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## Sport, Entertainment and the Live(d) Experience of Cheering

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*Sport is readily thought of as entertainment in the context of both live events and individual practice. Both experiences are widely consumed, produce excitement, satisfaction and a great sense of fun among participants. This paper uses phenomenological and anthropological methods to look at the embodied relationship between athletes and cheering at cross-country mountain bike events to investigate the experience of sport — understood as both entertainment and skilled performance practice — by both athletes and spectators alike. This work also allows for better understandings of the rehearsal processes of other types of popular entertainment, such as circus or dance, which also have a rigorous physical component in their development and execution but may not have an audience as vocal or articulate during the time of the performance as that on the sporting field.<sup>1</sup> Kath Bicknell is a PhD candidate with the Department of Performance Studies at the University of Sydney. Her research interests include embodied performance, audience-performer relationships and sports phenomenology.*

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*I was racing hard. There was one kilometre to go and the lead I had over second place had evaporated. With two obstacles left to clear, the end of my favourite section drew near, as did my final chance to gain any time.*

*I heard a voice from the crowd: "Suck it up, Kath!" It was teasing, motivating and matter-of-fact. It reminded me I needed to suck up the pain and power ahead. I sucked up*

*the spit dribbling down my chin and felt myself suck in my fears, reel in my ego, stop worrying about what may happen and give the race everything I had left. I was hurting so much from pushing so hard, but the comment somehow made me call on an extra burst of strength and self-belief. I rode the hill faster than I had every other lap, I relished the speed at which the ground passed underneath me and surprised myself with the speed I carried to the top.*

*I passed the finish line and carefully placed my feet upon the ground. I lent over the handlebars, still heaving for air, wobbly from the effort. Eventually, I turned and waited for my opponent to come through. (Field notes, NSW XC Round 1 – Fitzroy Falls, 17 May 2009.)*

The event from which the above account is drawn—a community-level mountain biking event, the opening round of the 2009 New South Wales (NSW) Cross-Country (XC) Series—involved 137 people competing in 14 race categories. A very small number of those riders present would compete at national and international level races that year, but like other riders at the event, they were primarily there to have fun. There were no ticket sales, jazzy infrastructure or a fancy event centre. A record of the event is not something that can be easily found in newspapers, or magazines; even a “Google” search would not reveal much about the racing that took place that day.

Hundreds of riders participate in biking events such as this every weekend across many cycling communities. Many more people, who perhaps identify primarily with playing other sports, enjoy themselves in a similar way. So why, when performance studies theorists look at sport, is it so often considered in relation to spectacle, or training? Is it enough to liken live sporting events to festival or spectacle experiences, or enumerate the sheer numbers of spectators to demonstrate the popularity of sports performance and the entertainment it provides? Does this mean that small, community-level sports experiences are, by comparison, unpopular and fail to entertain? Or do they in fact offer different ways of understanding the appeal of sport, ways that spectacle-scale events, and academic studies of them, might obscure? Locating this study within the paradigms of performance and anthropology allows us to consider responses to these questions.

In this article, I look toward small-scale events in the Australian mountain bike community to investigate what the personal and particular nature of cheering in this genre of performance reveals about embodied elements of entertainment such sporting events arouse. In doing so, I will reveal ways of thinking about the

preparative practices for other types of sporting and skilled performance practice. I will also discuss elements of the processes of spectating, and of racing, that are exciting and motivating and demonstrate why sport at a community, national and international level is seen as a popular form of entertainment by participants on both sides of the track.

I will draw upon a phenomenological anthropological method for this study. The embodied, descriptive process this allows provides discussion of sporting events that can be used alongside theoretical analysis to explain how people in a particular community understand what it is that they do. By examining how phenomena are felt, experienced and responded to by riders it becomes possible to discuss the systems of logic that govern how riders make sense of these experiences. In the context of cheering, this mode of enquiry allows us to consider how cheering is meaningful to both riders and spectators, and what this meaningful process accomplishes in the context of sporting performance. Such a method also assumes that sports participants do not need to understand theoretical constructs that explain or rationalise these systems of logic in order to race well, yell encouragement for their peers, and have a rollicking great time while they do it.

