

JOSEPH M. M. ALDINGER  
Lynchburg College

Narratives of Overcoming: Disability Theory and *The Crash Reel*

The creation of Entertainment Sports Programming Network (ESPN) in 1978 and its subsequent success not only reveals the important position that sports hold in our culture, but also solidifies the relationship between modern sports and the entertainment industry. Because sports are always ‘more than just a game’, narrative, symbolism, and tropes are equally critical. If you want to appeal to a broader audience, you have to entertain them. Narrative has helped bridge the gap between hard-core fanatics and the wider viewing audience.<sup>1</sup> Sports studies scholars like Lindsey J Meân have documented the imbrication of sports and narrative theory. Meân writes that “Sporting mythologies and nostalgia rely on well-used tropes, symbols, narratives, and understandings that are familiar to sport fans and easily consumed by nonsporting audiences.”<sup>2</sup>

The entertainment industry has taken advantage of and popularized a variety of narratives that sports utilize to entertain and connect to their viewing public. One recurring trope is the familiar ‘underdog story’, which portrays athletic competition as an opportunity to overcome a socio-economic obstacle, a genetic lottery, or racial inequality. Examples of this narrative go as far back in cinema as 1940. In *Knute Rockne: All American*, the son of a Norwegian immigrant grows up to become the head coach of Notre Dame and eventually encourages his team to get over the loss of their teammate and star halfback George Gipp as they “win one for the Gipper”. Recent dramatic portrayals range from *Rocky* (1976-2015) to *Rudy* (1993), *Remember the Titans* (2000), *The Express* (2008), and *The Blind Side* (2009). The underdog narrative dominates the genre of romantic comedies as well; *Unnecessary Roughness* (1991), *The Replacements* (2000), and *The Longest Yard* (2005) are all films about football teams comprised of hodgepodge rosters, men who are given the chance to redeem themselves by transcending their particular circumstances be that old age, racism, regrets, or imprisonment.

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<sup>1</sup> Serving as another testament to the modern link between sports and entertainment is the history of the halftime show. Up until the 1970s, the Super Bowl’s halftime show was a college marching band routine. In the 70s, halftime was given a theme and performed by a college marching band. By the late 70s, producers such as Jim Skinner, former CEO of McDonald’s and executive chairman of Walgreens, and The Walt Disney Company paired with performers such as Up With People to put on more elaborate themed shows. Through the 80s-90s, this trend shifted to combine an artist with a marching band until eventually it became the “show” that we all know it as today. The corporatized production of a halftime “show” demonstrates the shifting ties between sports and entertainment. What was once a time to take a pause from the game has now become the game itself.

<sup>2</sup> Lindsey J. Meân, “The 99ers: Celebrating the Mythological,” in *Journal of Sports Media* vol. 10 no. 2 (Fall 2015): 31-43.

This narrative is made even more familiar in contemporary advertisements such as Jimmy Graham's 2015 Powerade commercial. A superstar of the National Football League, a young Graham is shown walking down the hallway of Goldboro Community Orphanage, North Carolina in 1998. Dramatizing Graham's childhood, the commercial positions football as a way out of a system of oppression that often leads to the unequal institutionalization of black bodies. Graham, the viewer is led to believe, transcends his circumstance through sports. As Graham passes by doorways, the camera pans to fights breaking out, uniform bunk beds, cement block walls, and a lack of windows that recall the atmosphere of the correctional facility. Graham runs through the hallway as the narrator interjects to give us his pull-yourself-up tale. An omniscient voice accompanied by drums asks, "Have you ever heard the story about the mouse who finds himself drowning in a bucket of cream? Now most mice would just give up, but not this mouse. This mouse was different. He had a fight in him and eventually all that fighting churned that cream into butter, and he simply climbed out."<sup>3</sup> The story of "the mouse" is relayed through montage: Graham fighting, doing pushups, and playing basketball. At a crucial moment in the narrative, Graham falls down only to punish himself with more pushups. This montage quickly transitions to football where we see the athlete training for the NFL Combine. The commercial culminates in a much-anticipated touchdown – the first of many, as we the audience know.

Where in this commercial or the 2009 film *The Blind Side* it is suggested that racial and socio-economic inequalities can be overcome by success in sport, an equally popular overcoming trope is found in representations of disability; whether it be through the rhetoric of inspiration porn or that of the super-crip, ability and disability are central to sports narratives more generally and to the overcoming narrative specifically. This narrative of overcoming tends to transform sport "into [a] discourse...governed by the endeavor to expel from reality... forms of [the body] that [are] not amenable to the strict economy of [bodily perfection.]"<sup>4</sup> Overcoming narratives, thus, often perpetuate problematic representations of disability, which understand the disabled body to be insufficient, a deviation from bodily norms in need of cure or rehabilitation.

