Comparison as Reflective and Affective Practice: Orientations toward the Middle in Recreational Road Cycling

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Abstract
The article discusses comparisons in recreational road cycling and asks how hobby athletes compare themselves and their performances with others. Based on a research project on orientations toward the middle, it focuses on constellations in which belonging to the midfield in sport is interpreted as a positive achievement and goal. The article shows how criteria of comparison are dynamic and negotiated in relation to other athletes and to a range of different motives. It shows how comparisons entail reflective, anticipatory, and affective elements and how available data and subjective estimations about others' performance influence comparative constellations.

Keywords: comparison, sport, cycling, relationality, observing apparatus

How do recreational athletes compare themselves to other athletes? With whom do they compare themselves? On which aspects do they focus, and which elements do they neglect, ignore, or avoid when they put themselves side by side with other athletes? To what extent can an athlete's comparison be understood as a reflective, explicit, and rationalized practice? What about affective, implicit, or anticipatory dimensions of comparison in recreational sport? For the world of sport, one answer to such questions of comparison seems to be obvious: being faster, stronger, better—in short, winning—is the guiding principle, resulting in straightforward results and rankings that differentiate among athletes on the basis of their performance. European ethnologist Hermann Bausinger talks of a "sport of standings" (*Tabellensport*; Bausinger 2015) to reflect on the prevalence of ranked tabular overviews in many sport disciplines. However, the dichotomy of winning and losing inscribed in such rankings and results is more complex than it seems (Stichweh 1990; Groth 2019, 203–7), at least in its absolute form. Despite the vast occurrence of standings in professional sports and increasingly in recreational sport, there are other criteria of comparison that can be more important than winning (Schulze 2005, 259–60). Consider professional cycling. A top-ten result in a big race can be considered a huge achievement and success, bringing prestige and prospects for a good contract with a team or sponsor. Furthermore, many cyclists are employed not for their chances of winning races but for their helper role as *domestiques*. They are not expected the cross the finish line in first place but to support their team leaders in various ways: as water carriers, as lead-out men for sprints, or providing slipstream by riding in front.

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If we turn our view to recreational athletes, the winning/losing dichotomy seems even more problematic. How many recreational cyclists can realistically hope to win a (hobby) race or land a spot on the winner's podium? To what extent are hobby athletes able to train in a way that allows them to compete for a top ten position in a race with hundreds (if not thousands) of participants? Like marathons and other running events, big cycling races for hobbyists have gained in number and popularity in Europe over the past couple of decades. In Germany, races exist with annually more than 20,000 athletes; from spring to early autumn, one has the opportunity to enter at least one race nearly every weekend. For most of the athletes participating in the races, it is not about winning. Other motives are more important: having fun, being fit and healthy, spending time with friends, and enjoying nature (Kaschuba 1989; Wicker et al. 2012; cf. Groth 2014, 44ff.). Nonetheless, their participation in races involves comparing performances with other athletes and with their own prior performances: How does one fare in comparison to cyclists from the same age group, to friends, or to colleagues? Can one do better than last year in the same race?

This article puts the focus on dimensions of comparison in recreational road cycling and asks which aspects come together when hobby cyclists compare themselves with others and with their own performances. Specifically, it aims to shed light on the interplay between reflective, anticipatory, and affective elements of comparison in recreational sports. By "reflective elements," I refer to relatively explicit and rationalized forms of comparison on the basis of information about performances, performance categories, and competitors; by "anticipatory elements of comparison," I refer to the anticipated performances of athletes and their competitors and the influence of such anticipation on competitive orientations. Last, "affective elements" for my purposes are understood as emotions with an effect on how recreational athletes compare themselves and their performances with others. A perspective on such elements of comparison includes a shift from the dichotomy of winning and losing toward a more relational and multidimensional understanding of comparison in sports, including different forms of rankings.

The article achieves this against the backdrop of developments in recreational sports and other fields that frame average performances as positive achievements. Specifically, in recreational road cycling, a rising number of athletes aim at keeping up with the midfield in hobby races, in real and virtual life. Despite spending many hours training and optimizing performance, these cyclists do not take the top as their goal, but instead choose a relational middle. For them, winning—often portrayed as the guiding principle of comparison in sport—is a negligible criterion. I will show which processes of comparison in its different dimensions are involved in such orientations toward the middle and how reflective, anticipatory, and affective elements feature in them. To analyze the impact of these elements on comparison as a social practice in recreational sport, the article starts by outlining orientations toward the middle in this field and contextualizes them as part of broader developments. Subsequently, the article investigates the extent comparison to which is a relational practice that can be used by athletes to make sense of and situate performances in recreational sport.

