

Form of transcendence in sports. Suggestion from Hollywood

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Abstract

This paper examines how lifestyle sport practitioners experience forms of transcendence, altered perception, and connection with nature, and considers whether these experiences can be meaningfully interpreted through concepts associated with shamanic practice. Drawing on Roger Caillois' taxonomy, it explores how elements of ritual, ecstasy, and symbolic imagination appear within contemporary sporting contexts.

The first section reviews classical scholarship and journalistic sources to identify experiential and symbolic parallels between sport and shamanism, with particular attention to fandom, practices oriented toward the pursuit of vertigo, and the spiritualised imagery of some lifestyle and extreme sports.

The second part presents an exploratory quantitative study administered to participants of a master's program in shamanic studies. The survey investigates perceptions of overlap between shamanic experience and sporting activity, especially regarding transcendence, flow-like states, inner transformation, and embodied engagement with natural environments.

The aim of the paper is to contribute to lifestyle sport studies by proposing a new line of inquiry into how transcendence, ritualisation, and ecological attunement shape contemporary sports practices, particularly in extreme or highly symbolised disciplines.

Keywords: Social Transformation, Shamanism, Californian sports, *Ilinx*, Extreme sports.

1. Introduction

This paper examines whether the experiential intensity of extreme sports – including both the preparations that precede them and the formation of communities confronting high-stakes or potentially fatal challenges – can be meaningfully integrated into broader sociological discussions on contemporary sport.

The starting point is the observation that sport spectatorship and participation, from stadium crowds celebrating their idols to small communities revolving around local rituals of belonging, frequently mobilise symbolic structures resembling those found in ritualised and ecstatic

practices. Our initial hypothesis is that certain sporting experiences – whether embodied in the iconic figure of the exceptional athlete, or in the solitary confrontation with natural elements in solo sailing, freediving, mountaineering, or extreme trekking – may evoke experiential patterns similar to those that anthropology has historically linked to shamanism. These include states of intensified awareness, the pursuit of liminal thresholds, and attempts to attune oneself to forces perceived as greater than the individual.

A preliminary review of the literature revealed that explicit discussions linking sport to shamanic logics are scarce and usually tied to specific contexts such as therapeutic activities, ageing populations, or sport practices in natural settings. This scarcity of systematic treatment points to the value of examining more closely how transcendence, nature-connection, and altered states of perception – key topics in lifestyle sports research – intersect with anthropological interpretations of shamanism. In this perspective, shamanism is not approached as a descriptive or explanatory model to be directly applied to sport practices, but rather as an interpretative lens that allows recurrent experiential, symbolic, and relational dimensions to be analytically foregrounded.

To explore this initial intuition, we combined a qualitative review of existing scholarship and popular discourse with an exploratory quantitative test conducted among participants of two consecutive cohorts of a master's program on shamanic studies. The questionnaire aimed to assess whether individuals with sustained familiarity with shamanic concepts perceived experiential overlaps between shamanic practice and their sporting activities, particularly in terms of transcendence, flow-like states, and engagement with natural environments.

The different empirical and cultural references discussed in the article are therefore not treated as directly comparable cases, but as heterogeneous manifestations through which similar experiential logics and symbolic patterns can be observed.

The paper therefore develops along four axes: a contextual overview of sport and shamanism and their potential functional analogies; an examination of practices where altered perception and embodied knowledge play central roles; an exploration of fandom and communal identification as forms of contemporary tribalism; and an analysis of specific sporting disciplines with shamanic echoes. A brief case study of *Point Break*, a questionnaire-based quantitative section, and a concluding discussion complete the work. Through this structure, we investigate how lifestyle sports may enable experiences of transcendence and embodied transformation that can be meaningfully interpreted through concepts associated with shamanic traditions.

2. In society

2.1 *Le jeu et l'homme*

According to the French sociologist Roger Caillois (1991), who in 1958 published *Les jeux et les hommes*, play is conceived as the counterpoint to work – time lost versus time well spent. It is an activity that produces nothing (at most it displaces wealth, but does not create it) and is characterised by a relative suspension of constraints and consequences in everyday life. A game is defined by a set of rules that all participants must follow; it is not the cheater who annihilates the game, but rather the one who denies its rules altogether.

Play makes sense when players respect the rules while simultaneously testing their limits. It is not only the specific activity that defines play, but also a set of tools, symbols, and shared meanings that characterise it. The impulses underlying games are usually divided into two antagonistic poles; otherwise, their classification would be meaningless. *Paidia* refers to a principle of amusement that manifests itself through spontaneity and uncontrolled turbulence, whereas *ludus* designates the need to discipline *paidia* through precise rules and structures.

