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Strength as phenomenon: a pure phenomenology of sport

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ABSTRACT

Strength is a central element of sport and therefore an equally central topic in sports science. In sports science, strength is dealt with primarily in biomechanics. Biomechanics reduces strength – legitimately – to a scientific subject. As a result, it loses sight of strength as a lifeworld phenomenon. The discipline that allows us to grasp strength as an everyday experience is phenomenology. This essay undertakes a phenomenological analysis of strength to uncover the diversity of strength phenomena in the lifeworld of sport. The theoretical and methodological basis for this is Hermann Schmitz's 'new phenomenology' (*Neue Phänomenologie*). With the help of new phenomenology, I first develop a real definition of strength ('strength is an intrusive effect through one-sided incorporation'). Second, I work out the general structures of the phenomenon of 'strength', that is, a system comprising ten categories ('pulling, pushing, centripetal, centrifugal, lifting, lowering, strong, weak, heavy, light'). Third, I use this system of categories for a phenomenology of sport-immanent strength phenomena. The paper thus makes a contribution to a pure phenomenology of sport.

KEYWORDS Strength; felt body; new phenomenology; pure phenomenology

If we were to summarize the fundamental concern of phenomenology in one sentence, we could say that phenomenology is concerned with describing the general structures of phenomena, that is, states of affairs as they appear to people in their everyday lives. This is linked to phenomenology's critical attitude towards the scientific objectification of lifeworld experiences. The reductionism of science, especially natural science, should be criticized from a phenomenological point of view, because it leads to phenomena of significance to the lifeworld being overlooked or ignored. The anti-reductionist epistemological goal of phenomenology therefore consists in proving that

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the natural world of everyday experience is the ground on which science stands. By searching for the 'seat in life' of scientific objects and concepts, phenomenology rescues lifeworld phenomena from their scientific objectification (which does not mean that it does not recognize the associated gains in knowledge).

This article aims to rescue the *phenomenon of strength*, which is central to sport, from its objectification in sports science. Sports science deals with strength exclusively as a natural scientific object and thus overlooks the diversity of strength phenomena in sports, which only comes into view through a phenomenological analysis of strength. The phenomenological analysis of strength to be presented below is conceived as a *pure phenomenology* of sport. It aims to work out the general structure of the phenomenon of strength and to demonstrate the diversity of strength phenomena in sports. The article thus sets itself apart from the majority of phenomenological sports research, which primarily acts as applied phenomenology.

The theoretical and methodological basis for the pure phenomenology of strength in sport presented here is Hermann Schmitz's 'new phenomenology' (*Neue Phänomenologie*) (Schmitz 1990, 2003, 2019a).[1] I will first present the scientific understanding of strength, before going on to the concept of 'phenomenon' and the method of new phenomenology. On this basis, I will carry out a neophenomenological analysis of strength, which I will use to describe the phenomena of strength in sports. Finally, I will make a case for 'phenomenological strength training', the aim of which is to provide a better understanding of strength phenomena in sports.

Strength as a natural scientific object

Strength is one of the constitutive conditions of every human being and therefore also every sporting movement. Strength is a requirement of all sporting movements, whether it is running short or long distances, swimming or climbing, sprinting from a standing position or somersaulting, taking a running jump, jumping up or down, travelling up or down a slope, lifting, pulling, pushing, or shoving an object – including your own or another person's body – or kicking, throwing, or rolling a ball. Accordingly, every actively practised sport is a 'strength sport' (not just sports labelled with this term, such as weightlifting, bodybuilding, or powerlifting), or rather, this term is a tautology, strictly speaking, precisely because there is no sport without strength.

In sports science, what is meant by strength is defined by biomechanics and training science. According to these disciplines, strength can be defined both physically and functionally. In the physical sense, force (F) is the product of mass (m) and acceleration (a), as expressed in the formula $F = m * a$. In accordance with this principle, 'the acceleration of a given mass is directly

proportional to, and in the same direction as, the force applied and the duration over which it is applied' (Turner and Comfort 2022, 13). From a functional perspective, strength in turn describes the 'ability to exert force on an external resistance'. On this basis, there are various ways in which athletes have to use strength: they must 'manipulate their own body mass against gravity (e.g. sprinting, gymnastics, etc.), both their body mass and an opponent's body mass (e.g. rugby, wrestling, etc.), or an external object (e.g. soccer, weightlifting, etc.)' (13). From a muscle movement perspective, Beachle and Earl (2008, 78) describe three different types of muscle action: (1) concentric muscle action, 'in which the muscle shortens because the contractile force is greater than the resistive force' (cf. also Komi 2003; Kraemer and Häkkinen 2002, 2), (2) eccentric muscle action, 'in which the muscle lengthens because the contractile force is less than the resistive force', and (3) isometric muscle action, 'in which the muscle does not change because the contractile force is equal to the resistive force' (cf. also Zatsiorsky and Kraemer 2006, 21).

If we follow this sports science understanding of strength, it becomes clear that three aspects take centre stage here: strength is (1) a physical phenomenon, namely muscle strength; strength is (2) an ability, namely a physical capacity; and strength (3) serves to overcome resistance. Strength training, which plays an important role in every type of sport (but also for non-sporting mobility and health maintenance), exists to improve this ability or the individual strength abilities. Strength training is a means of increasing maximal force production (strength) using programs with very high opposing force (resistance) (cf. Komi 2003). Strength, strength diagnostics, and strength training are based on certain physical and performance-physiological parameters that can be measured with the help of technical equipment. In short, strength as defined by sports science is a scientific and functional concept.