As a mountain biker, I have ridden and raced within the Australian biking community for 11 years. I have developed a level of skills and fitness that have enabled me to compete regularly at an elite level. This experience has given me a deeply embodied understanding of riding and the ways riders talk with each other about these experiences. While I acknowledge that this sustained level of involvement makes it difficult for me to look 'into' this lifeworld from a panoptic, outsider's perspective, it does allow me to communicate theoretically some of the ideas, experiences and lived practices that operate within the sport of mountain bike riding.

In this study, I will use field notes that document my experiences—as both rider and spectator—to invoke and to discuss embodied experiences present at biking events and to describe the ways that mountain bikers make sense of the process of cheering during live performance. Using work by John Sutton alongside phenomenologically-informed description and analysis will allow for further discussion on the use of verbal maxims as part of a deeply embodied approach to skill development and execution.<sup>2</sup> This will reveal that a shared familiarity with complex riding techniques and "insider" terminology used to trigger such techniques mediates racer-spectator experiences, which is vital to comprehend in order to understand the entertainment sport provides for competitors and spectators alike. First, however, I want to locate this study as part of a broader body of work on both sport and cultural performance.

### *Taking a chance*

Performance studies and anthropological approaches to sport commonly investigate sports in relation to large crowds (sport as spectacle)<sup>3</sup> or describe highly embodied accounts of training—often in relation to competition or personal levels of achievement (phenomenologies of sports practice).<sup>4</sup> Despite the innovative ways of thinking about sport and performance yielded by such studies, the emergent picture of sport (and sporting communities) overlooks the role of smaller scale events in shaping the narratives these studies construct. Moreover, due to their sheer size as an event, studies of sport as spectacle have the potential to dwarf or obscure discussions on some elements of the event that have led to their growth as a popular form of entertainment in the first place.

Thinking about sport under the banner of “cultural performance” allows for consideration of sport—as performance and entertainment—irrespective of the size or stature of a specific event. John MacAloon provides a useful definition of cultural performance that allows us to consider some commonalities between different types of performance practice:

All cultural performances proper have something of the routine about them in that they follow, or are believed to follow, some sort of preexisting script. As Singer puts it, cultural performances always incorporate “an organised program of activity.” Whether that program is flexible or fixed, conscious or unconscious, consensual or conflictive, or, as is usually the case, a little of each, there is no performance without pre-formance. Yet, in other respects, performances are anything but routine. By acknowledging responsibility to one another and to the traditions condensed and objectified in the “scripts,” agents and audiences acknowledge a risk that things might not go well. To agree to perform is to agree to take a chance.<sup>5</sup>

MacAloon’s description arouses some interesting ways of thinking about mountain biking. XC races (and indeed other race types in other sporting disciplines) certainly adhere to a pre-determined script or scenario: riders line up with other members of their race category, at a fixed time, at a fixed location. The race begins. Riders ‘clip in’ to their pedals and race around a pre-marked track. They jostle for position ahead of narrow singletracks—trails that are generally wide enough for one rider at a time, and full of obstacles to be negotiated such as creek crossings, tight corners, roots or rocks. They complete a pre-determined number of laps, the number of which is decided in relation to the course length and a recommended race duration

for each race category. The winner is he or she who completes the designated number of laps quickest.

While it may be possible to predict which riders may achieve podium placings, elements of racing, chance and preparation also come into play. Riders must negotiate technically challenging sections of the track without crashing or losing time to their rivals. They need to get their bikes through the event, negotiating any mechanical problems on the course. Tracks often change in relation to weather conditions and rider traffic. Body condition changes in relation to training, nutrition and stress. Sometimes riders have good days, sometimes they have bad days. To line up at the start line is—in MacAloon’s terms—“to agree to take a chance,” to acknowledge the “risk that things might not go well,” and to commit to racing as well as possible whatever happens out on the track. In mountain bike racing, this chance-taking is not only risking poor performance in terms of a result, or how well a performance pleases an audience. There is also an agreement to try to ride difficult sections of track, as fast, capably and efficiently as possible (but hopefully not so fast as to lose control of the bike and head off the trail into a race-ending obstacle).