Caillois established a taxonomy of play forms. First, he identified *Agôn*, the principle of competition. Second, he described *Alea*, the principle of chance. Third, he outlined *Mimicry*, the principle of simulation and role-play. Finally, he defined *Ilinx* as the pursuit of vertigo and perceptual destabilisation.

Caillois' work is eclectic, and a comprehensive discussion of his framework would exceed the scope of this article. For the purposes of the present analysis, attention is therefore focused on the concept of *ilinx*. The pursuit of dizziness consists of «an attempt to destroy the stability of perception for a moment and to inflict a kind of sensual panic on an otherwise lucid mind» (ibid.: 23). Caillois here refers to individuals fascinated by physical and psychological disorientation. While in earlier historical contexts *ilinx* (from the Greek term for whirlpool) was associated with turbulent ritual involvements and even trance states, in modern societies it increasingly designates the controlled pursuit of vertigo, often linked to mechanised attractions and, more broadly, to sport practices seeking intense sensory experiences.

Within this framework, the relationships between society and sport (Dunning, 1999), as well as between shamanism and society (Eliade, 1964), can be read in parallel, without implying any direct equivalence. On the one hand, contemporary forms of communication frequently promote the transcendence of sporting activity (Murphy & White, 2011); on the other hand, such representations contribute to the construction of a mediated reality in which Baudrillard's concept of simulacrum becomes useful for describing the pursuit of transcendence through performative and highly mediated sport practices.

Our interest, then, lies in outlining possible intersections between these different domains. Around teams – and not only sports teams – many communities reinforce their sense of identity and belonging through forms of altered, albeit often minimal, states of consciousness associated with physical vertigo and emotional intensity (Catone, 2018). These elements help explain why transcendence, altered states of perception, and the pursuit of vertigo occupy a central position in lifestyle sports and are therefore relevant to the research question addressed in this article.

2.2 People like bridges

This search of increased emotional or perceptual intensity is not restricted to the best-performing teams. This covers a wide spectrum of contexts – from small-town football clubs, with supporters' collectives, local *palios* (e.g., Siena, which can be represented through animal effigies) and to large teams in which fans can be mobilised on an emotional level (Taylor & Acic, 2021). Caillois' work is useful here again when he alludes to the mask being an artefact which results in trance – a mood of a state of partial forgetting of the ordinary self that impacts both the mask-wearing individual and the collective that is doing the performing for itself. Through these meanings, the mask functions not only as a social bond, but as a medium of symbolic mediation;

sociologically, it is seen as a form of local social capital. These processes are based on classical group psychology and promote identitarian dynamics that create in-group/out-group divisions and help in the development of common meanings and collective dispositions (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Cigliuti, 2018). Such patterns are ambivalent in their effects, as belonging mechanisms could simultaneously promote group bonding and generate exclusionary or boundary-drawing behaviors towards others. In terms of the passing down of values and norms, a variety of individual (goal-target oriented) and group practices are significant (Shields & Bredemeier, 2011). Discipline, consistency, acceptance of rules and opponents, loyalty and perceived fair play, are heavily held in common amongst these in the promotion of sport nowadays (Merico, Romeo & Tirino, 2022). This makes the message of ‘playing’ as a matter of rules and norms difficult to achieve. Sport has historically performed a role, not only as symbol but as case study of socialisation (Mead, 2009) and also, in various contexts, as a vehicle for social demands and claims for inclusion (Spaaij, 2009). Media visibility, at the same time, has rendered sport a privileged platform – the one sometimes deliberately cultivated, as in something commonly labelled as “sportswashing” – for illuminating injustices and abuse of power that propagate via socio-political and economic inequality (Boykoff, 2016; Hartmann, 2022). In this way, sport can act both as a vehicle for participation and integration to minoritarian or oppressed communities, and as a space in which exclusionary dynamics, struggles, and symbolic violence are replicable. This ambivalence ultimately complicates any objective reading of sport as an intrinsically inclusive practice, yet simultaneously reaffirms its crucial educational function in the socialisation of values and principles associated with equality, social justice and well-being, as underpinned by a number of the 2030 Agenda objectives¹. At this point, a reasonable reader might wonder how shamanism is a part of this debate. According to Singh (2017), shamanism includes practices of specialized spirit world specialists (shamans or samans) who communicate with the spirit world through altered mental states, including trance, for healing, divination, or guidance purposes. However, when viewed through its cultural context and unlike the more recent embedding of modern sport in institutional practice (Bausinger, 2009), shamanism has been analysed as having both individual and communal roles (Krippner, 2000; Eichberg, 2011), in society. References to shamanism in this article do not in and of themselves represent a direct identification between “shamanic” figures and modern athletes or fans. Instead, shamanism is instrumentalized as a comparative and interpretative approach to some aspect of transformation, identification and symbolic mediation. In different ethnographic settings, shamanic practices have provided ways for individuals to negotiate sociocultural problems and access socially acceptable identities. For example, in Siberut in the Mentawai Islands, individuals who become shamans later in life accept an altered status as healers or guardians of a group’s collective knowledge (Eichberg, 2011). Typically, such characters are not isolated from their respective communities but part of them and their activities are well socially accepted as significant gifts to the common life. Similar symbolic recognition dynamics are witnessed in sport but to a much greater extent. For instance, in sumo wrestling the athlete’s bodily attributes – that do not conform to prevailing aesthetic norms in Japanese society – are redefined in the competitive system and athletes are afforded a prestigious ceremonial status and social respect, sometimes described in para-religious ways