This scientific-functional understanding is undoubtedly useful for sports science. At the same time, however, it is also a reductionist understanding of strength. From a phenomenological point of view, reductionism consists first in the fact that sports science regards strength as an object, but not as a *phenomenon*. Second, from a neophenomenological point of view, the sports science understanding of strength is reductionist in that it views strength as a physical property, but not equally or primarily as a *felt-bodily* phenomenon. Third, this goes hand in hand with the fact that strength in sports science is understood as an activity and a manipulable object, but not as a *pathic*, *lifeworld experience* that is felt-bodily.

New phenomenology: phenomenon and method

To answer the question of what kind of phenomenon strength is, it must first be clarified what is meant by 'phenomenon'. In the first volume of his ten-

volume main opus 'system of philosophy' (*System der Philosophie)*, Schmitz follows Heidegger's definition, according to which a phenomenon is 'that which shows itself' (Schmitz 1964, 139). In his later works, Schmitz distances himself from this definition because it is based on a 'naïve concept of matter': it is naïve to assume the possibility of a full or final 'return to the things themselves', as Husserl had formulated it. The essence of a phenomenon cannot be grasped, as the phenomenon does not appear 'as such' but to a person who has a biography and is culturally shaped. The more modest but realistic phenomenological task is to determine what a phenomenon appears as, and according to Schmitz, this is a 'state of affairs' (*Sachverhalt*) (2019a, 47). Schmitz therefore defines phenomenon as follows: 'a phenomenon for someone at a time is a state of affairs of which the person cannot in earnest deny that it then is a fact' (ibid.). The double relativization 'for someone at a time' makes it clear that Schmitz is not concerned, like Husserl, with determining the essence of a phenomenon but with the question 'What should I take to hold true?' (Schmitz 2019a, 47). What I should take to hold true can change over time and in confrontation with the experiences of other people and/or the reading of texts, so I have to check again and again whether the phenomenon is still a phenomenon for me. In this respect, new phenomenology proves to be an empirically oriented science.

New phenomenology is also a science in the sense that it uses a methodological approach with which the researcher can determine what should be considered a phenomenon. In contrast to the two core elements of Husserl's method, 'transcendental-phenomenological reduction' and 'eidetic reduction', Schmitz calls his method 'phenomenological revision' (Schmitz 2019a, 47). 'Phenomenological revision serves to approximate the spontaneous life experience, i.e. what really happens to people in a felt manner without them having intentionally constructed it' (Schmitz 2019a, 48). Schmitz proposes a 'three-stage method' for this (Schmitz 1964, 141):

(1) In the *descriptive* stage, the aim is to describe a phenomenon area using everyday language. The point here is to compile a variety of phenomena on the basis of personal experience, conversations, the reading of texts, reports on television, and so on, which can be described as belonging to a phenomenon area on the basis of their characteristics. An attribute is then assigned to this phenomenon area, with the help of which it can be differentiated from other phenomenon areas. In the present case, this means that the first step is to look for phenomena in everyday life whose common features can be described with the word 'strength' (see next section).
(2) In the *analytical* stage, it is then necessary to identify the recurring, characteristic features of the phenomena and to fix them

terminologically. This analytical step aims at developing a system of categories that names the general structural features of the identified phenomenon. These categories are elementary phenomena that result together in more complex phenomena (cf. Böhme 1994, 235). With Schmitz (1964, 141), this category system can also be described as a kind of 'alphabet', 'with the help of which the phenomenon area in question can be spelled out'. For example, Schmitz (1965, 170) developed an 'alphabet of the felt body' (*Alphabet der Leiblichkeit*) that contains the categories ('letters') of the 'felt body' (*Leib*), which are themselves felt-bodily (*leibliche*) phenomena: 'The moments or building blocks of this structure are the categories of the felt body. Let me list them again: narrowness, wideness, contraction, expansion, direction, tension, swelling, intensity, rhythm, (felt-bodily economy as the whole of intensity and rhythm), privative expansion, privative contraction, protopathic tendency, epicritical tendency, felt-bodily island formation, felt-bodily island disappearance'.[2] In the following section, I take this as a basis for developing a phenomenological alphabet of strength.

(3) In the *combinatorial* stage, the various categories are finally linked to reconstructively describe individual phenomena of the phenomenal field. The 'letters' of the alphabet developed in the second step are put together to form 'words', so to speak, with which a concrete phenomenon is described as precisely as possible. The phenomenological analysis ends with a 'real definition that [...] summarizes the gain in knowledge' (Schmitz 1965, 170). With this in mind, the following section will present a real definition of 'strength' and a phenomenological strength alphabet that will be used for a phenomenological description of strength phenomena in sports.

