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# Disengaging from high-risk sports: the identity-based rationales and biographical shifts that lead male athletes to “give up”

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Sports sociologists have widely questioned what pushes individuals to take part in 'high-risk sports'. However, they have somewhat neglected the reasons that lead individuals to stop confronting the risks involved: despite their enthusiasm, individuals invariably disengage and all give up eventually. The analysis of twenty-nine life stories reveals that there are numerous intertwined reasons that prompt men athletes both to take part in and drop out of these activities. This paper aims to shed light on the individual and organizational dynamics that might lead to disengagement over the course of an individual's lifetime. Dynamics linked to change and continuity appear to structure the decision to drop out.

Keywords: disengagement; dropping out of sports; outdoor sports; risk; identity

Over the last thirty years, outdoor activities have spread widely (Lefèvre and Thiéry 2010). In some of them, accidents cause serious injuries or even death on a regular basis (Soulé et al. 2017)<sup>1</sup>. Usually aware of the risks they run, participants in such activities are involved in singular forms of 'bodily engagement' (Routier and Soulé 2012) that necessitate an autonomous safety management. In this case, not only is danger inherent in the activity, but "practitioners have a particular interest in courting danger while still maintaining control over themselves, their equipment, their surroundings, and/or their sanity" (Laurendeau 2008, 294). This serious game enables participants to test and demonstrate their skills and their ability to cope with uncertainty.

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<sup>1</sup> For some mountain sports activities, Soulé et al (2017) have established a mortality index representing the percentage of deaths among all accident victims. BASE jumping is at the top of the list with a mortality index of 47%. In comparison, microlight aircraft has an index of 38% (in second rank) and mountaineering, generally considered particularly risky, an index of 13%, ranking 10th.

Voluntary risk-taking in sport could be seen to contrast with the growing social demand for security in contemporary Western societies (Giddens 1991; Beck and Chalmers 1996; Peretti-Watel 2003). We will therefore examine “forms of high levels of voluntary risk-taking in sport that both fascinate and intrigue, entailing admiration as well as misunderstanding” (Soulé and Corneloup 2007). To date, social scientists have broached “extreme sports” through diverse perspectives. By way of an illustration we could mention the work of Stranger (1999) on surfing, Wheaton (2000) on windsurfing, Laurendeau and Van Brunschot on skydiving (2005), Martha and Griffet (2006) on BASE jumping, West and Allin (2010) on rock climbing, Soulé, Routier and Boivert (2012) on sailing or Pabion-Mouriès, Reynier and Soulé (2016) on freestyle skiing and snowboarding. Beside this research focused on specific activities, some academics developed transversal analyses of risk taking: Lyng (1990) through the concept of ‘edgework’; Routier and Soulé (2012) through the concept of ‘bodily engagement’. Whether it be a quest for intense thrills, a desire to achieve results, a hunger for adventure, or even the urge to forge an identity, a whole range of explanations, many of which are complementary, coexist and allow us to better understand the reasons why individuals get involved in potentially lethal sports.

Conversely, social science research poorly focused on the drop out of such sports activities. Through the sociological concept of career (Hughes 1955; Becker 1985), this article aims to analyse the difficulties encountered to disengage, and to typify them according to their underlying dynamics. Our purpose is to place into perspective both the reasons for which individuals claim to act (individual dynamics) and the contexts in which they act (structural dynamics), as proposed by Fillieule (2001), Darmon (2008) or Héliardot (2010) regarding other forms of commitment (political activism, militantism, etc.). Disengagement from hazardous activities is a multifaced phenomenon (Routier 2013) that requires a plural analytical framework (Routier 2011). Lyng (2014, 444) himself considers jointly “individual

motivations in relation to historically-specific structural forces impinging on social actors”. Now rooted in a Goffmanian interactionism approach, his approach to risk-taking initially relied on a Marxism perspective before structuralism (through the lens of modern reflexivity) became his main framework for taking “structural forces” into consideration. Lyng's concept of ‘edgework’ is an essential foundation for this contribution; at one level Lyng emphasises the existential and phenomenological perspective of risk-taking (Lyng 2012), but also the structural imperatives of late modernity forcing people into greater risk-taking in their everyday life. ‘Edgework’ engages with the core debates around structure and agency associated with risk-taking in late modernity.

### **Theoretical framework: bodily engagement and disengagement**

Rather than a set of sports activities, bodily engagement refers to a type of danger exposure that is conscious and assumed (Routier and Soulé 2012). Reasoning in terms of danger acceptance should not lead us to believe that it is the keystone of investment. Engagement must be understood in the dual sense of "conduct" and "act", referring to "doing" but also to "being". Plural forms of exposure coexist, but not all of them can be qualified as engagement. In this perspective, “bodily engagement” implies a concrete pledge of the participant's integrity. It also supposes the autonomy of participants, rather than relying on external security. This ethics of responsibility for one's actions is cornerstone; it is coupled with a strong identity content that bodily engagement could reinforce.

Through the concept of 'edgework', Lyng (1990) promotes the idea that bodily engagement must be understood through the symbolic universes of both participants and the society they live in. It makes sense as a response to social oppression characterized by "alienated work", over-socialization, rationalization, bureaucratization and radical individualism (Lyng 2008). Moreover, faced with this feeling of engulfment, practitioners seek to assert their control on uncertain situation through voluntary risk-taking. The concept

of 'edgework' is all the most relevant here that it explains the unique nature and motivation for engaging in voluntary risk taking, as well as the specific qualities of the experience (Lyng 2012, 410).