Examining the documentary *The Crash Reel* (2014) and its intersection with disability, both that of injured snowboarder Kevin Pearce and Kevin's brother, David Pearce (a young man with down syndrome), I consider the film's break from the traditional overcoming narrative. Focusing on how the Pearce family, friends, and "Frends" (Pearce's snowboarding crew) deal with Kevin's traumatic brain injury (TBI), *The Crash Reel* upends the conventional sports narrative of transcendence to explore the newly intimate relationship of Pearce and his community. After Pearce's 2009 superpipe crash, we are not given a happy ending. Kevin does not return from his TBI to win an Olympic medal for team USA. We are instead confronted with a body in need of care, an individual whose mode of experiencing the world has changed in ways that ask him to

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gW1ByRmV0-c>

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Volume I an Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 36.

relearn his body and his relationship to those around him. Amplifying this narrative of recovery, the documentary pays close attention to the relationship between Kevin and his younger brother David. David has down syndrome or as he prefers to call it “up syndrome” because he’s an “up kind of a guy.”<sup>5</sup> *The Crash Reel*’s sharp focus on the family as a relational unit demonstrates how disability disrupts, realigns, and creates new forms of relation between self and other.

#### *Narrative, Sports, and the Body*

On December 19<sup>th</sup> 2012, KSDK Channel 5 news from Saint Louis, Missouri covered a story on Demetrius de Moors and Michael Lind, high school wrestlers from Georgia. Just prior to the annual South Metro tournament, Lind’s coach contacted Moors’ coach to arrange an exhibition match between the two. With respect to athletics, there was nothing extraordinary about these athletes. Certainly nothing that would garner the attention of the national news. What was different about this particular match? Moors’ father had recently died in Iraq and Lind has down syndrome. Moors was nominated for the National Sportsmanship Award in 2012 for agreeing to compete against Michael Lind. I am not interested in evaluating Moors’ character based on this match. What does interest me is the larger narrative that provides cultural traction for this kind of story to become national news and my concerns about its ableist logic.

Through a “win,” it is often suggested that the “tragic” person with a disability is able to transcend his or her “limitations”. Sports meet personal “tragedy” with an ephemeral victory in which the body is, if only momentarily, glorified on account of its ability. Within the larger logic of sports, it is intimated that through a victory the athlete achieves his or her revered cultural status on account of one’s exemplary body. Winning moves towards excessive ability, a body that through will and physical prowess can overcome personal and competitive obstacles. In the realm of sports, disability is briefly rehabilitated (if not literally than at least symbolically) through the act of winning and its conferral of ability. If we can’t medically fix or cure a given disability, it is suggested that perhaps the person with a disability can win and in doing so overcome his or her personal limitations and all for the satisfaction of an able-bodied spectator.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond this rehabilitative logic, overcoming narratives tend to rely on the spectacle of disability and its inspirational potential. Spectacle is not unfamiliar

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<sup>5</sup> *The Crash Reel*, directed by Lucy Walker (2013; Santa Monica, CA: HBO Documentary Films and Phase 4 Films, 2014), DVD.

<sup>6</sup> For the popularity of these videos see the following YouTube videos: “Waterboy with Down Syndrome Scores Touchdown,” “Disabled Basketball Player is Given Help by Opposing Player to Score a Shot,” “Autistic boy scores touchdown,” “2012 National Sportsmanship Awards-Demetrius de Moors,” and “7-yr-old Jack, W/Brain Cancer, Scores Touchdown.” To get a sense of the influence of these videos and circulation, as of December 18, 2015, collectively these videos have been viewed 12,384,142. That is more than one and a half times the population of New York City, only roughly thirty-five thousand less than both the population of NYC and Los Angeles combined, and greater than the population of the next seven most populated cities in the United States. Statistics from: [www.factfinder.census.gov](http://www.factfinder.census.gov).

territory for sports that thrive on packed stadiums, televised exhibitions, and mass fandom. Certain sports, like professional wrestling, prosper primarily because of their spectacular nature. Roland Barthes notes of amateur wrestling (today's WWE or professional wrestling) that it "is not a sport, it is a spectacle" because unlike boxing which is based on "a demonstration of excellence" the outcome of a wrestling match is predetermined. It is the execution of roles and the playing of parts that is important in wrestling and not the competition.<sup>7</sup> These predetermined roles often have symbolic meanings, which are attached to audience's desires. Barthes explains, "What matters is not what it [the public/audience] thinks but what it [the public/audience] sees."<sup>8</sup>