Phenomenology of strength

The first, *descriptive* step on the way to a phenomenology of strength is to look for everyday experiences from a first-person perspective to which I can assign the attribute 'strength'. This raises a methodological problem that is well known in philosophical and scientific discourse as the 'hermeneutic circle'. This refers to the relationship between prior knowledge, which is expressed in language, and experience. Concretely: How can I collect everyday phenomena that I describe as strength phenomena without a prior understanding of strength? The answer is simple: I cannot. I cannot escape the hermeneutic circle. Nevertheless, there is a solution to this problem.[3] Husserl called it 'epoché', the methodological self-discipline that consists in describing a phenomenon by 'bracketing in' my prejudices, assumptions,

prior knowledge, and the like as well as possible. In this sense, everyday spontaneous experiences of strength for me include the following:

- Everything that causes me to exert myself has to do with strength. It doesn't matter whether it is physically strenuous (lifting or pushing an object, walking uphill, running a marathon) or mentally strenuous (reading a difficult text, working through a problem). I experience all these efforts as phenomena that demand perceptible strength from me.
- Any resistance that I am confronted with and that I want to withstand or overcome requires strength. For example, I experience natural phenomena such as the wind hitting me in the face and having to brace myself against it to move forward as something powerful. But I also experience it as a phenomenon of strength, as a force of resistance that I must overcome, when someone verbally resists me in a discussion, causing me to find it difficult to hold my own or even just speak up.
- Everything that fascinates and captivates me, that I find appealing or experience as attractive, has to do with strength. It doesn't matter whether it's a person, a book, a landscape, or a song that fascinates me, sweeps me away, and so on.
- I experience feelings, moods, and atmospheres that move or affect me as powerful phenomena. Similarly, films or animals that touch me emotionally, a look or a voice that melts me, and a photo or behaviour that shakes me are phenomena that have something to do with strength for me.
- Furthermore, I experience as a phenomena of strength everything that I perceive as an urge or drive, as a compulsion or pull, and that moves me in a certain direction, literally or figuratively, to which I submit even though I may not want to.
- Ex negativo, all phenomena that are concerned with feebleness are also phenomena of strength. A lack of strength is at play when I can't get out of bed in the morning, when I can't get myself to do anything, when my weaker self once again prevents me from going jogging, in short, and in the words of Schmitz (2019a, 65), whenever my 'vital drive' (*vitaler Antrieb*) is perceptibly reduced or completely slack. This in turn means that the vital drive is also a strength phenomenon.

The list of such spontaneous life experiences, which I refer to as strength phenomena, could easily be continued. The descriptive compilation of single phenomena into a phenomenon area, which is then given a concrete name – in this case, strength – is ultimately never complete. Nevertheless, these few examples should suffice to name the recurring basic features of these very different examples of strength in the second, *analytical* step. So, what are the general structural features of the different strength phenomena?

An initial answer to this is that in the first-person perspective, a recurring basic feature of these strength phenomena is that they are experienced as an effect. As spontaneous, unpremeditated experiences of life, strength phenomena appear more precisely as felt-bodily effects. The stroke of the wind, the touch of a movie, the fascination of a soccer match, the arrival of a flash of inspiration, the effort of walking uphill, and so on, are all strength phenomena because I experience them as felt-bodily intrusive action. This is why strength can be defined phenomenologically: *strength is a felt-bodily intrusive effect*. This real definition can be rendered even more precisely.

If we look at the examples of strength listed above more systematically, we can say that there are obviously various *sources of strength* that appear as felt-bodily intrusive effects: possible sources of strength include natural events or natural places, artifacts of all kinds, 'half-things'[4] (*Halbdinge*) (Schmitz 2019a, 99) such as the gaze or the voice, social situations, thoughts, and one's own body. In turn, one's own *felt body* is the *place* where these *strength phenomena are experienced*. Therefore, the source of strength and the place of strength are two sides of the same coin: the source of strength and the place of strength are in a relationship that Schmitz describes as 'one-sided incorporation' (*einseitige Einleibung*) (Schmitz 2011, 38). The incorporation is one-sided insofar as the source of strength plays the dominant role over the place of strength: nature, artifacts, half-things, social situations, thoughts, and one's own body are sources of strength that act on the felt body as a place of strength by being experienced as intrusive. In other words, sources of strength are states of affairs that affect people in such a perceptible way that they are at least tempted to spontaneously orient themselves according to them. If this is the case, strength appears as a felt-bodily intrusive effect. The above definition can therefore be expressed more precisely: *strength is an intrusive effect through one-sided incorporation*.

However, strength experienced as an intrusive one-sided incorporation has an effect in very different ways. Analytically, therefore, some *categorical differentiations* can be made. In other words, it is possible to develop an 'alphabet of strength' that comprises a total of ten 'letters'.

The basic pair of categories of the phenomenon of strength is the contrast of *pull and push* with the two phenomenal tendencies of *pulling and pushing*. Presumably all human experiences of strength, regardless of their respective source, lie in the field of tension between pull and push. Strength always has the effect of *pulling* when a person is felt-bodily attracted to something or someone, is pulled away or down, is fascinated or captivated by something or someone, is carried away, falls under a pull or spell, or feels a strong urge or drive. On the other hand, strength always has a felt-bodily *pushing* effect when something or someone is perceived as a burden or weight or as burdensome or weighty, when strength is perceived as pressing, striking, or

overwhelming. A low room has an oppressive effect, lecture situations or 'unnecessary' thoughts can be perceived as burdensome, the behaviour of another person can seem like a slap in the face, and so on.

