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Into the glidescape: an outline of gliding sports from the perspective of applied phenomenology

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ABSTRACT



There is an absence in the literature on sports of a conceptualization of what in French are labeled *sports de glisse*: sports that imply gliding on water, through air, and on snow and ice, such as surfing, paragliding, skiing, and skating. Inspired by Ingold's (1993) concept of the taskscape, we introduce the idea of the *glidescape*: a perceptual field in which gliding sports practitioners inhabit, create, and transform their environment while at the same time being recreated and transformed themselves. Using an applied phenomenological approach, we describe the main experiential qualities and structure of the glidescape. In the quest for extended phases of effortless movement, gliders engage in a clearly accentuated rhythm with sharp contrasts between forceful effort and smooth effortlessness based on a fine-tuned proprioceptive sense for material and ecological resonance, which opens fleeting and emplaced moments of freedom and authenticity.

KEYWORDS Gliding sports; phenomenology; taskscape; rhythm; ecological resonance; authenticity

Introduction

Sports build on a variety of human movement possibilities. Some sports, such as track and field, cultivate the basic movement patterns of running, jumping, and throwing. Other sports, such as gymnastics and diving, build on less intuitive and more complex movement techniques. In this article, we will examine the nature of a group of sports where the emphasis is on one particular movement pattern: that of *gliding on a surface or through air*. Examples come from winter sports like speed skating, skiing, and snowboarding, water sports like surfing and sailing, and aero sports like hang gliding and wingsuit flying.

According to *The Cambridge Dictionary*, the verb 'to glide' can mean 'to move easily and continuously, as if without effort' and 'to fly by floating on air currents instead of using power from winds or an engine'. Used as a noun,

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'glide' can refer to 'a long, easy smooth movement across a surface that makes no noise'.¹ 'Gliding' is related to 'sliding', which means 'to (cause to) move easily and without interruption over a surface' and is used in sentences such as 'I slide down the hill'.² In the following, we will understand 'glide' and 'gliding' as the more inclusive terms referring to moving easily over a surface *and* floating on air currents. More specifically, we will understand gliding in sports as *a movement pattern produced with muscular and/or gravitational force to enable extended phases of effortless movement on a surface or through air*.

We will understand sport in a broad sense as activities with a non-instrumental social logic in the forms of play, games, and organized competition where human movement capabilities and skills are the key sources of meaning. Typically, whether we talk of football, hurdle running, or wave surfing, the constitutive rules and goals ('scoring' by moving a ball across a white line without using the arms and hands, running a certain distance while jumping a specified number of hurdles, or searching for effortless gliding on water) make little sense outside of the activities. Independent of practitioner motivation (although most practitioners will be intrinsically motivated), the logic and meaning of sporting rules and goals are found within the activities themselves.³

Gliding can occur in many sports. In tennis played on a clay court, athletes sometimes glide on the surface to reach a ball. In football, well-timed gliding on the grass is part of tackling skills.⁴ In these sports, however, gliding is just one among many movement elements and plays no key role. We will examine sports where effortless movement in gliding is a core skill and meaning-producing element, such as skiing, surfing, and hang gliding.

Gliding skills are practiced at all performance levels. A child discovers an icy pond, picks up speed in the in-run, and balances on her feet as she glides on the surface. An experienced snowboarder turns the board on its edge, increases friction against the surface, and enters the floating phase of the turn. An elite surfer glides seemingly effortlessly on the breaking wave. If performing well, practitioners demonstrate a unique sense of gliding. The child passes the pond without falling, the snowboarder senses the changing materiality of the snow and cuts a clean line, and the surfer has direct and intuitive way of 'reading' the constantly changing waves. Can the sense of gliding be described in more general terms?

In French, for instance, in the French version of Wikipedia, sports with gliding as the main movement pattern are conceptualized as *les sports de glisse*.⁵ For over 30 years, the Swiss production company *Nuits de la glisse* has launched adventure sports films emphasizing the gliding sensation in skiing and surfing.⁶ References to *glisser* (to glide) has also been used in research published in French. Jaccoud and Pedrazzini (1998) report from studies on emerging sports in urban contexts such as skateboarding is named *Glisser dans la ville* ('Gliding in the city').⁷

In other languages, such as in English, or in the Scandinavian languages spoken within a sports culture in which gliding on ice and snow plays a key role, the concept of gliding sports does not exist, and the characteristics of gliding seem less understood or perhaps taken for granted.