In higher profile events, technical sections are often better prepared for than in lower profile ones. There is more at stake in the performance, and such sections are often more difficult, to reflect a higher level of international competition.<sup>6</sup> Travelling athletes often arrive at a race location a few days ahead of a big race in order to familiarise themselves with a track.<sup>7</sup> For events which are more of a local level in social standing and assemblage of participants, they are often attended by riders who live nearby and range in ability and fitness from elite athletes, to Weekend Warriors (an affectionate name given to riders who ride less often than elite riders, but enjoy the sport with similar levels of enthusiasm), to first time racers. The times and dates of local level races reflect the spirit of these events as a form of weekend entertainment and are chosen to allow participants to balance racing with work, family or other commitments. Generally speaking, less importance is placed on fine-tuning approaches to specific elements of the racetrack in such circumstances. In this sense, riders are also agreeing to take a chance in relation to this element of performance as well, with many riders seeing technically demanding sections of a track for the first time on their first race lap.

Spectators tend to group at technical sections of the trail. It is entertaining and motivating to see a rider perform well in challenging circumstances, but it can also be entertaining and motivating in a different way to see someone crash. Crowd noise, density and volume at such sections is clear evidence of this fascination with technical challenges as is the encouragement directed from spectators toward riders whether they conquer these challenges or fail. In fact, Australians are described by

international riders as being particularly excited about sport.<sup>8</sup> MacAloon places this excitement within the greater context of the performance event:

The investment of resources in preparation, anticipation, transportation, and admission, the social interests composing the performance's purpose, and the dramatic character of its form all contribute to the excitement already embodied potentially in its contents. "Excitement" here means a particular kind of attention, attention especially aroused, concentrated, and generalised, the attention that flows, so to speak, from attention...Whatever performances do, or are meant to do, they do by creating the conditions for, and by coercing the participants into, paying attention.<sup>9</sup>

Excitement, here, is not just to do with specific moments of performance, but the preparation, orchestration and participation in the performance as a whole; an event where spectators are as fundamental to its success and overall 'feel' as the performers.

Before further discussing the excitement provided by spectating in relation to specific types of attention XC yields, it is necessary to cover some background information about the development and execution of embodied performance techniques that takes place outside of racing. This will allow a clearer understanding of spectators' appreciation of difficult riding techniques—something that is often implicit in the language used while cheering and riders' responses to spectators as a source of motivation.

### ***Triggering better biking***

John Sutton reminds us that "[c]oaches can sometimes successfully realign a broader pattern in a player's technique by reminding them of a simple principle."<sup>10</sup> He uses the example of the phrase "eye on the ball" used in cricket, demonstrating that expert players take their eyes off the ball earlier than less skilled players, and that the phrase in fact realigns a more complex embodied action (in which players absorb information from the movements of the bowler for instance to predict where the ball is going to arrive). A simple cue, which promotes a whole-of-body response, aids in the recreation of a series of actions that had momentarily been lost:

So what seemed like just vague words to the novice has now become very detailed practical talk, a shorthand compendium of 'caretaking practices' for toning and reshaping the grooved routines. [...] Thus a complex bodily pattern or set of possible movements can be compressed into and partly cued by a phrase or memory or ingrained

image, bringing the player back to, rather than away from, the well-learned habits.<sup>11</sup>

Most Australian cyclists do not have an ongoing relationship with a skills coach. Most riders learn skills through riding, meaning they will often look at—and workshop—technical sections of a track together on social rides, and discuss approaches to technical sections in social contexts. Culturally speaking, this develops a naturalisation of ‘practical talk,’ recognition of varying levels of competency and a heightened awareness of the consequences of misguided techniques. This builds relationships between riders where advice on skilful manoeuvres is supportive, valued and trusted. While the potency of insider words may waiver depending on factors such as overuse, unnecessary use or a rider’s unwillingness or inability to convert instruction into movement, I argue language can be used strategically and deliberately to enhance embodied performance and as a trigger for good technique when it is not ‘just happening’ by itself.

### *Looking ahead*

I often use trigger phrases to remind myself of ‘well-learned habits’ when riding if my skills are not at the level where I want them to be. I forget to look very far ahead, so “look ahead” becomes something I think often when riding and wanting to improve my performance. The following writing is from a training session where my focus was investigating this weakness. I have selected it to use here as the riding abilities it revealed in training were no different to what happens when I think the same words while racing, except that when racing I am puffing harder and under more physical stress.

