

# Negotiating Discipline: A Foucauldian Analysis of Narrative Strategies in High-Performance Sports

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## Abstract

This paper explores the narratives that shape the identity and well-being of high-performance athletes. It examines the desirability of alternative narratives (the growth narrative, the relational narrative, and the restitution narrative) over the performance narrative by situating existing narrative research in sports psychology within Foucault's framework of disciplinary power. First, the analysis argues that while the performance narrative directly responds to the power relations of high-performance sports, it is problematic because it risks producing overly compliant docile bodies. Then, the paper considers how three alternative narratives utilize the enabling potential of disciplinary power to help athletes reorient themselves and enhance agency. In doing so, this paper aims to understand and clarify how athletes strategically employ narratives to negotiate the self within a high-pressure athletic context.

*Keywords:* narratives, sports, high-performance athletes, disciplinary power, docile bodies

## **Introduction**

Narrative is a central means through which meaning is ascribed to human experience (Polkinghorne, 1988). Narratives are important because they help create and sustain identity and a sense of self (McAdams, 1993). In the context of competitive athletics, narrative plays a crucial role in shaping athletes' resilience toward the many high-stress situations they are expected to overcome in pursuit of optimal performance and success.

Narrative research has been an important field within sports psychology. One early and influential contribution to this field was the identification of the performance narrative (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas & Carless, 2006). Within this narrative, competitiveness is storied as natural, and winning is prioritized to the extent that discipline, sacrifice, and pain are accepted in the pursuit of glory (Carless & Douglas, 2009).

After the 2000s, sports scholars increasingly shifted from a singular focus on enhancing athletic performance to a more comprehensive look at athletes' mental health and identity development (Stambulova et al., 2020). Narrative inquiry studies subsequently proposed and examined athlete narratives beyond the performance narrative, including the growth narrative, the relational narrative, and the restitution narrative, which this paper will later define and expand on.

Research has shown that the nature of an athlete's narrative can either support or undermine their performance and well-being (Stambulova et al., 2020). Empirical studies point out that the performance narrative has many negative consequences, such as an increased risk of depression, anxiety, or a weakened sense of self (Lally, 2007; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). In

contrast, athletes who identify purposes beyond athletic performance exhibit higher levels of overall well-being and resilience (Houltberg et al., 2018).

To analyze the desirability of alternative narratives over the performance narrative and to better understand how athletes negotiate the self within a high-pressure context, this paper situates narrative studies within a Foucauldian analysis of high-performance sports. A Foucauldian theoretical framework was first applied to competitive athletics by Shogan (1999). In her book *The Making of High-Performance Athletes*, she outlines how disciplinary power operates in high-performance sports through various disciplinary techniques that control time, space, and activity. Following Shogan's framework, later studies have used disciplinary power to analyze retired athletes' reorientation to exercise and the deployment of fun in varsity coaching contexts (Jones et al., 2022; Avner et al., 2017).

The present discussion extends the Foucauldian analysis of competitive athletics to the narrative discourse of high-performance athletes. Drawing on Michel Foucault (1977) and Shogan (1999), the "High Performance Athletes" section of this paper will demonstrate how athletes become disciplined docile bodies and how the competitive nature of athletics maintains this docility. Then, the "Performance Narrative" section analyzes how the performance narrative is a logical, straightforward response to the power relations in high-performance sports. It also critiques that the performance narrative often results in negative consequences by fostering "overly-compliant" docile bodies.

Foucault's account of disciplinary power also provides a useful framework for understanding the ways alternative narratives support athletes as they negotiate their identities amid intense pressure and rigorous training norms. Foucault implied the dual effects of

disciplinary power: while it restricts and homogenizes bodies, it also holds the potential to enable and thus individualize. Following this logic, the “Alternative Narratives” section examines how narrative constructions allow athletes to develop the appearance of individualization. Through ascribing personal value to their progress and achievements, athletes experience a sense of self-enhancement and agency, even as they remain inevitably constrained by normative expectations. This section presents three alternative narratives identified in sports psychology research—the growth narrative, the relational narrative, and the restitution narrative—and analyzes the enabling potential of each.

The paper offers a framework for better understanding athletes’ mentalities. The analysis aims to clarify how athletes perceive and narrate themselves and help them navigate the intense pressure to succeed. The new understanding could also benefit coaches, health professionals, educators, and parents in developing improved systems that promote athlete well-being and performance.

### ***High-Performance Athletes***

In his seminal work *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) argues that normalization is an ongoing process of constructing and enforcing ideal behavioral norms through a distinct form of power—disciplinary power. This power operates by shaping and influencing individuals to conform their behavior to what is deemed normal. Disciplinary power operates through systems of surveillance and regulation that increase the efficiency and utility of the body, but these techniques of control are not imposed by a single authority. Rather, they are embedded within broader systems of power (Foucault, 1977). Through “a policy of coercions that act upon the

body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behavior” (p.138), disciplinary power produces docile bodies. Foucault calls a “docile body” one whose discourses and actions are controlled and directed by power relations. Docility is the result of disciplinary mechanisms that regulate behavior, rendering individuals compliant and efficient within social structures (Foucault, 1977).

