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**“Sport saved my life” but “I am tired of being an alien!”: Stories from the life of a deaf athlete**

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## Abstract

*Objectives:* This study explores the ways in which a deaf athlete's experiences of participation in sport can affect his psychological and social well-being, and how social and interpersonal relationships play a role in shaping these experiences.

*Design:* To produce an understanding of the embodied experience of being a deaf athlete over the years and in different social situations, an autoethnographic approach was adopted.

*Method:* To generate the stories represented in this study, three main strategies have been adopted: memory writing, emotional recall, and the use of memory. Adopting the position of the storyteller, data was represented through an evocative autoethnography, with the aim to describe subjective emotional experiences to create empathy with, as well as increase awareness and encourage reflection in the reader.

*Results:* Five story fragments taken from a deaf athlete's life are presented, in relation to key moments of the athlete's life. The stories show how social relationships affect the athlete's experience of sport participation, spanning from an enthusiastic inclusion in playing sport with hearing and non-hearing peers, to the feelings of alienation felt due to social exclusion from hearing sport events, and the hopelessness deriving from a lack of understanding of the specific needs that come from coaching a deaf person.

*Conclusions:* The theoretical and practical implications of this study are discussed, with particular attention towards the opportunity of portraying the experiences of a category of athletes that has been scarcely investigated, and even more rarely allowed its own voice.

*Keywords:* creative analytical practices, autoethnography, deafness, disability, well-being, social relational model

1           *BRRING!*

2           *The bell announces lunch time.*

3           *I toddle behind the older children towards the dining room. The teachers sit us down*  
4 *and we get ready for our prayer.*

5           *“Thank you for the world so sweet, thank you for the food we eat, thank you for the*  
6 *birds that sing, thank you God for...”*

7           *I am praying, singing with everyone else, when suddenly everything around me is*  
8 *quiet. I cannot hear the clock going “tick, tock, tick, tock.” I cannot hear the other children.*  
9 *But it’s normal, isn’t it? Usually each child says a line of the prayer, it must be my turn!*

10           *I began to pray aloud, with all my energy.*

11           *SMACK!*

12           *I gasp for air, feeling my cheek burning. I froze, hand on my cheek, looking at the*  
13 *teacher who just slapped me. What is going on? I look around, all the children are quiet as*  
14 *mice, their big puzzled eyes looking at me. There is no sound, the air is still. I cannot hear a*  
15 *thing. My body tingles, everything becomes blurred. I see the teacher’s lips moving, she is*  
16 *saying something. But I cannot hear. “What’s going on?” I am scared. Tears stream down*  
17 *my face. “What’s happening? Why did my teacher hit me? I didn’t do anything wrong!” I am*  
18 *angry, and lost, and scared. The teacher keeps moving her lips, keeps saying something, but I*  
19 *cannot hear. She grabs my arm and drags me outside of the dining room, to the head*  
20 *teacher’s office. I scream and scratch, like a wounded cat. They think I am being rude. More*  
21 *slapping on the way. I hear they call my dad, tell him I am being rude. I cry, and scream, and*  
22 *try to breath. I am scared, scared, scared. I don’t understand what is going on. Why is*  
23 *everything quiet around me?*

24    \*\*\*

25

## Introduction

Disabling hearing loss (i.e., hearing loss greater than 40 decibels) affects the life of 5.3% of the world's population – 360 million people (World Health Organisation, 2017). In the UK, more than 900,000 people are severely or profoundly deaf, with a hearing loss of at least 70 decibels, and estimates are that by 2035 one in five of the population will have some form of hearing loss (Action on Hearing Loss, 2015). Previous research (e.g., Arlinger, 2003; Chisolm et al., 2007) has highlighted the adverse impact that deafness can have on a person's quality of life, with deaf people withdrawing from social life, isolating themselves (e.g., Hetu', Jones, and Getty, 1993), and doubling the risk of developing mental issues such as depression and anxiety (e.g., Saito et al., 2010). In recent years the topic of sport and disability has been explored from several perspectives, from the psychological benefits of being active and participating in sport (e.g., Williams, Papatomas, & Smith, 2014), to the managerial and organisational aspects of including people with disabilities (e.g., Shapiro, Pitts, Hums, & Calloway, 2012; Townsend, Smith, & Cushion, 2016). Despite the increased attention on disability, it appears that not all different disabilities have been investigated equally, and that the same solution cannot be assumed to be relevant for everyone, failing a "one-size-fits-all" approach (e.g., Ulrich & Egbert, 2013).

A recent survey conducted by the English Federation of Disability Sport (EFDS Lifestyle Survey, 2016) discovered that only 9.7% of 253,970 deaf people in England participate in 30 minutes of moderate intensity activity once a week - the lowest percentage among various disability types - while the remaining 91.3% is even less active. Given the positive effect that sport has been shown to have on issues such as depression and anxiety (e.g., Berger & Tobar, 2011; Biddle, 2000), these numbers are alarming and warrant the search for a better understanding of the experiences and barriers keeping deaf people from participating in regular physical activity. To the present day, the literature looking at the role

1 of sport in the life of deaf people is scarce. More than 25 years ago, Stewart (1991)  
2 encouraged research to focus on sport as an environment which allows us to understand the  
3 dynamics and tensions of deaf people's life experiences. A decade later Atherton, Turner and  
4 Russell (2001) moved the focus of research on deaf athletes from the United States to the  
5 United Kingdom, interviewing deaf football players to explore the values and benefits they  
6 experienced. Emotional (e.g., feeling part of a community, making friends) and socialization  
7 aspects (e.g., meeting new people, discovering different sign languages) were key themes  
8 (Atherton et al., 2001). More recent studies focused on the impact of sport on deaf athletes'  
9 personality, such as self-esteem (Uchida, Marsh, Hashimoto, 2015), and perfectionism (Ho,  
10 Appleton, Cumming, & Duda, 2015). These studies offer very straightforward  
11 representations of the experiences of deaf athletes, which fail to account for the complexity of  
12 being disabled, despite the continuous development of disability studies.

