

## As Fast as Possible Rather Than Well Protected: Experiences of Football Clothes

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### Abstract

With Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological view that human beings 'take in' the world and experience themselves as subjects through their bodies as a starting point, players in both men's and women's teams, kit men, purchasing managers, sporting directors, and a coach from Swedish football clubs have been interviewed about their perceptions and experiences of football clothing. Since the body is both a feeling and knowing entity, clothes are seen as components of body techniques, facilitating or restricting body movements in a material way, but also as creators of senses, like lightness and security; in both ways, influencing the knowledge in action that playing football is. In this article, the content of the interviews is discussed in relation to health. When clothes are primarily related to a biomedical view that health means no injuries and illnesses, warm pants and shin guards are mentioned by players, who are rather ambivalent to both, since these garments counteract a feeling of lightness that is connected to the perception of speed. Players want to be fast rather than well protected. If clothes, instead, are interpreted as related to a broad conception of health, including mental, social, and physical components, the relation body-space-in-between-clothes seems to be an important aspect of clothing. Dressed in a sports uniform, unable to choose individual details, the feeling of subjectivity is related to wearing 'the right-size' clothes. Also new textile technology, like injury-preventing and speed-increasing tight compression underwear, is perceived by players based on feelings that they are human subjects striving for both bodily and psychological well-being.

**Keywords:** Interviews, phenomenology, football clothes, conceptions of health, subjectivity

## Introduction

### **Signs Creating Unity and Belonging – But Also Materiality Sensed by the Body**

Match kits and training tracksuits are sports uniforms (Craik 2005a: 140). Analysed with semiotic theories by which garments or articles of clothing are seen as signs of communication and expressions of symbolic meanings, they can be interpreted as tools for symbolizing group identity, unity, and belonging.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, a rather loose jersey, shorts, and knee-high socks are the garments for football.<sup>2</sup> That combination has probably been maintained since it is important for each sport to uphold a specific dress code with clothes of a certain style and iconography in order to be recognized (Burgoyne 1998). This underlines that semiotic aspects are relevant. But to grasp the full impact of clothes, it is necessary to go further and research material and embodied aspects of dress as well (Beward 1998; Entwistle 2000: 4–5; Miller & Kuchler 2005; Woodward 2007: 23). How clothes are cut and made or how different textile materials touch the skin must be considered to understand how dress shapes the body and what meanings clothes convey to the body in a material way. Then, specific garments can be interpreted as components of body techniques (Craik 2005b: 12) and the way players dress for football can be seen as situated bodily practice (Entwistle 2000).<sup>3</sup>

### **Research Based on Qualitative Interviews**

This article aims at contributing to such clothing research ‘beyond semiotics’ by discussing aspects of how football clothes are experienced by players and others active within top-level football clubs in Sweden today. Players from seven men’s teams and five women’s teams in the Premier Division (Allsvenskan) – in total, twenty-four players (twelve men and twelve women) – have been interviewed. I have also spoken to four sporting directors, five kit men, four purchasing managers, and one coach.

An equal number of male and female players were interviewed, but the starting point of the research was that if they, irrespective of their sex, were allowed to speak, first and foremost, as football players, then the theme ‘football and clothing’ could lead away from discussions about gender differences. Thus gender issues regarding football clothes will hardly be elaborated here.<sup>4</sup> Mostly the sporting directors or purchasing managers suggested which players should be interviewed. There were, however, various reasons for proposing certain players. One sporting director mentioned that one player was known to be frank and talkative. Some players said themselves that they probably were chosen since they were interested in fashion and clothing, while others were suggested since they were able to stay after training for the interview. This means that a broad range of players were interviewed, some rather new members in the first teams of the clubs, and others who had been elite players for many years. One exception in the variation though is that only Swedish-born players have been interviewed.

But, in other respects, the players do not represent any different groups. Their stories about football clothing can be seen as personal, yet not individual, since as the sociologist Joanne Entwistle (2000) tells us, dress as an embodied practice is always embedded within social relations, and clothing practices are formed in the intersection between discourses ascribing specific meanings to bodies in different contexts and embodied experiences of dress. In other words, personal talk about clothing practices and clothing experiences conveys cultural themes and is influenced by the person's social relations. Thus, in this article, quotations have been selected to discuss some perspectives which have appeared in several interviews. The quotations express rather clearly, or, in some cases, in an especially interesting way, things that also others spoke about in similar ways. But even if the article is based on common traits in the interviews, it still conveys qualitative research which aims at presenting many different aspects of experiences of football clothes and understanding how such experiences are made through bodily perceptions. The intention is not to make statements about how general these experiences may be among players today.