Rooted in contemporary risk culture (Peretti-Watel 2003), this trend is consistent with the individual will to exert control and reflexivity in a context of accelerated social change. Against this backdrop, an intense bodily engagement provides cathartic properties allowing a personalized construction of identity (Stranger 1999). Both because the ability to face contingency became a source of valorisation (Giddens 1991), and because societal efforts to mitigate the manifestations of uncertainty made such opportunities scarce. Paradoxically, an overly-regulated life would be at the origin of bodily engagement, in order to temper the flat calm of routine existence, to spice up daily life, but also to benefit from the demonstration and staging of the control exercised over uncertainty (Lyng 1990; Mitchell 1983).

By linking the meaning of voluntary risk-taking and the confinement of individuals in assigned professional roles and social settings, and by integrating this question into a more general macro-sociological framework, Lyng positions his analysis in a dialectical scheme of intelligibility (in the meaning of Berthelot 2001). Voluntary risk-taking being a multidimensional phenomenon (Lyng 2014), the cathartic view constitutes another facet that reintroduces the singularity of social reinterpretations by individuals.

This pluralist perspective is consistent with the few studies published on disengagement from "high-risk sports". Various situations, ranging from "turning points" to catastrophic events, can lead to drop out (Routier 2013). Echoing the focus on reflexivity as a key feature of social order in the late modernity (Lyng 2014), disengagement seems to take two main forms, characterised by the role of will and autonomy in the process (Routier 2013). Life events (such as an accident) may force participants to accept a change both unforeseen and unwanted, likely to be somewhat traumatic. In contrast, when the desire gradually fades

and/or the practice competes with new obligations (family and/or professional), the process of disengagement is more voluntary, better anticipated, and therefore relatively well managed – thus maintaining a certain balance in the lives of former practitioners.

Most research tackled either the causes of career termination, or the consequences of retirement (in terms of identity and life satisfaction) (Lavallee and Wylleman 2000). Retired athletes tend to cling on to their former sporting role so as to avoid having to face up to new situations that might illustrate or reinforce their loss of social status. In reference to the concept of social death, "it is the transition from being exceptional, admired and valued by society to being an ordinary citizen, a "nobody", that troubles elite athletes who have retired" (Navel 2011, 11). Other less fatalistic approaches suggest that the end of a sporting career is a transition from one state to another (Werthner and Orlick 1986), that can be anticipated and controlled to a degree. If we follow this argument, the halting of a sporting career should be seen as a double transition, not only from one activity to another, but also in terms of role and status (Coakley 1993). The entailed "discontinuity" (Crook and Robertson 1991) in the athlete's life mobilises his reflexive capacity to be an actor of this transition.

To "understand the thought process that practitioners go through" (Lafabrègue 2007, 310), we will undertake an examination of their successive biographical states. For this purpose, several factors (objective and subjective, individual and collective) must be considered in order to report on these "typical phases [...] which affect the way in which individuals interpret the events that punctuate their existence" (Lafabrègue 2007, 310). As Bidard (2006) suggests, these events prompt questions regarding their unpredictability and/or congruence. Such facets of disengagement as its degree, and the extent to which the individual controls the decision (level of self-determination or individual reflexivity) must also be taken into account. To summarize, disengagement from a sports activity is considered as a journey during which various events, be they sport or non-sport related, lead practitioners

to assign evolving meaning to their involvement in an activity and, therefore, to reconsider its whys and wherefores (Coakley 1993). This career process is a social construct resulting from interactions between various actors (athletes, loved ones, coaches, institutions, etc.). Our goal is not so much to reveal the most common paths to disengagement, but to explore the various types of shift that can be observed and to typify them in terms of general dynamics.

## **Methodology**

Our approach is part of a hermeneutical and “comprehensive” thought process for which the semi-structured interview seems to be the most appropriate. According to Habermas (1979), hermeneutics consists in interpreting the meaning of individuals’ intentions through action and speech. More specifically, we used ethnosociological life stories (Bertaux 2005, 8) to bring to light "courses of situated action", and reveal the motivations and reasons for action of the actor according to a specific context conceived as a set of specific structural forces affected them, in accordance with Lyng’s (2014) recommendation.

Questioning the process of disengagement and past commitment requires the respondent to immerse himself in a past when his motivations and the meaning of his practice potentially differ from their current expression. It necessitates an important reflexive effort on the part of the respondent. The diachronic nature of ethnosociological life stories is of first interest, since it is likely to unveil the rationale underpinning the actions of individuals in their biographical development. Over the course of a sporting career, processes of engagement and disengagement are built upon "causes" that emerge at different points in time. This succession of phases, behavioural changes and personal perspectives are the result of events and/or interactions whose outcome is potentially unpredictable (Grossetti 2004). As it stands, therefore, the individual cannot always anticipate them, which puts a strain on his decision-making autonomy and reflexivity over the course of his life. Finally, it is important not to consider disengagement as a linear and binary process (the transition from one state to

another, i.e. to be or not to be an edgeworker). If it can be thought of as total and definitive, disengagement is also sometimes temporary, and/or partial, i.e. gradually distancing with edgework. Indeed, a practitioner may be unable to practice following an accident and seriously think about stopping the moment we question him. However, this does not mean that it will never resume. In this case, the disengagement is only temporary. Finally, for athletes used to being close to the limits, disengagement can also be thought as a gradually distancing from the game to the limits, which does not mean stopping the activity, but just lifting the foot and no longer engaging so strongly.