Elements of explicit reflection and more implicit anticipatory and affective practices of comparison are analyzed. In the conclusion, the interplay between these elements and the influence of rankings as an "observing apparatus" (Sørensen, Marlin, and Niewöhner 2018) are discussed.

Orientations towards the Midfield in Recreational Road Cycling

"Keeping up" with the midfield, achieving middle incomes, or belonging to the middle class are increasingly powerful models for socioeconomic behavior and imaginaries in Germany (Schöneck and Ritter 2019). Recent sociological studies on Germany highlight that the "civil normal biography" is preferred over "excessive luxury" (Calmbach et al. 2016) and that "conformity" with the middle class (Koppetsch 2013) is viewed as a favorable goal. Such orientations toward the middle exist in the sphere of work where sabbaticals, part-time work, and work-from-home schemes as well as work-life balance have become increasingly common and people argue that the professional career is perceived of as less important than a happy and balanced life. The article is based on a broader empirical project on orientations toward the middle in different fields, among them recreational road cycling (Groth 2014, 2019a). The project involved participant observation in hobby races and training sessions, interviews with cyclists and race organizers, and analysis of social media debates as well as cycling publications.

However, positive references to the middle are not limited to work life. In the sphere of leisure, for example, in recreational road cycling as a sport, the orientation toward the middle, toward averages, and toward somewhat "normalized performances" is prevalent as well. Hobby cyclists argue that their motivation is not to win a race or be the best but to achieve good performances relative to friends, their age group, or their own performance in previous years (Groth 2014). Belonging to the midfield is argued to be an achievement of its own and is framed as desirable. Overly extensive training durations and aspirations can even be seen in a negative way in this context. In online fora and on other social media as well as in interviews, hobby athletes argue that very ambitious cyclists should participate in amateur races rather than the popular lower-ranked and leisure-oriented hobby races (*Jedermannrennen*). In the past few years, such races have mostly been won by sponsored teams with support staff and for professional or amateur cyclists—a development criticized as it weakens the traditional amateur races and introduces a highly competitive style of racing in events marketed to more casual cyclists. On the other hand, a significant share of participants in hobby races tries to avoid bad performances. They train regularly, are often part of clubs, invest in new equipment, and aim for "good" results in training and races. While the podium and—in some larger events—even the top 100 of a race is hard to reach, these cyclists seek to better prior performances, outsprint colleagues and friends, or be among the faster cyclists on a climb (Groth 2014). The efforts required to be part of the midfield are nonetheless high, especially in light of professionalized teams in hobby races involving training camps abroad, sponsored bikes and equipment, team coaches, and strategies. Without continuous training efforts, even the mid-

field is hard to reach.

Accordingly, among a specific group of recreational cyclists, the middle or the midfield is conceived of as positive points of orientation, not as a deficit or failure. There is an immense willingness to compete and perform, added to the sometimes huge training loads of athletes taking part in hobby races. At the same time, their competitive orientation takes only their own performance development (the increase in performance from year to year) as a goal or that of other groups in their social vicinity—the same age group, athletes with similar build and experience, or those in their same club. Orientations toward the top, however, are rare. Thus, in the field of recreational road cycling, one finds what one might call a "competition for the middle" or the midfield with positive demarcations against the top and the bottom. Against the top, a stratification of motives backgrounds absolute competition and foregrounds compensation from stressful work life or health benefits. "Too good" performances associated with quasi-professional teams, former professional riders, or immense training loads—while not discouraged—are viewed with skepticism. The comparative dimensions one finds in this field are relative, such as aiming at bettering one's own time or comparing oneself to similar performance groups or social groups that are seen as realistic. Achieving these relative goals, most importantly belonging to the midfield, is a hard task and connected with many requirements. Against the bottom, there is a strong demarcation against worse athletes, which goes hand in hand with goals to improve one's performance. Aspiring to achieve absolute goals is not deemed to be efficient because this is seen to involve high risk and great efforts; furthermore, one may lack the talent to be one of the best and on the podium. Competition for the midfield in recreational sport is connected with a voluntary restriction to medium goals. The limitation is argued to be a positive choice, leading to enjoyment of races and less pressure to perform. No absolute goals are set in competition with other actors; goals are seen as relative in relation to other actors who are perceived to be comparably strong. Here, the middle can be understood as relational and dynamic: if one's performance improves or one finds less time to train, the perception of medium goals can be lowered or heightened. Yet there is an interplay involved between voluntary self-limitation—being content to belong to the middle—and external constrictions—not being able to achieve more than the middle due to lack of training, talent, or resources.[1]