### **Phenomenology of the Body as the Starting Point**

The research is phenomenological in the sense that the interviews aimed at getting thorough descriptions of perceptions on football clothes and understanding experiences of the clothed body from the interviewees' perspectives (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009: 26–27). The same themes were discussed in all of the interviews, but not in the same order and only some questions were identical from one interview to another. I tried to be open-minded and listen to what the respondents wanted to talk about and posed lots of follow-up questions to learn more about their perspectives. But rather than keeping my prior knowledge to myself in every instance, I sometimes shared it with the respondents instead. The rather sophisticated method Hammersley and Atkinson (1989: 115) propose, which is to pose questions that lead in an opposite direction from where you expect the answer to be, was not used. But reading their text made me less hesitant to pose leading questions. Thus, this was sometimes done when trying to confirm that I had grasped what the respondents meant in ways they could recognize. At this point, we were already having a good exchange of views, and the interviewees were straightforward enough to tell me if they thought I had misunderstood them.

The research is also theoretically informed by phenomenology. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's view that human beings 'take in' the world and experience themselves as subjects through their bodies is the starting point. The body is the acting complex from which perception, and thus existence in the world, emanates. Humans perceive themselves as subjects related to the surroundings by what they do with their bodies. The body itself is both a feeling and knowing entity. Human subjectivity is not best understood based on the Cartesian claim that what makes us human beings is that we think, because even if the body is where thinking resides, it also has sensomotoric abilities which make it possible to treat 'being in the world' without cognitively conceptualizing and categorizing it (Merleau-Ponty 1997, 2004; Entwistle 2000: 28–29; Engelsrud 2006: 30–34; Allen-Collinson

2009: 282–283). All of us have stored bodily experiences. Our bodies can perform tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1983).

A sportsperson often has to limit the time between thought and execution to zero so when it comes to a series of movements, he or she ‘. . . reduces the thought required between individual movements to habits, that is to nonreflective actions’, according to the sociologists of knowledge Joseph Bensman and Robert Lilienfeld (1973: 62–63). Thus, body movements execute a person’s know-how, for instance knowing how to play football. And as parts of body techniques, clothes can either facilitate or restrict body movements and thereby influence such ‘knowledge in action’ (Molander 1996).

These phenomenological perspectives were starting points when I began to interview. But theoretical lessons from Entwistle (2000) also influenced the research. She suggests that to understand dress as a situated practice, what is needed is a combination of phenomenological perspectives and insights into representations and discourses of body and clothes (Entwistle 2000: 39). Thus, when analysing the interviews, I connected things that were said with the growing medialization and the aesthetization of everyday life – two sociocultural processes going on in society today. Listening to the interviews, and, at the same time, thinking about the medialization and aesthetization of sporting bodies, I understood that aesthetics, achievement, and health are three important related categories involved in shaping experiences of football clothes today.

### **Skilful, Beautiful, and Healthy Sporting Bodies in Consumer Culture**

As visual consumption has become more and more predominant (Schroeder 2002: 4–5), the importance of unique actions by individual athletes has grown when it comes to producing sport stars (Smart 2005: 196). Spectators want to see the stars express competitiveness, joyfulness, and strong emotions, but also body power, speed, and technical skill (Smart 2005: 194). Lotta Schelin, a forward for the Swedish national football team, confirmed this when photographed by a Swedish tabloid. Doing stylish volleys in a photo studio, modelling Puma underwear, she said: ‘You cannot be just a footballer today, but an acrobat as well’ (Mravec 2007).

Highlights from matches can be seen over and over again on TV, and when attending an Allsvenskan game, you can see replays on big screens. Since photographers often try to catch moments of ‘the beautiful game’, these practises of highlighting skills, at the same time, contribute to the aesthetization of the body in contemporary consumer culture (cf. Featherstone 1994). And it’s worth noting that the skilful, beautiful body also very often is portrayed as healthy. Healthy and beautiful bodies construct each other in much of the talk about the body today.<sup>5</sup> For instance, the expression ‘radiant with health’ implies that a person looks dynamic and therefore beautiful. Clothes can help shape bodies according to prevalent norms of beauty and materially construct sporting bodies as healthy and/or high achieving. The accentuation of the body’s skill and look during the game makes football clothes more important than ever before as a functional ‘working outfit’, allowing players to perform to the best of their ability.