After an exploratory phase (n=14), 29 individuals were interviewed (14 practitioners and 15 former practitioners). All have been or are still intensively involved in seven activities<sup>2</sup> consistent with the conceptualisation of bodily engagement (Routier and Soulé 2012). This data was supplemented by numerous informal discussions and exchanges with these athletes. Interviewing practitioners in the frame of an investigation focused on disengagement may seem surprising at first glance. However, this is consistent with our intent to better understand the potential difficulties encountered by “disengaging” athletes, and to consider disengagement as a progressive, rather than linear and binary process. While the question of the representativeness of the sample is not very relevant here, the set of "cases" examined was nonetheless "constitute so as to make it possible to compare them by identifying their similarities and differences" (Bertaux 2005, 27).

Finding volunteers who were willing to take part in lengthy interviews was a difficult and laborious task (200 people were initially contacted). As a consequence, we have certainly missed some forms of engagement. To overcome this limitation, an appraisal based on the truth table method (Becker 2002) is provided after the results analysis. Using a logical

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<sup>2</sup> Mountaineering, BASE jumping, freeriding, caving, deep-sea sailing, freediving and hang gliding.



combination of a small number of relevant attributes<sup>3</sup>, this method enables the emergence of "types" of disengagement that our inductive approach probably caused us to neglect. More precisely, like Hélaridot (2010) in a research carried out on career paths, attributes were synthesized around two structuring axes: the first one specifies the characteristics of the initial situation according to the opposition continuity/change; the second one specifies the degree of concordance of this dynamic with the individual's aspirations.

From a sociodemographic perspective, the interviewees were all men aged between 23 and 70<sup>4</sup>. Given the difficulty for obtaining a gender-balanced sample, we chose to focus on the paths taken by men. This is an important point since risk regimes are gendered (Penin 2006; Laurendeau 2008). Moreover, only 10 of the interviewees had children. Most were single or living with a partner but unmarried, with the majority belonging to middle or upper class (middle or senior managers, heads of companies, self-employed professionals, etc.).

Interviews revealed that disengagement is all but easy, given the intense, almost addictive (Bunn 2017) nature of the experiences described. The encountered difficulties (such as accidents) and reluctances (on the part of the family, for example) were not necessarily strong enough to make athletes stop. Therefore, it is important first to identify the difficulties faced when attempting to abandon or slow down. Then, we will focus on the events and factors that trigger a disengagement process, differentiating between structural and individual ones.

Based on this primary analysis, several combinations of biographical shifts emerge around two dynamics. First, the individual can choose to adapt (accommodation) either completely

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<sup>3</sup> Primarily, the characteristics of the initial situation with respect to the opposition between continuity and change (structural dynamic). This allows us to qualify the situation independently of the practitioners' immediate will. Secondly, the degree of concordance between the structural dynamic and the desires or aspirations of practitioners in terms of the opposition between yes (accept) and no (endure/resist) (individual dynamic). This allows us to qualify how the individual perceives the initial situation and responds to it by attempting to either accept or modify it.

<sup>4</sup> Their sociodemographic characteristics are detailed in Appendix 1.

and wilfully, or partially and reluctantly. He can also choose to resist continuity in order to generate change, or resist change to better anticipate its impact.

## **The struggle to disengage**

### *Nostalgic retirement: leaving the door open*

Most of the former practitioners interviewed acknowledge that they occasionally feel genuine nostalgia when thinking about the past. The difficulty with which some individuals called an end to their sporting story also attests to the passion that fuels these careers. It also underlines the importance of these experiences in building the identities of the men we spoke to. Talking at length about their past involvement becomes a way of reliving a bygone period. Moreover, their current activities rarely give them the same satisfaction as those they have abandoned:

*"I have absolutely no regrets about what I do today. I work on fascinating projects, on things that I am very passionate about. But it is true that I sometimes think back to the races I took part in, about their intensity, and it's true that... I have no regrets... but I do get a little emotional"* (Jacques, yachtsman – age 48, former practitioner).

Nostalgia for "adventurous" achievements sometimes requires keeping a door open to the past to cope with change. Thus, while projecting into the future, some interviewees talk more or less directly about their desire to return to their sport if the opportunity arises, whether or not this is a long-term venture:

*" I'll get it [his hang glider] out again because the friends with whom... One of them is in Annecy and he said to me "Hey Laurent, next time you come down to Annecy, we can go flying" (...) And if I do fly again, the first few flights will be easy ones. Just so I can regain my bearings, you know?"* (Laurent, hang glider – age 62, former practitioner).

During their interview, former practitioners share vivid memories, associated to pronounced hand and arm gestures and striking facial expressions. All are indicative of recollections that

cannot always be put into words, most of these experiences being partly ineffable (Lyng 1990). While they are conscious that they will probably never take up their sport again, leaving such doors open is also illustrative of the difficulty to disengage.