The "middle" is a powerful concept to structure action and perceptions. Orientations toward the middle in recreational sport and other fields merit deeper scrutiny to show how they are constituted in specific settings and constellations, which discourses they reference, how they relate to debates on competition and performance or how they are referenced to make sense of economic and social conditions. These orientations are a form of social comparative (Nullmeier 2016), a form of orientation that draws a line against the bottom and the top. In contrast to competitions, such orientations seek not the best but a medium position, a "good average" or a "happy medium" with which one is content (or claims to be). They are socially constructed and gain traction through their relation to relevant social categories. Instead of being defined by objective or neutral factors, such as mathematical medians or statistic evidence,

they are placed in reference to situated criteria. Friends, family, or colleagues serve as points of reference rather than objective scales. What is understood as the middle is dynamically constructed and is contingent on personal living conditions. A specific sport performance can be perceived of by an individual as more than average at the point of its execution, but after two years of hard training, it might be deemed too low and not appropriate. Expectations and perceptions of the middle change over time and with shifting social conditions. The middle is flexible as it compares positions—in terms of performance and other criteria—to the specific social context. Orientations toward an average are dynamically constructed from subjective points of view—they are not fixed but emerge as negotiations of individual positions, aims, and potential vis-à-vis other actors. In the interviews with recreational athletes I conducted, as well as in publications, online fora, and social media, being part of the midfield is framed as a positive choice and not an external limitation. It is portrayed as an achievement of its own and framed as desirable while overly extensive training durations and aspirations are, in this context, seen in a negative way.

Comparison as Relational Practice

Orientations toward the middle in recreational cycling centrally involve comparative elements. To situate oneself in a position that draws a demarcation against the bottom and the top, others and their performances or assets play a crucial role. They have to be at least tangentially observed, acknowledged, or heard of. As Fochler, Felt, and Müller (2016) argue, this is not limited to the phenomena compared but stretches to other interests and motives as well. In this sense, comparisons are connected to other criteria, and processes of everyday comparison are not isolated from other spheres of life. Instead, comparators and criteria are entangled with the lifeworlds of actors. Such a constellation of comparison in which a comparison with other actors is tied to other motives can also be found among recreational road cyclists. Here, a pluralization and personalization of motives can be observed, allowing insights into how different comparative criteria are configured (Groth 2014). Other motives for doing sport—health benefits, relief from work, social contacts, or enjoying nature during bike rides—need to be taken into account as part of a stratification of motives for analyzing situated comparisons. The ideal type of a win/loss coding of sport as a guiding principle of comparison (between winners and nonwinners) does not suffice to grasp the quotidian interpretations of competitive comparison (Groth 2019). When recreational cyclists compare themselves or their performances with others, the process cannot be reduced to isolated indicators, such as the power output one can generate over a defined time. Such indicators exist, for example, in the form of "functional threshold power" as the maximum power output (in watts) a cyclist can sustain for one hour. Although this measure can be compared among athletes, "pure" comparisons of performance indicators need to be contextualized with regard to individual biographies, motives, interests, and social configurations. Recreational cyclists with a background in high-performance sports with immense training loads and striving for a top position in races compare themselves differently than do athletes who started late with the sport

and exercise primarily to be with friends and to decompress from a busy work life. Thus, comparisons are not just a technique of distinction between winning and losing or being better or worse but an instrument of relating actors that positions them in the social field in relation to other actors, their motives, and backgrounds.

