talento e o ideal, que se apresentaram com suas respectivas políssemias.

Palavras-chave: Desempenho atlético, Atividade física, Esforço físico

RESUMEN

El imaginario de corredoras de larga distancia

Las corredoras de larga distancia tienen presentado una rápida ascensión en sus resultados en las últimas dos décadas, posibilitando así su reconocimiento en nivel mundial. Sin embargo, este camino solamente fue posible por medio de mucho esfuerzo, sudor y lágrimas y renuncia. Fuimos motivados a investigar los sentidos que la carrera tiene para estas mujeres, sentidos estos que las motivan a continuar obstinadas en sus propósitos, y saber por que ellas no se contentan con sus conquistas, por que continúan a búsqueda de plumeras marcantes. La investigación, de naturaleza cualitativa, ocurrió en el campo de conocimiento del Imaginario Social y tuvo dos objetivos: a) investigar algunos sentidos que se presentan en los discursos de las corredoras de larga duración; b) evidenciar las imágenes, los símbolos y los mitos que surgen en estos discursos. Fueron realizadas diez entrevistas con corredoras de elite de larga distancia del deporte brasileño. Entre los mitos se destacan de forma significativa los discursos de las corredoras de larga distancia identificamos Ártemis, Atena y Narciso. Se pudo identificar el grupo formado por estas deportistas que se encontraba dividido en dos grupos: el que corre DE, o sea que utiliza la carrera como un medio para vencer las diferencias; el segundo grupo que corre PARA, que busca con la carrera el placer de la victoria. El método utilizado para interpretación de los discursos fue de Análisis del Discurso, de Eni Pulcinelli Orlandi. La identificación de las marcas lingüísticas que surgieron en los discursos permitió la caracterización de los siguientes sentidos: el gusto, la profesión, el sueño, el individualismo, el talento y el ideal, que se presentaron con sus respectivas variaciones.

Palabras clave: Rendimiento atlético, Actividad motora, Esfuerzo físico
was with the participation of Aída dos Santos, that despite the lack of family support and having suffering from prejudice by her own Brazilian delegation. Aída earned her an honored 4th place in high jump. This deed will go down in history of the female Brazilian athletism. According to Mourão (1998:165), she is the symbol of the Brazilian women who had emancipated in and through the sporting practice. The athletism earned her a wide variety of opportunities, which were fundamental to help her arrive at where she did. Nevertheless, and despite her deed, the athletism had been massively male.

While several sporting modalities had their recognition in the worldwide scene, the female participation in some athletism modalities has kept timidly. Among them the long-distance race which lives drowned in discrimination that made difficult female practice.

**CONQUERING THA PARTICIPATION IN THE LONG-DISTANCE RACE**

In the 1960’s saw some struggles waged by women to enter the long-distance race. Undoubtedly, we cannot leave out Helpomene’s deed, in the first marathon of the Olympic Games of the modern age, held in Greece (when the athlete covered 40km 4 hour and 30 minutes) in 1986, as well as Maria Louise Ledm, at the Paris Olympic Games, in 1918; and Violet Piercy, in 1926, in the Polytechnic Harry’s Marathon, in England. But in 1967 an unfortunate episode took place demonstrating that all discrimination suffered by women as for sporting practice of long-distance race: the runner Kathrine Switzer registered in the Bosthon Marathon under the name K.V. Switzer, arriving in 261th place. She positioned at the start and raced, but some kilometers later she was stopped by an officer, Jack Sample (cf. photo), which tried to take her out of the race; but her boyfriend, Thomas Miller, a hammer thrower, protected her, so she finished the course, but she was suspended by the American Sports Confederation.

In the 1970’s saw big achievements for the official female participation in the long-distance races. In 1972, in the USA, women participate in the first marathon officially. In 1974, many events took place: the first North American marathon’s championship, the first international female marathon, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF). In 1975, celebrating the International Women’s Year, it was included the female presence in Saint Sylvester Marathon, in São Paulo, with the participation of 9 athletes (we cannot forget that this race had already happened since 1924, but only with male participation). In 1979, it takes place the first female Brazilian participation in international races, with Eleonora Mendonça participating in the Avon International Women’s Marathon.