Strength as an intrusive effect through one-sided incorporation can be further systematized categorically through analytical differentiation according to its felt-bodily direction and felt-bodily intensity. With regard to its *felt-bodily direction*, strength in the first-person perspective appears centripetally as an acting inwards or centrifugally as an acting outwards and as a lifting or lowering. *Centripetal* forces are primarily pressing forces that act on the physicality of the person affected, such as the resistance against which one literally or figuratively bounces, blows that one takes, feelings that one is seized by, and so on. *Centrifugal* forces are predominantly felt-bodily pulling forces, such as the longing for something or someone, the pull exerted by a fascinating book, the strong urge to do something, a seductive person, attractive things, and so on.

Whereas strengths acting inwards and outwards appear felt-bodily horizontally, so to speak, lifting or lowering strengths act felt-bodily vertically. Powerfully *uplifting* is the spontaneous joy that causes you to leap into the air or the sublimity of a landscape that is perceptibly uplifting to contemplate. Strengths that have a *lowering* effect pull or push downwards, such as a heavy backpack – both literally and figuratively – that you must carry, existential worries, or a great social responsibility under which you almost collapse.

Regarding their *felt-bodily intensity*, experiences of strength in turn have the phenomenal characteristics of *strong and weak* as well as *heavy and light*. Irrespective of the source of strength, strength is a subjective fact whose effect is always experienced somewhere between strong and weak. Maximum *strength* caused by one-sided incorporation is a shock that leads to a loss of consciousness, whereas something that only touches you very gently – a look, a physical touch – can be described as an extremely *weak* experience. In turn, experiences of strength caused by one-sided incorporation with weights or loads of all kinds appear *heavy*, and it is particularly the resistance caused by these weights or loads that makes the heaviness perceptible. Overcoming such perceptible resistance, which requires a greater or lesser amount of strength, can make it appear *easy* or *relieving*. In the first-person perspective, strength is an easy or relieving experience, such as when a strenuous activity comes easily. If you are in top athletic form and are in a 'flow', you will feel like you are 'flying' to the finish line at the end of the race despite having perceptibly heavy legs.

This completes the first two steps of the phenomenological analysis of strength. Let me summarize: First, strength can be *defined* from a neophenomenological perspective as an intrusive effect through one-

sided incorporation. Second, the *system of categories* (or alphabet) of strength comprises ten categories (or letters): *pulling, pushing, centripetal, centrifugal, lifting, lowering, strong, weak, heavy*, and *light*.

Strength phenomena in sport

The third, *combinatorial* step now deals with using the ten phenomenological categories of strength for a phenomenological analysis of sport-specific strength phenomena. This reveals fundamental differences between a phenomenological and a biomechanical or training science analysis of strength: First, a neophenomenological analysis of sport-immanent strength phenomena focuses on the *felt-bodily effect* of strength instead of considering strength functionally as the cause of a change in movement. Second, phenomenology is interested in strength as an *event* that is experienced subjectively (*Widerfahrnis*)[5] and not in strength as an ability. In a neophenomenological sense, the strengths of sports are pathic experiences and not actively usable abilities. Third, with the felt body as an experiential place of strength, the focus shifts to the *sources of strength* in sport, each of which brings about specific experiences of strength through one-sided incorporation. Thus, for reasons of systematization, I will group the diversity of sport-immanent strength phenomena according to their sources.

Bodily strengths

The fundamental strength phenomenon of sport is the *vital driving force*. The vital driving force is the basic felt-bodily condition for every sporting activity; its source of strength is one's own body. The body is the source of strength insofar as physiological states and processes in one-sided incorporation bring about a felt-bodily experience of strength: the vital drive is promoted by sufficient sleep and rest or warm-up exercises, and it is inhibited by a strong muscle ache, a full stomach, menstrual cramps, or flu. Subjectively, the vital drive can be experienced in sport as a more or less perceptible *urge to move*. The urge to move is a felt-bodily experience whose perceptible effect is pulling, centrifugal, and oscillating between strong and weak and whose goal is physical activity. If the vital driving force has a high felt-bodily intensity, giving one the feeling of being able to 'tackle anything', for example, the felt-bodily intrusive effect of this strength pushes outwards into a physical movement to be acted out and counterbalanced by it in equal measure. In less physically intense cases, the centrifugally acting vital driving force requires a correspondingly more moderate physical counterbalancing activity to tame its expansive felt-bodily urge.

The fundamental importance of the vital driving force for athletic movement can also be seen ex negativo. One example of this is the so-called

weaker self. Anyone who feels the weaker self is able to exercise only with difficulty or not at all, because the vital driving force is more or less completely absent. The bigger or more felt-bodily powerful the weaker self is, the more strongly it appears as a powerful adversary that weighs down its felt-bodily victims and thus prevents them from engaging in sporting activity. Even if you have the firm intention to exercise, you will not be able to do so if you are perceptibly gripped by your weaker self. Its felt-bodily power physically overpowers the affected subject before the sporting activity has even begun. In the form of the weaker self, the vital drive proves to be a felt-bodily lack of strength.

This should be distinguished from the dwindling of the vital drive during sporting activity. Sport has numerous metaphors for the loss of the vital drive, such as 'My batteries are empty', 'I've run out of juice', 'My plug's been pulled out', 'I'm dead', and so on. Those affected experience cases such as these, in which the vital driving force slowly dwindles due to physical exertion, as a felt-bodily depressing, centripetal, heavy, and strong experience from which they are ultimately no longer able to escape when their batteries are empty. Their own body then proves to be the maximum source of strength, which may completely eradicate the felt body as a place of strength (for example, in exhaustion-induced fainting).