In contemporary recreational road cycling in Germany, the process of relation building includes social-comparative orientations among athletes, where placings in the midfield are aspired to. Here, comparisons can be directed at different sets of criteria or categories. One's self can be at the center of comparison when current performances are compared to prior times: results can be tracked over time and compared to gauge whether individual capabilities have changed. In these cases, being better than last year or being faster on a climb than weeks earlier can be conceived of as a success, even if one only places in the midfield and is far off the results of better athletes. Furthermore, athletes from my research project regularly refer to their social vicinity when comparing their performances: to friends in cycling clubs, to family members, and to colleagues. Here as well, the constriction or confinement to medium goals is relational with regard to one's lifeworld and less to static or statistical values. Orientations toward the middle can change depending on the situation, for example, with changes in one's circle of friends, one's ability to train, or life situations. In these cases, comparisons are directed at the social environment, that is, at performances or positions in the specific social context. What is understood to be the middle is negotiated subjectively. Comparisons are made in social vicinity, and less in terms of seemingly objective medium values (e.g., with regard to a "functional threshold power"). The social vicinity is not limited to direct contacts but can be extended to contacts from online fora or platforms on which recreational athletes can compare themselves with others (see Krahn 2019). Platforms making performance data available and publicly tracking training efforts, such as Strava,[2] or online results from hobby races give cyclists an opportunity to see how one fares in respective age groups or in comparison with friends. Important here is that actors make a selection of who is viable for comparison based on a variable set of criteria, such as age, weight, a comparable (sport) career or education, or direct or indirect social acquaintance. Not all participants in a race or athletes on an online platform are used for comparison. This would introduce too much complexity—especially in large races or given the immense user base of platforms such as Strava—and result in less meaningful comparisons. While investigating how much faster an ex-professional or a top recreational athlete went up a climb in a hobby race may be of interest, recreational cyclists with orientations toward the midfield can situate and orient themselves in relation to similar and known actors.

Orientations toward the middle are socially comparative in that they are relational and subjective. Accordingly, it is not about fixed criteria of performance but about subjective and situated interpretations and interactions, which are not entirely stable. The middle in recreational road cycling is not a clearly bounded or objectively definable concept. Here, comparison is a social practice with subjective, relational, and situated constructions of comparative criteria that also involves selecting or dismissing specific dimensions of comparison. Thus, not only the criteria of comparison but also

other comparators (or phenomena to be compared) are adjusted: with whom does one compare oneself?

Comparison as Explicit Reflection

A selection of "comparable" athletes partly hinges on the social vicinity of actors. The performative abilities of friends and members of the same cycling club are known as a result of shared training rides and races; data about other athletes are available on training platforms and social media. This results in a relative transparency with regard to the performances about others. It includes explicit references to relatively stable sets of criteria of comparison, such as race results, performance tests and categories, and scientific models of performance, allowing for comparability through scales and accumulated data. These criteria pertain to explicit dimensions of comparison—they motivate and enable athletes to figure out who is comparable in terms of performance, age, and background. Furthermore, the criteria confront actors with automatically calculated indicators of their performance or ranking in a specific context to be used for comparisons with others. In such processes, the comparative criteria can partly be explained as the basis for reflecting about performances in relation to others.

One such set of criteria in recreational road cycling is tied to the possibility of quantifying performances and mapping them onto scientific models of sportive potential. Through various performance tests, even hobby cyclists can estimate their potential in terms of power output (in watts) over time. This gives them an indication how well they could do in a race and a comparison with other cyclists: together with their weight, the resulting watts per kilo metric is, in principle, able to accurately predict the time a cyclist needs to climb a certain hill or finish a known course of a time trial, for example. With data and knowledge about training methodology, comparisons of performance among recreational cyclists are connected to (quasi-)scientific models of power output and give indications about how well one will compete in relation to other known or unknown riders (Groth 2014). With the help of various training platforms such as Strava and because performance metrics are shared over social media, these data are observed and quantified as well. Before and in races, such data can be used to estimate how fast one can complete the course, which result (in terms of placement) this could theoretically yield, and what level of performance is needed to place well in the midfield.

Although this reads like a theoretical premise, explicit reflections about potential performances feature strongly in interviews with recreational road cyclists and in online fora, where tips about the best training sessions and estimates of potential improvements are shared. These aspects are incorporated to arrive at more informed (or elaborate) comparisons. By using gadgets like bike computers and sport watches, as well as training and analysis software, recreational athletes can make precise estimations of their potential. Specific tools and software are marketed toward hobby cyclists and are easily available. Some gadgets even allow for an auto-calculation of metrics, such as functional threshold power or maximal aerobic capacity (VO2 max). With using cycling computers, it is possible for athletes to gain insight into "how much is left

in the tank" in a specific race situation. Based on energy expended, such calculations inform riders about estimated reserves. In sum, performance tests, references to (quasi-)scientific models, and calculations are used even by recreational cyclists to reflect about their position and adjust comparative dimensions.