Both aesthetic aspects of sports clothes and, to some degree, the impact of clothes on achievement have been discussed in design literature and in ethnology and cultural studies (Andrew 1998; Busch 1998; O'Mahoney 2002; Craik 2005a, 2005b; Petersson 2005). In particular, 'Fastskin' swimsuits have been discussed as an example of performance-enhancing garments blurring the border between body and clothing (Craik 2005b). But when it comes to health, protection is only occasionally referred to within qualitative research as one function of sports clothes. Instead, the impact of protective garments while playing football has been discussed in medical research conducted using quantitative methods (Sandelin et al. 1985). How well shin guards made of various materials protect against a tibia fracture (Francisco et al. 2000) and the effect of adolescent players' use of protective headgear (Delaney et al. 2008) have, for instance, been studied. However, neither in medical research nor in the humanities have experiences with football clothes ever been interpreted from the point of view of how clothes can contribute to health if a broad understanding of that concept is applied.

In order to cover this gap in the research, the focus of this article will be interpretations of how football clothes relate to health, both medically and broadly (cf. Andersson & Ejlertsson 2009): What views on football clothes, as expressed in the interviews, can be discussed if clothes are primarily interpreted as related to a biomedical view that health means no injuries and illnesses? What aspects of football clothes, as mentioned in the interviews, are accentuated if the clothes are, instead, seen as related to a broad conception of health, which includes mental and social as well as physical components?<sup>6</sup>

## **Protection against Injuries and the Cold – Clothes Seen from a Medical Conception of Health**

### **Connections between Lightness and Speed**

When one player was asked if he had ever experienced football clothes as obstacles stopping him from achieving, he suggested changing subjects, namely from clothes to boots:

No . . . yes, clothes if you include boots. Then, some boots are made of material that tears more easily, like if they are a little thin. So, of course, in that case, it can be like that – it can be an obstacle. . . . And maybe a stud can fall off too. And then you get a worse grip. So you have to go and change.

From that moment, I decided that, based on the players' own emphasis on boots, my research, which initially was meant to be just about clothes, would also discuss boots.

One prominent feature of both the Adidas and Nike football boot ads in the Swedish magazine *Goal* during 2008 was the idea that boots can help improve precision when shooting. The players interviewed in 2008 and 2009, on the other hand, spoke more of lightness than of precision when discussing boots. One of them said: 'If you compare boots today with those ten years ago, there's really a big difference; first of all, when it comes to weight, thickness of the leather, and

all that . . .'. Some made a connection between the use of lighter boots and the feeling of speed.<sup>7</sup> For example, one male footballer said: 'You want a boot as light as possible. You feel a little faster and you feel it's a little easier to run'. That clothes made of thin, light fabric often felt nice when training was also discussed: 'You must not feel that your clothes are chocking you; instead, they must be loose fitting and can sort of breathe . . . fairly light fabric and thin!' One kit man said that already in the 1980s some players wanted thin socks. He particularly mentioned one of the club's stars: '. . . he had to wear very light ones if he was to run faster, he thought'. The trend has been towards thinner socks, so most players are content today, the kit man explained.<sup>8</sup>

The combination of lightness and speed that players sense is an example of the important point in Merleau-Ponty's theories that the senses simultaneously let in different perspectives on the world, and together they constitute a totality of perception. Introducing a series of Merleau-Ponty's lectures, Baldwin (2004: 19) makes this clear when he writes: '. . . our perceived world is structured by a plurality of overlapping perspectives within which different aspects are somehow seen together, as aspects of just one world'. Thus, the footballer's lived bodily experience is made up of mixed sensations. In the same instant as he perceives his body moving faster than ever before from one point on the pitch to another, he also 'brings in' the (compared to earlier models) decreased weight of his very light boots (and his thin socks).<sup>9</sup> Sensations go together and they are blended, but since one statement comes after the other in language, which is linear, the wholeness of a bodily experience is not easy to express in words. When interpreting the interviews though, now and then I sensed that a player was returning to a totality of aspects on clothes, which she or he has experienced through the body. This was manifested as a rapid change of subject, from discussing one sensual impression to instantly talking about another sensual perception; as if the interviewees brought additional perspectives of their embodied experience into our conversations to make me understand the totality of their bodily experience better.<sup>10</sup>

Most players saw the combination of lightness and speed, which the lightweight material of many football boots nowadays seems to contribute to, as a positive experience. But when a midfielder brought up the importance of speed in his performance, some negative health-related aspects regarding boots also came up. He emphasized that lightweight boots lack other properties:

. . . they may not give as good support to the foot and the risk of injuries may increase a little. [They are] not as sturdy if you get a whack. Then it's like you get it full on, the whack . . . instead of the boot perhaps taking a little bit of the load otherwise when it is the bigger, sturdier boots.