Building on the vital driving force, one's own body has a felt-bodily intrusive effect as a source of strength simply because one always has to deal with physical *resistance* during sporting activity. As mentioned at the outset, muscular strength is required to maintain resistance (isometric contraction), to overcome it (concentric contraction), or to yield to it (eccentric contraction). In sports, however, physical strength is not only involved in the movement of one's own body but also in confrontation with other living and non-living bodies. Taking a boxing punch, throwing a judo partner, keeping a horse in check, shooting a ball, holding a racket, jumping on a trampoline, riding a mountain bike, or climbing a rock – all of these and countless other forms of contact with other bodies require the use of physical strength and bring about a felt-bodily experience of strength. From a phenomenological point of view, it is of interest to what extent the felt-bodily experience of strength differs depending on whether the source of strength is *one's own body* or a *foreign body*. Two phenomenal differences stand out.

First, in contrast to one's own body, foreign bodies in sport have a sensual *expression* for the subject, which it perceives as a felt-bodily *impression* with a more or less powerful strength. Other human, animal, or material bodies are seen, heard, or felt in sporting interactions (cf. Hockey 2021; Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2007), and this has felt-bodily effects on the athlete. For example, opponents in a contact sport may be perceptibly intimidating or unsettling simply because of their visible physical presence, exerting a centripetal strength that is perceived as oppressive and stressful. On the

other hand, the visible obstacles in the course and the palpable rock may seem impressive to the show jumper and the boulderer, respectively, exerting a strength that can vary between oppressive and inspiring, centripetally pushing and centrifugally pulling. The physical-material expression of these objects has a felt-bodily force of impression, which is likely to be significant for the respective execution of the movement.

Second, this is linked to the 'suggestion of motion' (*Bewegungssuggestion*) (Schmitz 2019a, 68), which emanates from foreign bodies, but not from one's own body. The predetermined movement of the flying ball or the fist reaching out to strike are felt-bodily powerful phenomena insofar as they cause the people affected by them to act in a certain way. Soccer players run to the place on the pitch where they can receive the ball according to the direction of the ball's flight, and boxers take a step to the side to avoid being hit by the fist coming towards them. All of this happens virtually automatically, pre-reflectively, intuitively, as 'co-acting without reaction time' (Schmitz 2011, 32) with the foreign object. Strictly speaking, the source of strength in cases like these is therefore not the foreign body itself (ball, fist) but the suggestion of motion that accompanies it, as its felt-bodily intrusive – typically pulling-centrifugal – effect seduces us to act in a specific way (cf. Gugutzer 2024).

An interim conclusion can be drawn: When sports science deals with the subject of strength, it is exclusively interested in the strength of the body. It has a lot of useful things to say on this subject, which can be usefully supplemented by a phenomenological perspective on physical strength. However, the real benefit of a neophenomenological strength analysis of sport can be seen in the fact that it makes it possible to identify strength phenomena *beyond* physical strength and to describe them in a phenomenologically appropriate way – strength phenomena that inevitably elude a scientific perspective. These include, above all, the felt-bodily intrusive effects of psychic strengths, half-thing strengths, and social strengths.

Psychic strength

Athletes also have felt-bodily intrusive experiences of strength due to the *one-sided incorporation of psychic states and processes*. This refers to felt-bodily experiences that are brought about by perceptions, thoughts, memories, ideas, willpower, anticipation, intuition, and the like. However, sports science, and sports psychology in particular, do not treat such mental states and processes as strength phenomena, but as 'psychological factors' impacting on cognitive, motivational, volitive, and emotional processes (cf. Weinberg and Gould 2011, Part I) or in the context of 'personal psychological makeup', such as personality characteristics or individual orientations (Weinberg and Gould 2011, Part II). This functionalist view of cognition,

motivation, and so on is undoubtedly useful for anyone interested in the question of which adjustments need to be made to improve an athlete's athletic performance. However, those who are interested in understanding how psychological processes are experienced as subjectively effective and thus become meaningful would do well to view them phenomenologically as strength phenomena. A simple example of this that is central to sporting action and interaction is *concentration*.

Concentration is a fundamental prerequisite for the successful execution of a movement (unless you want to rely on luck or chance). Whether you are a beginner or an expert, if you are unable to concentrate, you run the risk of failing to execute your movements, even if they are habitualized. In psychological terms, concentration 'is the ability to maintain focus on relevant environmental cues' (Weinberg and Gould 2011, 365). Concentration implies an intentional relationship between subject and object,[6] the directing of consciousness to a stimulus such as a tennis ball during a tennis serve or the starting shot while standing on the starting block. From a neophenomenological perspective, however, concentration is a felt-bodily experience[7] that is perceived as centripetally pressing, perceptibly tense attention. For example, if you stand concentrated at the penalty spot to take a penalty kick, you experience your concentration as a felt-bodily contracting, pathic experience that holds all your senses together. Although it is of course possible to deliberately concentrate on the execution of the movement, concentration is nevertheless a felt-bodily experience, which is shown by the fact that it is often enough impossible to concentrate due to the interference of personal factors (lack of self-confidence), felt-bodily states (exhaustion), or environmental conditions (noise).