In what follows, we will examine gliding sports from an applied phenomenological perspective. We aim to describe what we take as their characteristic experiential qualities that make up their experiential structure. We will examine 'what it is like' to glide.⁸

Firstly, we present the premises and methodology of applied phenomenology and the theoretical framework based on Ingold's (1993) concept of the taskscape, or what we will refer to as *the glidescape*. In the second part of the article, we describe in more detail the experiential qualities and structure of the glidescape. Summing up, we point to the significance of applied phenomenology in sports studies and emphasize its potential role in the broader social-cultural understanding of sports.

Applied phenomenology

In the last decades, there has been an increased scholarly interest in the social sciences and humanities in embodied, sensory experiences and in the intersections of embodiment and environment. This includes both theoretical and methodological innovation (Geurts 2002, Howes 2003, Ingold 1993, Ingold 2000, Ingold 2017). The interest is also found in research on sports (Wacquant, 2004; Allen-Collinson 2009; Ravn and Krogh Christensen 2014; Aggerholm 2015; Aggerholm and Larsen 2017) with examples in edited collections such as those of Martínková and Parry (2012) and Sparkes (2017). Sparkes (2017, 174) points to how the study of the sensual world of sports requires openness and creative methodologies to grasp its '... multiple shapes, colors, tonalities, textures, patterns, sonic reverberations and pulses, ... tastes and odors, movements and imbalances, fragrances and painful sensations'.

The main body of this work is based on empirical descriptions of first person-accounts of the participant experience. The methodology is qualitative and sometimes referred to as interpretative phenomenological analysis (Burch 2021), phenomenography (Martínková and Parry 2011), or the kinesio-cultural approach (Larsson, Nyberg, and Barker 2022). In our study here, empirical work represents but one source of information. Individual experiences and their interpretations are of great diversity. Norwegian Olympic cross-country skiers and Australian amateur surfers practice their sports in radically different material, social, and cultural contexts. Whereas the ambition in social science is to explore and interpret this diversity, we aim to describe the experiential qualities and structure of the gliding experience itself. Our task is primarily philosophical and builds on phenomenological premises.

The nature and content of philosophical phenomenology is contested terrain, and further discussion is beyond the scope of this essay.⁹ Our perspective is one of *applied* phenomenology (AP). We depart from real world-questions. What are the experiential qualities and structure of gliding in sport? Burch (2021) discusses the challenges of AP and offers a solution. If AP implies nothing more than a description of experiences, it offers nothing distinctive, and human experience can be studied empirically with sharper tools. If AP is nothing more than what is found in what Burch calls pure phenomenology, that is, in the analysis of the conditions of *how* we make sense of the world from a transcendental first-person point of view (and not of phenomena in themselves), AP becomes relevant only to a small group of philosophers. To Burch (2021, 275), AP is an independent research program that ‘... brings the phenomenological and the resources of at least one other discipline to bear on problems beyond the scope of any monodisciplinary approach’.

Operationally, Burch (2021, 288) sees AP as consisting of three steps: (1) the identification of interdisciplinary problems (as in our case, the question on the experiential qualities and structure of gliding in sport), (2) the use of core phenomenology (CP) to characterize the constitutive features of subjectivity implicated by those problems, and (3) the integration of (2) with the findings and/or methods of some other discipline(s) to solve those problems.

What, then, is the CP framework relevant to our question of the nature of gliding in sports?

Core phenomenology

In general terms, phenomenology is the study of conscious experience in its many forms: perception, memory, thought, emotion, social activity, and, as in our case: embodied action.¹⁰ The phenomenologist aims to describe the world as immediately given and experienced from the first-person point of view. ‘I glide on ice almost without effort’. ‘I surf effortlessly on water’.

The core structure of conscious experiences is that of *intentionality*. Consciousness is always directed towards objects and phenomena of the world in certain ways: gliding on ice, balancing on a wave. Consciousness is always consciousness about something. Intentionality connects consciousness and objects and phenomena in the world in a pre-reflective and direct manner and structures the experiences that make up our lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*). Interconnected experiential qualities, such as those of gliding effortlessly on ice or water, make up more specific experiential structures or *Gestalts*, such as those of skating or surfing.