### **Shin Guards: A Questionable Piece of Protective Equipment**

Another piece of equipment valued by players through their experiences of connections between lightness and speed is shin guards. Players claim that shin guards give a feeling of extra weight, and, therefore, the ones used by many elite players today are so small that they can be held in the palm of a man's hand. Today, the protective foot part, made of textile material and extra ankle padding, is

fastened with Velcro so you can easily rip it off from the hard part over the shin. One purchasing manager said: 'Since it [the foot part] makes their feet a little stiffer, it's nicer to play without them. It's virtually only youth players who use them'. A player told me: 'Well, having as small shin guards as possible has become a bit of an issue because . . . some players think it's annoying, too annoying, if your shins are covered a lot. Actually, I can understand that. It *can* be annoying sometimes. So we . . . well, usually . . . I always train without shin guards'. These sentences are interesting since the content goes from general observations and other players' possible thoughts to what this player thinks himself, and then, after some hesitation, finally, also to what he actually does. During the interview, I felt he sensed my astonishment that he and his teammates didn't consider this garment's protective function more. But he certainly didn't have to reveal to me his own habit of training without shin guards. I think he did it to convince me that, from his point of view, the natural standpoint is that ways of protecting the body must not interfere with the sense of the optimal ability to perform as a footballer.

He gave further arguments why shin guards are unnecessary, but when he continued talking, there was, nevertheless, some ambivalence:

Actually, it is very seldom you get a whack on the shin. Mostly, it is on the thighs and the feet. So, it's strange really . . . but probably these shin guards are a relic from the past. But certainly they are – the shins, I mean – they can get *badly* injured easily, break your leg and things like that . . .

Most likely, a nasty injury that a player in another club recently picked up was the reason for the last sentence. Another player said that in the injured player's club, the coach decided that shin guards had to be also used when training. Such a decision can be interpreted as an example of how a club cares about the employee's health, but the interviewed player was not that positive: 'Well, but we are not thirteen, you know. Actually, we have to take responsibility ourselves'.

My impression of the calm tone used when injuries were discussed in the interviews is that taking risks and getting injured are seen as a necessary part of the game if you want to be successful. Both the demand that you shall be individually responsible for your body but also the habit of exposing your body to rough treatment and giving little consideration to health have been linked to constructions of masculinity (Whannel 2002: 68–70, 157). But hardly any difference between male and female elite players' attitudes was noticed.<sup>11</sup> 'I suppose you don't think much about protection. Instead, it's more about that it must be small. You have to be light', one female player, for instance, said about her shin guards. She continued: 'It is impractical and a little bulky. We don't see it as if they have to protect us; instead, it is more that it is a little impractical'. And what she said echoed what the male players thought. According to one male player, the habit of not thinking much about protection had to do with demands for speed made when playing at the elite level:

The higher the level of football you play . . . well, there must be no obstacles for me to be as fast as possible. And nothing annoys me as much as large shin guards, which don't feel comfortable; instead, as small as possible and as light as possible. And you must be as fast and as flexible as possible. Then you may have to cope with injuries later.

Shin guards are obviously different from ordinary clothes since they are meant for protection. So I asked one player: ‘But do you think of *clothes* as protection for the body when you play?’ He took his time and hesitated a bit before answering:

No . . . well . . . it is . . . yes, actually. On . . . when you play on artificial turf, like in the winter, at least when you train, then you can have long underpants underneath your shorts and socks because it hurts quite a lot if you slide tackle. Then, you can really get huge burns. So then you do [think of clothes as protection] . . . well, you can get such burns. Also, wearing shorts, you get them when training indoors on those parquet floors.

Then he was asked if he ever wore long underpants during matches on artificial turf: ‘No. It’s strange really. You don’t’. He laughed and seemed confused, maybe because he felt that I found it a bit odd that he wanted to incur injuries when he actually knew of a way to protect his body. (Even though, I, of course, didn’t say that, maybe my facial expression told him so.) He concluded by saying: ‘Well . . . you probably feel that you can sacrifice yourself a little more during a match. That’s probably the way it is’.

### **Warm Pants for Protection**

The garment players themselves first mentioned as protection against injuries was warm pants. In Sweden, they are called *ljumskbyxor*, which includes the name of the part of the body this garment is meant to protect (*ljumske* is the Swedish word for groin). *Ljumskbyxor* are a broad category since the term can denote both thick and thin warm pants, totally or partly made of synthetic rubber material (neoprene), and thinner polyester tights. ‘I think it was in the 1990s they started wearing those’, a kit man said, and he continued: ‘At that time, often everyone used so-called Vulcan pants, such really thick, disgusting warm pants . . . but nowadays not many use them. Today, they’ve got these pants . . . some of them want these tights all the time’. When I said that sometimes it would be very warm wearing them, he answered: ‘It has to be warm!’ He meant that warmth protects the muscles against injuries. One player didn’t mention the need to protect his muscles by keeping them warm as a reason for wearing leggings though. He said he uses them instead of ordinary underpants because they are nicer, more elastic, and simply feel better.