13         Historically, the search for an understanding of disability began with the adoption of  
14 the medical model, which defined disability as a deviation from what was considered normal  
15 and saw impairment as its defining feature (Townsend et al., 2016). The model has been  
16 critiqued for the reductionist biological perspective, which fails to consider other aspects of  
17 disability and simply depicts it as an individual problem (Thomas, 2004). Stepping away  
18 from a biomedical view, the social model explained disability as completely socially  
19 constructed (Thomas, 2014). By doing so, the model highlighted how the structural barriers  
20 in social life created disadvantages for impaired people in several areas (e.g., employment,  
21 transports, education). While the social model contributed to several changes in architectural  
22 structures, from a disability sport perspective it failed to provide an explanation of the lived  
23 experience of being impaired (Shakespeare, 2006). To answer the criticisms towards the  
24 medical and social model, the social relational model has been developed by Thomas (2007).  
25 In this model disability is not only considered as socially constructed, but it is also lived,

1 experienced, and culturally fashioned (Smith & Perrier, 2014), and by doing so it encourages  
2 research done *with* disabled people as subjects, and not simply *on* them as objects of study  
3 (Townsend et al., 2016). More recently a new model has been developed, which shifts the  
4 attention onto the human rights to basic freedoms, among which participating in sport is one,  
5 and by doing so encourages the need for research to illuminate disabled individuals' – and  
6 athletes' – experiences of life (Townsend et al., 2016).

7         Despite the development of several models of disability, there is still a dearth of  
8 research in the area of sport psychology and coaching with regards to exploring disabled  
9 athletes' experiences in sport. Moreover, Bundon and Clarke (2015) argued for the need to  
10 address the potential risks of being a disabled individual in the sport environment, through  
11 research that fosters political, social, and cultural change. A methodological approach to  
12 research that allows to relate personal accounts and cultural practices is autoethnography  
13 (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). Over the last twenty years, a growing number of  
14 scholars has decided to explore a variety of issues in the fields of sport, exercise, and health,  
15 using autoethnography (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). For example, their work spans from the  
16 experience of injury and how it impacts masculinity, or how the recovery process evolves  
17 (e.g., Allen-Collinson, 2005; Sparkes, 1996), to the development of identity as a professional  
18 golfer (Douglas, 2009), and the reflection on becoming an expert coach (Zehntner &  
19 McMahon, 2014).

20         With the preceding discourse in mind, the current study aims to share the story of a  
21 deaf person who engaged with sport throughout his life, highlighting both the benefits of  
22 sport, but also the organisational issues that deaf people still face every day. Specifically, it  
23 aims to adopt autoethnography to encourage readers to put themselves in the place of others  
24 and to provide them with the possibility to reflect, increasing empathy, social awareness and  
25 – in turn – encouraging social change (Ellis, 2004; Zehntner & McMahon, 2014).





1 the social and cultural components of experience; secondly, a more inward, autobiographical  
2 perspective, which focuses the attention on the self and the personal component of  
3 experience. Autoethnographic texts are usually written in first-person voice and can take  
4 various forms (e.g., short stories, poetry, fiction, personal essays, journals), which show  
5 aspects of action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness (Ellis,  
6 2004).

7         There are numerous categories to autoethnography (e.g., critical, analytical, queer,  
8 performance), but as Bochner and Ellis (2016) explain, ‘from the beginning, even before we  
9 settled on the term “autoethnography”, we saw evocation as a goal’. The aim of moving the  
10 readers emotionally is a fundamental characteristics of autoethnography, which crosses over  
11 the different categories, with the exclusion of analytic autoethnography. This type of  
12 autoethnography tries to align with the more traditional view of social science, which takes  
13 representation back into the control of reason and analysis (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). In line  
14 with Ellis’ approach to autoethnography, I, the first author, have chosen to create an  
15 evocative autoethnography to invite readers to *think* and *feel* together with my story, and be  
16 immersed and engaged in my account from a moral, aesthetical, emotional, political, and  
17 intellectual perspective (Bochner & Ellis, 1996).

### 18 **Crafting an Autoethnography**

19         The process of autoethnography relates to the (re)collection of data, for which several  
20 techniques can be adopted (e.g., systematic sociological introspection, diaries, free writing,  
21 song writing; Douglas & Carless, 2016). To generate the stories represented in this study,  
22 three main strategies have been adopted. Initially a technique called ‘memory writing’  
23 (Lupton, 1996) was used. Through this technique, I, the first author, looked back at the  
24 materials, such as school diaries and photographs from my childhood and teenager years, to  
25 help myself reconnect with the experiences of those days (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010).