We explore a particular kind of bodily movement: gliding in sports. Merleau-Ponty’s (2012) phenomenology of the body provides relevant concepts and understandings. At the core of the lifeworld resides the sensorily

engaged 'lived body' experiencing and acting with objects and phenomena in the world in immediate, pre-reflective and sense-making ways. Perceptions of the world are bodily; we are embedded in the world in a fundamental sense. 'The body is our general means of having a world', says Merleau-Ponty (2012, 147).

Whereas objects in the lifeworld have 'positional spatiality', the body has 'situational spatiality' and is always directed towards tasks of many kinds (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 100 ff.). During her descent, the experienced skier makes her turns while at the same time reading the terrain and finding the ideal line. The skilled hang glider adjusts his glider continuously and relates to the sudden thermal updrafts 'without thinking'. In bodily movement, we inhabit the world in active ways. The body has 'motor intentionality', and actions in the world have both 'concrete' dimensions ('I glide on snow', 'I float through air') and, simultaneously, 'abstract' dimensions extending intentionality beyond 'the here and now' ('I read the terrain and adjust the line of travel down the mountain/through the air'). These abstract dimensions can even be existential in kind: 'I explore my possibilities of movement in the world'.

Experienced gliders in action are on a constant quest for effortless movement. They have the skills of responding and adapting to gliding challenges in immediate and efficient ways. Merleau-Ponty's (2012, 144–145) analysis of habit, understood as the embodied, pre-reflective and autonomous traces or remains of past activities, is illuminating. The body 'remembers'. There is a dialectic at play here between immediate and situational spontaneity, and habitual stability. The skilled skier turns left and right as the terrain invites changes of direction while at the same time having a stable movement technique anchored in habit.¹¹ Habits have their own inertia and are '... knowledge in our hands' (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 145).

Integration with other disciplines

In step 3, Burch's (2021) idea is to integrate the CP framework sketched above with the findings and/or methods of other disciplines that help our analysis. We will expose our descriptions of the experiential qualities of gliding to critical reflection and see them within a horizon that may not have a consciously felt phenomenal character. As we will show, anthropologist Tim Ingold's concept of the taskscape will be of help: what we will call the *glidescape*. Moreover, insights into enabling background conditions of gliding such as the proprioceptive sense, or the mechanics of gliding, or standards of performance excellence in gliding sports, will be informative.¹² We emphasize, though, that our aim is not to *explain* gliding in sport from a natural or social science point of view, but, via phenomenological sensitivity and critical reflection, to *describe* its experiential qualities and structure.

From taskscape to glidescape

Following the recent interest in the senses, Pink (2011) has argued for a shift from embodiment to *emplacement* to recognize the entangled interrelatedness of the body and place as one of the premises of a materialist perspective on sports practice (Thorpe et al. 2021). Ingold's (1993) conceptualization of the taskscape combines these ideas. Taking inspiration from, among others, James Gibson's ecological psychology and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, Ingold describes how landscapes are transformed and shaped in temporal processes as they are inhabited by humans (and other forms of life). Our everyday life and practices are based on adaptive development and growth of insight and skills. In these processes, humans are transformed and shaped themselves. One standard example, as exemplified by Ingold's (2000, 201–207) analysis of Bruegel's image *The Harvesters*, is the farmers who transform and create the landscape in sowing the grain and then harvesting it in a process in which they learn and grow themselves. In embodied and habitual practice, landscapes are brought to life and become taskscapes. 'Dwelling in landscapes' implies the constant weaving of 'a tapestry of meaning' (Ingold 2000 177) that makes up our lifeworld.

Ingold's ambition is the general one of overcoming the binary distinction in anthropology and the social sciences between social life and the material and natural environment and, basically, between culture and nature. Our ambition here is far more limited. We aim to describe the experiential qualities of one particular kind of emplaced practice: gliding on a surface or through air in sports. Still, the taskscape approach is relevant. Actually, Ingold's original use of the taskscape points to the need to operationalize and exemplify the concept with concrete practice:

... taskscape can be a handy moniker for a descriptive account of the spatio-temporal layout of activity at a site, which is exactly how I had used it myself when, in those lectures in Manchester, I had first introduced the term. (Ingold 2017, 26)

We will refer to the particular taskscape of gliding sports as *the glidescape*: the perceptual field in which practitioners inhabit, create and transform their environment in their quest for gliding locomotion and in which they are recreated and transformed themselves.