The female long-distance runners have kept advancing in their achievements, and in the 80’s the world has started to know more about them, along with their extraordinary timings and beautiful performances. There was a vacuum to be filled, and this final achievement arrived in 1984, in the Olympic Games of Los Angeles, when the marathon started to be part of the Olympic program, standing out names such as Joan the Benoit (USA), Rosa Mota (Portugal), Ingrid Kristiansen and Grete Waitz (Norway), Priscila Welch (England) and Lisa Martin (Australia).

In the first female Olympic marathon, an unexpected episode occurred: Gabriele Andersen, a Swedish runner, as well as all the other female athletes, had trained a lot for a competition, making long and stressful trainings to triumph in the great day. With the racing strategy designed, the athletes departed to run the 42.195 meters. The first half of the competition was quite comfortable and all the athletes have kept a good pace, they only thought about victory.

However, as in any marathon, the fatigue began to appear after the kilometer 30 and the signs of wearing grew visible on the face, for keeping the pace is a matter of honor. The arrival positions began to be defined, and the athletes were vibrant with their deeds, they come into the Olympic Stadium of Los Angeles, receiving a round of applause of a crowded and avid stadium for the champions’ presence. But Gabriele Andersen saw her dream come to nothing a sleight-of-hand trick, she came into stadium, without running, without body domain of her movements and showing a body taken over by exhaustion. With enormous difficulty, moved by a force beyond our wildest dreams, she would not be stopped by fatigue; the athlete was able to cross the finish line. She did not earn her a medal, she conquered the world with her bravery, however.

This bravery is promoted by an eager press for make a spectacle out of the human performance - in the case the human tragedy and heroism - for displaying the sacrifice of an athlete. It was inevitable the association to the figure of Gabriele Andersen with Pheidippides, an Athenian soldier who in 490 B.C. ran from the city of Marathon to Athens in order to give some news of the victory over the Persian invaders, dying
from exhaustion as she arrived. Would Gabriele Andersen be an update of heroism of Pheidippides?

**THA MYTH OF THE HERO AND THA FEMALE LONG-DISTANCE RUNNER**

The researcher and professor Junito Brandão (1999:10) comments that “the hero is that one that depletes in his mission, life and cause. As beings that are not either humans or human, they are in-between between the world of the conscience and the unconscious, even if they have a tragic death.” With this look, we can understand Gabriele’s images upon coming into the stadium. Her superhuman effort comes close to the divine, something superior to common mortals, anesthetizing the painful sensations that the sports activity inflicts. Many are the cases of heroic tragic figures of exaltations in sports, be it in the athletism, swimming or boxing. But the fragile figure of a woman in that state causes more impact in people’s sensibility.

A curious fact happens in Brazil: in the 80’s, a Portuguese athlete, Rosa Mota, who with simplicity, sympathy and determination won six editions in a row of the Saint Sylvester Marathon, in São Paulo, conquered the Brazilian’s hearts. Today, Rosa Mota is an idol of one of our main long-distance runners, Maria Zeferina Baldaia, São Silvestre’s champion in 2001, to whom this Portuguese athlete was her mirror.

It is noticed that, with a lot of determination and persistence, the female long-distance runners had conquered the world with their bravery. The woman definitely took part in the sports setting, and assured their participation in several sporting competitions, amongst them: Olympiads, world-wide championships, grand prix. However, the feminine access to the podium has been conquered at the expense of a lot of human toil and sweat, self-denial and many tears. Besides all types of discrimination, which still remain in the male belief, such as that of fragile bodies are not capable of participating in the so-called male competition; such as the throwing or the long-distance trials, which would not be practiced

by women for requiring a lot of endurance and promoting a very high exhaust, or the half marathon, marathon.