1 Then I used the strategy that Ellis and Bochner (2000) define as ‘emotional recall’ to  
2 visualise myself in the scene, because they suggest that ‘if you can revisit the scene  
3 emotionally, then you remember other details’ (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 752). The third,  
4 and most important ‘strategy’ that I adopted to write my autoethnography is memory. The  
5 concept of memory is a complex one, which is moving from the traditional metaphor of  
6 ‘memory as archive’ towards one that emphasises its ‘plasticity’ (Young, 2008), highlighting  
7 the reconstructive and dynamic nature of memory (Brockmeier, 2015). As a consequence of  
8 this new perspective, the act of remembering has been reconceptualised too as a social and  
9 cultural practice (Brockmeier, 2010), influenced by the present we live in and the perspective  
10 we are using to examine our memories. Using memory as a strategy to write autoethnography  
11 therefore does not mean that the author will provide a transparent account of the events  
12 remembered, as “what I remember of my history is anchored by what summons me *now* to  
13 remember, and my memory is, in part, a response to what inspires my recollections”  
14 (Bochner, 2007, p. 198). Instead autoethnographic memories should be used as an inspiration  
15 for interpretation, inquiry and engagement (Bochner, 2007).

16 As CAP consist of both analytic and creative practice, data (re)collection was only the  
17 beginning of the autoethnography. Crafting an evocative personal narrative means that the  
18 memories are not enough, the writing needs to become – as the name itself explains –  
19 evocative. Bochner and Ellis’ (2016) advice is to ‘Show the reader everything, tell them  
20 nothing, [...] because showing evokes, whereas telling tends to inform or analyze’ (p.110).  
21 By allowing the readers to become witnesses of the storyteller’s story, evocative  
22 autoethnography becomes a way for people to learn from the experiences and the life of  
23 others, with the potential to induce reflection and initiate change (McMahon, 2017). Writing  
24 evocatively then means that one needs to work to activate readers’ senses and feelings,  
25 adopting fiction-writing techniques (e.g., dialogue, interior monologue, metaphors, strong

1 imagery, flash-backs and flash-forwards) to 'stage' the stories and engage the audience  
2 (Richardson, 2000). I followed Bochner and Ellis' (2016) guidance on the features of  
3 storytelling (i.e., characters, setting, temporal ordering of events, a crisis, trouble and  
4 dramatic tension around which the plot or the action revolves, and a moral to the story to give  
5 meaning to the experience) and I adopted different ways of formatting the text to help set the  
6 scene and to offer a sense of passing time. For example, I used all capital letters when I  
7 wanted to convey a loud sound or tone of voice, to recreate the characteristics of different  
8 environments (e.g., the gym hall) or the excitement or anger in characters' voices. I also used  
9 stars (\*) to space paragraphs related to the same story, but separated in time, allowing myself  
10 to flash forward between different events related to the same overarching theme.

11           Crafting my story though was not only a matter of how to format it. Autoethnographic  
12 work requires the care of many different aspects that are related to *what* one recounts, not  
13 only *how* to do it. As in any research project, even one concerning the researcher's self needs  
14 to answer numerous ethical dilemmas. I received a formal ethical approval from the  
15 University Ethics board, but it was once I started writing that I realised the real ethical  
16 implications of writing autoethnographically. One aspect often neglected by institutional  
17 ethics board is what Ellis (2007) defines as 'relational ethics', which consist in what needs to  
18 be done to be 'true to one's character and responsible for one's actions and their  
19 consequences on others' (Slattery & Rapp, 2003, p. 55). Writing one's own story means also  
20 writing about the 'others' who are involved in our life, therefore it is important to consider  
21 how disclosing one's story will impact their life too. In order to answer this ethical question, I  
22 adopted two main strategies: firstly, I used pseudonyms or even no names at all for the other  
23 characters that appear in my story. Furthermore, as a way to preserve their anonymity, some  
24 of the characters in my stories are composites (i.e., a mix of similar characters merged into a

1 single one). By adopting these techniques, my aim is to respect the dignity and the right to  
2 privacy of the ‘others’ in my story.

3       Finally, crafting an autoethnography also means to consider the criteria that will  
4 measure the goodness of its product: its validity. With regards to validity, the study was  
5 guided by a relativist non-foundational approach, in which criteria are not universal, but  
6 rather they are guided by a list of characterising traits that are time- and place-bound (Sparkes  
7 & Smith, 2009). Following Smith and Caddick (2012) suggestion and Ellis’ (2000)  
8 reflections on evaluating narrative ethnographies, these are some of the questions that should  
9 guide the reader in the judgement of this work: does this study contribute to my  
10 understanding of social life? Does it engage me, from an emotional and intellectual point of  
11 view, pushing me to think and feel with it, moving me to ask questions and act? Does the  
12 story provide an understandable and lifelike experience? Is there sufficient dramatic tension  
13 that keeps the reader involved? Does it have the possibility to resonate with particular readers  
14 through the use of an evocative representation? Also, do the stories offer a new perspective,  
15 by giving voice to characters not so often represented in the literature? It is important that the  
16 readers draw their own conclusions to these questions, as they are the only judges who will  
17 know *how* and *if* the story is acting as an effective stimulus for reflection and change. As  
18 Bochner and Ellis (2016) explain, ‘The reader’s life is implicated in and by the text and the  
19 life it depicts. [...] the reader, who is not just a consumer of the story but also by implication  
20 a character in it’ (p. 70). Therefore, keeping the previous questions in mind, the reader is  
21 invited to approach the following stories, which portray different and important moments in  
22 my life as a deaf individual and athlete, illustrating the different roles played by sport.