The experiential qualities of the glidescape

We work from the hypothesis that gliding sports can be described with core experiential qualities that together express the experiential structure of the glidescape. The first experiential quality is that of particular movement rhythm.

Movement rhythm

Most gliding sports involve a concentrated phase of effort and force followed by the experience of effortlessness while being in a stable, balanced position. The ski jumper's concentrated inrun is followed by an explosive take-off that initiates a phase of flying through air. In his journey over the mountain, and with the help of powerful kicks, the cross-country skier enters a series of gliding phases. Many gliding sports have specific auditive qualities that emphasize these rhythmic patterns even more (Touché, 1998). The sharp sound of a skater's edge towards the ice or a recreational rower's oars hitting the water is followed by a lasting and swoosh-like sound in the gliding phase. The initial phase of effort and force followed by a longer phase of effortless movement constitute a characteristic *movement rhythm*.

Meinel and Schnabel's (1987) analysis sheds light on experiential rhythm structures. They depart from a definition of the basic phase structure of a movement pattern: a structure that includes all its essential movement elements organized in an orderly and efficient manner in time and space. In walking, the basic phase structure is the step, in skating the stride, and in alpine skiing the turn.

In some sports, the basic phase structure is performed separately and not repeated in a continuous series. In hang gliding and ski jumping, for example, the inrun and take-off lead to the flight and an extended phase of effortless movement with a conclusion in the landing. We may call this mono-rhythm sports. Typically, mono-rhythm sports pose extreme requirements on the precise ordering of movement elements in time and space. Small errors and misjudgements can ruin the performance. In gliding sports involving high speeds and flights, loss of rhythm can have dramatic consequences. In many other sports, movement rhythm is defined by the linking together of a series of basic phase structures into functional wholes, such as in an interlinked series in walking of steps, in skating of strides, and in alpine skiing of turns. We may call this multi-rhythm sports. Although movement rhythm is crucial to the outcome, multi-rhythm sports are usually more forgiving as small errors and misjudgements in one phase structure can be adjusted and compensated for in the next.¹³

From a phenomenological perspective, the experienced glider's rhythmic structuring of movement elements into basic phase structures is best understood as a habit, that is, a conserved, pre-reflective, and autonomous movement pattern from past activities that enable appropriate response to the invitations from the environment. The alpine skier floats from turn to turn and the skater glides rhythmically over the ice in a repetitive movement pattern as they are 'at home' and *inhabit* their glidescape.

To devoted gliders, dwelling in the glidescape is loaded with meaning. The habitual and rhythmic movement enables extended phases of effortlessness in a sense-making way. How can this sense-making be understood?

Merleau-Ponty (2012, 144; 146) points to the skilled typist who '... literally incorporates the space of the keyboard into his bodily space', and to the blind man who, with the far end of his cane, explores and inhabits his lifeworld and its possibilities. Similarly, with the help of skis, skates, hang gliders, and surfboards, gliders explore in direct and immediate ways the possibilities and limitations of their glidescape.

Neuro-psychological research informs the analysis. In her study of body rhythms and the experience and regulation of emotions, Koch (2014) emphasizes the role of dynamic body feedback. She draws a distinction between 'indulgent' movement rhythms with smooth transitions related to kinaesthetic pleasure and the contrasting 'fighting' rhythms with aggressive changes between movement elements connoting sharp reversals and break-ups. Findings show that dynamic movement qualities with smooth transitions cause more positive affects and higher receptivity toward the environment than movement without these transitions.

Some sports are dominated by sharp movement reversals and breakups, such as running or boxing, exemplified by the steady and short stride-by-stride rhythm of the marathoner or the surprising and intensive series of blows of the boxer. Gliding sports, too, include forceful 'fighting' rhythms but only as means to realize the smooth transitions in effortless gliding movements. To a larger extent than many other sports, gliding sports are based on complex rhythm structures with an emphasis on indulging smoothness and kinaesthetic pleasure.