However, while Foucault uses the term “docile bodies” to describe individuals shaped by disciplinary power, he emphasizes that docility is not synonymous with passivity. The techniques of control are not wholly limiting because they produce human bodies with skills and abilities (Shogan, 1999). On the one hand, disciplinary practices subject the body to meticulous scrutiny and manipulation. On the other hand, these practices increase the individual’s efficiency within their institutional context, enabling them to execute precise and specialized tasks (Foucault 1977).

The disciplinary logic that underpins the production of high-performance athletes aligns with the paradoxical effects of disciplinary power. Disciplinary practices aim to relentlessly homogenize athletes to perform prescribed skills with minimum error and maximum intensity in stressful circumstances (Manley and Williams, 2022). Disciplines routinely and continuously monitor athletes’ bodies, shaping them to conform to rigorous training regimens and strict norms. However, simultaneously, disciplines enable the acquisition of skills and the enhancement of performance.

Once athletes have accepted the norms that are required of them, they become docile bodies who are self-disciplined in their training efforts (Sinden, 2010). Athletes themselves carry

a strong internalized sense of a need for discipline and conformity to the practices necessary to achieve the desired goal. For over a century, a prevailing rationality has reinforced this need, positing that the sport's established norms, traditions, and procedures offer the most effective means to develop athletes. These norms, enacted through coaching techniques, instruments, and material practices, shape athletes into docile bodies optimized for performance (MacLean, 2021).

### *Performance Narrative*

Following the above analytical framework, Shogan (1999) argues that high-performance athletes derive success and fulfillment from the very system that regulates them. In other words, the rewards of discipline, such as improved performance, reinforce athletes' commitment to these practices. However, while bodies capable of performing amazing skills are produced as a result, during the acquisition and performance of these skills, athletes often perceive themselves as having little or no agency (Shogan, 1999).

The performance narrative exemplifies the power relation in high-performance sports, where docility is prioritized given its apparent surface benefits, e.g., performance and winning. The performance narrative represents a totalitarian view whereby sport takes a central place in elite athletes' lives to the exclusion of other areas of life and self (Douglas and Carless, 2006).

However, the performance narrative can become problematic. Its negative consequences arise from athletes becoming "overly compliant" docile bodies. Athletes who go to extreme lengths to align their lives with the performance narrative often experience role engulfment and constricted identity development (Brown & Potrac, 2009). These effects can manifest as identity

foreclosure, compromised education, and continued training or competition despite injury (Williams, 2020).

The problematic dimensions of the performance narrative are proven by empirical findings. Hughes and Coakley (1991) demonstrate that over-compliance with the performance narrative drives athletes to overconform to the “sport ethic”—a cultural norm emphasizing sacrifice and pushing physical limits—leading to behaviors like competing with untreated injuries. This results in chronic conditions such as injuries or burnout. Psychologically, Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) found that elite female gymnasts who adhere to the performance narrative experience identity crises upon retirement, reporting a “loss of self” when gymnastics no longer defines their identity. Feelings of disorientation, void, and frustration arise due to previous over-reliance on external validation. Roderick’s (2006) ethnographic study with professional footballers reveals that a player’s inability to take part in their sport due to injury produces a loss of self-esteem. These athletes lost the primary source of their positive self-image when they were deprived of the ability to perform.

A Foucauldian analysis perfectly captures the dynamics of the performance narrative: it leverages disciplinary power to enable success while fostering over-compliance that undermines athletes’ broader well-being and sense of self.

### *Alternative Narratives*

Many athletes aim to increase agency and negotiate experiences of pleasure and meaning within a context of performance pressure, bodily risk, and sporting discipline by constructing self-narratives in place of the performance narrative.

From the perspective of narrative theory, stories are understood not merely as portrayals of lives but as active agents in the construction of those lives. “Stories work with people, for people, and always stories work on people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided” (Frank, 2010).

Foucault (1978) points out that “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.” His productive articulation of power relations implied opportunities for the negotiation and alteration of dominant discourses and power relations (Markula and Pringle, 2006). This indicates that although high-performance athletes cannot escape disciplinary power, they can strategically reorient and adjust the self to increase agency and subjectivity through narratives.

In sport, disciplinary power enables athletes to acquire new skills and capabilities. Athletes then rationalize this process by attaching personal value to each incremental improvement. In framing their progress as personal and self-directed, they construct a sense of individuality, even though their development still occurs within and reinforces the very norms to which they are conforming.