### 23                                   **Being deaf in a world of sport: My story**

24 **In my mind basketball was magic**

1 We moved to London soon after discovering my deafness. My birthplace, the  
2 beautiful Montserrat, is no place for a deaf child. Here in London I can have a future. Here in  
3 London they gave me hearing aids. Two years after the day I became deaf, I could hear the  
4 world again. Oh, what a joy it was! When the phone rang I almost jumped out of my skin!  
5 But I could hear people, and my parents talked to me so that I could develop my speech.  
6 Everything was strange at first, but soon I started to feel normal again. Or so I thought.

7 \*

8 Every Saturday, I watch my brother pack his basketball kit and leave for training. He  
9 learnt to play basketball when he was living in America. Now that we are in England, he  
10 made some friends with whom he “plays ball”. He stays out for hours and then comes home  
11 with his smelly kit. I watch him and envy how easily he adapted to his life here, how easily  
12 he got new friends. Maybe that ball has some magic in it? Maybe if I could play with it, I’d  
13 make friends too?

14 One afternoon, I am walking down the stairs and I see the basketball next to the  
15 television. I stare at it. What if I touched it? What if I tried to play with it? I slowly walk  
16 towards the ball and pick it up. It is covered in a weird material, and it’s heavy.

17 “Thomas! What are you doing? Put the ball back!” I hear my brother shout.

18 I hesitate, but then put the ball back because I did not want him to tell me off. I walk  
19 back to my room.

20 \*

21 One week later, I am in my room.

22 “KOCK KNOCK”

23 “Come in”

24 The frame of my brother, holding his basketball, appears. “Hey, Thomas, fancy  
25 coming play ball with me and my friends today?”.

1 “YES!!!”

2 “Woah man, calm down or you’ll break the bed if you keep jumping like that! Ahah!”

3 “I thought you’d never ask!”

4 I can picture it: friends, fun, laughs. It will be awesome!

5 \*

6 Or maybe not.

7 “Ough, this kit is so heavy! I am melting down!”

8 “Come on, Thomas, stop pulling that face! You wanted to play with us and now you  
9 are here! Just pay attention to the game and to the others!”

10 I wish I could...it’s hard to grasp what is going on and what people are saying. They  
11 talk and shout in a funny Caribbean dialect, it’s not even English. My brother doesn’t seem to  
12 realise though...

13 Still, running around the court feels great, liberating.

14 “Woo, well done T! That was a good shot!” My brother looks quite impressed.

15 “See you next week, Thomas?”

16 Why not? I smile, happy. “Yes, see you!”

17 We walk back, my brother, one of his friends, and me, tired and relaxed after the  
18 game. This feels good.

### 19 **An alien kicking the ball**

20 My primary school in London is a mainstream school with a unit for hearing impaired  
21 children.

22 “Hey guys, shall we go and join the football game?”, I sign to my classmates.

23 “Naah”...“Let’s sit here”

24 “But guys...we always sit here”

25 “What’s wrong with it?”

1 “It doesn’t matter. See you in class”, and I skip towards the hearing kids.

2 I like running, I like to feel free, I like to do tricks with the ball. I have fun. Most of  
3 the time, at least. Today was not one of those days.

4 “Hey Spiderman, sure you don’t want to stay with your friends down there? I  
5 wouldn’t want to hurt you”.

6 “Hey, Spiderman...what’s that on your ears? Creepy!”

7 “Hey, Spiderman...can you speak clearly please? If I cannot understand you how do  
8 you think we can win the game?”

9 “Keep your tears in, Thomas. Don’t cry. That’s all he wants... Just keep kicking the  
10 ball. Focus on running. Focus on the ball. Don’t listen to them”, I keep telling myself.

11 Wrong, I am just wrong. Different. An alien. Of course the other children laugh at me,  
12 at my hearing aids...Spiderman...Alien... Can’t we just enjoy playing football together?  
13 Why do they have to tease me about my ears? I’ll show them! I’ll show I am just like them!

14 \*

15 Today I hated my PE class. I was forced to stand in front of hearing people so I could  
16 understand them, lip-reading.

17 “I want...Luke...Sam...Grace...Holly...Rob”.

18 I guess I’ll sit on the bench watching, then... “I am deaf and no one wants to have  
19 anything to do with me!” The words keep going through my mind, non-stop.

20 \*

21 Home.

22 “AAAAAAH! I hate these things! Hate them!”

23 SBAM! My hearing aids are on the floor.

24 My mum looks at me, puzzle and worry in her eyes. She wraps her arms around my  
25 curled, sobbing frame on the bed.

1 “I just – sob – want to – sob – hear!”.

2 Hot tears stream down my cheeks. My mum is warm, her rocking soothing.

3 “What’s wrong, Thomas?”

4 “I am an alien Mum! I am tired of being an alien!” I say, signing to her.