In principle, all other cognitive, motivational, and volitional processes are comparable to concentration as a felt-bodily intrusive source of strength: with regard to cognition, the memory of a previous failure may seem paralysing in the current situation, that is, centripetally depressing and heavy, whereas the calming self-talk shortly before the start may seem hopeful, that is, centrifugally uplifting and light; with regard to motivation, a motivating shout of 'You can do it!' or 'Let's go!' has a pulling-centrifugal-strong effect, whereas a demotivating remark such as 'Loser!' can have the opposite effect, namely depressing-burdensome-heavy; and with regard to volition, the willpower that makes it possible to persevere in a strenuous race has a pulling-centrifugal-strong effect, as does the intentional striving for a certain finishing time in the next marathon. The phenomenological specification of such psychological processes – their understanding as strength phenomena – helps to understand why they (do not) become effective and meaningful: if the one-sided incorporation of memory, self-talk, appeal, will, or intention is missing, their realization is unlikely. Without the felt-bodily intrusive effect of the psychic sources of strength, their physical realization is at least more difficult.

Strength of half-things

I have excluded emotions from the felt-bodily intrusive psychic processes and states mentioned in the previous section. The reason for this is that I understand emotions in the neophenomenological sense as 'atmospheres' (Schmitz 2014; 2019b). According to Schmitz, atmospheres are half-things in the ontological sense, just like wind, voice, heat, night, rhythm, looks, pain, or also strength. Half-things are not psychic and physical phenomena but rather felt-bodily experienceable intermediate phenomena. They are interesting for a phenomenology of strength in sports, because as felt-bodily intrusive effects they have a strong influence on the actions and experiences of those involved in sports.

Natural half-things, such as night, morning, heat, cold, or wind, are felt-bodily sources of strength, because they significantly shape the sporting experience and action through one-sided incorporation. Some people prefer to go running at dawn or late at night, because the clear morning air or the darkness has a centrifugal, light, and strong effect that drives them to run. The unbearable heat at midday, on the other hand, can weigh so perceptibly heavily on the runner that its centripetal strength turns every step into torture. Wind, on the other hand, is a pushing-pulling source of strength for cyclists when it supports them from behind so much that they have the feeling of flying up the hill, whereas wind has an inhibiting effect when it hits them in the face from the front, centripetally strong. From this perspective, riding in the slipstream also proves to be a strength phenomenon, insofar as it pulls athletes riding or running in the slipstream along in a centrifugally strong manner, allowing them to retain felt-bodily reserves of strength.

Like the forces close to nature, *atmospheric* forces also have a felt-bodily intrusive effect on the actors in sports. This applies above all to *feelings*, which, according to Schmitz, are spatial but surfaceless (*flächenlose*) phenomena, namely atmospheres (Schmitz 2019a, 94; cf. Schmitz, Müllan, and Slaby 2011). Private feelings such as the fear of competition or failure have an oppressive-centripetal-heavy effect on athletes and thus typically reduce their potential physical performance. A similar felt-bodily intrusive effect is inherent in despair or the feeling of powerlessness, the strong felt-bodily intensity of which can result in a veritable inability to act. Conversely, people affected with euphoria or ecstasy may act uncontrollably 'in the exuberance of their feelings', because felt-bodily intrusive euphoria has a strong centrifugal effect and demands a spontaneous physical compensation of movement.

However, the felt-bodily power of atmospheres by no means extends only to individuals but applies equally to collectives (cf. Gugutzer 2024). *Collective feelings* are always a source of strength when they take hold of a crowd in

one-sided incorporation to such an extent that the crowd behaves differently than it would without this feeling. The exuberant, rousing, heated stadium atmosphere, for example, only develops its powerful and exhilarating (light) strength because it stimulates the vital drive of the people affected by it to sing, dance, shout, jump, and laugh and thus moves the crowd collectively. Collective atmospheres of this kind are felt-bodily experiences, as they cannot be produced voluntarily. The felt-bodily experiential character of collective atmospheres is particularly evident when there is no atmosphere in the stadium or sports hall, even though everyone present has gone there for this very reason and is supposedly doing everything relevant to creating the atmosphere. People can prepare atmospheres, but this does not mean that they will actually materialize. Why there is no atmosphere in a social situation, or why there is a ghost atmosphere, is phenomenologically just as interesting a question as when and why, for example, the mood shifts in a team. The tipping of the mood is a powerful phenomenon because it irritates, interrupts, and turns the current or expected social process on its head.

Particularly significant half-things with a felt-bodily intrusive effect are rhythm and the gaze. According to Schmitz, *rhythm* is a felt-bodily suggestion of motion that intervenes in the vital drive of the people exposed to it and influences them in their movements, sometimes positively guiding them. The rhythmic clapping of the spectators exerts a pulling-centrifugal, lifting-light strength on long jumpers, which may make them feel inspired in their run-up but at the very least will probably give them a supporting push, and this without any physical contact from the crowd pulling them. What has the strongest movement-suggestive strength, however, is musical rhythm. This can be seen, for example, in the fact that many people jog with music in their ears and that loud, rhythmic music is played during competitions at major sporting events. This gives athletes an additional, felt-bodily drive that ideally promotes performance.