¹ <https://unric.org/it/agenda-2030/>

(ibid.). Similarly, it is through the emphasis on the connection between man and nature (common in shamanic traditions; Townsend, 1997; Harvey & Wallis, 2010) that the theme of environmental immersion and embodied attunement to a natural setting, notably in a lifestyle and outdoor sport culture, is reiterated in the practice of sports. Empirical accounts also provide evidence of the persistence of ritualised and symbolic imaginaries in organised sport. In 2002, the Confederation of African Football instituted regulations against witchcraft following accusations that teams had resorted to ritual specialists before the fixtures (Sadhu, 2022; Stan Chu Ilo, 2025). Analogous dynamics have been similarly described in some contexts – for example an association with a shaman (by the Peruvian club *Binacional*); group action of a group of Andean ritual specialists (Tayta Inti and Pachamama) before Peru is to compete in the World Cup against Australia (Sadhu, 2022). Although such events are often depicted in media texts as exotic or folkloric, the evidence suggests a continuing prevalence of ritual paradigms, which tie meaning, protection, or favors to sporting performance. These practices are in line with Nemeroff and Rozin’s (2000) notion of “sympathetic magic”, the idea that objects and people can imbue symbolic qualities or energies by means of being in contact, or through similarities or connections². This is an approach also seen in individual sports-specific cases such as tennis, where Novak Djokovic openly mentioned the presence of a spiritual leader-trainer (Pepe Imaz) through the guru of Spain and its self-described shaman as part of his larger search for himself.

In those diverse instances it is not the presence of these symbolical or ritualist resources that differs, it is the extent of cultural legitimacy associated with such resources and the manner in which these are openly recognised, mediated and commodified, given in the contemporary sporting context.

3. Embodied techniques, altered states, and ritual imaginaries

Following the concise discussion of play, vertigo, and symbolic mediation introduced through Caillois and developed in the supra paragraph, could be useful to foreground the collective dimension that emerges from these experiential dynamics. The pursuit of perceptual intensity and emotional arousal in sport does not remain confined to the individual body; rather, it is socially organised, culturally mediated, and collectively recognised. While the historical and cultural roots of modern sport as well as shamanism may differ, some partial and practical similarities of the two can be observed. Sport-related achievement often depends upon the discipline of practice over years and the systematic development of physical and technical skills (Stafford, 2011). Shamanic practices are also characterized by prolonged apprenticeship, where ritual learning and transformation, in conjunction with embodied training, are also highly common (Singh, 2017). Moreover, many sports require continuous internal effort on the part of athletes and sports performers to concentrate, meditate, and visualise (Orlick, 1986) in order to achieve the same level of performance (e.g., target shooting, fencing, martial arts, and combat sports). They require anticipatory mental scenarios along with a more present sensibility that directs the athlete at nuanced corporeal and situational clues. Fighting athletes often refer to this condition as an acute perception of the proper time, or spatial position that is necessary to

² Cited in Taylor&Acic, 2021, p. 575.

