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Competing geographies of recreational running: The case of the “jogging wave” in Sweden in the late 1970s

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ABSTRACT

Recreational running encompasses more than one type of exercise. Different running practices offer different, even opposing, conceptualisations of the role of the environment. As illustrated in this paper, historical studies can uncover and explain these variations. By studying the clash between two practices in Sweden in the 1970s – the newly translated idea of North American jogging and an already established tradition of fitness running – this paper qualifies the difference between them and illustrates how they assembled competing geographies. The paper argues that current planning would benefit from acknowledging this multiplicity because different forms of running offer complementary strategies for inclusivity.

1. Introduction

This paper argues that the interplay between the runner and the environment varied historically, for instance with different ideas on the inclusivity of the exercise. Thus, by comparing different practices of recreational running, we can obtain wider knowledge of its potential as an inclusive practice. In turn, this knowledge can be fruitful in policy making around recreational running when it is seen as a sport for all.

In order to illustrate this, the paper studies the competition between two forms of recreational running. As part of the welfare society, fitness running was introduced in Sweden in the late 1950s, attracting considerable attention in Sweden and elsewhere in Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, for instance within the international Trim campaign (see Dieckert (1973) and Schwedischer Sportbund (1975) on Trim Parks for fitness running). Yet in 1979, a sudden and rapid marketing of North American jogging turned a previously taken-for-granted practice of fitness running into a matter of concern: it provoked a debate in which mundane matters, practices and experiences of running surfaced. Within just a couple of years, the new practice had been naturalised, turned into a matter-of-fact, whose intricate dependence on a heterogeneous network of particular places, bodily ideals, running techniques *etc.* would be difficult to trace through the study of documents alone. An examination of a critique of, and hesitations within, the marketing of jogging in 1979, reveals the differences in the practice of fitness exercise, but also in societal, bodily and landscape ideals.

This study was inspired by relational geography and recent research on policy mobilities, which demonstrate that ideas and practices are

not simply transferred, but are interpreted and negotiated, not only due to language and cultural differences, but also due to the different landscapes, histories, institutional arrangements and customs (McCann and Ward, 2011; Qviström, 2013; Wood, 2016). In line with relational geography (*e.g.* Murdoch, 2006, Farías and Bender 2010), this research emphasises the situatedness of practices and policies, the work involved in “exporting” the habit or the idea, and the fact that the ideas are more than abstract conceptualisations, but instead are constituted of heterogeneous assemblages of texts, techniques, products and practices. Hence, we are likely to find local variations of “American” jogging coloured by local practices and national policies, for instance. As this paper focuses on the importance of place and differences in the practice (and not on the travel of policies as such), this paper offers an on-site study of the mobility of a practice: the translation of North American jogging to Sweden and the challenges it encountered from an already established notion of fitness running. This explains why the North American context and the malleability of jogging, which McKenzie (2013) notes in her research, is not discussed: the focus here is on the role of the imported version of jogging.

While research on recreational running is a rapidly expanding field within geography and related disciplines (see Cook *et al.* (2015) for an overview), it focuses primarily on running as a sport and has been dominated by (auto)ethnographic accounts (*e.g.* Hockey, 2013, Bajić, 2014, Ronkainen *et al.*, 2014, Edensor and Lorimer, 2015, Barnfield, 2016; see Latham and Hitchings (in this issue) for an elaboration of sport-centred research), with only a few studies on the history of recreational running that offer detailed notions of the practice as such and its geography (*e.g.* Plymire, 2004, McKenzie, 2013, Qviström,

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2013, Latham, 2015). Comprehensive studies of jogging and the history of running have so far downplayed its European history, assuming its development was dependent on the import of jogging (e.g. Gotaas 2009, Scheerder et al., 2015). There is therefore a need for the European history of fitness running to be written: this paper contributes to this by exploring its history in Sweden.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first offers an overview of the initial campaigns for fitness running in Sweden. It then uses the introduction of jogging to reveal its specific features, and finally it discusses the implications of this for future policies and planning.

1.1. Methods and materials

The study was initiated by undertaking a survey of articles in the journals of key organisations involved in recreational running and articles in daily newspapers for the period 1978–1982. The study covered primarily *Korp Motion* (the journal of the Swedish inter-company athletics organisation, Korpen), *Jogging* (presented below), *På fritid* (“On Leisure Time”, published by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities), *I alla väder* (the journal of the Swedish Ski and Outdoor Association), and catalogued articles on the themes of “running” and “exercise” in *Dagens Nyheter* (Sweden’s largest newspaper) and *Expressen* (the country’s second largest evening paper). Two complementary journals were chosen for more detailed examinations: the enthusiastic marketing of jogging (and city marathons) in *Jogging* (1979–1980) and more hesitant articles on the same theme in *Korp Motion* (1979–1980).