### ***Why not disengage, but what to do?***

A number of interviewees are simply not ready yet to considering disengagement. When confronted with this eventuality, some have difficulty imagining activities that could provide some kind of compensation. François (base jumper – age 50, continuing practitioner) is particularly committed to his sport, which he deems to be the only activity that can bring him everything he needs (recognition, self-esteem, thrills, etc.). He believes that today "*no other sport is as powerful as base jumping (...), it has everything!*" Calling a halt to his involvement would mean investing in another activity difficult for him to identify. Nervousness, situations of uncertainty and intoxicating sensations are ingredients that this interviewee states he needs to feel alive. Lastly, losing the touch of spice that enhances his experiences is a source of anxiety for this base jumper. The fact that he does not know how to "live" outside of base jumping makes him a "prisoner" of his sport, because of the lack of potential replacement pastimes.

Didier (yachtsman – age 48, former practitioner) also considered halting his career in deep sea sailing without knowing how:

*"I have experienced quite serious moments of doubt, and at times I have wanted to do something else, but I didn't really know what (...) I couldn't find anything as good as what I was doing (...) So I never really looked for anything else, I pondered the question, but I didn't really search for an answer?"*

This phenomenon is especially apparent in sports such as sailing, hang gliding, freediving and base jumping, where age has a limited impact on performance.

### ***Slowing down rather than disengaging***

The "strength" of their commitment is such that it is almost unthinkable, for some interviewees, to give up their pastime, even after a serious accident. "Slowing down" is, on the other hand, an alternative. After a potentially fatal accident, David (base jumper – age 40, former practitioner), returned to the sport as soon as the opportunity arose:

*"Everything changed in 2000 when I had a very serious accident. I hit a cliff when my chute opened and I was basically broken all over. I had a few major operations and spent 8 months in a wheelchair. It took me a year to walk again. It was catastrophic (...) because I was very badly injured and I thought I would never jump again. And then my natural urges returned after a year and a half or two years, as soon as I was better. Now I think I can say that my best jumps are ahead of me (...) In the beginning when I was all smashed up, I told myself that I wasn't that young any more anyway. I had become practically disabled and for what? Just for a bit of fun? (...) But now I'm jumping again pretty much every month".*

As numerous practitioners put it, accidents and serious injuries are part of the game. That is probably why, out of the four base jumpers questioned, two were not jumping at the time of the interview due to a recent accident, but were still not considering putting an end to their career. One of them is Damien (base jumper – age 42, former practitioner):

*Damien: "I spotted the landing area a little late and I steered my chute in the wrong direction (...) my left leg hit a rock and was smashed into several pieces (...) it was a tough two and a half years. First of all because it affected my ability to work, so there was no money coming in. It was also tough physically, and I'm still bent out of shape now (...) I had to move back in with my parents during my recovery period (...) The girl I was with at the time left me..."*

*Interviewer: "And even when the accident happened, did it not cross your mind?"*

*Damien: "To stop? When I woke up after the crash, the first thing I thought about was jumping again".*

Base jumpers are not the only ones who go through these difficult times. Cédric (freerider – age 33, continuing practitioner) started skiing again a few years after suffering an accident:

*"It was really hard when I had my accident. Not hard because I was injured or anything. It was hard because I couldn't ski anymore. The doctors said I probably wouldn't be able to ski like I did before the accident. But I worked hard and got myself back to the highest level, to the point where I was picked for the French national team. All that's in the past now, competing for France and everything... I work here now and ski in my free time. But it's true that I don't go as big as I used to. As I was telling you, I don't think I could ever stop. It's just that with time, age and possibly the accident too... I've probably become a little more careful (...) But stopping altogether? Forget it!"*

Showing less commitment and practicing less frequently does not mean that one cannot progress. Francis (freediver – age 43, former practitioner) says that he dives much deeper than he did when he was "*still in the race*":

*"I actually perform better now, even though I don't attempt records or compete any more (...) I still train a lot (...) And I perform better in deep water than I did at the height of my career. I've started using a monofin for constant-weight diving and I've gone through the 100-metre barrier. So, for me, freediving has become a kind of quest or study, rather than being about breaking records"*.

Disengagement can therefore take different forms and is not limited to complete withdrawal from a discipline. Slowing down, while still continuing to progress, is also seen by some practitioners as a form of disengagement insofar as, for them, it is not so much their performance that defines their physical commitment, but their investment (in terms of time and stakes involved). In other terms, as equipment and techniques evolve, achievements that would previously have been considered outstanding are today commonplace.

### ***When unforeseen events cause individuals to re-engage***

Among the practitioners who had interrupted their engaged practice, some returned to the activity when the circumstances changed or as a result of a chance encounter. Damien (base jumper – age 42, former practitioner) exemplifies this perfectly:

*"I hadn't jumped since 1997, whether it be sky diving or base jumping. Then one day... I was managing a restaurant and an American guy came up to me (...) he said "I feel like I know you"; I said "so do I"; then he asked me "weren't you a sky diver?"; I said "yes I was", etc. So, I asked him "what are you doing here?"; he said "I'm on my way back from a sky diving contest in Russia and tomorrow, we're going to the Gorges du Verdon (...) come along, I've got a 3<sup>rd</sup> chute you can use". And that's how I started base jumping again".*

However, unpredictability is not the same as improbability. While the circumstances surrounding this encounter may be qualified as unpredictable, they only led to the individual re-engaging with the sport because the desire was already there. Damien already felt the urge to start jumping again, so he seized this opportunity which served as a trigger for his re-engagement.