As a consequence, the female athletes have gone doggedly in search of imaginary of winning and overcoming the limits of high performance. In it, she has been manipulated, exploited depersonalized and alienated with the most different types of training routines, and has not even escaped from the use of chemical substances to increase performance. But how has this process taken place? In a first moment, it is a matter of choice; later, they have begun to act submissively, at least in the appearance, in the trainings. You wonder whether the decisions to begin and continue are conscientious and they know what they are doing.

The athletes live in a world in which the esthetic is essential and the “ugly ones” are not well accepted. But female athletes, mainly the female long-distance runners, do not care much about physical appearance. Their ideal model is another one, and the fragile, thin body, from the spectator standpoint, is only the way to accomplish the deed of running long-distance running competition and reaching the highest place in the podium. This fact has become a matter of survival. The masculinity and femininity concepts which surround the female athletes are in fact, only two stereotypes which resist to cultural changes, mainly in the competition sports. And how do these concepts in the appearance, in the esthetic manifest?

Body cult, seduction for achievements and marks to be reached transform or deform the female physical, which begins to be seen by great part of indifferent people to the field considered as masculine and fragile. It must be clear that these characteristics are made present due to the training through which they got.

**FEMALE SPORTING HEROIC IMAGINARY X ANDROGYNY**

High level sports is a system which requires performance to assure survival, for the technological and scientific dimension, which the sporting competition sport assumed, does not allow individuals who do not have refined athletic capacity. On a regular basis new records are broken, new technologies for the enhancement of performance are invented. In other words, the ones, who do not adapt, keep the exhausting training routines, and consequently, do not target the podium, are out!

Teves (2001a:47) shares my questioning,

_How to explain the struggle between conscience and athlete’s body in hard moments of competition, when the body continually complains and appeals to conscience so that it yields to pain, that misses the target and admits defeats? Who controls this conscience, hindering it to yield to the body? It is willpower. But where does this force come from that dominates the body appeals body?_

In this competitive world, the woman must give up on what is conventionally known as femininity.
gressiveness, leadership, ambition, i.e., masculinity. Nevertheless, how to assume these characteristics and not be masculine?

When the female athletes are accepted in this community, they enter a restricted and selective club of the professional sports and of overpriced trade-off. All sacrifice is always insufficient to continue on top. The pharmacological preparation does not have sexual boundaries, in a clear demonstration that the sports performance is a sui generis system which incorporates any sexual stereotypes. What drives a woman to do weightlifting, boxing or play soccer? Or otherwise, what drives a man to do ballet, yoga, amongst other activities?

Let us remember, amongst some examples, the Chinese swimmers who had haunted the world with technical indices nearer and nearer the ones of men, or even near the Eastern Germany athletes who had used as many anabolic steroids which as time went by they did not feel like being women themselves because of their manlike bodies, opting out for changing their name, assuming their masculinity conquered through long training routines and through the insatiable search for the highest place of the podium.

The researcher’s arguments (Oglesby, 1978) shows that the truest woman’s personality is androgynous who searches for overcoming the human limits, by means of the sporting practices for competition. We take the author’s side, for we report primal myths, the goddesses, amongst them are Arthemis and Athena, who had a so strong and active animus component in their personality that they did not feel needs to have the masculine image by their sides to complement them. They have already it inside, and the athletes also live under this behavior.

We cite Teves (2001a, p.47), once more:

“The techniques, the trainings are extremely important moments for the athlete’s preparation, but not enough to imbue the athlete with the divine dimension that she assumes in the dispute, in the ecstasy for victory or in the moment of the defeat. They are moments in which the myths possess the athlete. Epic heroes or tragic heroes, in the podium they are shown as beings that surpass the human being dimension. Willpower and determination are of the essence for victory. It is the glory of being possessed by the ecstasy of living, still taking part of the cosmos of that form, and not of another one.”

These women, who act in world-wide sport setting, pay a high price before the society: the negation for the own gender, identity, having their social behaviors and feminine personality identified as man-like. However, this search belongs to them; therefore it was conquered after a long struggle: it is not about stereotypes, male or female ones, but personal accomplishments.