When Moors wrestled Lind, the audience had expectations of who would win. Moors and Lind were playing all too familiar parts (a charitable young man and an innocent and relentlessly happy teen with a disability). Attempting to hide the spectacular nature of the event, broadcasters made a point to describe moments in the match where Moors "made him [Lind] work for it." As if Lind's working for it could somehow transform the young men's pre-scripted roles. Indicative of the "feel good" nature of this story, broadcasters introduced this news clip with the proclamation that "there may be no event more appropriate for the Christmas season." The wrestling match was thus framed as a story of charity, the acting out of 'the Christmas Spirit'. Moors embodied charitable good will, while Lind represented "the sweet, young thing whose disability should inspire pity and compassion."<sup>9</sup> While this model of the inspirational disabled person is "deeply moving to most non-disabled Americans [it is] widely regarded as oppressive by most disabled ones", notes Joseph Shapiro. As Shapiro explains, "The disability rights movement discards the notion that people with disabilities should be courageous or heroic superachievers, since most disabled people are trying simply to lead normal lives, not inspire anyone."<sup>10</sup> An athletic example of Tiny Tim, this televised match and the subsequent news special showed audiences that "although [Lind] reminds us of our capacity for goodness ... [his body] also serve[s] to emphasize that we are fortunate enough *not* to be like [him]."<sup>11</sup>

Roughly two-weeks prior to the release of *The Crash Reel*, youtube user InspiredWorld 2013 posted the KDSK video to youtube under the title "High School Wrestler Shows his Competitor an Incredible Kindness (sic)." Twenty-one days after the release of *The Crash Reel*, Fox News posted the video, "Waterboy with Down Syndrome Scores a Touchdown (sic)" on its YouTube

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<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1972). An electronic copy of this out of print text can be accessed at: <http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~ikalmar/illustex/Barthes-wrestling.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Niall Richardson and Adam Locks, *Body Studies: the Basics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 68.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Random House, 1993), 16.

<sup>11</sup> Richardson and Locks, *Body Studies*, 68.

Channel.<sup>12</sup> These are a few of the many videos of their kind. It should come as no surprise that the overcoming narrative flourishes in sports. Sports have always been an expression of bodily transcendence; as any athlete will report, the athlete's true competitor is never the other team, but the limits of one's own body. Sports thus become the perfect breeding ground for what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder refer to as "narrative prosthesis." Noting the prosthetic framework of literary narratives, Snyder and Mitchell write that "all narratives operate out of a desire to compensate for a limitation or to reign in excess."<sup>13</sup> Literary narratives in particular are often called into being through a problem-solution structure. The narrative begins when "something has gone amiss with the known world" and the story "rehabilitates or fixes the deviance in some manner." Sports narratives heighten the stakes of this prosthetic framework with their emphasis on the idealized body and the body's capacity for limitless potential. Athletic competition stages our desire for limitless bodies as we see athlete's perform "freakish" feats far beyond the ability of the standard body. The hyper-abled athlete provides a fantasy of limitless ability despite the very real limitations of all bodies. As we will see in the next section, *The Crash Reel* disrupts this prosthetic overcoming narrative. What emerges in the documentary is not a rehabilitated body but an emphasis on new forms of social relation prompted by disability.

*The Crash Reel and Narrative Possibilities: 'Think About the Stories We Could've Told'*

When your brain isn't in a position to make a decision.  
It's good to take advice [from family].  
-Adam Pearce, *The Crash Reel*

I just don't know if it will ever be fixed. I just don't...  
I just can't know if it will ever be fixed...  
It just feels never ending.  
-Kevin Pearce, *The Crash Reel*

On the surface, *The Crash Reel*—a documentary directed by Lucy Walker about professional snowboarder Kevin Pearce—is a conventional sports documentary. The film tells the story, as the website explains of "an escalating rivalry between Kevin and his nemesis Shaun White in the run-up to 2010 Olympics."<sup>14</sup> The opening scene of the documentary confirms the narrative conventions that make for entertaining sports stories. The audience meets Kevin Pearce through an interview conducted on "September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009: 159 Days before the Vancouver Winter Olympics." Kevin tells the interviewer that he is excited "to be going for it [Olympic Gold]." Ominous foreshadowing cuts across this familiar exchange as the interviewer asks Kevin about the "new" twenty-two feet high walls of the

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<sup>12</sup> The former's historical roots can be found in Adam Sandler's *Waterboy* (1998), a film about a waterboy with a cognitive disability who when given the chance to play football is discovered to be the team's greatest tackler. Sandler's film participates in the mythology of the super-crip.