5 “An alien? What do you mean?”

6 “I want to be like the other kids! I want to hear things! I am tired of being called  
7 Spiderman and being left out in PE. I want to play with them. I hate to be an alien”, I sign,  
8 feeling the tears kept for so long inside slowly streaming down my cheeks.

9 “Thomas, do you trust me?”

10 “Yes”

11 “You are not an alien. You are special, yes, but in a good way. And the kids at school  
12 just don’t know it yet. We’ll let them know”.

13 I hear the warmth of my mum’s tone, and her arms tight around me. I finally relax in  
14 her embrace. Everything is going to be ok.

15 \*

16 PE hour again. I look around, ready to go and sit on the bench.

17 “I want Thomas”, says Jerome, a boy who plays football with me during breaks.

18 Wait...did he just pick me to play? Wow! I guess the headmaster’s speech was useful then.

19 I smile and happily skip next to Jerome, ready to play with my team.

20 **Sport is great with deaf people too!**

21 “OMG I love that school!” I excitedly sign to my parents after we come back from  
22 visiting the boarding school for deaf students we visited. I could not keep quiet, I was too  
23 excited. What an amazing place! I could picture myself living happily there for the next 7  
24 years of secondary school. It was perfect: amazing teachers, able to work with us. All deaf  
25 students. Teachers encouraging us to use our voices to speak, to make ourselves heard.



1 Drama classes, music classes....and sport! Lots of sport activities! I was ready to pack up and  
2 move there.

3 [3 years later]

4 “Coming here was the best decision of my life!” I think, while walking back onto the  
5 school’s grounds. I can feel the smile plastered on my face, while I squeeze the trophy in my  
6 hands and feel the weight of the medals hanging from my neck. Today County Athletic  
7 Championship was a blast! I broke the national junior long jump record, and jumped 5.75m,  
8 winning the event. Being on that podium felt so good!

9 And even better was when that tall guy came to me and invited me to participate in  
10 the National School Championship in Birmingham! Imagine that! A deaf boy competing  
11 and...who knows? Maybe even winning! I need to train!

12 [1 month later]

13 “Any news?” I hurriedly ask my dad as soon as I set foot in the house?

14 “Nothing yet...” is the deflated response.

15 People at the National championship were supposed to contact my parents. No one  
16 did though. My mum called them, they said they would call back. No one did though. She  
17 then called my boarding school asking if they had any information or had heard from anyone.  
18 No, no information and no one called them either.

19 I sit down in the living room, looking in front of me without really seeing anything.

20 Lost. Defeated.

21 “Maybe I am just not good enough. I am deaf, so they’ll probably think I am not good  
22 enough to compete with normal kids. What’s the point in training? What’s the point in  
23 putting all this energy in all these activities? I’ll always be the alien!” I stand up and angrily  
24 walk out of the door, slamming the door.

25 “If there is no point, I’ll just give up”, I think to myself, sitting down on my bed.

1 [1 week later]

2 This has been the most inactive week of my life. I know my parents are worried, I can  
3 see the look on their face. I know it's not their fault, and I hate myself for making them  
4 worry. But I can't stop thinking..." what's the point?"

5 KNOCK, KNOCK.

6 "Yes?"

7 "Thomas, it's me", comes my dad voice, "can I come in?"

8 "Yes dad, what's up?"

9 "Well, I saw this website and I thought maybe you could be interested...have a look,  
10 won't you?"

11 He leaves the laptop on my bed and then sheepishly walks out, leaving me staring at  
12 the screen. What is this anyway? Deaflympics? What's that?

13 [...]

14 "THIS IS BRILLIANT!"

15 Ooops, looks like I startled them! My parents are sitting relaxed on the sofa and look  
16 up to me expectantly, a smile tugging at the corner of their lips. Looks like the website had  
17 the effect they were hoping for...

18 "I am going to become a Deaflympics athlete! And then a coach! I don't have to be an  
19 alien! And have you seen? There is a GB Deaf Basketball team too! If I get back to training I  
20 could do that too! I always loved basketball! YES! I'll be a great deaf athlete! I'll show  
21 everyone how good a deaf athlete can be!" I keep shouting, punching the air with my fist.

## 22 **Basketball without borders**

23 Today is the day: Great Britain Deaf basketball trials are taking place. My friend  
24 Calum told me to get ready and meet him at the sport centre in the morning for warm up. I  
25 feel really nervous and overthinking at the same time. It is not a good combination.

1 “Are you nervous Thomas?”, says Calum, “You are shaky as hell. You shouldn’t be!  
2 Go out there and play your own game!”

3 The trial is brutal. I am just a little kid stuck between all those big men who  
4 manhandle and outmuscle me all over the court. Once the games are over, I feel like I have  
5 been battered by a hurricane.

6 But it’s worth it. I made the team.

7 \*

8 “HAPPY BIRTHDAY TOOOO YOUUUUU!”

9 Sixteen. Really, sweet sixteen. My birthday couldn’t have been better timed. My eyes  
10 dart to the plane tickets in front of me: Stockholm. My first GB Deaf Basketball tournament.  
11 In three days’ time, I’ll be on that plane! If I hadn’t turned 16 I would have had to wait. And  
12 if I had already turned 16 I am not sure finding the money for the tournament would have  
13 been so easy. But this is just perfect. The plane tickets, the hotel accommodation...it’s a big  
14 birthday present and it’s the best one ever.