We believe that it is not only a woman made of flesh and blood that is present in the force of a female runner athlete, who makes her endure her body moans until the finish line. What is witnessed in the sports spectacle in general, it is not reduced to the athlete’s body. Her performance is not associated with experienced lives by her and by all those who had involved direct or indirectly. At the party, in the spectacle, we see performances, but also physical expressions overloaded with emotion. Then, we put forward some questionings: What drives the female runner? Are there only psychophysiological alterations? Which are the fears, desires, and fantasies? What meanings does a race take in this universe?

**Guiding questions for the study were:**

* Which meanings does the race have them?
* Which Imaginary do they make along their ways as athletes?
* Which symbols and myths come up in their discourse?

**CONCLUSION**

The mapping of linguistic marks, which emerged from their discourse, allowed the explicitness of the following meanings: enjoyment, profession, individualism, talent, the dream and the ideal, which presented with polysemic meanings. We concluded that the female long distance runners were truly heroines in the accomplishment of an ideal. However, despite seeming homogeneous, the group composed of these athletes in fact fell into two subgroups, in accordance with reasons that drove them to the glorious path. One group is defined by running FROM or group 1: these women had a deprived childhood, even without having anything to eat, and thus running meant a means of overcoming dissatisfactions with life and family. The other one is defined by running TOWARD or group 2: during the childhood they lacked emotions, achievements, pleasure. They saw in it the way to make their dreams come true by going behind Eros that drives them. They were infuriated and unsatisfied with their lives, they had taken the decision to abandon their families.

The path paved by these women is explained by Campbell (1964) who divides the heroic path into three stages. The first phase is about separation: these heroines, still as simple mortals, go away from the family and friends in order to run away from the suffering or live a great dream, and they start to live together with strangers, who will later shelter them.

In the second phase, also called initiation, these women find out that they are capable of taking on great tasks and get drown in the sports setting. They begin to train intensively and cover bigger and bigger distances; the search for breaking records is inevitable. These women, then, find satisfaction in it. Amongst the task carried out by heroes, they will identify with agonistic (athletic disputes for which the heroes trained exhaustingly).

They begin to be admired, worshipped and even coveted by the society and the means of communication due to their great deeds, reaching the apex of their lives, and thus becoming fulfilled as athletes. The deprived and emotionless childhood is left behind, the inflicted scars of the past will never be forgotten, but now it is time to focus on victories.

Their lives begin to be a great adventure. They travel around the world in search of victories, records, recognition and admiration, for they appreciated being admired and love when they hear or
read some comments in relation to their beauty, physical vigor or even the slenderness, trait of the sportive modality to which they are dedicated.

Amongst the myths which bring meaning to their lives, we find Athena, Arthemis and Narcissus; however, we can adopt as the most impressive the myth of Arthemis. For this goddess, the physical energy which keeps her alive, and on account of all this energy the woman Arthemis is capable of racing faster, or lifting more weight, or climbing more than men. Woolger and Woolger (1989) highlight that this type of woman is born with strong qualities considered as man-like in their building. Arthemis has an intense love for freedom, independence, autonomy, and we can say that these characteristics are perfectly suitable for linguistic marks found in their discourse. The race appeared before them meaning life for them, for they are submitted to hard struggles in an insatiable search for improving timings, overcoming opponents and themselves, which no one knows exactly when this will end, therefore they cannot help living without race.

We understand that these women become fulfilled with movement, and as skilled followers of the goddess Arthemis, they show themselves stubborn at achieving what they want, even if it is necessary to risk their lives.

The study identified that Group 1 makes use of racing in order to beat differences, whereas the Group 2 does the same in order to overcome their limits in search of the ecstasy.

The last phase of the heroic path analyzed by Campbell (1964) is the return that the present study did not approach for having dealt with high level athletes, which are still competing. However, we observed that the athlete of Group 1 seeks balance, and reflects upon the return; whereas in the group 2, we observed that they do not do the same, and consequently, there is no reflection that.

Another important aspect to highlight is that athleticism is a sport aimed at the financially underprivileged classes, for running is simple, therefore no special gear is needed, i.e., even barefooted.

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