For example, when discussing the motivation for her comeback to tennis, renowned tennis player Naomi Osaka (2024) states, “At the core of everything, I want my daughter to remember me playing tennis for as long as I can play tennis because this is such an important part of my life.” Central to her statement is her identity as a mother. Rather than understanding her engagement in disciplinary practices, such as extensive training, as submission to regulation, she identifies the motivation behind such practices as contributing to her identity as a mother.

Narrating her comeback in a way that emphasizes personal meaning, Osaka is able to create the appearance of grasping subjectivity while still conforming to the disciplines of competitive athletics. In talks like these, the essential power relation between discipline and winning is concealed.

In a more general sense, athletes construct and internalize narratives that emphasize the importance of improving on the self, building meaningful connections with teammates and coaches, deriving purpose from resilience and overcoming adversity, or acting as role models for future generations. In this dynamic, competitive athletics can serve as a forum for athletes to generate meaning by improving themselves and finding belonging and meaning. This enables athletes to identify personal narratives while conforming to norms.

Carless's (2012) study used a narrative methodology to explore the stories Olympic and elite athletes tell. Brown's (2021) qualitative methodology developed thematic profiles of athletes. Drawing on these studies, this paper organizes three narratives that provide alternatives to the dominant performance narrative: the growth narrative, the relational narrative, and the restitution narrative. It is important to clarify that athletes do not adhere to a single narrative. They may simultaneously possess multiple narratives or switch between narratives through different stages of their career. The main focus here is on how these alternative narratives assist athletes in reorienting themselves.

The following section outlines the three alternative narratives. Each narrative is defined, illustrated with specific examples, and analyzed in terms of the dynamics through which athletes enhance agency and cultivate individualization. To demonstrate these processes, the analysis

draws on quotations from Mikaela Shiffrin, a legendary ski racer who, as of 2025, holds the record of 100 World Cup wins.

### ***Growth Narrative***

A growth narrative focuses on effort and personal growth, emphasizing a controllable and sustainable story of application (Carless & Douglas, 2012). The growth narrative emphasizes effort and personal development, framing athletic endeavor as a journey of self-devotion and self-improvement rather than a singular pursuit of victory. Athletes adopting this narrative prioritize personal progress, reorienting disciplinary practices toward self-actualization.

Mikaela Shiffrin, in her documentary *Moving Right Along Season Finale “The Love of the Turn”* (2024), regards her motivation as:

*The work itself—all of the time on snow, video analysis, all of this is, in and of itself is what motivates me. All of that goes together to put me at my best level.*

*That’s the motivating piece...not a record, or a result, or some accolade that I want to achieve before the end of my career. It’s just simply doing this thing as well as I can.*

Shiffrin reframes her engagement with disciplinary practices such as training, analysis, and repetition from submission to a system aimed at winning toward a voluntary pursuit of self-actualization. By valuing “the work” as a means to reach “my best level,” she constructs a narrative where her efforts contribute to personal growth and not just competitive outcomes. This reorientation conceals the inherent emphasis on victory in elite sports, allowing her to derive

fulfillment from the process itself and assert agency through a commitment to continual self-improvement rather than external validation.

### ***Relational Narrative***

A relational narrative prioritizes relationships and the connections forged with others along the way (Carless & Douglas, 2013). Athletes who have internalized a relational narrative narrate stories about using sports to form and maintain social connections with others. Relationships are recognized as central to thriving as they strengthen coping with adversity and provide opportunities for growth and meaning (Feeney & Collins, 2015).

For Shiffrin, relationships with her team, coaches, and the wider skiing community provide a source of meaning and motivation that extends beyond individual achievement.

In her documentary *Moving Right Along* (2024), Mikaela Shiffrin highlights how relationships with her team motivate her:

*When I'm struggling to feel motivated, one of the things that gets me going is remembering how much work my staff does. Our motivation...I would say they play off of each other. It's this ping-pong back and forth that keeps us all motivated, keeps us all on our toes...keeps us striving for more.*

Through Shiffrin's "ping-pong" dynamic with her team, she describes motivation as a reciprocal exchange, where she finds strength in the respect, gratitude, and collective energy of the team. Shiffrin's relational narrative disrupts the self's typical relationship with performance

by transferring the center of motivation from herself alone to the interplay between her and her team.