<sup>13</sup> David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 53.

<sup>14</sup> <http://thecrashreel.com/about-the-film/>

mountain's superpipe to which Kevin responds that "[it] changed the way that we got to snowboard."<sup>15</sup>

One of the many metanarratives that runs throughout the documentary is the progression of snowboarding from a backyard sport to small competitions and finally to the Olympic stage. Just as the halfpipe grew into the superpipe, so too has the sport of snowboarding grown. From this first interview to Kevin's Friends<sup>16</sup> crew discussing the need for "airbags" within the sport or Kevin's father, Simon, discussing the rapidly growing size of the halfpipe, Walker highlights how professional snowboarding and extreme sports have placed the bodies of young athletes at risk in the name of bigger, better entertainment.<sup>17</sup> Increasing the size of the halfpipe walls amplified the height at which aerial tricks could be executed— making the sport more enjoyable for thrill-seeking audiences and more dangerous for competitors. The difference between snowboarding's beginnings and its present form is one of bodily feats. In its origins, snowboarding was a grassroots movement. Many resorts kicked snowboarders off of their mountains and competitions were seldom attended by large crowds or televised. However, as the snowboarding industry began to develop and take hold in the marketplace of winter sports, audiences grew in direct correlation to the marketing of snowboarding products. The eight-foot high walls were no longer enough to captivate growing audiences who wanted to see extreme tricks and extreme risk. Much like the spectacle of the nineteenth and twentieth-century sideshow, performers/athletes were required to further differentiate themselves from paying audiences. This has required a kind of "enfreakment" of the athlete through bigger better and more dangerous tricks— tricks that push the limits of the body and can be accompanied by extreme injury.

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<sup>15</sup> *The Crash Reel*, directed by Lucy Walker (2013; Santa Monica, CA: HBO Documentary Films and Phase 4 Films, 2014), DVD.

<sup>16</sup> Friends is the name that Kevin and his snowboarding friends gave to themselves. The group includes: Kevin Pearce, Danny Davis, Scotty Lago, Keir Dillon and the brothers Jack and Luke Mitrani. The groups name derives from the removal of the "I" from the word friends. For a more detailed account of the group's history see: [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/22/sports/othersports/22friends.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/22/sports/othersports/22friends.html?_r=0).

<sup>17</sup> In 1986 when the World Championship contest for snowboarding was held in Breckenridge, Colorado the halfpipe had five feet walls with no vertical and was one-hundred and fifty feet long. By 1990, the World Cup regulation size for the halfpipe was four-hundred feet long and the walls were ten to twelve feet high. Fast-forward to the 2001 US Open and the walls of the pipe grew to eighteen feet high. As *The Crash Reel* points out, by 2009 the modest halfpipe of the 1990s grew to the mammoth proportion of twenty-two feet high side walls whose geometry changed from a semi circle (i.e. very little flat area between the walls which limited speed as wells as little to no vertical angle on the walls which limited height or amplitude) to an oval shaped superpipe in which riders drop-in or enter the pipe eighteen-feet above the twenty-two feet high vertical walls that are spread apart by thirty feet of flat. Superpipe dimensions allow riders to recover and gain more speed between tricks. See Lee Crane, "A Complete History of the Snowboard Halfpipe," in *Transworld Snowboarding* December 01, 1996 and Jeremy Repanich, "Evolution of the Snowboard Halfpipe," in *Popular Mechanics* March 02, 2011.

The freak show, as Robert Bogdan points out in his cultural history of the industry, did not simply display unusual or different bodies labelled “freaks” because of their physical or cognitive deviations from bodily norms; rather, the sideshow was dependent upon particular modes of presentation to produce the freak.<sup>18</sup> It was the particular stylization of a body and the narrative of the sideshow barker that made an individual a “freak”. With respect to snowboarding, it is the presentation of young athletes’ bodies that has made snowboarding an entertaining spectacle; savants of sorts, Kevin Pearce and Shaun White both went pro prior to graduating high school. Snowboarding’s process of “enfreakment” has primarily occurred as athletes were positioned higher above the pipe, demonstrating their miniscule size in comparison to the massive superpipe that has quadrupled since its beginnings. The much larger pipe was eventually equipped with towers to measure amplitude for inquiring audiences, visually confirming that professional riders are on average traveling eighteen to twenty-plus feet out of the superpipe, which translates to forty-plus feet from its base. With such daunting heights has come very dangerous, real, and disabling falls. Much like the freak shows of the past that provided “the pleasures of watching the ‘freak’ body...arguably [so that]...the spectators feel better about themselves,” snowboarding and extreme sports test the limits of the athlete’s body while the audience remains safe from harm.<sup>19</sup> When riders crash the audience finds relief in the athlete getting back up; falls provide onlookers with simultaneous thrills and security. If as Tobin Siebers argues one of our greatest cultural anxieties is the fear of disablement, snowboarding and other extreme sports flirt with danger and disability only to eventually assuage these fears by demonstrating the body’s resilience, its ability to absorb a tremendous impact and quickly recover.<sup>20</sup> When a rider crashes to the bottom of a superpipe falling forty feet through the air, the audience finds pleasure in the ability of the rider to ‘walk it off’; it is this display of ablebodiedness following the crash that combats our fear of disability. Unfortunately, the body does not always remain intact or “able” after such tremendous crashes; the greatest achievement of *The Crash Reel* is that it destabilizes this neat narrative of limitless potential and resilience through Walker’s focus on disability.