15 [Sweden – friendly deaf basketball tournament]

16 We are playing Latvia. Well, they are. I am warming up the bench. As I have been  
17 doing for the previous three quarters of the game. I don’t like this feeling. It’s not new and  
18 it’s not welcomed either.

19 \*

20 Second day, we are playing Estonia. I must look less enthusiastic than yesterday,  
21 because Coach approaches me before the match.

22 “I made you sit on the bench yesterday because those guys are not easy and I wanted  
23 you to have some time to read and understand the game. Once I feel you’re ready in training,  
24 I’ll give you minutes to play.”

1 Ok. Not exactly the best news ever – when will he think I am ready? I want to play at  
2 this very moment! – but at least there’s hope.

3 Last quarter, my team is losing, I am still sitting on the bench, watching my  
4 teammates, when I feel a tap on my shoulder, and look up to the coach:

5 “YOU! THOMAS! GET READY NOW, YOU’RE GOING ON!”

6 This – is – it.

7 It’s happening.

8 My stomach rumbles. No, not hungry...I suddenly can’t breathe, I am so anxious! But  
9 I stand up, jump on the spot and then focus on putting on foot in front of the other. I am on  
10 the court. I am in!

11 \*

12 The referee signals the end of the game. Estonia won. Not surprisingly as they  
13 dominated the whole match. I am disappointed but it’s ok. I can’t shrug this feeling  
14 of...what? Adrenaline? Joy? Enjoyment?

15 “I loved it!” that’s all I can text to my parents back home, while I smile to myself.

## 16 **Goodbye, Sport**

17 “Goodbye mum” I manage to say before the air gets squeezed out of my lungs by my  
18 mum’s intense hug.

19 “Goodbye Thomas, make me proud!” she replies, even though her words are muffled  
20 by her happy tears.

21 I watch my parents heading back to the station, to London, and to our home. I stay  
22 here, in Cambridge, my new home for the next few years. What a beautiful place, full of  
23 history but at the same time fresh and buzzing with the energy of the thousands of students  
24 living here. Yes...thousands...but I don’t know anyone here. And no one knows me or knows  
25 *of* me, of my deafness, of my story.

1 I look around, at all the young people walking by, chatting, calling each other... What  
2 if I can't make new friends? What if my new non-deaf classmates don't like me? Will I be  
3 the alien again? Fear starts creeping up my spine, but I shake my head, shrugging these  
4 negative thoughts off, and decide to have a walk around the Freshers' fair on campus.

5 \*

6 "Hey mate, do you want to join our football team? It's great fun!"

7 Sport! What a great idea! It's the perfect way to make friends! I smile and grab all the  
8 leaflets the guys dressed in purple t-shirts are giving out.

9 Let's see...football, rugby, tennis, judo...basketball! There is a basketball team! This  
10 is perfect!

11 "Great mate, so you are in! See you on Sunday for training". I smile at the guy, while  
12 I hand him back the pen and the filled-in form. I just joined the university basketball team.  
13 Only a couple of days and I'll be on the court again. I can't wait!

14 [Sunday]

15 THUD, THUD, THUD.

16 I hear the sound of the ball before walking into the gym. My body's reaction is the  
17 same it'd have if I was watching a chocolate cake in a bakery window: I am drooling at the  
18 thought of feeling the heaviness and roughness of the orange basketball. It's been too long  
19 since I played my last match with the GB Deaf Team, months.

20 Having to say goodbye to the team and to those amazing experiences was a tough  
21 decision and I had to stay away from basketball for a while, but I know it was the right choice  
22 to make. I couldn't afford to pay for University tuition and the GB Deaf Team away games. I  
23 had to make the responsible choice and let GB Basketball go.

24 But now I am here, in a gym again, ready to play again! I haven't mentioned that I  
25 used to play for GB Deaf Basketball Team when I signed up. I didn't want the guy to think I

1 was trying to show off. I'll just make sure they can see I am good and pick me for the first  
2 team by bringing my best game today.

3 A tall, bald black guy walks up to me. I look up towards him, so I can lip-read him.  
4 He is so tall, and I am not even 6-feet.

5 "Hey, are you new?", tall-guy asks.

6 "Hmm, yeah... I am..."

7 "Great, me too! My name is Graham", tall-guy says, stretching his hand towards me.

8 "I'm Thomas", I happily reply, squeezing his hand.

9 "Is it ok if I call you Tom?" This seems to be Graham's only worry. He does not  
10 mention my hearing aids, doesn't even seem to pay attention to them. All I know is that a few  
11 seconds later we are playing, and I just feel at home.

12 \*

13 "OK GUYS, THANK YOU FOR TODAY, WE'LL LET YOU KNOW WHICH  
14 TEAMS YOU HAVE BEEN ASSIGNED TO", shouts one of the coaches a couple of hours  
15 later. I am dripping and sweating away, but I couldn't care less. I feel good.

16 I run towards my bag, ready to quickly pack up so I can meet my new friends outside  
17 for a drink, when Coach approaches me and mumbles something. I don't understand what he  
18 is saying but the expression on his face makes me think he seems impressed with me.