Vulcan pants are also still used today. Both players and others see them as a protective garment that helps prevent injuries. Wearing them can create a feeling that you are taking care of yourself; you are doing what you can to avoid injuries. They produce warmth, but none of the players said the pants give a feeling of well-being. On the contrary, the thick warm pants restrict movement: ‘But these very thick underpants, in them you feel a little inhibited. It is rather hard to move in them and so on. So I don’t use them much. But there are those who do’, one player said. Another man always used warm pants for training, but never during a match:

I take them off because you become a little lighter when you don’t wear those thicker pants. They are a little heavier . . . hardly noticeable, but, to some extent, it is psy-



chological. You take them off for a match and feel a little lighter because you don't wear that much.

This is another example of a player who is ready to sacrifice more during matches, and, at the same time, his statement is proof that the sense of lightness must be there if he is to feel that his capacity is at the maximum level.

### **Dressed to Keep Warm**

Talking about the need to protect the body against the cold to prevent injuries draws on the biomedical view of health. But when players mention that you must dress warmly for your own well-being, it is, rather, connected to health in a broad sense. And, actually, players talked more about protecting themselves against the cold in order to feel good rather than to avoid injuries. A noticeable change of materials came during the 1990s. A female player, when asked about functional changes to football clothes, said the following about match jerseys:

You sweat a lot and they absorb it so you don't get that wet and cold. That has become better, it really has. . . . They breathe in another way and it is somehow another material, so you notice a difference, yes, you do.

Clothes soaked with sweat were highlighted as a greater problem in cold weather than in warm.

That Swedish elite players, above all, think about protection against the cold is, however, not surprising. Cold, rain, ice, and snow are weather conditions that even players in the south of the country mention. A male player had been testing special underwear also used by hockey players. It was a long, tight-fitting, sweat-absorbing turtleneck jersey. He described the fabric as equivalent to 'wetsuit material' and stated that he certainly didn't feel chilly in it:

In the winter, when you get sweaty and it [the ordinary thermal top] gets soaking wet, then actually you get very cold. If you were to stand still for a little while, well, you would become kind of cold. As long as you are moving, there's no harm. But that jersey actually made you feel dry, and your skin was dry all the time. And I suppose that's really the purpose with . . . well, with clothes, that you will feel as dry as possible.

### **Cold Feet with Blue Nails**

The thought that you must protect yourself against the cold apparently does not apply to the feet. Instead, players' choice of boots seems to be determined by the idea that the sock and the boot must be thin layers, with as little space in between them as possible so that the foot can easily interpret the tacit knowledge, conveyed by the tactile sense, when the foot meets the ball. It seems they see the foot, just like Merleau-Ponty might have seen it, as part of the sensing and knowing body. Thus, the boots are very tight: 'Because of the feeling, they want boots that are virtually too small. So, if you see a football player, he always has blue nails!' a kit man said, and laughed a little, as if he knew it was an exaggeration, even though there was also some truth to it.

A twenty-nine-year-old male player explained that when he was young, he always wore very tight boots, but now, a bit older, he had changed his habit:

Well now, I use one size larger so that some more air can perhaps get in and it becomes a little warmer. Because if you have very tight boots, then you often get ingrown toe nails, and especially in the winter it gets extremely cold.

This shows that experience can be important for players' decisions about how to dress for training and matches. As a child, you often in accordance with the dress code within youth football have to fully protect yourself by, for instance, using big shin guards. When you become a junior player, the willingness to dare to take any risks seems to increase. After some years at the elite level as a well-established professional player, knowing that you 'are someone' in the Swedish world of football, the players interviewed seem more anxious to take care of themselves, to 'still be going strong', but also more anxious about their well-being, about feeling good. And maybe years of practise can train the ability of the foot to interpret the meeting with the ball, so you can experience the same feeling even though the shoe is a little bigger?