In the glidescape, and as a first experiential quality of gliding sports, there is the *rhythmic contrast between a concentrated phase of forceful effort and an extended phase of effortlessness and kinaesthetic pleasure.*

Fine-tuned proprioceptive sensitivity

More than many other sports, gliding sports cultivate sensitivity of the material context: the surface upon and the air within which gliding takes place. Or, more precisely, a core experience in gliding in sport is that of smooth and accurate adaptations to the material context. Gliding implies a deep-seated 'feel' for playful interaction with frictional forces. Body surfing and free fall parachuting involve pre-reflective, direct, and tactile play with water and air resistance, respectively. Small changes in body positioning immediately impact friction and hence speed and direction. In skiing and skating, and similar to Merleau-Ponty's example with the blind man's cane, skis and skates become prolongations of the body through which athletes explore their possibilities in the world.

The mastery of moving effortlessly in sports is often understood with reference to the kinaesthetic or proprioceptive sense. From a neuro-

physiological perspective, Muñoz-Jiménez et al. (2021) define proprioception as ‘... the brain’s conscious and unconscious capability to detect musculoskeletal body structures (e.g. muscle, tendon, joint), their position, and movement in relation to space and time’. Proprioception includes multiple inputs from muscle and connective tissue receptors as well as information from the vestibular system and the exteroceptive senses: vision, sound, and touch.

The proprioceptive sense is an enabling condition for having first-person experiences of gliding. To Merleau-Ponty (2012, 100 ff.), the kinaesthetic sense is a pre-reflective and interactive system in action involved in the handling of the body to realize motor intentions in the world. We can expand on the analysis of motor intentionality. Motor actions are concrete. I grasp the glass of water. Or: I put slightly more weight on the outer left ski and turn towards the right. Concrete actions, says Merleau-Ponty (2012, 106–109) are centrifugal. They gravitate toward their own concrete goal: grasping the glass, making a right turn. At the same time, motor intentionality has an abstract, centripetal dimension pointing outwards, a *motor horizon*, we may say (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 109–112). Stretching out for the glass points to the possibility of water and reducing thirst. Skiing to the right is based on a pre-reflective and ‘skillful’ reading of the ‘invitations’ of the glidescape and extends the phase of smooth, effortless movement.

Montero (2016, 121) criticizes the standard scientific account of proprioception as reductionist and extends the concept with reference to ‘... an aesthetic sense, that is, a sense by means of which we experience beauty, grace, and other aesthetic properties’. Aesthetic experiences are experiences of *meaning* in movement. Examples from gliding sports can be the holistic sense of a rhythmic skiing descent in deep snow (Loland 2009), the experience of balance and equilibrium in a skater’s extended gliding phase, and what Humberstone, Fox and Brown (2017) describe as the sensual pleasure of silent and smooth sailing on water. Good gliders inhabit, create and transform their glidescapes while at the same time being recreated and transformed themselves.

Tentatively, the second experiential quality of gliding is that of *fine-tuned proprioceptive material sensitivity*.

Ecological resonance

Our interest in the materiality of the glidescape falls in line with recent ecological interpretations of the taskscape. For Ingold, the taskscape is a meshwork of lines of movement, practices, and material conditions: a tapestry woven by both human and non-human life (Ingold 2011, 63–97). With metaphors from music, Ingold outlines the social, environmental,

and natural *resonance*, or what we can call the shared ‘wavelengths’ of meaning in human taskscapes as they are interwoven with natural cycles such as night and day, the tide, and the seasons (Gruppuso and Whitehouse 2020).

Næss’ (1990, 51–67) eco-philosophy offers further theoretical framing. Here, the phenomenological first-person perceptual field is extended into a ‘relational total-field image’. What Næss (1990, 51–67) calls the primary qualities of reality, that is, the quantifiable qualities, which in our case are defined by biomechanical and neurophysiological analyses of gliding movements, are abstract structures. The ‘concrete contents of the world’ are made up of secondary qualities, that is, the sensual world of colors, smells, tastes, sounds; and tertiary qualities, that is, perceptually complex and emphatic experiential qualities (*Gestalts*) of the interconnection of all life forms and even eco-systems.

To Næss, human beings, as all other forms of life, are knots in what he calls the ecospheric web. Experiences of ecological interconnection are found in concrete action at micro level, such as in the hang glider’s adaptation to the thermal updrafts or the skier’s intuitive response to the invitations from the terrain, and, simultaneously, at the macro level, such as in hang glider and skier’s pre-reflective and abstract deep-ecological experiential quality of being in resonance with nature.