By knowing about performative potentials, recreational athletes can adjust and reflect on their expectations and situate themselves in relation to comparable cyclists. More specifically, it enables them to relate to a number of preconfigured categories relevant in road cycling: besides age groups as a central distinguishing category (as is also the case in running, triathlon, and other endurance sports), these categories pertain mostly to different performance categories in races. In recreational road races, different start blocks, and times are used to separate top riders from those interested in a more relaxed experience. Usually, riders from sponsored teams with expectations to finish in a top position take up the first rows at the start line; further back are experienced but slower riders, and beginners are grouped in the back of the field. Riders can partly choose which category or start block to enter by providing information about their performance to race organizers. Yet this reflection about adequate categories can be forced when organizers check race results from prior racers and organize athletes into respective start blocks. Such categorizations can influence comparative constellations when riders are grouped in the front or the back and can cause debates about where riders are placed. This is a frequent topic among athletes who consider this categorization to be unjust or faulty and demand to be put in the front block. Similarly, recreational athletes with aspirations to finish in the midfield can be influenced to adjust their expectations when they are grouped in with top riders.

These categorization processes expand to the realm of online races as well. Over the past several years, the number of cyclists riding on stationary bikes in their homes in virtual environments has increased significantly. Companies such as Zwift[3] provide software solutions in which avatars in virtual worlds replicate cadence, power, and heart rate of riders on their connecting trainers and a tablet or laptop as a display. Originally intended to provide a training opportunity during the winter months, when roads are icy, and conditions are difficult, smart trainers are now popular throughout the year with dedicated race leagues, clubs, and public events. Races at times take place every other hour, enabling cyclists to join competitive events around the clock. Even national championships in virtual cycling have been organized, and professional cyclists participate—even those who can also be found at the start line of stage races like the Tour de France. In virtual races on Zwift, cyclists are automatically categorized based on their performance. "A" riders are the highest ranked, with "B," "C," and "D" categories reserved for weaker riders. If the average power output of a cyclists exceeds a certain amount—for example, the range of category C—the athlete is automatically ranked in category B. Accordingly, athletes are not able to choose but are forced into an adequate category and can be placed from the top in lower-ranked category to the bottom of a higher-ranked category. In such cases, comparative constellations change, and athletes have to adjust to new comparable cyclists.

Anticipatory and Affective Dimensions of Comparison

Apart from such technological and data-driven enablers of comparative configurations, explicit reflections about comparisons entail more subjective references to known competitors, be it in sporting clubs, online platforms, or races. Such comparisons in the social vicinity between athletes are also present in training sessions or more leisurely bike rides. One interviewee stressed that although she is not particularly interested in races and competition and rides mostly for health benefits and as a relief from stressful family and work life, she wants to be better than her training partners in specific situations.[4] Listing a couple of criteria (such as experience, body composition, or perceived fitness), she argued that she subjectively should be better on a specific hill and thus created a situated comparative constellation in which she systematically reflected about her and her opponent's potential. When comparing oneself with others, these criteria are incorporated to arrive at more informed (or elaborate) comparisons. Despite being based on subjective observations of competitors and being explained in interviews, subjective references entail anticipatory and affective elements that are not reflexive in the way the metricized and numerical criteria are. These elements remain implicit. This points to the fact that comparisons in recreational road cycling can involve ephemeral, anticipatory, and affective dimensions. Future developments of performance and future competitive constellations—such as the composition of a race—are anticipated by athletes and taken into account when making comparisons. Available data about performance and subjective estimations about anticipated performances come together. For recreational cyclists, these anticipated performances are tied to a specific observation of difference. For example, if one anticipates that one will perform significantly worse compared with the top or better cyclists in one's social vicinity, the criteria of comparison can be adjusted and "more comparable" athletes (from one's age group or sporting club) can be chosen as a point of reference. Such estimations can be based on knowledge about competitors and on behavior (how other cyclists prepare themselves at the start of the race or how they ride their bike), appearances (such as clothing or a lean or muscular body), and material dimensions (such as the bike).

Estimations of others and their performance are subjective and lead to dynamic anticipations, affecting which other cyclists are perceived as "comparable." Performance categories or metrics as indicators are stable and impartial, but they are always "socially and culturally loaded" (Thedvall 2012). Their impact (or affordance, see Bareither 2019) depends on whether they are understood or accepted to be significant. Accordingly, the impact of subjective estimations, categories, or metrics on comparisons hinges on whether athletes pay attention to them and regard them as important. With regard to orientations toward the middle, cyclists often dismiss absolute rankings and top hobby cyclists as irrelevant for their ambitions and instead focus on comparable athletes and positions. By stressing some dimensions of comparison (e.g., experience, body composition, or perceived fitness), other dimensions are neglected and ignored. Thus, comparisons are a focus and a reduction of contingence, which helps one make a selection by setting comparative criteria and comparators. A selection can

be achieved by explicitly reflecting about criteria with reference to scientific models or known factors (e.g., experiencing a competitor or performance metrics).