Interviewer: *"So was it essentially by chance that you got "back in the saddle"?"*

Damien: *"There was an element of chance, but this chance was provoked because I was still in touch with my friends in Florida and I was up to date with everything they were getting up to. I got the occasional phone call from them saying "you have to jump again", that kind of thing. I never really let go of base jumping (...) I didn't jump for 10 years and then one day I went back and did a jump... I don't think it was by chance, or maybe it was by chance, or maybe that day the urge was stronger than another day. But once you've jumped once, you're back in the game".*

Thus, while their family and/or friends might exert a degree of pressure, while they may previously have suffered accidents and injuries, and while the ageing process often means that individuals cannot partake as intensively as in the past, practitioners find it hard to disengage.

The intensity of their past experiences is often so irresistible that it overrides the difficulties and reticence with which they are confronted.

Disengagement cannot be viewed in a binary fashion, or as a simple process. It is a phenomenon that forms part of a continuum ranging from "slowing down" to "stopping completely". Although numerous participants state that they are in no way considering disengaging from their sport, a smaller number explain that what prompts them to stay in the sport sometimes contradicts their better judgement and is primarily due to circumstance.

### **Some dynamics of bodily disengagement**

An analysis of the stories highlights various types of shift in the biographies of practitioners. By adopting a position that could be qualified as "subjectivising" (Bessin, Bidart and Grossetti 2010), we will attempt to understand not only the meaning that individuals assign to the events that have punctuated their life journey, but also the temporalities and rationales that underpin them. The aim is to explore the combination of structural and individual rationales that might come into play over successive biographical phases that hold particular meaning for the individual. Through this framework, disengagement should be seen as more than just a bifurcation<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, the shifts that take place are not necessarily sudden, unexpected or related to catastrophic events (Negroni 2005). Two main rationales emerge behind the observed shifts, which immediately call into question the role of reflexivity in disengagement: the first is a logic of adaptation (or accommodation), while the second is a logic of resistance (or distancing). Both can take a variety of temporal forms, depending on the consequences of events that can vary in their suddenness and predictability.

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<sup>5</sup> In the sense of a sudden, unplanned and durable change in one's personal circumstances and life prospects, in one or more spheres of activity.

## *Adapting*

Within our corpus, adaptation takes two forms: total and wilful on one hand, and on the other hand, partial and reluctant. The former is a rather “happy” adaptation, while the latter is tinged with sorrow. Both are linked to an external source of change, since disengagement is not initially triggered by the individual. Consequently, whether the change is viewed positively or negatively depends intrinsically on the individual's perception and experiences. As H elardot (2010) points out, in such situations the old adage that states that "everything happens for a reason" and the idea that you cannot "cheat luck" both seem to be verified.

### *Adapting completely and wilfully*

Several of our interviewees recount singular life experiences and can be categorised as individuals who have adapted completely and wilfully to their change of path. These are situations in which circumstances blend "naturally" with the wishes of the practitioner, giving the latter the opportunity to bring about an evolution in their life by disengaging from their sporting activities. Here, we can draw parallels between this type of situation and the notion of coincidence (Becker 2002). Indeed, things are neither totally random nor entirely pre-determined: they simply "coincide". In such cases, desires and external factors combine, instilling individuals with a feeling of existential consonance (Bajoit 2003).

The most typical illustration of this scenario is undoubtedly Didier (Yachtsman – age 48, former practitioner). Having spent many years sailing at the highest level, Didier chose to gradually scale down his involvement in the sport and put his energy into new activities linked to his former profession. The shifts that enabled this evolution did not take place at his own behest, but followed a more structural logic that ultimately suited him:

*"Deep down, I probably also wanted to do something else with my life. I just happened to start supervising the construction of boats (...) and then I managed the "XXX" team,*



*and then I was asked to be a race director. One thing led to another (...) I hadn't planned it at all (...) Basically, I was there at the right time and with the right experience".*

In a period during which Didier got bored, he was looking for a change without really knowing what to do. Throughout his sporting career, he has been able to adapt and seize the opportunities that were available to him. New roles and positions became available at the time and he had the required skills. In this sense, Didier found himself in a situation when an individual logic fitted the structural one; his own desires and external factors coincided.

Other paths can be said to resemble this type of adaptation, which is not limited to opportunism and chance. In completely different circumstances, Dominique and Jean (Cavers – age 69 and 70, former practitioners) gradually disengaged by adapting over the course of their lives. It is true to say that neither would be able to express what it was that led them to disengage, so slow and smooth was the transition. Ultimately, "*that's life*" (Jean) and "*that's just how it happened, that's all, with the passing of time*" (Dominique). Very gradually, their "extreme" caving turned into "underground hiking". Both cavers have no difficulty accepting this situation, which their body imposed upon them. While their aspirations in no way converged with the structural dynamic taking place, it cannot be said that the situation was something they had to endure against their will. Their paths took the form of a "maturation" process. Indeed, these paths were gradual and slowly altered the value of advantages and statuses, leading to the decision to commence a new phase (Bidart and Lavenu 1999).

