

Embodied Thought of the Month: March 2016

'Dirty Sport': Experiencing my first OCR.

Amy Clark

'When I say 'nuts' you say challenge! Nuts ... CHALLENGE! Nuts CHALLENGE!!' I'm double checking all my neoprene gear is secured and covering my cold, naked flesh. I'm adjusting my gloves to make sure they cover my bony wrists. Head warmer on correctly? Check! Laces tightly secured? Check! *(Oh god I hope I'm not all the gear with no idea!)* I had been to training day the previous year – but this was nothing like I had ever done before! Looking around and making eye contact with people, looks of anticipation were frequently shared. I had been volunteering throughout the morning and had heard that many had had to stop the course as they had come down with hypothermia, we could also hear the hail and snow bouncing off the tent roof throughout the morning. My cousin, a frequent obstacle course race (OCR) goer, mentioned she was worried this may be the first one she doesn't complete ... *(shit I hope I'm going to get through this ok, what the fuck am I doing here?!)*

'WE ARE ALL HERE TODAY TO HAVE FUN , shouts the announcer, ARE YOU READY TO COUNT DOWN WITH ME! 5 ... 4 ... 3 ... 2 1 GO GO GOOO!!!'

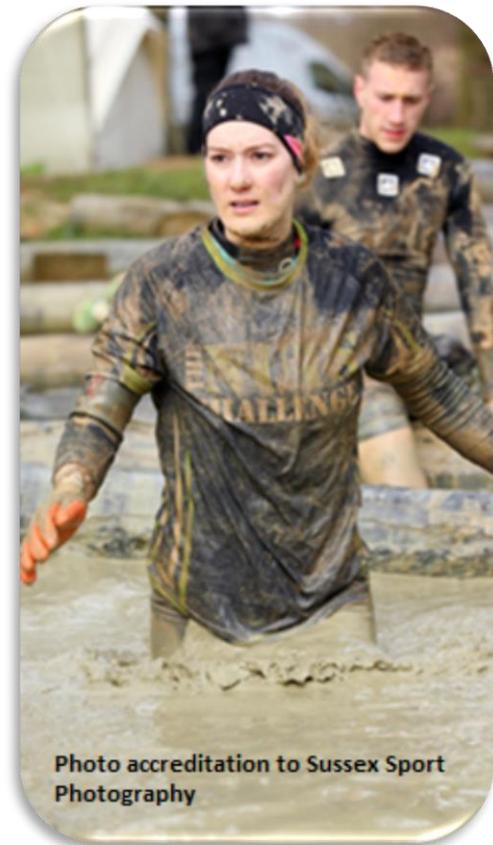
There's no turning back now. I cross the starting line and begin my 7km OCR with over one hundred obstacles. This is my first time doing a race like this. It's cold, wet and muddy and there's no way my body is going to survive this without a few bruises and cuts. Luckily I'm not running on my own, my cousin is with me and her friend is also with us. He has competed in many events before too so I feel that I'm in safe hands! I also reassure myself that I am very active and in the in the build up to the race, I've done a few spin classes, had some cake and enjoyed my yoga sessions. However, there are doubts about how my body cope with this one!

After a brisk but not so unpleasant muddy run along a straw field, my body is pulsating. I can feel the warm movement of my blood engorging through my head and chest. A few slippery obstacles later, we have to do a little cross along a muddy and freezing river and as I enter the water I take a deep breath in. The shock of the swirly muddy water filling my trail trainers isn't as harsh as I initially expected. The water comes up to my waist *('ok, this one is good, I can do this')* and I carry on through the river until I accidentally trip and fall into the icy liquid *('ahh shit! Shit! I knew I was going to stack it in this bloody freezing water 10 minutes in!')* I can see the Marshall is chuckling to himself as I drag my body out of the river. Letting out an agonising breath of air, I continue running towards

the next obstacle (*'shitttt I can't believe I did that!'*) relieved that I was saved just in time so my head wasn't submerged. This is all much to my cousin and her friend's amusement, and as they chuckle, they tell me to keep on moving and to try and keep my body warm. I'm annoyed, I continue on whilst swearing to myself, shaking off the cold muddy water in the process (*'I'm bloody glad I've got neoprene on'*). I remember reading about intense embodiment¹, although in that case it was about experiences of overwhelming heat whilst running. However, the intensity of the coldness flooding my body in this situation can be considered as a similar 'intense embodied experience', but contrasted in much colder conditions.

Throughout the 7km course, we drag ourselves through muddy lakes, climb up hills with sand bags and tyres, slide down hills, blaze through tunnels and launch ourselves over wooden obstacles. The three of us help each other over obstacles and encourage each other the whole way – on many occasions the mud is so thick and gummy that it becomes ankle deep. *'How the hell are guys running in this!!'* another woman cries out! *'Expensive shoes'* my cousin shouts, as we continue to watch our step as we see more victims slip and slide in the mud. All the while, my thighs are burning and my breathing is heavy.