## **Being 'Me' in the Right Size – Clothes Seen from a Broad Perspective of Health**

### **Absent Clothes for an Absent Body**

The difference between heavy warm pants and lighter underwear during matches was felt by some and when asked about the importance of colour, a few mentioned that the colour of their teammates' socks could be helpful when they were surrounded by opponents and needed to pass the ball without looking up. But, otherwise, most of the players didn't say anything about experiences of clothes related to their performances during matches. An explanation for this can be that it has to do with the disappearance of our body from awareness, which occurs now and then in everyday life. This is an important aspect of embodiment elaborated by Leder, working in the phenomenological tradition of Merleau-Ponty (Leder 1990). That the body 'disappears from awareness' means that it ceases to be an object that awareness is directed towards, and, instead, it is used to 'bring in the world' (Toadvine & Lawlor 2007: 86). It functions as the perceiving subject and a tool for action-oriented existence – a function of being-in-the-world (Csordas 1994: 12). It is open to the world so impressions from the senses flow through it and changing sensations are balanced by body movements, even though people do not think (cognitively) about what they are doing (cf. Polanyi 1983).

From what was said in the interviews, it seems that football is at its best when every player's own body has disappeared as an object from his or her awareness. Then, instead, perception can be directed at all the movements and events on the pitch. And because clothes are so closely connected to the body – since textile fabrics touch the skin – clothes that are not obtrusive in any way are a material condition that must exist to make 'the disappearance of the body' possible. Your clothes have to be so comfortable that they do not remind you of your body.

The early 'backstage' work when players tried on that season's kit later made them confident in their clothes. For example, a female player said:

So on match day, when you dress, you do your routine, taking your clothes . . . you have your exact size, you know what you will be wearing for training or matches. And, at that time, you will not be focusing on that. Then we just know it is perfect, everything is the way it ought to be, and we have what we want. So when you start the game, you really do not focus on that.

A male player said the same: ‘You try everything on, you are comfortable in it and so you order it. So you know what you get. . . . It has never been an obstacle for me, nothing too tight and nothing else’. But when we continued talking, new aspects of clothes occurred when he seemed to stop thinking of material garments as physically stopping him from doing different movements, and, instead, expanded the meaning of the concept of comfort so it, rather, denoted the immaterial psychological state of well-being that clothes can contribute to. Then he discussed comfort as something that had to do with subjectivity:

I think it is important that you are comfortable in what you wear and that you feel, well somehow, this is *me*. I really wouldn’t want to wear a very baggy match jersey. . . . That might restrict my performance because I don’t feel comfortable and I don’t like what I am wearing.

Design researcher Judy Attfield (2000: 121) writes: ‘Clothing and textiles have a particular intimate quality because they lie next to the skin and inhabit spaces of private life helping to negotiate the inner self with the outside world’. This player gives an example of that negotiation. To make it possible for him to accomplish top performances, a feeling of ‘being me’ must also be realized when he starts the game and enters the (discursive) position of ‘being a football player’. In this negotiation between (outer) materiality and (inner) feelings, the size of the clothes is very important. He probably could move well in a baggy jersey; the garment would hardly be a material obstacle to moving. But because of the interplay between material and immaterial aspects when processing his being-in-the world, he would be dissatisfied anyway with the size of a baggy jersey since he has made a habit of wearing quite figure-hugging garments a part of his subjectivity – his sense of ego.

### **Problems with Sizes and Brands**

In May 2008, one purchasing manager said that he would soon be going to a meeting with the sports brand his club had a contract with. At this meeting, they were going to discuss clothes for the next season (which in Sweden started in the spring of 2009). Just a little while after that, before he knew which players were in the squad for next season, he had to order the clothes. Some players would be sold and others bought during the transfer windows. And those leaving and coming do not always have the same body sizes. So the importance of getting the right-size clothes was seen as a problem from this purchasing manager’s point of view.

In connection with the transfers of players, problems with boots were also mentioned by some of the players and the coach interviewed. One man said: ‘Well, you can say that boots are really our tools.<sup>12</sup> So they play a great role. You really have to be happy with them. And it’s like the feeling is there when you hit the ball. So it’s very important’. The words some players use are that they are secure

or safe in their shoes, which accounts for a psychological state of well-being. Thus, suddenly being forced to play in another brand of boots than what you are used to can be experienced as a problem:

Some players like a specific brand. Then they change clubs and get a totally different brand which, for example, doesn't make boots that fit their feet. Then it's a strange situation because you have to learn to play in them. And it may sound like a luxury problem, but it isn't. Because to play well, you really have to feel good.

Only some successful players can get individual contracts with a football boot manufacturer. And if you can show that you have your own contract when you change clubs, you can continue to play in that brand of football boots. But, otherwise, you just have to accept switching to another brand. I asked if exemptions can be made:

Yes, you can probably get it if you have a doctor's note and medical reasons, etc. . . . But I think it's rather difficult anyway, because nowadays even every brand has a fairly good selection of different sorts of boots.