Case studies from sport and leisure movement practices, among them ‘naked’ surfing, triathlon, and dancing, provide further examples (Andrieu et al. 2018). Andrieu and Loland (2017) discuss how immersing in movement practices in nature can lead to a process of dynamic and spontaneous *ecologization*: a fleeting experience of interconnection and ecological resonance. Practicing sports in nature is not enough, however. Ecologization implies dwelling in the taskscape and awakening the body’s sense for the ‘shared wavelengths’ of ecological meaning and interconnectedness. In gliding sports, the potential for ecologization is particularly strong as they, more than other sports, cultivate fine-tuned, proprioceptive and material sensitivity. James’ (2017) philosophical analysis of surfing provides further illustrations. James describes the concrete actions of surfing while at the same time pointing to the abstract dimension of the essence of the sport: the principle of dynamic ‘adaptive attunement’. One main experiential quality of competent surfing to be in material resonance with the ocean.

Howe (2012) underlines the extended, aesthetic engagement of performance in nature-based sports. In a similar way, we argue that gliding sports in nature allows for material resonance and ecologization processes. Not all gliding sports take place in nature, however. For example, ice skating and even skiing can be removed from their original landscapes and be practiced as indoor sports. The potential for experiences of ecological resonance is less. Still, as long as the experience of gliding includes a pre-reflective,

proprioceptive sensitivity for the materiality of nature gliding sports offer stronger potential for ecological resonance than many other sports.

A third characteristic experiential quality of gliding is that of being in *material, ecological resonance*.

Authenticity and freedom

A fourth characteristic of gliding sports is linked to speed and risk. Activities such as skating, skiing, and hang gliding involve moving at higher speeds than in regular everyday practice and in many other sports. In some activities, high speeds imply that even small mistakes and misjudgements can lead to severe injury and death. Interestingly, risk sports are often gliding sports, such as wild water kayaking, wingsuit flying, and freeskiing. What are their experiential qualities?

Imagine wingsuit flying close to the terrain. The activity requires immediate and extremely precise movement adaptations in a perceptual field of constant and rapid change. To the experienced practitioner, adaptations are pre-reflective habits based on which the flyer responds to emerging situations in concrete ways: adjusting the wings to gain speed in a straight line over open terrain, performing a flare for additional lift, and, at the end of the flight, deploying the parachute. At the same time, wingsuit flying has abstract dimensions. What are they?

There are several studies with phenomenological approaches to sense-making and meaning in and of risk sports (Brymer and Gray 2009, Breivik 2011). Rickly-Boyd (2012), in her interpretation of concepts stemming from Heidegger, explores the experiential quality of existential *authenticity* in liminal practices, such as mountain climbing. Exposure to and mastery of the risk open for 'fleeting moments of self-examination' (Rickly-Boyd 2012, 101). Applying Rickly-Boyd (2012, 2013) in our context, we understand existential authenticity as the immediate experience in risk sports of situating one's possibilities ('mineness') and acting with tenacity to claim this potential (resoluteness). For example, in a risky descent, the free-skier claims her potential (resoluteness) in concrete turns while simultaneously visualizing her possibilities (mineness) and invitations from the terrain on upcoming turns and line choices. Risk sports intensify the experience of authenticity as there is an existential drama at play where even minor mistakes can have dramatic consequences. Moving at the brink of nothingness emphasizes the significance of our pre-reflective handling of the world and our embodied access to 'the real'. In risk glidescapes, there is an emplaced and fleeting sense of authenticity and of acting in the world as a 'true', embodied self.

This experiential quality of authenticity is not unconditional. In his *Phenomenological Psychology* (1966), Straus discusses gliding as existentially

ambivalent: as a source of anxiety *and* a source of possibility and joy.¹⁴ To the novice, gliding risk sports can be a perceptual field of disconnection and confusion. With no embodied habituation and skill, the field cannot be 'read' and makes no sense. To the passionate and proficient, on the other hand, and as sketched above, inhabiting the risk glidescape offers a tapestry of meaning and truth.