perform an effective movement. This kind of awareness is associated with being in tune with one's own body, sensations, emotions and fears, as well as those of the opponent. Athletes may experience an awareness of the optimal moment for positive movement, sensing subtle signals of bodily tension and breathing rhythm (O'Shaughnessy, 1995). By using focus, repetition, and routines of preparedness – often by superstitious and ritualised actions on the part of the individual (or in some cases the supporters) – sport performance can lead to altered states of experience. In sport psychology, they are most commonly defined as sensations of 'flow' or being 'in the zone,' with deep participation in the activity and the temporary abating of the distractions, physical, psychological, or otherwise (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Such events are not to be equated with religious trance, but it is the same reconfigured attention, perception, and perception of time and space. In shamanic settings, trance states, often realized in bodily practices, can be considered to be a means of attaining alternative forms of perception and knowledge, including communication (Eliade, 1964). Rather than considering these states as having to be one and the same, the focus of this analysis is to imagine them as structurally similar experiences, through the means of embodied technique of sensation, perception, and self-awareness in an unspoken form. Finally, sport and shamanic practices can be seen, not only in terms of the individual elements of transformation they provide – but equally as a means for transformation in different directions— but can be seen as a kind of transformative tool. Within sport, these transformations are typically prioritised for performance enhancement, competitive excellence, or individual and collective wellbeing (Merico et al., 2022). In shamanism, these concerns relate to more general forms of knowledge, balance and mediation between human and non-human aspects of perception (Larsen, 1998). These experiential dimensions – attention, embodiment, and trance-like concentration – represent domains with potential points of convergence of terms that are specific to shamanism with some form of lifestyle sport practice, but they do not imply a direct equivalent or continuity of causality.

4. From embodied experience to collective belonging

The experience of the modern fan is often understood as a reaction to the transition from community-based social structures to complex, differentiated societies — a phenomenon that has been thoroughly explored in classical sociology (Harris, 2001). This change has been considered a progression from mechanical integration to organic forms of social cohesion (Durkheim, 2007), along with the emergence of individualism (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2020), the erosion of normative ties that traditionally support communal life and the emergence of anomie (Durkheim, 1993). These dynamics are associated with the rational bureaucratisation of organisations (Weber, 1978) and the technologization of social existence (Ellul, 1964), as well as the gradual decay – and replacement – of magical-religious worldviews for scientific and technical rationalities, as well as the so-called “iron cage” of modernity (Weber, 2001) and the weakening of so-called “grand narratives” (Lyotard, 1979). In this respect, sports fandom has been read in

this context by some as contemporary tribalism³ (Maffesoli, 1996) and not as a return to pre-modern social structures, but as a metaphor for expressions of a new form of social life in which there is emotional intensity, collective symbols and group identification. From that perspective, some might interpret fandom as a modern belonging mode that can re-awaken affective connections and social engagement; such that it has also received attention in the media and communication literature (Dionísio, Leal, & Moutinho, 2008). The tribal experience of fans is often characterised by strong emotional involvement and a sense of solidarity that can temporarily suspend perceived social differences related to class, age, gender, or ethnicity (Taylor & Acic, 2021). At the same time, types of belonging are intrinsically ambivalent. In addition to unity and emotional togetherness, fandom also provides for exclusionary identities, conflict and symbolic and bodily violence, and the practices of discrimination and the formulation of boundaries (Serazio, 2013). These tensions emphasize not merely the necessity to tackle “tribalism” as a stable or normative status but as a dynamic and contested phenomenon. The same can be said for some extreme sports, which have been occasionally read through the dual interpretive framework of modern tribalism and shamanism (Thomassen & Balle, 2012). In ethnographic settings, shamanic practices included the ritualised and intense tests of endurance, courageousness, and bodily control (Eliade, 1964). Extreme sports can also be considered as ‘interstices’ through which participants expose themselves to potentially frightening and uncertain situations, heightening their sensory sensitivity and facilitating bonds within communities and between individuals (Van Gennep, 1981; Brymer & Schweitzer, 2013). While these practices should not be confused, they can be analysed as framing risk, stress, and cognitive changes as significant experiential resources (Lyng, 2004). Altered perception and acute experiential states have also been utilised in communication and branding strategies in modern sporting contexts. In this sense, the symbolic aspects of sport can be intentionally exaggerated and framed via marketing and PR practices to encourage identification with teams, events or brands. As a distinctive management function, public relations involve establishing and maintaining communication, understanding, and cooperation between organisations and their publics. This facilitates organisational adaptation to social changes through research-based, ethically oriented communication strategies (Heath & Vasquez, 2001). A common case within Italian context is Ducati’s communications restructuring of the late 1990s and early 2000s, which utilised Maffesoli’s concept of modern tribalism, explicitly. Within this narrative framework, customers, enthusiasts, and employees were figuratively reconfigured as belonging to a “tribe”, the brand was depicted as a totem, and marketing activities were ritualised through events, spaces, and shared practices. Although this model was intended to be understood as a communicative or symbolic formation rather than a sociological description, it resulted in significant organisational and commercial outcomes, including greater attendance at brand-related events, increased use of corporate spaces and substantial growth in sales and profitability (Vecchiato, 2008).