*The biggest difference I noticed was I would steer and use power in accordance with what was coming up five to ten metres away, rather than one metre away. This made my steering and use of power more efficient (lines were smoother, more direct, and took advantage of the curves of the track better). Instead of a short burst to get around a corner, my legs would exhibit a longer, sustained effort to cover the following incline with more ease and a sustained sense of momentum. This taught me several new, efficient lines I hadn’t recognised, and taught me bike-handling skills along these lines (like how to power over a sharp, loose, uphill corner that I didn’t know I was able to ride). I also rode much faster as I was anticipating the future directions of the track better in relation to where I was riding “now.” Again, more flow, and less energy wasted correcting mistakes that are made by being surprised at an approaching corner or bump in the track. (Field notes, training session at Stromlo Forest Park, Canberra. 29 October 2008.)*

In this scenario, “look ahead” became a trigger for the successful performance of learned skills and also helped facilitate the techniques necessary for sections of a track that I was unaware I could ride. It helped to build a feeling of flow and to create a more even feeling of power distribution in relation to obstacles on the track.<sup>12</sup> In mountain biking terms, “The bike was no longer riding me, I was riding the bike.” Using Sutton’s argument to consider the effect of key word triggers on embodied performance, it becomes obvious that if we trust and obey such triggers, and keep them at the forefront of our consciousness, they can be used to overcome bad habits.

The example quoted reveals an interesting relationship between a guiding phrase and an embodied relationship to place. Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who argues that we act into the world with a ‘corporeal intentionality’ (we are mobilised as a coordinated, embodied being by an objective), Edward Casey argues that places have an ‘operative intentionality’; they encourage and respond to us as we move through them in specific, embodied ways.<sup>13</sup> In the training session above, looking ahead shifted the operative intentionality of this track from several, shifting objectives (say, ride around the rock, turn right, watch out for the loose sand, shift forward to keep traction uphill...), to a longer, more sustained objective (as the corner approaches, keep the pedalling smooth and powerful to climb the uphill). A simple phrase therefore enabled a more complex bodily reaction to the track than simply lifting my eyes would perhaps imply.<sup>14</sup>

Knowledgeable spectators often call out well-used maxims to riders during a race. If we consider cheering in response to the training practices described above, we can begin to appreciate how spectators can do more than simply motivate riders; they can enhance the execution of new or familiar techniques as well. This is possible due to the ability of ‘expert’ spectators to anticipate action and intervene with verbal guidance toward the correct technique.

### ***Complex action and anticipation***

Sutton discusses how expert players are better than competent players at *anticipating* action—that is, they are better at assimilating information from the greater context of an event to enable them to predetermine their future course of action or to narrow the possibilities they will draw on for a certain course of action when the moment arises.<sup>15</sup> Linking this back to cricket batting, this is what enables the better batters to draw their attention away from the ball earlier than less experienced batters, and to adjust their focus to where and how they are going to hit it. Whilst embodied action is still an important part of this process, Sutton reveals it must be adaptable in order to meet the variable circumstances of the scenarios we respond to. In doing so, he demonstrates the ability of the expert player to filter the different information available to him or her in a split second, and choose a



responsive—and often successful—course of action. These ideas are complemented by research in the field of neuroscience, such as that by Hubert Dreyfus who suggests experts have a wider range of stimulus-output scenarios in their repertoire of experience, meaning complex decision-making paths are not necessary each time a player faces a challenge they have dealt with previously.<sup>16</sup> I have demonstrated elsewhere how expert audience members are also able to assimilate performance information from complex movement patterns and use this to further develop their own embodied practice.<sup>17</sup> It can therefore be assumed that they are good at anticipating action in similar scenarios as well, something that will become evident in the two case studies that follow.

### ***(Mis)identification of lumps in the dirt***

There are two main reasons riders head to the racetrack to watch: to motivate other riders, or to watch how certain riders perform on specific sections of the track. Obviously, most observers are there to do both, so it is never surprising that the largest groups of spectators are at sections where they can yell motivation and see how individual riders tackle specific obstacles at the same time. Given most spectators at Australian mountain bike events are often riders themselves, they can draw on their own experiential knowledge of the demands of the sport to motivate other riders who are racing. This is clearly demonstrated through a simple observation of cheering. The following example comes from my experience during the 2008 Australian National XC Championships:

*As I was struggling up the new single track climb, some people on the side of the track yelled at me to power over a small lump of dirt up ahead. I clicked my gears down before even looking at what they were talking about. They yelled out again: "Power! Power!" I felt myself push my body weight forward and maintain traction over this section of the course before I had even realised what had happened. Their instruction and motivation had bettered my own performance, and their excitement about this was obvious through the elated cheering which followed. Unfortunately they were no longer at this point when I came through on the following lap, I forgot their words of wisdom, lost traction and had to walk my bike up the remainder of the hill...(Field notes, Australian National XC Mountain Bike Championships, Canberra. 27 January 2008.)*

Considering this experience in relation to Sutton's discussion of the way coaches can realign a specific technique "by reminding them of a simple principle," in the example above it was the audience who played this mediating, observing role. Rather than communicating their excitement with a 'Go! Go! Go!' or, 'You're looking

good! Keep it up!' the words, 'Power! Power!' economically reminded the racer of a coordinated movement pattern needed on the approaching trail. In response, power was generated through a harder gear, a shift in body position and an altered pedalling technique. The crowd had obviously identified a section of the course that was difficult, and had drawn on their own embodied appreciation of riding to generate words that would encourage racers on their approach to the obstacle, thus helping them to race more successfully. Due to their position on the side of the track, watching several riders struggle with a specific section, the audience in this example were able to see what the approaching rider could not.

Like the observer who shouted to "Suck it up!" in the opening text, this audience's personal investment within the sport enabled a quick, successful generation of terminology, which reminded the performer of what must be done to negotiate the course. It is doubtful that, "There's a lump of dirt up ahead that people are having trouble with, you need to change gears, hover above the saddle and pedal harder if you want to make it!" would have been as effective given the necessary timing of the manoeuvre and how long the rider is in earshot. A simple reminder before the obstacle and during the manoeuvre was all that was necessary.

The implicit fact that I trusted their interpretation of the course and did exactly what they told me to do also warrants attention. I was aware that generating extra power in that location would not cause any disadvantage to my race, but I had not identified this particular obstacle in practice laps. In practice laps I was feeling fresher and more energetic. This made it easier to power over something without realising it, compared with tackling the same obstacle during a race when I was powering so hard over everything that the extra effort needed to clear something unexpected was harder to muster. Due to my position in the race (24<sup>th</sup>) I assumed this audience had seen a few people stumble on this section already, which made me more willing to follow their advice. The word "power" in relation to bike riding technique was also a term I knew well, and it created a well-drilled response in me as a result.

It is also interesting to reflect on this occurrence in relation to ways riders develop and workshop skills in a social context. While spectators might talk negatively to each other about a rider's performance, in my 11 years as a rider, I do not recall having heard malicious or harmful comments directed at mountain bikers *while* they race. If audience members do not like a particular rider, they are more likely to remain quiet or cheer with less enthusiasm than attempt to hinder performance. This is perhaps due to an awareness of the potential for dangerous crashes in the sport, and perhaps due to a shared attitude among riders that celebrates an individual's best levels of performance on the day. Unlike sports where cheering reflects fans' positive and negative support of different teams or individuals, my quick response to the spectatorial instruction to 'power' is indicative

of the senses of logic governing a very particular social world; one that lends particularly well to analysis of the positive and supportive relationships between training, racing and cheering.

### ***Taking the B-line***

There have been several instances where, as a spectator, I have encouraged riders about how to approach a section of track and I have witnessed a responsive change in action as a result. This brings attention to the live(d) experience of cheering from the other side of the racetrack; the side that allows the participant to compare and contrast multiple approaches to one obstacle, and adjust motivation expressed through cheering accordingly. Consider the following example from a NSW XC Round (part of the same day-long event used in this paper's opening). Having raced that morning, some friends and I formed a group at the final technical section to watch other age groups compete in their events. We knew some of the riders from previous experiences of riding and racing events over the past few years. While the racers could hear us, we were not in their direct line of sight.