19 "I am sorry, I don't understand what you are saying? I am deaf, sorry. Can you speak  
20 slowly for me?" I say.

21 "Aw, I'm sorry! I didn't know! I was saying that you played really well today! Would  
22 you like to play a friendly game next week? I can put you in the starting group, as you are  
23 really good and exactly what we need!" says Coach, with his mouth wide open as if talking to  
24 a dumb guy who doesn't understand any English.

1 I don't let the wide-open mouth affect me, though, and agree to play next week's  
2 friendly game with the university first team. I grin. I really couldn't have asked for a better  
3 start.

4 [1 week later]

5 THUD, THUD, THUD.

6 The sound of the ball on the court is loud. I normally find it beautiful too but I am not  
7 in the mood right now. I am sitting on the bench. Not playing from the start, as Coach said  
8 last Sunday.

9 I am confused. Maybe I didn't understand him. Maybe he just meant that I was going  
10 to play. Two more quarters to go. Maybe I'll get on later.

11 ...or maybe not...

12 PHEEW PHEEW!

13 The referee signals the end of the game. And I am still warming up the bench. As I  
14 have done for the full 40-minute game.

15 I don't like this feeling. But I tell myself I am new and things will change soon.

16 [1 year later]

17 "Coach, can you look at me when you speak? Loud and clear please?" I remind  
18 Coach for the millionth time, in the middle of the training session.

19 "Yes, yes, yes my bad. Keep going! You're doing well, Thomas!"

20 \*

21 Doing well? I can't help but wonder if he really means it. It's been a year now and I  
22 can probably count on the fingers of my hands the amount of minutes I played. I am now  
23 Bench-guy, spending every game sitting on the bench, trying to figure out what I have done  
24 wrong in training. Maybe I am not good enough just yet? "But you were more than good

1 enough”, says an evil voice in my head. That voice has been talking more and more lately. I  
2 try to shut it up, but it is becoming harder and harder each week.

3 [1 week later]

4 This is it.

5 I had a hell of a week, trying to finish all my assignments without skipping any  
6 training. But despite every attempt to play, to improve, to listen to Coach’s advice –  
7 whenever he remembers not to mumble when talking to me – I am benched. Again. And  
8 people who trained once during the week are playing. Again.

9 I give up.

10 I hate giving up, but I also hate this situation, which is like a déjà vu, repeating itself  
11 over, and over again. Every time I am the 14-year-old deaf boy left out from the National  
12 Athletics School Championships. Every time they make me feel like I am not good enough.  
13 Again, and again. It doesn’t matter what I do. I am an alien.

#### 14 Discussion

15 In line with my chosen methodology, I offer no analytical interpretation of the stories  
16 presented, as this could detract from their evocativeness (McMahon & McGannon, 2017). On  
17 the contrary, readers are encouraged to build their own understanding and observe their own  
18 reactions to the stories. In line with Barone’s (2000) idea of the *artful writer-persuader*, we  
19 accept that the identity of a text depends on a co-creation of meaning, between the author and  
20 the reader. Barone and Eisner (2012) encourage autoethnographers to be brave and “release  
21 control of the work, understanding that others with alternative backgrounds, ideologies, and  
22 worldviews will do with it what they will” (p. 120).

23 Nonetheless I, together with my co-authors, selected the stories to be included in this  
24 work based on a personal perspective and on a personal interpretation of my  
25 autoethnography. We agree with Ellis and Bochner’s (1996) when they ask, ‘Can’t we



1 discuss this perspective and help readers connect themselves to these *stories* without  
2 necessarily privileging our voices? [...] it is dishonest to pretend we are invisible. [...] We  
3 should make ourselves accountable for our perspective' (p. 15). Therefore, with the aim of  
4 making ourselves accountable, instead of providing an analytic interpretation of the stories  
5 we offer readers our personal perspective. Why did we decide to share these stories? What do  
6 they mean for us? What did we learn from them?

7 **Thomas.** When I had to decide what topic I wanted to address in my undergraduate  
8 degree “major project”, I found myself torn...all my peers were talking about hypothesis,  
9 testing, measuring. I was not sure I wanted to do something like that, I always found that  
10 research boring and ‘cold’, so detached from human experience (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).  
11 There was a voice inside my head that was telling me I had to talk about the experience of  
12 being a deaf athlete, but how could I do that? Was it measurable? Sitting into Kat’s lecture –  
13 one of the few qualitative ones we had that year – I suddenly felt enlightened. She was not  
14 talking about hypothesis. She was talking about weird words, like ontology and  
15 epistemology, and even if I felt slightly confused, it sounded like her approach to research  
16 could have a space for the type of project I was interested in. When I talked to her, I went  
17 home with lots of articles on autoethnography, a fancy and slightly daunting word. But how  
18 that word change my life! I loved reading those people’s stories (e.g., Sparkes, 1996; Tsang,  
19 2000), they were different, they moved me and I suddenly felt the need to write mine. It just  
20 happened, I had to do it. Ellis (2004) defines knowing when a story is worth writing like “a  
21 calling” (p. 32), and I can relate to that feeling. I do not know if my story will have on others  
22 the effect that reading those autoethnographies had on me, but I certainly hope so. I realised  
23 there were no stories like mine out there, that as much as there was (a dearth of) literature on  
24 deafness in sport, the voice of deaf athletes was non-existent. I wanted to break the silence, I  
25 wanted to be the one to step up and start sharing his story. Doing it was no easy process.