³ In Michel Maffesoli’s conception, tribalism (or neo-tribalism, *néo-tribalisme*) refers to a postmodern social phenomenon where the rigid, rationalized structures of modern society (class, nation, institution) are replaced by fluid, emotional, and small-group affiliations. He argues that while modernity was characterized by individualism and large-scale, rational organization, postmodernity is defined by a return to intense, localized, and affective (emotional) social bonds. Please note that in this work, the term *tribalism* is used exclusively in the sense represented by the French sociologist and borrowed by other scholars following the same line of interpretation.

5. From shamanism to sports

The Olympic Games are probably the most emblematic embodiment of Pierre de Coubertin's view of sport. They serve as a symbolic model that traces back to the ancient Greek Olympics, where athletic competitions were infused with ritual practices in honour of Zeus (Kyle, 2014). Similarly, many traditional sports in North America were developed in a ceremonial context and were often tied to dance, prayer and ritual performance (Culin, 1907). Other sport traditions have been temporally related with ritual and shamanic imaginaries as well. Mongolian wrestling, for example, has been tied to shamanic practices grounded within wider cosmological systems (Humphrey & Sneath, 1999). Aspects of martial arts have also been explored through the lens of the spiritual and ritual traditions in which they have been performed, but such connections should be understood within the cultural, historical, and philosophical framework from which they arose. Chinese *kung fu* and *tai chi* are closely related to Taoist philosophy (Krist, 2019); Japanese martial arts have appeared in the form of myths and imagery associated with mythological figures, including the *Tengu*. These legendary beings from Japanese folklore are believed to have symbolic links to the ritual and spiritual aspects of martial practice (Knutsen, 2011). Throughout these traditions, means of meditative, visualising and corporeal discipline and visualization techniques have been used to induce states of harmony and heightened awareness (Vertonghen & Theeboom, 2010). In recent generations, elements of shamanic iconography and intuitive practices have been applied to modern personal, professional and athletic coaching. Methods such as John Moore's "Shamanic Intuitive Coaching" draw from shamanic imagery in conjunction with strategies borrowed from hypnotherapy, adult learning, and performance coaching. Access to publicly available documentation and other materials related to such practices depict coaching as a journey toward transformation, overcoming personal and professional barriers through the activation of intuition and embodied awareness. Although these methodologies work almost entirely by means of market dominated and self-development discourse, they do demonstrate how shamanic vocabularies and ritualized metaphors are circulating beyond the cultural context in which shamanic voices and rituals are created, and they are re-imagined within contemporary performance cultures. Analyses of client accounts of comparable coach-based interventions such as Anne-Marie Southcombe's⁴ and Sandra Molendyk's⁵ focus on clients' perceived increases in productivity, psychophysical well-being, and

⁴ Comments from the practitioner's clients reflect extremely positive experiences with the coaching received, emphasizing how the process has had a significant and transformative impact on their lives. One client describes the experience by highlighting the holistic approach involving thinking, writing, physical and mental exercise. Another client, who worked with Anne-Marie as a life coach for over a year during a period of great pressure, praises the coaching for helping him realise that slowing down and connecting with himself was the key to unlocking greater productivity and success. A third piece of feedback, from a participant in a weekend retreat, emphasizes the value of connecting with others and the welcoming and comfortable environment created, despite his own introverted tendencies.

⁵ The website provided outlines the holistic approach of Sandra Molendyk, a Sport Shaman, who integrates sports psychology, positive psychology, neuroscience and shamanism to improve personal and athletic performance. Her method is highly customised, focusing on understanding the client's personal, professional, and athletic ambitions, and applying tailor-made methods for improvement. These methods aim to transcend ordinary experiences, creating joy, leadership and meaningful success. Molendyk emphasises the creation of a state of bliss for elevated awareness, facilitating deep personal insights and methods to overcome challenges and achieve goals. The approach also addresses healing on multiple levels: physical, energetic,

personal growth. Reoccurring terms – “healing,” “energy,” “spirit,” “success” – indicate a holistic commitment to a merging of symbolic, psychological and neuroscientific registers. At the same time, by far the least reference to traditional meditation practices suggests a more flexible and instrumentalized understanding of balance and awareness, which is inclined less toward spirituality per se than toward measurable performance outcomes. Collectively, the examples illustrate how, across and between historical and cultural contexts, symbolic and ritual elements are transmitted and appropriated to shape the contemporary sports practices and narratives that are characterized by risk, bodily engagement, nature and altered states of perception. Instead of suggesting continuity or equivalence as such migrations do, such migrations showcase the adaptable character of ritual imaginaries in contemporary sport cultures. These motifs – risk, altered perception, symbolic membership and the pursuit of vertigo – offer a way of framing lifestyle sports not as casual pastimes or games, but as opportunities for transformative experiences. The following section refines the Cailloisian categories used throughout the article by using a widely known cultural narrative that, in our view, has become emblematic of extreme sports and the contemporary search for transcendence.