In conventional overcoming narratives the protagonist is met by some form of social, economic, physical, or racial adversity; this ‘challenge’ is ultimately transcended through an achievement that transforms the protagonist’s life, which has been cast as a personal tragedy. *The Crash Reel* critiques this narrative trajectory by telling the stories of athletes who do not recover, ‘walk it off’, or return to their sport. Using the framework of “[x] Days before the Vancouver Winter Olympics,” Walker draws attention to the Olympics as *the* anticipated culmination of the film. However, Kevin Pearce’s accident and subsequent injury

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<sup>18</sup> David Hevey, *The Creatures That Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery* (London: Routledge, 1992) and Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988)

<sup>19</sup> Richardson and Locks, *Body Studies*, 58.

<sup>20</sup> See Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 5. Siebers writes, “Disability creates a different picture of identity...[it] present[s] the opportunity to rethink how human identity works. I know as a white man that I will not wake up in the morning as a black woman, but I could wake up a quadriplegic.”

disrupts this neat linear narrative or “chronotope” – “a time sequenced event”.<sup>21</sup> Tracking time through the continual allusion to the number of “days before the Vancouver Winter Olympics,” Walker defamiliarizes the straightforward progression of recovery, drawing attention instead to the retroactive framing of documentaries that often connect an athlete’s success with their ability to overcome adversity. *The Crash Reel* thus places into question how we tell the athlete’s story and demonstrates how narratives of overcoming are often influenced by audience’s desires for a certain kind of beginning, middle, and end to sports narratives – an obstacle that can always be transcended and an ending that is marked by the ablest emphasis on physical success.

The documentary draws our attention to narrative framing through not only Kevin Pearce’s disrupted timeline, but through interviews with Pearce’s fellow athlete and adversary, Shaun White. When we first meet Shaun he is nine years old and is shown at a snowboarding competition, where he is answering questions about his incomparable spins. This interview of old cuts to a present-day interview; Shaun is now twenty-three years old and is gearing up for the Vancouver Winter Olympics. Recounting his journey to the Olympics, Shaun explains “I was born with a heart defect, so I had a couple of surgeries when I was just one years old. They said I wasn’t going to be good at sports, but you put that obstacle in front me and I want to overcome it.”<sup>22</sup> Beginning Shaun’s story here implicitly ties his success to his congenital heart defect (CHD). His present success seems dependent upon his ability to transform his personal “tragedy” into a success story in which he becomes a superstar snowboarder.<sup>23</sup> While the move from heart defect to Olympic athlete makes for good television, this supercrip narrative is a problematic one. “The flip side of the pitiable poster child,” the super-crip “remain[s] among our most glorified disabled role models, lavishly lauded in the press and on television.”<sup>24</sup> These supercrip narratives overwhelming misrepresent the array and spectrum of experiences of individuals with disability, in this case people with CHD.<sup>25</sup> They suggest that “a disabled person is presumed deserving of pity – instead of respect – until he or

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<sup>21</sup> I here borrow this term from Lennard Davis’ use of it in *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. Borrowing the term from literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, Davis notes that the chronotope as a “time sequenced narrative” is central to narrativizing disability in so far as we take interest in the narrative origins of a particular impairment and attempt to place a given disability within a narrative framework. Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (New York: Verso, 1995), 3.

<sup>22</sup> *The Crash Reel*, directed by Lucy Walker.

<sup>23</sup> See the following for examples of the kind of problematic cultural repercussions of narratives of overcoming: <http://www.clickondetroit.com/health/shaun-white-shares-childhood-battle-with-heart-defects> and <http://blog.cincinnatichildrens.org/rare-and-complex-conditions/olympic-success-despite-congenital-heart-condition/>

<sup>24</sup> Shapiro, *No Pity*, 16.