1 Once I started writing my story I realised with surprise that I never really shared my personal  
2 life with anyone at University, because I always felt embarrassed, or ashamed of who I am, of  
3 my being different. I realised that somehow I make the “alien” out of myself by staying  
4 isolated. But once I started sharing my story, the opposite happened. People were touched by  
5 my story, and wanted to do something, change things...suddenly I felt I was not an alien  
6 anymore, on the contrary I felt part of a community. Bochner and Ellis (2016) explain how  
7 the act of writing represents something that can be meaningful for ourselves *and* for the  
8 readers, helping to relieve one’s distress in a therapeutic way. Working on my  
9 autoethnography turned out to be not only a therapeutical experience for me, but also a  
10 chance to reflect on my experiences so far, on how they have impacted my life and on who I  
11 have become as a consequence. As Frank (2010) says, ‘Stories work *with* people, *for* people,  
12 and always stories work *on* people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible,  
13 and as worth doing’ (p. 3); writing my story, and then reading, and telling it, helped me  
14 realise how my past shaped who I am (Ellis, 1993). But sharing my story and seeing people’s  
15 reaction to it made me determined to grow from here, and motivated me towards new goals I  
16 can reach in the future.

17 **Katrina and Francesca.** When we read Thomas’ story for the first time, we could  
18 not stop thinking about it. First came the shock of reading about his experience of  
19 discovering his deafness. It was not difficult to picture that sweet little boy immersed in a  
20 society that was not ready for his issue, almost making it his fault. Then the description of his  
21 relationship with his dad – the one person who seemed to really know him – was intense and  
22 moving. But it was reading about his experiences in sport that made the story really resonate  
23 with us, as we both have a sport background, first as athletes and then as coaches. It was not  
24 just the shared “being an athlete” aspect in Thomas’ story that got our attention though. It  
25 was the way reading it made us feel: not good about ourselves as coaches. Just like Bochner

1 and Ellis (2002) suggested, Thomas' autoethnography informed us, but also appeared to have  
2 awaken and disturbed us. Together we have more than thirty years of coaching experience  
3 and it dawned on us that we could have easily been like *that* coach. Even worse: we probably  
4 *have been* like that in the past. We had been given no information on how to effectively adapt  
5 our coaching to disabled athletes. Why in all the courses we attended in different sports,  
6 different Countries, different years and levels, adapting coaching styles to include disabled  
7 athletes was never a topic? Just like Bochner and Ellis (2002) predicted, 'Once aware,  
8 individuals may find the consequences of their involvement (or lack of it) unacceptable and  
9 seek to change the situation' (p. 221). This incentive towards change represents the wider  
10 impact that autoethnographies can have, as they not only act on the individual telling the  
11 story in a therapeutic way, but they also can be used as an *instructional tool* (Chang, 2008).  
12 Stories as tools have the potential to impact different learning communities (e.g., classroom,  
13 practitioners) by allowing individuals to gain a more in-depth understanding of one's self and  
14 of others, and as a consequence they facilitate political, critical, and public pedagogy (Smith,  
15 2017). For us, once Thomas' story had been read, it was impossible to un-know what was in  
16 it, and un-feel the disturbing feelings we had. At that point we both knew what we wanted to  
17 do: raise awareness. Change the way things work.

## 18 **Conclusion**

19 Sharing Thomas' story was our way to try to end the silence that surrounded the sport  
20 experience of deaf individuals (Ulrich & Egbert, 2013). Despite the increasing research  
21 attention towards disability, the fact that the International Committee on Sports for the Deaf  
22 has the longest history among sport organisations for individuals with disabilities (Ammons,  
23 2009), and that Deaflympics Games appeared before Paralympics, the latter has engaged  
24 more extensively with research (Kurkova, Valkova, & Scheetz, 2011). Nonetheless, as sport  
25 is renowned for its beneficial effects on individuals' well-being (e.g., Groff, Lundberg, &

1 Zabriskie, 2009), it is timely to highlight the difficulties that deaf people constantly face  
2 when trying to participate in an activity they enjoy and that has the potential to make them  
3 feel part of a community. Thomas' story aims to extend the understanding of what it means to  
4 be a deaf athlete in an environment that is still lacking awareness to deal with specific needs  
5 (Ulrich & Egbert, 2013). Following Perrier, Smith and Latimer-Cheung's (2013) suggestion,  
6 he offered a personal narrative of an embodied experience of an impaired body in the sport  
7 environment. Future development of this avenue of research could look at the effect of the  
8 stories on readers, the consequences of these effects (e.g., have they pushed readers to act to  
9 change the current situation?), and the use of stories as a way to discuss – and hopefully  
10 improve – deaf athletes' experience in sport. Moreover, coaches' reflection on the stories  
11 could also help to review and adapt coaching education to cater for different types of  
12 disabilities, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach.

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**Highlights**

- Research looking into the experience of deaf people in sport is scarce.
- Sport can be a positive experience for deaf people but it can also marginalise them.
- Stakeholders in sport (e.g., coaches) need to be aware of how to effectively work with different types of impairments.
- Writing autoethnography can have a therapeutic role for the author and raise awareness and encourage social change in the readers.