*...The course split into two separate paths here. The 'A-line' went up a steep bridge. If you ran out of speed, there was nowhere to put your feet if you needed to take them off the pedals to remain stable. There was also an easier 'B-line', which carved a route up the side of the slope and met up with the main track at the top of the bridge. After seeing several men fall off the side of the bridge on the A-line, we began yelling at approaching riders to "Take the B-line!!!!" as we didn't want to see more carnage. In response to our suggestion, we watched riders alter their course, and take the safer route up the small pinch.*

*Due to the number of crashes that occurred where the A-line bridge met the loose dirt at the top, the wood became increasingly covered in loose soil, which added to the difficulty of maintaining traction. While one group of people yelled at approaching riders to take the B-line, another observer ran up to the bridge and wiped off the loose dirt to make it safer for those who rode it.*

*Duncan Miller approached at a slower speed than most of the riders who had successfully ridden the A-line, but one of the spectators knew that Duncan was a strong, skilful rider who wouldn't attempt the bridge unless he had assessed it to be within his capabilities. One spectator went to yell out to do the B-line, but was stopped by the other spectator who said "No, it's Duncan, he'll get up there with his calf strength"—which he did without a hitch. We cheered loudly, as though he was in the lead. (Field notes, NSW XC Round 1 – Fitzroy Falls, 17 May 2009.)*

Given the casual nature of this sporting event, most participants turned up that day or the afternoon before to see the racetrack for the first time. In fact for most racers the first time they saw the track was during the first lap of their race. While many riders still raced hard, their less stringent approach to some competitive elements of the event (and event preparation) reflects a more relaxed, friendly attitude that was prevalent on this day as well. Given this, the level to which the athletes embodied the technical aspects of the course is meagre by comparison with the methodical way mountain bikers prepare for World Cup races over days or sometimes weeks and months before the event.

Spectators could identify the lack of familiarity riders had with the race track alongside the social aspect of the competition. They intervened more as one might help a friend looking at such a section for the first time on a social ride (while respecting that the riders would continue to race through the section, not get off their bikes and take a longer look). The words “Take the B-line” cued an immediate change in trajectory and skilful action to ride the windy, sandy B-line instead of the steep bridge. It was used to guide a reserve technique rather than encourage the refinement of a more complex one. As spectators, we were responding to cues from the *movement* of riders as they approached the trail—speed, body position, tension—and using these to anticipate action about to happen. The yelling (and course altering) was considered as neither haphazard nor indiscriminatory and represents an interesting component of the rider-spectator relationship that is quite pronounced at this recreational level. It is possible there were other riders in this race with Miller’s ability we misidentified. Whether or not this is the case, watching the difference in the body positions of the riders whom we advised to take the B-line demonstrated that our instruction had altered their intended trajectory and indicated their willingness to ride what their audience considered a better route.

While embodied knowledge assisted spectators in their anticipation of the approaching riders’ actions, this is not to say that non-riders would be unable to appreciate the nuances of skilled performance as ‘expert’ spectators. Knowledge of skilled performance can also be developed through sustained observation, other people’s accounts of performance process and discussion. While this certainly develops some very detailed ways of knowing about performance, Justin Spinney argues an embodied approach provides a heightened sense of the ‘feel’ and ‘rhythm’ such experiences generate.<sup>18</sup> I argue that having ridden the course previously gave some spectators an increased awareness of the characteristics of the track and the skills and timing needed to ride it. Such characteristics in this scenario included the steep rake of the A-line, the difficult traction provided by the dirt on the A-line bridge, the slow speed at which the rider exits the preceding corner and the short amount of time the rider has to make a decision about line choice. The

misidentification of the difficulty of the A-line by many riders who had not ridden it before further indicates it was indeed harder to ride than it (visually) appeared.

It is interesting to consider the B-line scenario in relation to ideas about violence as entertainment in sport. While crash photos and video footage are popularly consumed in relation to professional sports or high-profile events, in the scenario above, the potential for crashes and violence caused intervention. It was not enjoyable seeing other riders get hurt. Unlike Lucy Nevitt's discussion of blood in professional wrestling as a reminder of the human side to super-human-like characters, these athletes were not seen as super-human at all.<sup>19</sup> While MacAloon describes notions of festival and spectacle as a governing logic of events happening under a the Olympic banner, it appears that this sporting event—by no means Olympic in nature at all—was governed by a different sense of fun and enjoyment, one that recognised there was nothing to be gained from seeing people get hurt in pursuit of the sporting goals of the day.<sup>20</sup> While riders had competitive goals, both riders and spectators recognised that due to the spread-out density of the field, small amounts of time lost by taking the B-line would not affect riders' competitive aims, but would support the social goals of the day. In this way we can see how both racers and spectators recognise and react according to what MacAloon described as "the social interests composing the performance's purpose." The critical distance of the spectators, the lack of a communication boundary between those trackside and those racing, and the shared familiarity with the demands of the sport and goals of the day was utilised by riders and spectators alike for the ultimate enjoyment and smooth running of the race.