Experiences of authenticity seem relevant not just to risk sports but to gliding sports in general. All forms of sportive gliding imply the intentional quest for extended phases of effortless movement rarely found in everyday, regular practice. Gliding implies an alternative way of exploring the world.

Moreover, with authenticity comes a particular experiential quality of freedom. Straus (1966, 363) writes:

In attempting to characterize gliding as movement, we stress that in it which is continuous and effortless . . . Gliding gives us spaciousness, and gliding motions are therefore usually pleasant. They heighten the experience of power and provide an awareness of vital freedom.

This is not freedom understood as limitlessness, however, but a pre-reflective, immediate, and emplaced sense of freedom. Again, James' (2017) surfing analysis is helpful. The deterministic mechanics of the body-board-wave system and of the biological limits of human movement frame the surfer's possibilities. To the surfer, however, the predictable framework works not as a limitation but as an enabling condition within which he can 'trust' the world and develop his habits and skills in continuous and playful 'adaptive attunement' and ecological resonance with the waves and streams of the sea. James (2017) outlines a 'compatibilist surfing theory of freedom'.¹⁵

On a more general note, there is a parallel here in Merleau-Ponty (2012, 518):

What then is freedom? To be born is to be simultaneously born of the world and to be born into the world. The world is always already constituted, but also never completely constituted. In the first relation we are solicited, in the second we are open to an infinity of possibilities. Yet this analysis remains abstract, for we exist in both ways *simultaneously*.

Summing up and providing further examples, the immediate and pre-reflective experience of moving effortlessly on a surface or through air in gliding sports has the abstract dimension of a fleeting sense of emplaced authenticity and freedom. The snowboarder transforms a snowy landscape into a unique, perceptual field of meaning. Snowboarding, Christensen (2001) claims, is 'embodied calligraphy' in which each practitioner draws her personal lines in the glidescape. Bäckström and Sand's (2019) study of skateboarders shows how they imagine spatial pleasures in urban environments ('mineness') while at the same time demonstrating emplaced and creative adaptations of it

(‘resoluteness’). Allain (2020) describes how aging ice-hockey players are slowing down the game to a non-contact activity but still relying on their gliding habits and skills. The glidescape is inclusive. In their best moments, the players glide collectively in what Parry and Skala (2012) refer to as a mutually produced contest rhythm and in which they can be recreated and transformed themselves.

A fourth characteristic experiential quality of gliding is linked to the liminality of the movement pattern and to its *potential for fleeting and emplaced experiences of authenticity and freedom*.

Concluding comments

We started by pointing to the absence in the literature of a conceptualization of what in French is labeled *sports de glisse*: gliding sports. With the help of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, and with Ingold’s concept of the taskscape, we introduced the idea of *the glidescape*: a perceptual field in which gliding sports practitioners inhabit, create, and transform their environment while at the same time being recreated and transformed themselves. Using an applied phenomenological approach, we have described the main experiential qualities of the glidescape.

In the quest for extended phases of effortless movement, gliders engage in

- *a clearly accentuated rhythm with sharp contrasts between forceful effort and smooth effortless*
- *based on a fine-tuned proprioceptive sense for material and ecological resonance,*
- *which opens fleeting and emplaced moments of freedom and authenticity.*

This, then, is the experiential structure of the glidescape.

Before we conclude, there is a need for a few comments. Firstly, this is not intended as a full-fledged and complete phenomenological description of gliding in sports. As our examples have illustrated, gliding sports are diverse. Our attempt has been to sketch core, experiential qualities that constitute the structure of the glidescape and provide a rationale for the concept of gliding sports. Further studies can test how this structure finds concrete expressions in the variety of gliding practices.

Secondly, we believe that applied phenomenological descriptions, as exemplified here, can play an important role in the social and cultural interpretation of sports. Sporting practices are, in part, matters of human playfulness and creativity and, in part, expressions of human instrumental rationality and the predominant norms and values in the social and cultural context in which sports take place.