For his part, Adrien (Mountaineer – age 32, former practitioner) experienced a change that was altogether more tangible, both from a temporal perspective and in terms of its consequences. He chose to physically disengage subsequent to two key events: meeting his wife, which led him to relocate and climb much less frequently, and having his first child, after which he withdrew from the sport completely. Once again, this was a change brought about by a dynamic that was external to the individual, one that was fully and immediately

assimilated. In this sense, it did not come into conflict with Adrien's desires, because even when he was still involved, he would tell himself that "*it would be great one day to meet a girl who's easy going and who I could spend my life with*"; or "*it was clear that I wanted kids one day*". The structural dynamic initiated here was in line with the individual dynamic, which was initially inhibited but nonetheless very present. What occurred in this case was a fortuitous convergence of two dynamics, or a coincidence so to speak (Becker 2002).

### *Adapting partially and reluctantly*

Conversely, when the change is "neither chosen nor positively reappropriated, we enter the "bad luck" rationale that is synonymous with impotent passivity and fatalism, i.e., a feeling of hopelessness" (Hélaridot 2010, 166). In such circumstances, individual logic (driven by desires) comes up against the structural logic of the context (external factors beyond one's control). In some cases of forced disengagement, there are signs that the individual feels the urge to resist, but is incapable or no longer capable of doing so. This instils them with strong negative feelings about the situation, which may be viewed as unfair and cause powerful existential tensions (Bajoit 2003).

Accidents are an obvious example of this type of situation: because they disable practitioners (at least temporarily), such events prompt them to disengage against their will.

Subsequent to accidents, three of the base jumpers interviewed have been forced to disengage. However, the adaptation undergone by these practitioners has only been partial and they are not planning to actually stop. Indeed, they have only partially adapted to the situation, leading them to follow a logic of resistance.

Cédric (Freerider – age 33, continuing practitioner) also suffered an accident from which he might never have recovered. While he eventually clipped back into his skis, the event had enough of an effect on him to cause him to significantly tone down his level of commitment. That is why his disengagement could be said to be partial and reluctant.

What fundamentally differentiates these two ways of adapting is the fact that the base jumpers have adapted only partially. Because their adaptation is purely a physical obligation, they cannot move on and imagine never being able to jump again. In these cases, partial and reluctant adaptation is more of a transitional phase than an end in itself and the underlying logic that guides the three base jumpers is ultimately one of resistance to change. Conversely, Cédric has genuinely and permanently disengaged.

### ***Resisting***

Another form of change relates less to a process of adaptation than to an opposing logic of resistance. Two scenarios can be observed: first, a dynamic of change initiated by the individual based on a logic of resistance to structural continuity; second, a dynamic where the individual puts up resistance to a change that arises (or that is imposed upon him), without completely excluding the possibility of adapting. These two scenarios can be reformulated as follows:

- the individual initiates the change when he is in a situation of stability and continuity that no longer fully satisfies him;
- the individual temporarily resists the change taking place and attempts to anticipate (consciously or not) possible solutions depending on the opportunities that arise.

### ***Resisting continuity to generate change***

The first type of resistance is displayed by athletes who willingly decide, at a relatively specific and identifiable moment, to initiate a change and call a more or less abrupt halt to a stable situation. In other words, by being the instigators of change, they consciously take it upon themselves to disengage. Here, individual logics override structural logics, even if the latter cannot be shrugged off entirely.

One illustration of this scenario is the story of Francis (freediver – age 43, former practitioner). After 12 years of intensive and competitive freediving at international level, Francis decided to cut his career short in the early 2000s, after a process that lasted around two years (*"I wanted to attempt the sport's three big records over an eight-day period: constant weight, variable weight and no limit [...] before ending my career in 1999"*). At the time, Francis was in a race with another diver to reach an emblematic depth in one of the three disciplines. His ambition at this point was to make history by breaking three final records<sup>6</sup>. He subsequently put an end to his career, as he had planned. Today, Francis remains an avid freediver and continues to progress, but he no longer competes. He has set up a business and works in several countries, where he introduces people to the sport, organises courses, takes part in television programmes, etc. However, there is a curious disjunction in his discourse: today, he says *"it's become my job"*, even though he was already making a living from his sport previously. This highlights what many individuals feel when they go from being a professional athlete (and therefore being paid to do something they consider to be a pastime and/or a passion) to simply having a job in the field, with all this entails in terms of following a routine.

It is important to point out that a logic of resistance to continuity causes change to occur in incremental steps, much like the cases of total and voluntary adaptation presented above. During an initial phase, Francis totally and willingly accepted to maintain his level of commitment in the lead-up to his "retirement". This is something he anticipated. Thus, his acceptance of a degree of biographical continuity in his professional career could be viewed as a phase that prepared him to resist this very continuity. Francis used the existing resources at his disposal – suggesting a form of continuation – to prepare for his record attempts and

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<sup>6</sup> This actually took him two years, due to conditions that were often unfavourable to his attempts.

thus "go out with a bang", which would give full legitimacy to his future projects (the opening of his "international freediving school") as well as facilitate his disengagement.

Although this biographical shift is not particularly radical, it nonetheless impacted his physical commitment. Thus, it can be said that while his abilities have improved, his level of commitment is lower than in the past.