Since it leads to some players being insecure, hesitant, and frustrated, and thus to their well-being deteriorating, the demand to use boots from only the brand the club has an agreement with doesn't go very well with the spirit of the broad definition of health, which includes psychological factors. But if football clubs were to carefully consider every player's health in a broad sense by letting them choose which boots to wear, this would have economic consequences. For instance, the clothing sponsor of one women's team discussed whether it should take back some of the money because not all of the players followed the contract to the letter. Some of them played in another brand of football boots: '. . . and that may be because they don't think they are comfortable, they don't have enough models that fit us', a player explained, and added: 'Our coaches claim that our players must be able to perform. They cannot have sores on their feet'. Her statements about boots show that apparently not all medical problems which are the result of playing in boots of the brand the club has chosen lead to exemptions.

### **The Compressed Body**

Now back to clothes again: more or less aware of it, players use the categories 'body', 'space in between', and 'clothes' to comprehend the feeling of comfort. Every player seems to have a preferred experienced relation between body and football clothes, and for him or her to feel comfortable, it has to be sensed. Nowadays, however, when it comes to the design of creating functional sportswear, questions about the dissolution of boundaries between body and clothing are relevant. More and more sportswear is no longer being worn loosely, allowing the body to move in a 'natural way' underneath. Instead, sports clothes affect and shape the body and with such clothes the category 'space in between' loses its meaning.

Earlier in this article, for instance, it was mentioned that clothes function as a second skin, absorbing the sweat and thereby helping to ensure that the cold is not felt so often. Synthetic fibres created from scratch are used to make such close

connections between body and clothes possible. According to the anthropologist Kaori O'Connor (2005: 46), making these fibres is not 'culture being laid on the surface of nature' as when textiles are made from natural fibres, like cotton or wool. Instead, culture and nature are intertwined at the more fundamental level, where certain characteristics are built into the fibre.

Being able to feel lightweight and sufficiently warm is apparently valued positively by players today. But textile technology for football clothes also goes further than just creating a second absorbing skin that lets sweat through to the surface of the fabric. Some textiles nowadays even affect the internal biological functions of the body. According to the Adidas advertising campaign launched in September 2008, using football players as models, its version of so-called compression underwear, Adidas Techfit TM, speeds up the process by which energy is created in the muscles by compressing muscles and tissues and thereby making the blood flow faster. This is said to prevent muscle injuries and also improve footballers' performances, especially their speed. The other major sports brands, like Puma, Nike, and Craft, have their own forms of compression underwear too.

A footballer dressed in compression underwear is, of course, nothing like the picture of the Cyborg – the man-machine hybrid – as portrayed in Puma's marketing campaign for football boots in conjunction with the 2008 European Championship, where Fredrik Ljungberg's upper body was joined with artificial legs looking like the robots from the Star Wars film. But actually these compression garments are a real example of clothing technology that creates a human-technology symbiosis which wouldn't have existed if there were only natural fibres available. They are also an indication of the trend that medical health today is often created through connections between the human body and artefacts. But while the popular culture Cyborg is driven by technological mechanisms and programmed to be a sharpshooting, effective, and insensible creature, footballers in their clothes are still 'taking in' events around them through their sensing and knowing bodies. And even if Adidas ads tell us that objective measurements show that they increase the player's speed, it seems that the very tight compression clothes don't create the feeling of air touching the skin, which some players associate with the desired sense of lightness and thereby with the perception of rapid movement.

When one player was asked what compression underwear felt like, he said: 'First of all, it is very tight, it really fits like a snakeskin!' The snakeskin is an outer layer that sometimes when you see a sloughed skin laying in the road can be understood as separate, but usually belongs to the body. So, in all its ambiguity, it seems to be an excellent metaphor for very tight clothes that influence the body's internal processes! This player said that at his club a majority used this type of underwear. A kit man at another club said that initially players were a little dubious, then they tried wearing it for matches and now four or five on his team used compression underwear regularly. This was in May 2008, in a squad of about twenty players. So this kind of underwear was only recently being used in Swedish top level football clubs in 2008.

One player at the same club kept an open mind to accepting the new underwear, but his first impression of it was not positive and it was not totally clear to him what it was supposed to be good for: 'There are now some new jerseys which are very tight. And I don't know if they are designed to pull up your chest so you can breathe better in some way'. He explained that the brand of jersey used at his club pulled the shoulders back so that you had a straighter back and chest. He also confirmed what the kit man had said by adding that he didn't think many players used them. He was asked how it felt to wear these jerseys and he stated:

Well, they are *very* tight. It almost feels like you get a little confined in it. I don't like it when it's too tight during matches, etc. . . . It is probably to do with the fact that when I feel terribly confined I almost feel a little panicky.