### *The live(d) experience of cheering*

As mountain bike events grow in size and scale, the relationship between riders and races changes. Crowds become denser, noise becomes louder and more constant, and utterances less specific. It is harder to gauge the experience of cheering beyond the greater atmosphere of the event. Bike events with high levels of prestige and larger crowds of spectators also assume a different level of skill, fitness, preparation and familiarity with the track held by racers. Words used in cheering tend to become more motivational in nature as the main goal is for riders to push through pain and fatigue to reach the finish line in the best possible time. In such circumstances, the ways of thinking about trail obstacles discussed in this paper tend to disappear from ethnographic observation at the event. They would be more commonly heard while observing riders practicing on the course before the race and are sometimes thought about by riders while racing as a form of self-talk. As such, they more closely resemble the example of looking ahead I discussed at the beginning of my analysis.

The relations between preparative processes and ways of watching and speaking about performance practice in mountain biking do not differ as much as expected from other types of skilled performance practice. Such practices include those of other sports where the correlation between words and action-responses can be easily observed, and those of artistic disciplines such as dance, circus or cheerleading where different audience-performer relationships inhibit such observation. Findings in this article can also be used to assist analysis of rehearsal or teaching techniques in disciplines where complex moves may be labelled, taught, directed or developed using words or metaphors that encourage a more complex whole-of-body movement than the simple meanings of the words imply. In dance, this might include expressions such as 'drop your weight,' 'own the movement,' 'feel the floor' or 'soften the ankles'; modes of communication which are sometimes used during movement, but are also used to talk about movement after a sequence has finished. Considering the embodied effect of short-hand 'insider' terminology through mountain biking therefore offers insightful ways of understanding rehearsal and development processes in a range of professional, amateur and leisure activities.

With regard to the popularity of widespread community participation in sport, I have suggested that spectators can have a profound impact on a competitor's performance and decision-making processes during live events. Alongside the obvious motivation and thrill athletes experience due to a vocal crowd, the case studies I have detailed demonstrate that knowledgeable spectators can influence the outcome and enjoyment of a race in a very positive way, making them co-participants in the creation of the performance event. Their investment in the sport gives rise to a certain emotional involvement in the event, but their embodied expertise gives rise to an ability to distance themselves from the drama of the race. Linking this back to MacAloon's description of cultural performance, spectators recognise the "script" for the day's event, acknowledge the risk that things might not go well and, by accepting their responsibility to competitors on the field and to the greater context of the event itself, can play their own part to assist or motivate racers to take their chances and perform as well as they can on the day. Not only is it exciting as a spectator to experience this level of interaction within the race, it can be quite thrilling to feel that cheering has helped improve the experience of the athletes being cheered. The help this provides to individuals in their own competition can, in turn, influence the encouragement bestowed upon other competitors in future events or in other social circumstances. This ongoing process continues to foster an embodied appreciation of the sport for both athletes and spectators whilst simultaneously strengthening the emotional bonds between all participants within a sporting community. This clearly increases the shared enjoyment, enthusiasm for the racing experience and a sense of the activity as entertainment beyond spectacle, aesthetics and results. It is no wonder participants of all levels and abilities keep coming back for more.

<sup>1</sup> This paper extends theories of embodiment and spectatorship discussed in Kath Bicknell, "Feeling Them Ride: Corporeal exchange in cross-country mountain bike racing," *About Performance*, 10 (2010): 81-91. The earlier essay argued against a simple distinction between spectating and performance at live events, demonstrating that due to an embodied appreciation of the sport, knowledgeable spectators were able to observe elements of skilled performance (demonstrated by racers) they could then use to better their own riding abilities.

<sup>2</sup> John Sutton, "Batting, Habit and Memory: The Embodied Mind and the Nature of Skill," *Sport in Society*, 10:5 (2007):763-786.