#### *Resisting change to better anticipate its impact*

Lastly, "bifurcations in the making" (Hélaridot 2010, 166) are observed when an individual resists the change taking place, without rejecting it entirely. In this scenario, the change is foreseeable, or at least conceivable. This configuration is particularly interesting because "it shines a spotlight on the resistance and anticipation strategies implemented by individuals so as to delay or prevent the event that threatens them" (Hélaridot 2010, 166). These are situations where events disrupt the career path of individuals who have not anticipated the disengagement phase. This is notably the case when the event is sudden and unexpected, but does not call into question the practitioner's capacity (physical, in particular) to remain committed. In other terms, the individuals must deal with an unstable situation that will, in principle, require them to alter their path, but they cannot resign themselves to doing so, because they have failed to anticipate the situation and therefore have no "back-up solution". And yet, the individual knows that they will not be able to resist for long and will eventually have to accept this externally-initiated reality. Here, their tendency will be to resist temporarily to give themselves time, postpone the inevitable and organise, not to say (re)define, the upcoming change.

The story of Julien (freediver – age 26, continuing practitioner) provides a relevant illustration. Indeed, after the death of someone close to him (in a diving accident), Julien did a great deal of soul searching, apparently indicating that the process of change had been triggered. Because he found it too difficult to continue in his favoured discipline, he decided

to set himself new challenges by switching from constant-weight to free immersion diving. Julien used this switch as a way of intrinsically resisting an extrinsic dynamic of change. By changing disciplines, Julien was essentially starting from scratch and reducing the amount of pressure he was under. It also allowed him to postpone the end of his career. The time he saved enabled him to plan new projects, anticipate his disengagement and prepare for the future. This was his way of controlling the process that had begun. The solution stemmed from the experiences he had had previously and, curiously, with his deceased friend:

*"L. and I had talked [a few years earlier] about making a documentary, because he had set up his own production company. So, we bought a camera and shot a documentary (...) It was a turning point for me, since it was the first time that I had freedived for a reason other than competing or attempting a record. I had discovered a new facet of freediving (...) I'm still planning to develop something along those lines in the future (...) because I found it so aesthetically beautiful. I think images of freediving have extraordinary power. Each time I show people a freediving video, there's a great deal of emotion, it really touches people (...) I want to work in that area in the future".*

Although at the time of the interview Julien describes his projects as a return to his roots, the idea being to rediscover the pleasure of diving, this does not diminish the fact that they form part of a dynamic of resistance to a change that he still cannot resign himself to accepting. Beyond the question of pleasure, his decisions and desires have marked a turning point in his life: new projects underpin his gradual detachment. In this sense, continuity (in the practice of apnea) combines with discontinuity (Julien's no longer a real edgeworker). But Julien's course is full of twists and turns. He finally resumed competition and the quest for records. After a diving accident (hypoxic syncope) almost left him dead, he decided to definitively quit competition and only dives for the pleasure of immersion and image capturing (which was his project under construction, a few years before). This example refers very directly to the idea mentioned earlier: disengagement is not easy, and early signs must often be redefined by

athletes to make sense and trigger disengagement. Even if Julien's accident has led him to enter into a dynamic of adaptation, it was preceded by a dynamic of resistance.

Lastly, it should be underlined that, unlike the path followed by Francis, Julien's story seems to have been shaped by a dynamic of change in which the "intertwining" of activities encouraged a biographical shift (Bidart and Lavenu 1999). While his relatives were indirectly asking him to withdraw, Julien showed resistance following the sudden loss of his friend. This highlights the fact that the time he has given himself has allowed him to structure himself in his existence and to reinterpret his experiences in relation to the event itself. The combination of various factors, in the long run, has generated the possibility of a disengagement.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

To summarize, we can basically distinguish between an active and a passive form of biographical inflection. This opposition echoes the traditional distinction between the actor and the agent models. Nevertheless, by extrapolating these results and supplementing them with situations that have not led to disengagement, a number of variations can be considered according to the two "generic" models of active and passive biographical shifts. We decided to use the logical procedure of truth tables (Becker 2002), an extrapolation that enriched our results through the broadening of envisaged cases. It led us to build a set of eventualities representing a dozen possible scenarios, depending on whether the structural and individual dynamics are accepted, enforced or rejected, and depending on whether disengagement (or continued engagement) is total or partial. Thus, the four disengagement dynamics identified and exemplified inductively are joined by four additional dynamics (see Table 1).

We therefore have three examples of disengagement (cases 5, 7 and 9). "Active" disengagement (case 5) takes place when a person decides, at a specific point in time, to make a break from their current circumstances. This is where the individual dynamic shatters the

continuity of a relatively stable situation. We then observe two disengagement rationales in which adaptation is total and either voluntary or enforced (cases 7 and 9). In neither scenario is the individual the initiator of the disengagement, but the two situations are perceived differently by the protagonists. Indeed, in both cases the structural dynamic triggers the process of disengagement. However, while this is "welcomed" when the opportunity is consistent with the wishes of the individual (case 7), it is "unwanted" when it conflicts with the dynamic they had envisaged (case 9).