The *gaze*, in turn, is both a felt-bodily impulse-one feels the gaze of the other on one's own felt body – and at the same time an antagonistic form of felt-bodily or 'embodied communication' (*leibliche Kommunikation*) (Griffero 2017; Gugutzer 2024; Schmitz 2019a, 67). Schmitz speaks of a 'wrestling match of gazes', which is 'not due to any domineering intention, but to the structure of the felt body, which is imprinted on the meeting gazes as indivisibly extended felt-bodily directions' (Schmitz 1990, 136). The exchange of gazes is a power struggle carried out on felt-bodily terrain, regardless of whether the participants want to engage in it or not. Gazes are felt-bodily immersed in each other and are therefore 'among the most deeply intervening conflicts between humans and animals' (Schmitz 1969, 381). In a sense, gazes are strength phenomena that can be used strategically, for example by trainers who want to discipline their protégés: a stern, punishing gaze is sometimes more effective than

words are, precisely because it has a felt-bodily intrusive effect – oppressive, centripetal, strong. Even in contact sports, where the players are face to face, glances are used as additional felt-bodily weapons with the intention of intimidating opponents or making them nervous. Conversely, gazes also display their felt-bodily strength when they comfort a disappointed teammate or calm a nervous teammate. In such cases, too, gazes are often more effective than words.

Social strengths

According to Schmitz, gazes are an original 'source of you-evidence' (Schmitz 2003, 39). Gazes constitute felt-bodily intersubjectivity and can thus be understood as basic, felt-bodily intrusive *social strengths*. The social power of the gaze exhibits a property that is characteristic of all social strengths: it has a *dividing/separating* and an *integrating/connecting* effect. Just as an arrogant gaze has a dismissive, that is, divisive, effect, a loving gaze has a unifying effect. Social strengths always have this dividing and/or integrating social effect. In neophenomenological terms, this can be specified as follows: *Divisive social strengths* have an oppressive effect if and because they drive a wedge into a social fabric. Insofar as they drive people apart, divisive strengths have a socially outward, that is, centrifugal, effect. The people affected are likely to experience this as a strong, heavy, burdensome strength. *Integrative social strengths*, on the other hand, have a pulling effect, insofar as people feel addressed by a group or ideology. Integrative strength appears to those affected as having a socially inward (centripetal) effect, as a sense of belonging or togetherness, which those affected likely experience as a strong and equally relieving or uplifting strength.

Social strengths with a dividing/separating and integrating/connecting effect can be found in sports wherever processes of social inclusion and exclusion take place, where group-related discrimination takes place, symbolic battles of distinction are fought, or friend-enemy relationships are staged. Examples of this include Muslim migrants who are not allowed by a club to swim in a burkini, racist or homophobic comments that separate 'us' from 'them', rivalries between the 'traditionalists' and the 'modernizers' of a sport, such as those that regularly occur in the course of commercialization processes of so-called lifestyle sports (snowboarding, skateboarding, climbing), or historically grown enmities between fan groups that are repeatedly revived in 'derbies'. In such cases of social division and integration, strength phenomena are always involved when they are experienced and acted out as felt-bodily intrusive effects – the burkini ban as a result of a negative opinion of Muslims in the club, the racist and homophobic comments due to hatred towards foreigners and homosexuals, the rivalries between intra-sport or different fan groups due to diffuse feelings or assumed antipathies. In other

words, social strengths with a divisive and integrative effect are particularly evident when the situation in question is atmospherically charged, saturated, and dominated in a certain way (see above). Social strengths primarily have an effect in situations with *polarizing atmospheres*.

Conversely, this means that social conflicts, antipathies, rivalries, and the like in sports often arise because felt-bodily strengths act in the opposite direction on the – individual or collective – players. Those who have undergone a classic fan socialization that begins in childhood develop an attachment to 'their' club and a rejection of the rival club that is so deeply anchored in their felt-bodily disposition that it is effective and therefore significant for a lifetime. Even – or especially – the permanence of social conflicts is rooted in the felt-bodily anchored effects of antipathy and sympathy, resentment and affinity, I/we and the others.

Apart from the divisive or integrative effect of social forces, another strength phenomenon is particularly pronounced in sport: the *pressure to perform*. The pressure to perform, as well as the related pressure resulting from expectations or the pressure to succeed, already contains its felt-bodily moment of strength in the word: the pressure to fulfil a certain performance or expectation and to be successful is perceptible, depressing, centripetal, arduous, and sometimes very strong. Those who do not feel this experience of strength also have no pressure to perform, even if third parties assume that this should be the case. The perceptible pressure to perform is a social strength due to the norms and expectations that are inherent to it and that are either imposed on the individual from the outside (performance norm of a sports association) or adopted from the outside (socially prevailing aesthetic body norm). Through one-sided incorporation, such norms exert their felt-bodily pressure on the person concerned.

Conclusion: the case for phenomenological strength training

On the basis of the observation that sports science treats strength exclusively as a (natural) scientific object, the phenomenological analysis of strength presented here started one epistemological step earlier, namely with the *lifeworld phenomenon of strength*. With the help of the three-stage method of Hermann Schmitz' new phenomenology, the aim was to work out the general structure of the phenomenon of strength. The result was, first, a *real definition* ('strength is an intrusive effect through one-sided incorporation') and, second, a *system of ten categories* ('alphabet of strength'): pulling, pushing, centripetal, centrifugal, lifting, lowering, strong, weak, heavy, light. Third, against the background of the analytical distinction between the *source* of strength (body, psyche, half-things, social) and the *place* of strength (felt body), I used the ten categories of strength for a *phenomenology of sport-immanent strength phenomena*. In this way, it was possible to describe a large

number of strength phenomena in the lifeworld of sport, that go far beyond physical strength.