For this player at least, dressing in compression underwear – however medically healthy – cannot be seen as a situated bodily practice contributing to health in a broad sense, which includes psychological well-being, since wearing it creates a sense of discomfort. But when asked if he wouldn't use it a lot then, his answer revealed an interesting ambivalence between the negative sense of the garment's materiality and a positive attitude towards new training clothes: 'I don't know. I think it's a little bit of a habit too. If you wear it for a while, then maybe you will start to like it. But instinctively it was not nice'.

### **Brief Concluding Remarks**

The anthropologist Thomas Csordas underlines that we live in a historical moment when 'we are undergoing fundamental changes in how our bodies are organized and experienced' (Martin 1992, cited in Csordas 1994: 1). The borders of the human body are questioned by plastic surgery and the manufacture of artificial body parts and organs (Wilson 1995). But also feeling new injury-preventing and speed-increasing compression underwear against your body can be seen as a tangible example of these changes. Interpreted by post-human theories, these clothes could, first of all, be discussed as items taking part in dissolving 'the human' since they blur the borders between technology and 'human nature'. But the interviews in this project show that new textile technology is experienced by players based on the feeling of being a human subject striving for bodily and psychological well-being. Therefore, I hope that the phenomenology of the body – Merleau-Ponty's theories – will be used for further studies of the experiences of technological changes, including future development of clothing (cf. Allen-Collinson 2009).

The textile technology 'revolution' goes on (Farren & Hutchinson 2004; Quinn 2002; Shishoo 2005). So maybe those hoping for a long career as a professional football player today will have to remain receptive to the continuous changes to whatever sensations and feelings new body-altering, performance-enhancing textile technology may bring about in the near future, just like the pragmatic player interviewed who thought he would get used to the clothes. But there's also the possibility that manufacturers of football clothes will take players' experiences of clothes and their perceptions of relations between body and clothes as starting points for products that, to a greater extent, combine health-related medical alter-

natives, like functions that prevent or protect against injuries, with features, like lightness, thinness, and airiness, which means well-being for players. Wearing such clothes, players would probably individually decide to protect themselves even if their clubs didn't regulate what they wear. That would strengthen the connections between football clothes and health in the broad sense, including medical, social, and psychological factors.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In the interviews, travel tracksuits worn when going to an away game by bus are also mentioned as a means of creating team togetherness. One male player said regarding the reason for having travel tracksuits: 'Everyone must wear the same clothes. Look like a team!'
- <sup>2</sup> To avoid confusion, it must be said from the start that football in Sweden is called soccer in American English.
- <sup>3</sup> When Craik discusses body techniques, she draws on Mauss, who uses the term 'techniques of the body' (Mauss 2006: 77–96).
- <sup>4</sup> Different experiences that were actually discussed during the interviews and can be interpreted as related to gender will be dealt with in another article. A draft of a text regarding constructions of femininity related to football clothes was a distributed paper in the Research Committee on Sociology of Sport (RC 27) at the XVII ISA World Congress of Sociology in July 2010, held in Gothenburg.
- <sup>5</sup> Anorexic supermodels are, of course, a remarkable exception to this.
- <sup>6</sup> According to the World Health Organization definition from 1948.
- <sup>7</sup> This seems to be a perspective that the sports brand Adidas has picked up on in its advertising in 2011, where the football boot F50 Adizero is shown together with the text 'all light, all fast'.
- <sup>8</sup> Three of the interviewed female players were not happy with the socks though. They especially complained that they were not elastic enough and that the feet were too big. One male player had had problems with his shoes rubbing. The rapid turns he performed repeatedly during a game gave him blisters on the bottom of his feet. To avoid this, he used both an orthopaedic sole, which stabilised the position of the foot in the shoe, and special socks. 'Running socks' suited his needs better than ordinary football socks since they had two layers of fabric that move towards each other, and the movement between the foot and the sock caused no friction. He cut the feet off of his football socks and wore his special socks underneath. Most of his special sock was hidden in the shoe, and he fastened the tops of the rib-knit football socks with tape to make it look as if he had the same socks as all the other players.

- <sup>9</sup> It could just as well be a she. What is written here is valid for both men and women. But the person quoted is a man. Therefore, I have written 'he' and 'his'.
- <sup>10</sup> Another example of such a blending of sensations was given by one player who very quickly went from talking about smell to weight. When speaking about his T-shirt, soaked with sweat, he said it was both nasty smelling and heavier than a dry one.
- <sup>11</sup> Opinions, however, were not expressed in the interviews with the female players about whether it is good or bad if the use of shin guards during training is regulated by the club.
- <sup>12</sup> Someone else, instead, claims that legs and feet are the tools of a football player.

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