Besides the tight-knit relationship with her team, motivating the younger generation is also a branch of Shiffrin's relational narrative. In an interview with Olympics.com (2025), she shares: *It's important to inspire the next generation...It's just really important that you find ways to give back.* Immediately after securing her record-setting 100th World Cup victory, Shiffrin shifted the focus beyond her achievement, advocating for a greater cause:

*I'd like to turn the spotlight to something bigger than me. Helping Share Winter bring more kids to the mountain is really meaningful. It's bigger than me winning 100 races. This will make that 100th victory one of the most meaningful to me.*

(Instagram, 2025)

The relational narrative of inspiring the younger generation allows Shiffrin to find meaning beyond herself. By prioritizing giving back, Shiffrin aligns her success with the relational narrative's emphasis on interconnectedness and shared purpose. Her victories serve as encouragement for youngsters, rather than standing alone as individual accolades. In this dynamic, winning becomes less of an outcome achieved under pressure, but an empowering moment that could generate greater social impact.

### ***Restitution narrative***

The restitution narrative, often seen in the context of injury or recovery, focuses on the hope and belief in returning to a previous state of performance (Book et al., 2024). It allows

athletes to derive meaning from their recovery process and the resilience required to overcome adversity. Shiffrin, coming back to racing after her serious crash in Killington, explains:

*The last seven weeks have been grueling, but also amazing in what we've achieved*

(Skiracing.com, 2025).

In this statement, Shiffrin acknowledges the difficulty of the recovery process but emphasizes the remarkable progress made. The focus is on the journey, valuing incremental steps and resilience. In another interview, she adds:

*For now, it's all about taking things one step at a time...Just focus on the task at hand right now, which is successfully completing this recovery. It's going to continue to take time* (Skiracing.com, 2025).

By framing her recovery as a process requiring patience, Shiffrin allows herself to slow down and places value on each step, making meaning out of the journey. It quiets down all the talk on expectations. She is able to derive meaning from displaying strength in the face of adversity. In this dynamic, the bar is lowered, and attention is drawn to even the smallest progress and the very present.

Alternative narratives equip athletes with strategies to reimagine themselves in the inherently restrictive framework of high-performance sports. These narratives allow for different understandings of the athletes' relationship with themselves and the sport. In this way, athletes manage to prioritize personal well-being and interpersonal connections, finding meaning in their progress, experiences, and qualities such as diligence and resilience.

The growth narrative reorients athletic endeavors toward personal development and self-improvement. This allows athletes to derive intrinsic fulfillment from their efforts and reduces the pressure and anxiety to fulfill external validation (Carless & Douglas, 2012). Meanwhile, the relational narrative highlights reciprocal motivation with the team and commitment to inspiring the next generation. This emphasis on interpersonal connections provides a support network that enhances emotional resilience and a sense of belonging (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Finally, the restitution narrative allows athletes to set aside expectations to perform and find resilience in the process of a comeback. They find redemptive meaning in suffering and adversity, leading them to enjoy higher levels of mental health, well-being, and maturity (McAdams, 2013).

These narratives are demonstrably more desirable than the performance narrative. First, they support mental health by reducing the singular focus on competitive outcomes. This alleviates the depression, anxiety, and identity loss due to rigid adherence to the performance narrative (Lally, 2007; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). Second, they enhance resilience by offering diverse sources of meaning—personal progress, relationships, and recovery—allowing athletes to navigate the inevitable fluctuations of a sporting career (Houltberg et al., 2018). Third, they foster a holistic identity, countering the role engulfment and identity foreclosure associated with the performance narrative (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Within a Foucauldian lens, these narratives enable athletes to strategically reorient themselves within disciplinary power structures, asserting individuality and agency while still conforming to the norms of elite competition (Heyes, 2007; Foucault, 1977).

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have sought to integrate narrative research with Foucauldian theorization to understand how narratives shape the experiences of high-performance athletes, specifically analyzing the desirability of alternative narratives over the performance narrative. In doing so, I underline the problematic aspects of the performance narrative. By prioritizing measurable outcomes, this narrative constrains the self, producing subjects who excel yet remain constrained by systems that limit their agency and well-being. This narrative further reflects a broader cultural trend in which productivity and success come to dictate identity. It is a phenomenon that warrants closer examination due to its potential inaccuracies and implications.

The paper points out that narrative plays an important role in negotiating the self within social frameworks, its power lying in the capacity to reorient individuals within disciplinary structures. A Foucauldian lens uniquely clarifies why and how athletes construct these alternative narratives to increase agency and subjectivity. Athletes exploit the enabling potential within disciplinary power to assert personal meaning against a backdrop of constraint.

Psychological studies that compare the performance narrative and its alternatives in parallel neglect their intrinsic relationship. The current Foucauldian review positions alternative narratives as acts of resistance born from the performance narrative's dominance. This perspective not only explains why athletes reframe their purposes but also contributes to a broader understanding of narrative's enabling potential.

Closing on a broader note, narratives serve as a means to navigate the tension between conformity and individuality, shaping experiences across all domains of life. They reflect and

resist power, allowing individuals to push back against homogenizing forces. Understanding how narratives mediate power relations is essential to comprehending the human experience and fostering well-being, both in sports and beyond.

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