<sup>25</sup> I am not suggesting that Shaun White is capitalizing on his disability to heighten his celebrity or questioning the legitimacy of Shaun’s CHD. What I am placing into question are the cultural repercussions of choosing to represent Shaun not just as an amazing athlete, but as an athlete with a disability that was overcome. What I’m interested in are, in Shaun’s own words, moments when “something so much bigger than the world of sports” happens.

she proves capable of overcoming a physical or mental limitation through extraordinary feats."<sup>26</sup>

Juxtaposed to Shaun's narrative, we are given Kevin's story. After we initially meet Kevin on "September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009 159 Days before the Vancouver Winter Olympics," we are introduced to his family in Hartland, Vermont. Kevin has three brothers (Adam, Andrew, and David). Jointly the brothers tell us that their parents, as Adam says "believed in us and gave us a sense of"...David cuts in "belonging."<sup>27</sup> The scene establishes the close connection between Kevin and his brothers, which later becomes important to the film's representation of Kevin's experience post-crash. After meeting Kevin's family we meet his crew of "Friends" who are planning a trip to Aspen, Colorado "53 Days before the Vancouver Winter Olympics." The crew leaves Aspen for Park City, Utah noting that the Aspen pipe has a "curb," a rough spot that is too dangerous for the riders to practice on.

It is in Park City, Utah "51 Days before the Vancouver Winter Olympics" that Kevin crashes while attempting a double-cork—an aerial move in which a rider flies high above the pipe and completes two rotations on both axes, head-to-toe and shoulder-to-shoulder or forward and sideways. The *crash* of *The Crash Reel* is terrifying. Kevin never has time to brace himself during his momentous fall. As he floats weightless in the air spinning as fast as he can, he comes crashing down into the pipe's vertical wall from ten to fifteen feet above its surface on his face. A member of the Friends crew sums up the horrible accident, "that might've been the worst thing I've ever seen in my life."<sup>28</sup> Following the crash, we are left in absolute silence until an upbeat track plays and the time stamp changes to "September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1988 7817 Days before the Vancouver Winter Olympics." An eleven-month old Kevin is shown taking his first steps, followed by a shot of him daringly standing on the table of his highchair. Kevin's mother, Pia, cuts in "Kevin is always on the go."<sup>29</sup>

Walker quickly cuts from Kevin's injured body to home videos that emphasize Kevin's relationship with family and friends. A radical break from the trajectory of prosthetic narratives, Walker moves from Kevin's accident to his childhood—moving backwards rather than forwards in time. Described by Mitchell and Snyder, the traditional timeline of the prosthetic narrative proceeds as follows:

First, a deviance or marked difference is exposed to a reader; second, a narrative consolidates the need for its own existence by calling for an explanation of the deviation's origins, and formative consequences; third, the deviance is brought from the periphery of concerns to the center of the story to come; and fourth, the remainder of the story rehabilitates or fixes the deviance in some manner.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Shapiro, *No Pity*, 16.

<sup>27</sup> *The Crash Reel*, directed by Lucy Walker.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 53.

Rather than bringing Kevin's injured brain or "deviance...from the periphery of concerns to the center," Walker focuses on Kevin's relationships, which are often signaled by the filmmaker's use of home videos. Even more so, the dénouement of prosthetic narratives never arrives. Kevin never recovers. He heals in varying ways as the years go by, but he never returns to professional snowboarding, nor does he ever challenge Shaun White for his Olympic title. If successful recovery is marked by a return to his hyperabled life as a professional athlete, this recovery is never achieved.

Having taught this documentary to undergraduates, overwhelmingly students – who have no prior knowledge of the film's outcome – want Kevin to recover in very specific ways. The expectation is that at any moment we will be provided with a satisfying montage in which Kevin recuperates prior to the 2014 winter Olympics and just in time to beat Shaun White. This moment never comes. The juxtaposition of Shaun's CHD and Kevin's crash followed by both athletes' home movies draws audiences into desiring a similar "Hollywood ending" for Kevin Pearce; however, Walker's documentary explores other ways of telling a narrative that diverge from the stuff of Hollywood. Along the lines of Lennard Davis' critique of the chronotope, or the impetus to narrativize disability in particular ways, Walker resists the sentimentality that accompanies hero and victim narratives of disablement. As Davis notes:

When one speaks of disability, one always associates it with a story, places it in a narrative ... by narrativizing an impairment, one tends to sentimentalize it and link it to the bourgeois sensibility of individualism and the drama of an individual story ... so that deafness a physical fact, becomes deafness, a story, with a hero or a victim, a love story, a set of attributes (lively, hard working, hot headed).<sup>31</sup>

While *The Crash Reel* is certainly a narrative prompted by Kevin's fall and subsequent brain injury, his disability is hardly the platform for a story of heroes or victims nor is it the occasion for Walker to tell Kevin's story as an individual story of personal tragedy or triumph. Rather the film explores other narrative threads: 1) the rise of extreme sports and their physical demands 2) disability as an occasion to explore issues of autonomy, dependence, and interdependence.