With new phenomenology, strength comes into focus as a felt-bodily phenomenon respectively as a pathic experience. Of course, this is not the only way to analyze strength phenomenologically. A phenomenological analysis of strength based on Husserl, Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty, for example, would emphasize the 'intentionality' of strength or describe strength in terms of the 'acting body' (*fungierender Leib*) as the practical possibility of the 'I can'. Strength would thus be thematized more strongly in its active, goal-oriented, functional meaning, whereas Schmitz focuses on the affective involvement of strength. The different phenomenological approaches are not mutually exclusive, rather they complement each other.

The phenomenology of strength presented here is intended as a contribution to a *pure phenomenology of sport*. It is thus an answer to the question posed by several philosophers as to whether there can be a pure phenomenology of sport at all (e.g. Halák, Jirásek, and Nesti 2014). Yes, there is, and there should be. After all, the epistemological benefit of a pure phenomenology of sport is that it opens up sport for interpretation as a lifeworld experience and thus saves it from scientific objectification. Regarding this text, this means that because phenomenology is anti-reductionist and anchors strength in lifeworld experience, phenomenology discovers strength phenomena beyond measurable, quantifiable, trainable, and actively usable strength. A pure phenomenology of strength helps to understand that there are strength phenomena beyond muscular strength that are important in the experience of every sportsperson.

The neophenomenology of strength in sport presented here is a very first draft, which is why – in sporting terms—*phenomenological strength training* is needed to achieve (further) phenomenological and scientific success. Phenomenological strength training should aim to refine the category system of strength and to specify the sources of strength in sport to be able to more precisely recognize and describe the phenomenal diversity of sport-related experiences of strength. This is also necessary because the opponent of phenomenology, natural science, is strong. Phenomenology will probably only be taken seriously by sports science – if at all – when it presents differentiated analyses of individual strength phenomena in sports that promise practical benefits for this application-oriented science. However, the practical benefits of a phenomenology of strength can also be defined more broadly than is usual in sports science. On the basis of the psychologist Kurt Lewin's remark that 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory' (Lewin 1951, 169), that a good theory helps one to 'see', and that 'seeing' in a scientific context can be translated as 'recognizing', it can be said that the practical benefit of a phenomenology of strength consists in knowledge, ultimately in *self-knowledge*. In the words of German philosopher Gernot

Böhme, what is said about the phenomenology of nature can be said about the phenomenology of strength: 'Phenomenology of nature is knowledge of nature as self-knowledge' (Böhme 1997, 41) – the phenomenology of strength is therefore knowledge of strength as self-knowledge. It is useful to recognize where, how, when, why, and in what way I have experiences of strength in sport, and above all which of them I do and do not like, because it contributes to self-knowledge, or rather it is self-knowledge.

Notes

1. As there are hardly any English publications by Schmitz, I will mainly rely on German-language texts by Schmitz and translate quotations into English. A good English introduction to new phenomenology is provided by Tonino Griffero in his introduction to Schmitz's book *New phenomenology: A brief introduction* (Griffero 2019; see also Griffero 2016, 2017). Robert Gugutzer recently published an introduction to the New Phenomenology of Sport (Gugutzer 2024; see also Gugutzer 2019).
2. For a theory of the felt body based on the new phenomenology by Hermann Schmitz cf. Griffero (2024).
3. Another problem in the field of tension between language and experience is that different languages have various and different numbers of words for 'strength'. In German, for example, there is only one word, 'Kraft' (in the sense discussed in this article), whereas in English there are two words, 'strength' and 'force'. This makes it difficult to translate a German text about 'Kraft' into an English text about 'Kraft'.
4. 'Half-things differ from full-things with regard to two properties: 1. Their duration can be interrupted, that is, they come and go, without there being any point in asking what they did in the meantime. 2. Whereas causality generally is tripartite, subdivided into cause (e.g. a falling stone), influence (e.g. impact) and effect (e.g. the destruction or dislodegement of the object hit), the causality of half-things is bipartite and immediate in that cause and influence overlap. A typical example is the voice of a human' (Schmitz 2019a, 99).
5. For different studies on sport as a pathic experience (*Sport als Widerfahrnis*) see Gugutzer (2023).
6. It is thus strongly reminiscent of the intentionality concept of the philosopher and psychologist Franz Brentano, who described intentionality as the defining characteristic of the psychic: All psychic processes are in an 'intentional relationship' to their objects (cf. Brentano (1874) 1973). Following Brentano, Edmund Husserl introduced this concept of intentionality as a central concept in phenomenology (Husserl 1983).
7. Cf. Schmitz's criticism of Husserl's understanding of intentionality as 'consciousness of something'. Husserl's mistake is that he 'understands the intentional act as a basic trait of consciousness merely as the emergence of the ego into the object, while for affective involvement the opposite direction, that something inevitably imposes itself on the consciousness holder to the point of having to feel it, is the decisive trigger' (Schmitz 2017, 124). In Schmitz's New Phenomenology, 'affective involvement' is the central concept (Schmitz 2003, iii; 2019a, 46).

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