Conversely, there are situations in which the individual continues to be committed to an activity (cases 1, 3, 11 and 12), driven by motivations that have been widely covered in the literature. Staying totally and willingly committed to a sport (cases 1 and 12) is a choice made by individuals who have decided not to disengage: case 1 is essentially the result of a structural dynamic, while case 12 is primarily the result of an individual dynamic. These two scenarios stand apart from case 3 insofar as the refusal to disengage is voluntary in the former and endured in the latter. Indeed, there are situations where, despite there being a desire to change, the individual does not have the capacity to do so. Continuation through temporary resistance (case 11) differs from the other cases in that it is simply "disengagement waiting to happen". The change is foreseeable, but its nature remains uncertain. The individual must prepare and anticipate how they will fill the void that will appear.

Finally, there are also situations where individuals have partially disengaged (cases 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10), i.e., where the individual breaks unreservedly from their past commitment. The key distinction between these (partial) disengagement rationales can be drawn on two levels, depending on whether the decision is voluntary or enforced, on the one hand, and whether it stems from a dynamic of continuity or change, on the other.

This typology highlights fundamental differences in the characteristics of disengagement according to the sport's importance in the life of those questioned. While the



"pros" seek to gain control over its occurrence come what may, amateurs seem less rigid in this regard. Thus, it is quite clear that Francis (freediver – age 43, former practitioner) has anticipated his retirement, in the same way that Julien (freediver – age 26, continuing practitioner) puts up resistance and refuses to make too abrupt a change, preferring to prepare over the long term. Adrien (mountaineer – age 32, former practitioner), Dominique (caver – age 69, former practitioner) and Jean (caver – age 70, former practitioner), on the other hand, have accepted change without necessarily having control over the initial dynamic. The difference in their reactions and their degree of acceptance of change must obviously be viewed in the light of the financial gains afforded by their respective professional careers.

The fact that certain individuals find it difficult to disengage is hardly surprising, given the almost addictive intensity of their past experiences (Bunn 2017). The activities in question are generally practiced in a passionate way, thus becoming almost exclusive leisure activities, constitutive of lifestyles, and even, for some, proper professions. Interviewed athletes claim the acceptance of a certain exposure to danger, an edgework (Lyng 1990), experienced as an enclave compared to daily life routine (Elias and Dunning 1994) and an opportunity to go off the beaten track. Accordingly, develop an alternative project and focuses on it helps to disengage from edgework. It can be equated to a biographical turning point of a professional nature, like when an individual prepare his reconversion or his retirement. Conversely, in the absence of projects or activities that could serve as a replacement, and given that they apparently have no other option, some individuals simply "slow down" so as to "keep a hand in the sport", and especially not to lose control and experience an identity crisis that is too strong. What seems to be important here is that disengagement is not total. For some individuals, disengagement ultimately means slowing down, taking distance from the edgework. But given their initial level, it seemed to everyone that they were still engaged.

As regards disengagement strictly speaking, a number of catalysts that are liable to act conjointly have been identified (Routier 2013). Some are structural in nature and external to the individual, while others are inherent to the latter. Accidents are, without doubt, the most compelling structural factor, regardless of whether they are the direct cause of retirement from a sport: they invariably constitute an unforeseen and unwanted biographical turning point. What is important to note is the role that risk can play in the decision to disengage partially or completely. Even if it is not considered as an end to commitment in itself (Martha and Griffet 2006), it does sometimes appear to lie at the root of the decision to stop. When seriousness takes precedence over the game, commitment ceases to be "adventure" (Jankélévitch 1963) and loses its meaning. To this type of unwanted event, we can add the influence, sometimes combined, of others. The "smugglers" (Negroni 2005), who include partners and children are among those who might ferry these individuals from one phase to the next, by influencing their decision to disengage.

Another individual motive for disengagement is the desire to open up to others and, more generally, to the wider world (Routier 2013). Indeed, intensive and prolonged bodily engagement tends, sometimes, to isolate individuals. This logic of openness is more generally part of a process aimed at maintaining or rebuilding self-esteem, despite the change. Indeed, many interviewees built this esteem through an intimate relationship to risk and limits, like edgeworkers. The construction of self-esteem is then mostly individual, though strongly influenced by the sense of privilege and distinction inherent in the exerted mastery (Bunn 2017). Disengagement makes it more interactive, since the practitioner is put out of his world of insiders (Soulé and Walk 2007), and likely to rediscover what the outgroup might have to offer (Routier 2013). Moreover, it is a matter of "moving on", setting up new projects, evolving and adapting. These scenarios are consequently characterised by more voluntary forms of disengagement.

While it may be difficult to accept, disengagement ultimately becomes a part of the biography of many practitioners: indeed, “the inside of edgework space is one that can only be entered temporarily” (Bunn 2017, 11). However, this disengagement is likely to take variable forms and should not be considered in a binary way. While it may be definitive, it may also be temporary. While it may be total, it may also be partial, taking the form of more moderate commitment. In other words, a disengaged athlete may keep on practicing, but no longer be “on the edge”. This is all the more so when the athletes’ social environment leads to redefine what is an “acceptable” commitment (Laurendeau and Van Brunschot 2006). This work on oneself, sometimes impelled from the outside, implies a renegotiation of the boundaries deemed acceptable between chaos and order (Lyng 1990). Whether the individual chooses to adapt or resist, physical disengagement eventually results in biographical shifts that require the individual to display reflexivity.

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