The current hegemonic Olympic sports paradigm is one of formal competition, standardization, and hierarchical ordering of participants according to quantitative performance measurements with the record as the peak achievement (Guttman, 1978). In line with Krein's (2008, 2014) analyses of nature sports, we see gliding sports as ways of alternative sporting worldmaking with norms and values that challenge hegemonic frameworks. In an alternative paradigm, visible in youth culture and activities such as skateboarding, surfing, snowboarding, and free skiing, movement patterns are less regulated and standardized. Performance evaluations (if any) are, to a larger extent, qualitative, emplaced and relative to a concrete setting: skiing on a particular day on a particular mountain or surfing in a particular configuration of waves on a particular spot at a specific time. Accurate comparisons of performances across time and place in terms of records become impossible (Loland 2006).

Our hypothesis, to be further explored elsewhere, is that the overrepresentation of gliding sports in the alternative sports paradigm can only be fully understood and explained with insights into their experiential qualities and structure. More generally, and in a similar vein, we believe that closer examinations of sporting taskscapes, or what Sparkes (2017) refers to as 'sensuous scholarship in action', can balance the traditional social science emphasis on context and provide more comprehensive knowledge of what the human practice of sports is all about.

Notes

1. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/glide>. Accessed July 4, 2023.
2. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/slide>. Accessed July 4, 2023.
3. See, for example, Huizinga's (1955, 8–10) characterization of the nature of play as 'freedom', outside of 'the ordinary' and 'real life', and not connected to external interests. See also Suits' (2005, 54–55) definition of games as 'the voluntary attempt to overcome "unnecessary" obstacles' as an expression of a ludic (playful), non-instrumental attitude.
4. Thanks to Paul Gaffney for raising this point. Interestingly, Gaffney comments, too, on sports with the core skill of making physical objects glide through the air or on the surface – as in the javelin and discus events and curling. Indeed, these sports cultivate a sense for gliding. In this essay, however, we restrict our analysis to sports where the gliding body plays a key role.
5. https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sport_de_glisse. Accessed July 4, 2023.
6. <https://ndgcinema.com>. Accessed July 4, 2023.
7. As they share experiential qualities with typical gliding sports, our analyses include a few references to activities based on non-motorized rolling on a surface, as found in skateboarding. Although closely connected, these are not genuine gliding sports, however.
8. The phrase is inspired by the title of Nagel's (1974) essay 'What is it like to be a bat?' in which he discusses and rejects the possibility of explaining

subjective consciousness – ‘what it is like to be me’ - with objective measures and argues that the subjective character of experience escapes physical theory.

9. In their introduction to the *Encyclopedia of Phenomenology*, Embree and Mohanty (1997) distinguish between seven approaches, including transcendental constitutive phenomenology addressing questions of how objects are constituted in pure or transcendental consciousness, existential phenomenology with an emphasis on experiences of freedom and authenticity, hermeneutical phenomenology with analyses of the experiential structures on the background of the human (socio – cultural) world, and realistic phenomenology where consciousness structures and intentionality are described with the help of findings in neuroscience. Our ambition here is applied, and our approach gravitates towards existential and hermeneutic phenomenology.
10. For an informative introduction, see <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>. Accessed July 4, 2023.
11. In describing the experiential qualities of the lifeworld, one main methodological tool is that of the phenomenological reduction, or the epoché, in which pre-judgments and conventional views are ‘bracketed’ to grasp ‘how and as what worldly objects are given to us’ (Zahavi, 2021, 261). Zahavi (2021) questions the relevance of the epoché in AP. In what follows, we adhere to the more simple and common-sense advice of being critically reflexive and ‘bracket’ previous conceptions and pre-judgments of gliding in sports.
12. Using perspectives from natural and social science can inform phenomenological analysis in several ways. Examples can be Merleau-Ponty’s (2012) use of neurology and Gestalt psychology or, from a current perspective, the attempts in realist or naturalist phenomenology to merge phenomenological description with neuroscience (Gallagher and Zahavi 2013).
13. There are rhythmic hybrid sports, too, including both mono- and multi-rhythm parts. Tennis, for example, includes a mono-rhythm part in the serve and multi-rhythm parts in, say, a rally with a continuous series of forehands. Further discussion and distinctions of movement rhythms in sports are beyond the scope of our gliding sports discussion. For alternative views, see, for example, Best (1978, 138–161), and Parry and Skala (2012).
14. Thanks are due to Kenneth Aggerholm, who made us aware of Straus’ text on gliding.
15. Compatibilism is the view that free will is compatible with determinism, or, more specifically, it is possible to assign moral responsibility for actions in a deterministic universe.

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