In place of recovery, cure, and overcoming, Walker invites the audience to consider Kevin's changing sense of identity and our potential to be other than we are. In Davis's writing on "dismodernism," he argues for the renunciation of identity politics in favor of a disability studies informed politics that recognizes "that identity is not fixed, but malleable [and]...that dependence, not individual independence, is the rule" within modernity. Abandoning notions of the "normal" subject, what emerges from Davis's dismodern politics is a "new category based on the partial, incomplete subject whose realization is not autonomy and independence but dependency and interdependence."<sup>32</sup> Kevin's

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<sup>31</sup> Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 3-4.

<sup>32</sup> Lennard J. Davis, "The End of Identity Politics: On Disability as an Unstable Category" in *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, & Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York University Press, 2002): 9-32.

injury is the first occasion for *The Crash Reel* to disrupt this fantasy of autonomy and suggest a different reality all together. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson notes of injury and self determination:

[The] ideology of self determination ... assumes immunity to external forces along with the capacity to maintain a stable, static state of being ... According to such logic, physical altercations caused by time or environment—the changes we call disability—are hostile incursions from the outside, the effects of cruel contingencies that an individual does not adequately resist.<sup>33</sup>

That Kevin does not “walk off” his injury becomes a testament to the contingency of bodies. Antithetical to the idea of the self-reliant individual and even more so the hyperabled athlete, Pearce’s TBI exposes cultural fantasies of independence through not just any injury, but an injury that threatens Kevin’s sense of bodily control. Both Kevin and his mother explain that Kevin’s TBI effects his emotional responses in such a way that he cannot control his range of emotions in the same way: frustration, anger, and outbursts mark him as changed by the fall and its effects on his brain. These changes are further highlighted by another TBI patient and skateboarder who is introduced in the film; the young man’s violent outbursts, profuse swearing, and inappropriate laughter lead his family to question his sense of control. No longer able to accurately identify parts of his body or explain why he has injured others in his numerous outbursts, the TBI is presented as a particular kind of injury that alters mind and body in perplexing ways.

Kevin’s sense of identity is certainly changed after the crash. He is no longer Kevin Pearce the rival of Shaun White, but a young man whose traumatic-brain-injury not only changes his sense of identity, but alters the way he experiences the world. His brain injury leaves him dependent on a whole host of doctors, physical therapists, other patients, his family, the Friends crew, and roommates. Kevin’s new “crip” form of being in the world, as Rebecca Sanchez writes in this issue of the *JCRT*, “challenge[s] the configuration of all points within a conventional relationship: self, other, and the spaces around and in between.”<sup>34</sup>

Just prior to his one-year checkup, Kevin has a very hard conversation with his family that challenges our accepted idea of the individual as autonomous being. Kevin wants to return to snowboarding but his brother, Adam, expresses concern: “Your brain isn’t at a stage where it can tell you what the right decision is and you should take advice [from your family].” Kevin presses back asking, “Just how long am I going to take this advice for?”<sup>35</sup> Interjecting his opinion, Kevin’s brother David exclaims, “I don’t want to go through that again ...I don’t

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<sup>33</sup> Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 45.

<sup>34</sup> Rebecca Sanchez, “‘Perfect Interdependency’: Representing Crip Futurity in Beckett’s *Mercier and Camier*” in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 14. no. 2 (Spring 2016): 74.

<sup>35</sup> *The Crash Reel*, directed by Lucy Walker.

want you to die.”<sup>36</sup> The Pearce family does not attempt to declare Kevin medically unfit to snowboard nor do they suggest that he is unable to make decisions for himself. Instead, the scene highlights the impact of the fall on the entire family, who now participate in Kevin’s care. As Adam notes, post-accident he “quit [his] job and dropped everything” because he “was determined to stay with him [Kevin] till he got better.”<sup>37</sup> As Walker makes clear, Kevin’s crash has profound effects on his entire family, as does his decision to return to snowboarding. To be sure, the struggle between the family and Kevin (the self and others) is never fully settled. In the DVD’s “extras” we see Kevin practicing driving in order to gain his “freedom,” a freedom that is cut short as his mother Pia exits the house to insist that Kevin return home. Moreover, in a home video clip of Kevin and Hailey—his roommate, assistant, and in home caregiver—Kevin openly admits that “It is really hard to tell if I’m ready or able to live by myself.”<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps no other relationship demonstrates the connection between self and other as well as David and Kevin’s bond. David is the first Olympian in the Pearce family and is Kevin’s brother who as he explains has a “disability called down-syndrome.” David continues:

Well the first thing I want to say about my disability is I don’t like it. I hate it. Yeah, I don’t like it. I hate it. I want my disability to go away and not come back. I know I have it. It is really hard to have it sometimes. I feel stressed out about it and sometimes I feel anxiety about it too. I just go up to my room. I cry. I hangout. I perk up and I come down stairs...and a different day.<sup>39</sup>

The film never filters the expression of David’s experience. He notes that his down syndrome causes him anxiety and at times depresses him. He at once wants his disability to go away and also shares how he manages the anxiety produced by it. David explains his relationship to Kevin by remembering what it was like for him to see Kevin in the hospital bed hooked up to so many machines and tubes. David says, “I was emotional; I was afraid. I was scared because I knew I might lose him.”<sup>40</sup>

Just as *The Crash Reel* questions Kevin’s autonomy, the film reveals the fantasy of limitless bodies. Highlighting the reality of disability, the documentary showcases Kevin’s relationship to other injured athletes. As the movie pushes towards a resolution that will not come, we are confronted with more and more bodies that have suffered injury such as that of Sarah Burke (a Free-style skier who suffered a TBI and died in 2012), Trevor Rhoda (a professional skateboarder who suffers from two TBIs), the Friends crew (who all suffer from numerous body and head injuries), Adam Taylor (a professional skateboarder whose brain injuries have left him bipolar), and Stephen Murray (a professional BMXer who

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> *The Crash Reel*, directed by Lucy Walker

<sup>39</sup> Davis, “The End of Identity Politics,” 2002.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

is now a quadriplegic). These representations of disability are used to, as a naïve Shaun White puts it, “[shed] a weird strange light on the sport.”<sup>41</sup> While sports seem to discipline the body and uphold bodily norms, at the core they are represented as disabling by Walker. The fantasy of the ideal athlete’s body clashes with the reality that many athletes are left broken down and deteriorating. Standing at the center of this reality is Kevin’s brain injury and the numerous injuries of the athlete’s highlighted in the film. Each of these “dismodern subjects” draw our attention to sports’ disabling reality and the politics of caring for injured athletes. By the film’s end, for instance, Walker notes the growth of this amateur sport into a professional industry that does not provide insurance or follow up care for athletes who are injured on the job. In the case of skier Sarah Burke, her medical expenses were not covered by the insurance because she was participating in an unsanctioned event for Monster Energy Drinks. Gesturing to the expansion of the sport and the requirement for athletes to receive corporate sponsorship, Walker suggests that extreme sports, much like the halfpipe have expanded to astonishing heights but with little regard for the injuries and expenses that may follow. Kevin Pearce aptly describes the broader issue of injury in sports noting, “I don’t care whether it is the NFL, skiing, snowboarding, skateboarding...wherever all these athletes are hitting their heads and they are having serious injuries.”<sup>42</sup>

*The Crash Reel* represents the disconnect between the fantasy of limitless bodies in sports and the reality of the injuries they produce. As the closing footage of the film rolls, a remix of Asaf Avidan’s “One Day/Reckoning Song” plays. Asaf sings: “One day baby, we’ll be old/ Oh baby, we’ll be old/ And think of all the stories that we could’ve told.” Under the direction of Lucy Walker, *The Crash Reel* cogently thinks about “all the stories that [it] could’ve told.” As Kevin Pearce’s personal website describes the film, *The Crash Reel* is “a comeback story with a difference.”<sup>43</sup> Difference in *The Crash Reel* is multiple. On one level the film offers a different kind of comeback story as it does not fulfill an ablest desire for recovery. The documentary casts aside the prosthetic structure of narratives of overcoming to engage difference, the mental and physical experiences expressed through Kevin Pearce, his brother David Pearce, as well as the narratives of other injured athletes.

Dr. Joseph M. M. Aldinger is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Lynchburg College. He is the Assistant Technical Editor for the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* as well as the digital curator for The Global Arts and Ideas Nexus. He is currently working on a manuscript titled, “The Politics of Loss: The Poetic Reformation of Subjectivity.” This project considers early modern poetic representations of loss and their capacity to constitute progressive forms of the political subject.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> “Documentary,” Kevin Pearce, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://kevinpearce.com/documentary.html>