6. A short case history: “Point Break”

(Bodhi) It was never about money for us it was about us against the system. That system that kills the human spirit. We stand for something to those dead souls inching along the freeways in their metal coffins. We show them that the human spirit is still alive. (Point Break, 1991, 01^h:32)

The selection of the film *Point Break* – originally released over thirty years ago – is inspired by its enduring capacity to illustrate the experiential dynamics addressed in this article. It does a greater job than most new movies of boiling down themes of risk, transcendence, group belonging, and confrontation with nature into a kind of story that has come to symbolize the culture of extreme sports. The plot is quite simple: Johnny Utah (Keanu Reeves) is a young FBI agent; as he infiltrates a group of surfers thought to commit bank robberies while wearing masks of former U.S. presidents. The film was directed by Kathryn Bigelow and released in 1991. The group is led by Bodhi (Patrick Swayze), a glamorous presence who is propelled by the desire for adrenaline, freedom, and existential intensity rather than for money. While Utah submerges himself in the surf society of Southern California, the relationship with Bodhi slowly erases the old lines between professional obligation and personal devotion. The story examines identity, friendships, and transformation from extreme experiences. Surfing, skydiving and other very high-risk activities are not just amazing settings; they are narrative devices by which embodied involvement, trust and collective identity are described. Ericson Core’s 2015 re-envisioned *Point Break* builds upon these facets in its exploration of extreme sports from wingsuit flying to snowboarding to rock climbing. In this version, criminal conduct is recast as a series of ritualised ordeals aimed at achieving harmony with Mother Nature. Though they are stylistically quite different, spiritually fictionalised visions of nature, risk and collective life become intertwined in

emotional, spiritual and mental, using techniques such as energy healing, spirit/soul retrieval and guided visualisation. This comprehensive method not only aims to improve athletic performance but also enriches personal life, offering tools for sustainable growth and well-being.

both films. What matters most for in this analysis are not the ‘reality’ in these representations but the symbolic weight of them. In the film, the group, mainly led by Bodhi, is portrayed as bonded by a system of balance of self, other, and nature. The very fact of the character’s name – Bodhi, derived from the Buddhist ideal of *enlightenment* – implies a narrative leaning toward transcendence, self-overcoming life (without inferring doctrine-related alignment). Sociologically the movie serves as a fine example group integration and identity formation. Like Johnny Utah, arriving in a sort of insular [close-off] community, could be a fundamental experience in which an external actor learns shared codes, practices and embodied dispositions. These dynamic echoes Caillois’ category of *mimicry*. Utah adopts the surfers’ behaviours in the beginning not as a natural response but as a deliberate strategic form of role play, distancing himself from institutional routines and normative expectations. But imitation ultimately becomes a transformative process whereby identity is renegotiated and reoriented through the group (Nardini, 2018). The film also stages experiences that can be linked with *ilinx* – defined as the pursuit of vertigo and perceptual destabilisation. Surfing high-flying waves or jumping off airplanes serve as cinematic figuration of managed loss of balance, in which characters contend with fear, danger, and the edge of man’s capacity to exert control. Such encounters symbolically represent a search with an embodied and situational aspect, one that is non-mythological and not metaphysical. In this way, Point Break provides a narrative discussion of lifestyle sports as potential countercultural sites in late-modern societies. Bodhi’s critique of “the system that kills the human spirit” mirrors sociological diagnoses of rationalisation, bureaucratisation, and alienation made by Weber, Durkheim, and Ellul.

Extreme sport practices are therefore conceived as modes of experiential resistance that suspend temporarily routinised identities and consider alternative modes of existence. And so, the mask, both as a literal and figurative motif, becomes a way to strengthen the movie’s interest in the performative and ritual. The masks give people a way to suspend common identities, increase group solidarity, and travel into the liminal that opens up alternative social and existential spaces they can occupy. In that sense, Point Break does not present shamanism as such, but rather engages ritualised imaginaries which make sense within larger anthropological debates about liminality, mimicry, and transformation of self-embodiment. Both of these elements combined render Point Break a useful piece of cultural narrative to assist the Cailloisian categories mobilised in this article with explication. It doesn’t offer empirical evidence so much as it does an allegorical and experiential apparatus that works as a mechanism to explain how lifestyle sports can be understood as places of risk, transcendence and an identity reshaping in modern culture.

Bodhi : They [the rival surfers] only live to get radical. They don’t have any real understanding of the sea, so they’ll never get the spiritual side of it.