'WE ARE AT 5k!' my cousin shouts. *Come on we can do this!* She had messaged me the day before and had said that any time under two hours for this particular race was seen as pretty good within the OCR world. I replied 'game on' and even though this was my first OCR, my competitive side had emerged and I wanted to do this in the 2 hours. The last 1k was the hardest part as we had to run across wobbly platforms over a lake, cross another lake over numerous dinghies. Pulling my dead weight of a body across while letting out signs of pain at every movement, I could see my cousin one dingy ahead of me and my friend on the other side of the dingy trail, ploughing his way through. The thought of falling off into the 3 degree lake was excruciating and even though I was tiring, I remained focused. Luckily my friend helped me out of the last dingy. Grabbing his hand, absolutely shattered, I thanked him and we continued onto the last part of the race.



'COME ON CLARK, THE FINISH LINE IS JUST THERE!!'

We had two more obstacles to cross. These consisted of bales of hay and straw and metal ladders that had been soaked by the previous runners which meant that there was hardly anything to grab onto. Helping each other over, my legs throbbing in pain, we finally ran towards the finish line. *'Come on, running finish Clark!'* my cousin slaps me on the back and the three of us race to the finish line. There we are congratulated and welcomed by more Marshalls. A hard green medal is placed around my neck, I am thrilled and let out a huge sigh of relief. A Marshall who I had been chatting to at the beginning of the race notices me, *'AH WELL DONE! How was it?! Amazing! Well done!'* I nod back, barely being able to breathe a response. *I think we did it in under two hours!'* I add, swiftly grabbing a hot black current drink with my mud packed gloves. The Marshalls clapped and congratulated us again and I realise that I am starting to shake and feel the cold even though adrenaline fills my veins. At that stage I was buzzing and felt like I was filled with electricity. I sip the hot drink, nearly missing my mouth because of my shaking, and the feeling of the hot water passing through my chest is welcoming with its warmth. We retreat to the changing room tents.

When we finally enter into the female changing rooms, I am aware of feeling less inhibited in the way that I usually do at my gym². My priority was to get out of my cold wet clothes, but the changing area was distinctly different in that although the tent was heated the floor was covered with mud (*where's the clean space?!).*

The tent was filled with shaking bodies, teeth chatters and groans. I looked around, trying to find a place to drop my stuff on the floor, cringing when I had to put my clean bag on the muddy surface. We started to undress, layer by layer, puffing and groaning whilst ripping the soaking wet neoprene and other polyester layers off our skin. I realised at the time that I was near the opening of the tent. It wasn't private here, anyone could see in. I had joked around before on the journey to the OCR about my boobs popping out at some point, but I realised that after the race, I was too fatigued, too drained and too cold to even care if someone saw part of my naked body.

Standing in only my knickers, with only a t-shirt and no bra on underneath, I felt no shame³. Women were topless, half-naked, fully naked although it seemed like the atmosphere after finishing the gruelling race made everyone share the same spirit and intimacy. It was an acceptable environment to display the body after the hard grafting of pursuing the race.

Women were undressing accompanied by grimaces. I tried to preserve some of my modesty while my cousin held a towel around my lower half and managed to change into fresh clothing. At that stage I really didn't care who saw my naked body, even those who could see inside from the

entrance. I ended up saying to my cousin that I didn't care if anyone saw me in my knickers, I just needed to get changed and warm. During my glances around the tent, I caught eye contact with a few fellow 'nutters'. We didn't have to say anything as our shared pain and exhilaration was understood in that moment of non-verbal communication.

To my surprise, out of the 668 people that managed to finish the race (roughly 3000 people had initially started), I finished the race in 1:46:42, came 2nd in my age category, and was 20th out of 323 women, and 91st out of the 668 overall. Not bad for a first timer! I had initially doubted my ability, and found my final placing an unexpected surprise.

During the journey home, the three of us chatted about the race and remembered how we had been initially worried about the weather and were thankful that wearing the right gear had helped immensely with our performance (*'I definitely wasn't all the gear no idea- yes!'*). Returning to the sanctuary of my clean house, I headed straight to the shower and relished every second under the hot water, letting out satisfying moans like the woman in the shampoo add on TV. Every bruise and cut on my arms and legs became prominent, as I washed my sore legs the mud that covered them dispersed into the water down the plug hole. I smiled to myself as I thought about the past day's events. I sent a message to my cousin the following day with a picture of my bruised legs – a symbol of my battle scars. Feeling on a natural high for days after, I'm now already considering my next one. In the summer this time - although I still must be nuts!

1. Allen-Collinson, J., and Owton, H. (2014) Intense Embodiment: senses of heat in women's running and boxing, *Body and Society*, p, 1-24.
2. Sassatelli suggests that certain body practices, such as undressing and direct body care, are usually powerful signs of a private situation, and are exclusively and rigidly confined to the changing rooms - Sassatelli, R. (1999) 'Fitness Gyms and the Local Organisation of Experience', *Sociological Research Online*, 4(3), p. 1-21.
3. Dolezal describes how shame is an individual and necessary body experience, resulting from intersubjective relations, and is always contained in a nexus of political and socio-cultural norms. It also reveals our most personal parts - our hopes and aspirations - Dolezal, L. (2015) *The Body and Shame: Phenomenology, Feminism, and the Socially Shaped Body*. Lexington Books.

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