Rather than examining the power relations or the nature of the discourse as such, this study places an emphasis on the practices and the geography they assemble. It offers a close reading of geographical utterances in order to capture the complex relations between practice and environment that characterise the two forms of exercise. Articles that explicitly compare the Swedish tradition of fitness running with (North American) jogging or discuss the introduction of jogging, were selected for the study. The focus was on statements concerning the geography and practice of running, while other aspects (e.g. clothes and running equipment) were not included.

2. Fitness running and the welfare state

Fitness running was introduced in Sweden in the late 1950s in order to combat escalating health problems and costs related to welfare diseases. The initiative came from the Swedish Ski and Outdoor Association (SSOA, a grass roots organisation for outdoor leisure) in collaboration with medical doctors in Gävle and leading sport physiologists, in particular Per-Olof Åstrand at GCI, Stockholm University (Qviström, 2013). SSOA argued not only for fitness running as such, but that there was also a need for specific trails for running to be established. While their campaign soon gained economic support from insurance companies, the call for recreational facilities also matched emerging municipal leisure planning. In the 1960s, with rapid urbanisation, expanding infrastructures for social welfare and the introduction of a five-day week, leisure planning was one of the most rapidly expanding sectors within municipalities, involving them spending impressive sums on public baths, ice-hockey arenas, football fields etc. (Sundström, 1975). Fitness running was treated as any other leisure activity, i.e. as an exercise requiring its own places and infrastructure, in this case coordinated with the need for an infrastructure for skiing. In the interests of runners, forests and parks were equipped with illuminated bark running trails, parking spaces and a building with lockers, showers etc. (Grauers and Sundbom, 1972; Buxbaum and O’Connor, 1977; Qviström, 2013; Qviström, 2016; see also Schwedischer Sportbund, 1975). The establishment of these facilities attracted financial support from the Environment Protection Agency, which had national responsibility for leisure planning (Naturvårdsverk, 1971), but also from local municipalities and their



Fig. 1. The stamp “Fitness running in Sundborn” (Motionslöpning i Sundborn) from the “Fitness exercise” (Motionsidrott) series of 1977. The other four stamps in the series depict swimming, long-distance skating, cycling and badminton. The stamp captures an institutionalised practice of running in the forest as a family. The T-shirt to the right reveals the “keep-in-shape” logo of SSOA’s campaign for fitness exercise. © PostNord Frimärken.

umbrella organisation (The Swedish Association of Local Authorities) who offered annual courses on how to design and manage the trails and other recreational facilities. Buxbaum and O’Connor (1977) describe the “Swedish Training Track” as the epitome of the welfare society’s interventions to combat welfare diseases and encourage recreation. They praise not only the “enjoyable esthetic experience” and the soft running surface, but also describe its wider social and geographical context:

“In most communities at least one of the complex of paths is illuminated for night-time use, and they are maintained in winter for cross-country skiing. A system of “Trim Centres” – community centres for exercise information, training, changing clothes, sauna and obtaining (at minimal cost – about \$10 or \$15) a yearly modified stress test – has grown up to support the Fitness Trail network. These centres, located in the woods and parks, act as a sort of social and community meeting place for people wishing to improve or maintain their level of fitness. There is a concerted campaign on the part of several non-governmental agencies as well as the state to promote the use of these and other similar facilities.” (Buxbaum and O’Connor, 1977) (Fig. 1).

Fitness running was also set in the specific context of an exercise programme, which recommended a similar kind of diluted version of interval training as described by Latham (2015), but in combination with breaks for working out in outdoor gyms, and with recommendations for individual fitness tests (on a cycle ergometer) at the recreation centre, and/or health controls performed by a medical doctor (Qviström, 2013). Courses on how to run, use the gym, behave in the forest and use the cycle ergometer were also offered by SSOA and local municipalities. These trails and the practice of running were thus deeply embedded in the idea of building a welfare society.

In 1987 there were 1,950 illuminated running trails in Sweden (Svenska kommunförbundet, 1989). The illuminated tracks were usually the shortest of at least two or three trails, so the total number of trails was in fact much higher (cf. the guidelines in Statens naturvårdsverk, 1978). In comparison, the most practised sport, football, was supported by almost 7000 football fields of various standards, whereas most sports that required specialised arenas had fewer facilities than for fitness running (e.g. there were fewer than 700 badminton courts). Another illustration of the prevalence of running trails is that the greater Stockholm area had at least 100 facilities in 1978, some of them only consisting of a few prepared trails of various distances and a parking space, but most had changing rooms, at least one illuminated track, a sauna and sometimes a café. Following the national guidelines, all of them were situated in the forest (Falk and Löfberg, 1978). By locating running in the forest, this leisure planning followed a long tradition of hiking, skiing and orienteering in forests (Qviström, 2016). Therefore when the American idea of jogging was

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