Johnny : Hey, you’re not gonna start chanting or anything, are you ?

Bodhi : I might.... You still haven’t figured out what riding waves is all about, have you? It’s a state of mind. It’s that place where you lose yourself and you find yourself. You don’t know it yet, but you’ve got it. It’s right there (Point Break, 1991, 0^h:37)

7. A short quantitative approach

The narrative intensity of *Point Break* expresses in a stylized and symbolic register experiential dimensions that many lifestyle sport practices report on such as perceptual destabilisation, ritualized episodes of heightened states, and the creation of collective identities based off shared experiences with risk and nature. Building on this narrative background and offering a theoretical or heuristic basis for exploring how individuals with sustained engagement with shamanic frameworks may interpret similar dimensions within their own sporting experiences, the following quantitative section must thus be read as an exploratory counterpart to the qualitative and theoretical conversation we are presenting above. A questionnaire was given as part of the survey to 86 current and former students in the first Italian Master's programme with a focus on shamanism. The sample is not meant to be representative of the general population of sport practitioners but rather to encompass perspectives from individuals who already know the shamanic vocabularies, practices, and interpretative frameworks associated with sport. 79.1%, 18.6%, and 2.3%, respectively, identified as female, male, and 'other'. The average age was 50.5 years (median 51) with a minimum age of 27 and a maximum age of 77. In terms of educational background, 67.4 percent had a Master's or doctoral degree (including 18.6% who had a PhD), 4.7 percent held a Bachelor's degree, and 8.3 percent had completed compulsory schooling. Such high levels of education correlate with the admission and profile of the Master's programme itself, which presupposes at least a Bachelor's degree and is frequently pursued along with an advanced professional training pathway. In terms of occupational status, 51.2% of participants identified themselves as professionals, 29.3% as freelancers; 14.6% as executives or managers, and 4.9% as self-employed. Regarding the practice of sports, 37.2% of respondents indicated that they played mountain sports while 32.6% were involved in water sports, 4.7% in motor sports, and 34.9% in other sport activities; only 9.3% did not practice sports at all. Among respondents, about half (48.8%) performed the sport on a regular basis, while 51.2% did so at least sometimes. In comparison to ISTAT reference data on the Italian population, the percentage of the sample that involved sport practice is comparatively higher, especially with regard to outdoor sport. More than half (55.8%) of respondents mainly practiced outdoor sports, while 30.2% practised in sport centres and 4.7% at home. Although these numbers are above national averages, they are in line with the characteristics of the studied population. These perceived benefits of sport participation include improved mood (58.5 %), contact with nature (56.1 %), better psycho-motor coordination (56.1 %), increased resistance to effort (56.1 %), self-knowledge (46.3 %) and introspection (19.5 %) as mentioned by respondents. Course attendees were also asked to rate how far they agreed that sport facilitates feelings of transcendence from a scale of 1 to 10, with 84% rating it at 7 or better, with peaks at 8 (37.2%) and 7 (23%) rate. In the same vein, 48.8% rated sport as a tool for surpassing personal performance limits at ranges of 8 and 10, and 38.1% rated it as a source of inner transformation at level 8. A substantial number of respondents (95.2%) perceived a significant link between sport and nature; the highest frequency of responses occurred at levels 8 and 9. Thirty-nine percent of the sample reported awareness of the use of shamanic practices in organised sport contexts and perceived relevance was overall rated as high. Questions concerning flow and altered states of consciousness should be approached with caution. Although 81% of respondents described becoming "flowed" (or in a state of altered

consciousness) as being linked to shamanic activities, these responses are subjective self-assessments, according to the psychological literature of flow. The claimed influence of these experiences in relation to perceived individual and/or team performance should therefore be seen as indicative of participants' understanding of interpretation process as opposed to causality. The researchers likewise saw in extreme sports transcendental associations connecting risk and altered states of consciousness, which was perceived as high or above by 80% of the participants on a 10-point scale. Animal symbolism was found to be significant in sport situations with scores also clustering on the upper end of the scale. These interpretations are in line with symbolic and narrative elements described in the qualitative aspects of the paper. An open-ended question helped participants describe in their own words their experiences. For many, sport became an opportunity for introspection, heightened self-awareness, challenge and, sometimes, metaphorical parallels to shamanic journeys. Such expressions are subjectively mediated and culturally, but analytically interesting, they show how participants themselves negotiate their experiences through shamanic vocabularies. These narratives are not discussed as evidence of shamanic practices in sport but are read as evidence of interpretative convergence within this particular group. In conclusion, an exploratory factor analysis was performed to determine latent dimensions that influenced the response patterns (see Annex, Table 1). The results revealed associations between factors for transcendence in sport, animal symbolism and nature-connection. These factors are taken with a pinch of salt and construed as heuristics rather than stable constructs. More generally, the quantitative findings do not intend to establish generalisable relationships, rather they suggest early signs that those familiar with shamanic frameworks regard experiences of transcendence, flow-like states and nature-connection as interconnected for them to pursue in their sport.