Such processes of selection are often implicit, spontaneous, and tied to emotions, for example, when negatively connoted dimensions of comparison (such as absolute performance metrics) are neglected and positive aspects are stressed (such as belonging to the midfield). Emotions or affects tied to these selection processes can be rationalized ex post but are different from explicit reflections about comparative criteria. This is especially the case for orientations toward the middle. In my research on recreational road cycling, a number of interviewees changed their comparative criteria based on negative experiences. Some riders were once relatively successful with placings in the top 20s or top 50s of races with more than 1,000 participants. But the "professionalization" of hobby races with sponsored teams and former professional cyclists led to a situation in which the training regime, experience, and talent of recreational cyclists made it infeasible for them to compete with the top. This partly led to explicit reflections about this situation and the consequent shift in comparison—toward the positive understanding of the average or the midfield. It was also closely tied to negative emotions and a refusal to regard the new top cyclists as a viable group for comparison. Such affective dimensions of comparison and the entailing shifts in relational comparisons go beyond a mere rational reflection about negative aspects as comparisons.

Conclusion

Making comparisons is a relational practice in which criteria of comparison and comparators can be adjusted. This article has shown how reflective elements of comparison, based on processes of metrication and apparently objective indicators, as well as anticipatory and affective elements can affect how recreational cyclists compare their performances with others. Emic comparisons in the field of recreational cycling (as well as in other fields) are connected to what Sørensen, Marlin, and Niewöhner call "observing apparatuses" (2018). In the case of cycling, this apparatus consists of processes of quantification, increased transparency, and subjective estimations that feature in constructing comparative categories and shape comparisons. The observing apparatus has a "social form" insofar as it entails subjective knowledge about the abilities of friends, co-riders, or other known athletes. Added to this, platforms like Strava, race results, rankings, online discussions, magazine publications, and the social vicinity to other athletes provide cyclists with broad knowledge about the performative field in which they practice. Cyclists frequently participating in hobby races and practicing the sport as part of a club or with friends are especially well equipped with explicit and implicit knowledge about potential competitors and comparable athletes. The existence of performance data and the knowledge about the performance of others influence how actors compare themselves with others. Publicly available online information about a field of cyclists, race results, and the social proximity of athletes change how athletes make comparisons. The comparative regime in recreational road cycling, including processes of categorization and the possibility of measuring perfor-

mance capabilities, brings about new aspects and constellations of comparison, much like Marilyn Strathern has shown for audit cultures (Strathern 2003). Some indicators are objectified to a certain extent as the result of automatic categorizations, metrics such as functional threshold power, or rankings in virtual and real racing. Automatic categorizations of cyclists into different groups in online racing and hobby races affect comparative constellations and force athletes to reflect on their positions. Likewise, they can lead to the dismissal of comparative relations when they are tied to negative emotions.

Everyday comparisons in recreational cycling can be understood as practices in which decisions are taken and rationalized but where anticipatory and affective dimensions also play a role. The interplay between these dimensions of comparison and the effects of specific observing apparatuses needs to be taken into account when analyzing comparative constellations. This is especially the case for orientations toward the middle, which mediate between external pressures and constrictions on the one hand and voluntary limitations on the other. In recreational road cycling and in other fields, affective dimensions can lead to a backgrounding of unwanted elements of comparison and a focus on explicit reflections about comparative parameters or about positive affective elements—such as belonging to the midfield or achieving average incomes and performances. This requires attention to affective dimensions of comparisons and, closely connected, ethnographic insight to identify them.

Notes

1 This interplay can also be observed in the spheres of work and housing. The fields in which notions of happy mediums and good averages are referenced are very diverse and connected to diverging logics of practice, interpretations, and structural specificities. But the notions themselves stem from similar debates and discourses and share many commonalities—from the sphere of work with sabbaticals or notions of work-life balance; the sphere of housing with references to sustainability, decluttering, and minimalism; to the sphere of sport and positive attributions to the midfield.

2 https://www.strava.com.

3 https://www.zwift.com.

4 This is a recurring topic in the interviews I conducted with recreational road cyclists. Whereas noncompetitive motives are highlighted as reasons for practicing the sport, ephemeral competitive stimuli in specific situations—such as riding up an incline in training with other cyclists—are described as exceptions (see Groth 2014).

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