<sup>3</sup> See John MacAloon, "Olympic Games and the Theory of Spectacle in Modern Societies," in *Rite, Drama, Ritual, Spectacle*, ed. John J. MacAloon, (Pennsylvania, Institute for the Study of Human Issues, Inc. 1984), 241-280; Lucy Nevitt, "Popular Entertainments and the Spectacle of Bleeding," in *Popular Entertainment Studies* 1:2, (2010): 78-92, accessed 24 January 2011, last updated 28 October 2010, <https://novaojs.newcastle.edu.au/ojs/index.php/pes/issue/archive>.

<sup>4</sup> See Greg Downey, "Coaches as Phenomenologists: Para-Ethnographic Work in Sports," in *Being There: After — Proceedings of the 2006 Conference of the Australasian Association for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies*, ed. Ian Maxwell, (2008), accessed 24 January 2011, last updated 24 January 2011, <http://hdl.handle.net/2123/2490>; Justin Spinney, "A place of sense: a kinaesthetic ethnography of cyclists on Mont Ventoux," in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 24 (2006):709-732; Loïc J. D. Waquant, "Pugs at Work: Bodily Capital and Bodily Labour Among Professional Boxers," in *Body & Society*, 1:1 (1995):65-93.

<sup>5</sup> John MacAloon, "Introduction: Cultural Performances, Culture Theory," in MacAloon, *Rite, Drama, Ritual, Spectacle*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that some international level tracks are used in local events as well.

<sup>7</sup> This is often discussed by Australian world cup level riders such as Andrew Blair, *Blair's Racing Blog*, accessed 24 January 2011, last updated 13 January 2011, <http://www.andysracingblog.blogspot.com/>; Gracie Elvin, *Gracie Elvin*, accessed 24 January 2011, last updated 20 September 2010, <http://gracieelvin.blogspot.com/>; and Paul Van Der Ploeg, *Paul van der Ploeg: Travelling around Australia and the World!*, accessed 24 January 2011, last updated 24 September 2010, <http://paulvanracingfeltbikes.blogspot.com/>.

<sup>8</sup> Kath Bicknell, "Rebecca Rusch: the queen of pain," in *Enduro*, Spring (2010): 33-36.

<sup>9</sup> MacAloon, *Rite, Drama, Ritual, Spectacle*, 9-10.

<sup>10</sup> Sutton, "Batting, Habit and Memory," 773.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 773-4.

<sup>12</sup> I use the term 'flow' here in both the psychological use of the word which indicates an optimal state of experience, and as mountain bikers use the word to describe a feeling of 'flowing' through the trails.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Casey, "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena," in *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith Basso (New Mexico, School of American Research Press 1996), 13-52.

<sup>14</sup> Other common linguistic short cuts used by riders to guide performance include: 'off the brakes' (to remind the rider not to slow down), 'power' (when additional power is required), 'smash it down the fire road' (a reminder that the rider can make up time on untechnical sections of the course when the temptation is to rest), 'pedal!' (another reminder for making up time which is helpful in flowy sections of trail when it the rider does not need to pedal to flow through it), 'off the back' (a reminder to get body weight behind the saddle on steep sections of a track), and 'relax your arms' (as upper body tension inhibits good bike handling skills).

<sup>15</sup> Sutton, "Batting, Habit and Memory," 763-786.

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<sup>16</sup> Hubert Dreyfus, "The Current Relevance of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Embodiment," in *The Electronic Journal of Analytic Philosophy*, 4: Spring (1996), accessed 24 January 2011, [http://opac.library.usyd.edu.au/search~S2?fElectronic+Journal+Analytic+Philosophy/felectronic+journal+analytic+philosophy/-](http://opac.library.usyd.edu.au/search~S2?fElectronic+Journal+Analytic+Philosophy/felectronic+journal+analytic+philosophy/-3,0,0,B/1856~b2186144&FF=felectronic+journal+of+analytic+philosophy&1,1,,1,0/indexsort=-)

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<sup>17</sup> See Bicknell, "Feeling Them Ride," which also investigates phenomenological relations between watching, thinking and doing, from the perspective of a knowledgeable spectator.

<sup>18</sup> Justin Spinney, "A place of sense: a kinaesthetic ethnography of cyclists on Mont Ventoux," in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 24 (2006):709-732.

<sup>19</sup> Nevitt, "Spectacle of Bleeding," 78-92.

<sup>20</sup> MacAloon, *Rite, Drama, Ritual, Spectacle*, 241-280.