8. Concluding discussion

In this article, we consider how certain sporting practices, especially those associated with lifestyles and extreme sports, can inspire experiences of transcendence, altered perception and connection with nature. These experiences align with the dimensions often discussed in shamanic contexts. Throughout the paper, we argue that sporting experience should not be solely focused on performance results, but should also encompass symbolic, affective and embodied processes, which are reflected in ritual structures, liminality and heightened states of awareness.

Drawing on existing literature, including ethnographic analyses of surf culture and lifestyle sports, this study suggests that contemporary sports practices engage with aesthetic, existential and libertarian dimensions within a framework where sports participation is viewed as a pursuit of intensity, meaning and self-transformation. In this interpretation, ideas related to shamanic knowledge – such as embodied knowledge, ecological attunement and experiential transformation – do not merely serve as explanatory tools; they also provide insight into how practitioners relate to themselves, others and the world around them. Symbolic associations and affective dispositions persist within these forms of practice, which involve the concept of “sympathetic magic” (Nemeroff & Rozin, 2000). The shamanic symbolism and ritualism inherent in sport are clearly evident in its portrayal in the media and advertising, and thus in the collective

imagination. This is made quite clear through the analysis of the case study examined in the article. In these contexts, references to shamanism may signal authenticity, spirituality or ecological sensitivity, thereby enhancing the communicative and symbolic significance of shamanism. At the same time, this visibility highlights the tension between the lived experience of transformation and the strategic appropriation of ritual and spiritual motifs in branding, marketing, and identity construction processes (Yun, 2006) The findings in research comprise a combination of theoretical reflection, cultural analysis and exploratory quantitative data. These quantitative results indicate that individuals with prior knowledge of shamanic frameworks are more likely to perceive the intersection of sporting practice and shamanic ideals. However, these findings should be interpreted with caution. They reflect beliefs prevalent within specific, culturally situated segments of the population and, as such, cannot be generalised to broader sporting audiences. However, they highlight key areas where more systematic sociological research would be valuable, such as the interplay between shamanic frameworks and sporting experiences.

Cumulatively, the analysis points to sport as a context where ancient symbolic repertoires and contemporary explorations of well-being, intensity, and self-transformation converge. Whether such experiences generate a new kind of collective involvement instead of being almost exclusively individualistic and market-based remains to be seen. However, it is clear that the combination of performance, embodied transcendence and ecological awareness in lifestyle sports highlights ongoing processes of cultural hybridisation in a global context.

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Appendix

1. Interpretive summary of factor structure

Survey item (short label)	Main factor (F) loading(s)	Dominant dimension (interpretation)	Key insight for the paper
Sport facilitates transcendence	High on F1 (.655); low-moderate on F3 (.294)	Symbolic-transcendent (F1) with a performance component	Transcendence is closely tied to symbolic/shamanic aspects, but it is also partly linked to performance and challenge.
Sport helps overcome personal limits	High on F3 (.772)	Performance-challenge (F3)	Overcoming limits is the clearest “purely sporting” dimension, distinct from symbolic or ecological concerns.
Sport supports inner transformation	Moderate on F3 (.482)	Performance-challenge (F3) with diffuse links	Inner transformation is mostly embedded in the performance-challenge space rather than in purely shamanic symbolism.
Sport promotes connection with nature	Very high on F2 (.862); moderate on F3 (.379)	Nature-ecology (F2) with some performance relevance	Connection with nature forms an autonomous ecological dimension, only partly overlapping with performance motives.
Sport promotes environmental sustainability values	High on F2 (.672)	Nature-ecology (F2)	Sustainability is clearly clustered with the nature dimension, reinforcing an “eco-spiritual” reading of sport.
Extreme sports offer risk-based transcendence	Moderate on all three (F1 .349; F2 .320; F3 .430)	Hybrid (shamanic, ecological, and performance)	Extreme sports sit at the intersection of transcendence, nature, and performance, illustrating the paper’s core thesis.

Survey item (short label)	Main factor (F) loading(s)	Dominant dimension (interpretation)	Key insight for the paper
Importance of animals and animal symbols in sport	Very high on F1 (.938)	Symbolic–shamanic (F1)	Animal symbolism is the strongest indicator of the shamanic-symbolic dimension in the data.