Representing embodied expertise: anorexia and the celebrity athlete’s lifestyle advice

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Representing embodied expertise: anorexia and the celebrity athlete’s lifestyle advice

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ABSTRACT

Celebrity athletes have become a popular source for advice on healthy living. However, little research exists on the changing representations of their interventions. This article analyses the case of Dutch top cyclist Leontien van Moorsel, whose celebrity status increased after a highly-publicised struggle with anorexia. By examining biographies, cookbooks, and radio and TV appearances, it traces Van Moorsel’s celebrification and her transformation into an experience-based expert on lifestyle, and more specifically, eating disorders. It argues that, following her ‘anorexic period’, the cyclist’s physical appearance was presented as proof of her embodied expertise on defeating anorexia. Simultaneously, through her TV appearances as a coach for girls engaged in self-starvation, Van Moorsel reveals a tension between her ‘experience’ and her ‘expertise’: her representation as a dispassionate expert on anorexia demanded that she actively distanced herself from her own life story. Hence, the case of Van Moorsel demonstrates the possible contradictions in representations of celebrity athletes’ expertise. However, it also shows that it is likely that the social field of sport will continue to offer unique possibilities for presenting celebrity athletes as experts on healthy living.

Introduction

In recent decades, celebrities have become a popular source for lifestyle advice. They are increasingly represented as authorities, ‘placed in the same discursive category as other “experts”, such as doctors, psychologists, and dieticians’ (Lewis 2008, p. 3). As this new type of expert gains ground, some academics contend that the voices of traditional experts are being drowned out (Furusten and Werr 2016, Nichols 2017). This transition can partially be explained by the way in which celebrity representations validate consumerist and individualist ideals. Tania Lewis (2008), Brenda R. Weber (2009) and Angela Smith (2010) have argued that portrayals of celebrity experts invite audiences to think of themselves as consumers, and to think of lifestyle as an individual project one must perfect. In this context, claims of expertise have often been based on celebrities’ pre-fame occupations, as demonstrated by the careers of people like Jamie Oliver – who had previously been a professional chef – and Supemanny Jo Frost – who had been a babysitter. As these examples illustrate, the celebrity’s original social field helps them to ‘migrate’ to the role of lifestyle expert (Driessens 2013).
The relevance of celebrities’ original social field for representations of their expertise explains the rising prominence of the *athlete* in popular debates about lifestyle. It should be noted that significant public interest in athletes’ way of living is far from new. A century ago, their images were already used to sell a variety of health products (Jones and Schumann 2004, Veri 2016). But in recent years the involvement of professional athletes in representations of ‘healthy’ lifestyles has grown significantly (Elberse and Verleun 2012, Cashmore 2016). Yet, while scholars have reflected on the highly commercialised celebritisation of the field of sport (Smart 2013, Giulianotti and Numerato 2018), the construction of athletes as experts on healthy living remains an uncommon topic in both cultural studies and sport history.

This article aims to analyse the representation of celebrity athletes’ expertise by focusing on Leontien van Moorsel, an internationally renowned former Dutch cyclist. Throughout her life, Van Moorsel has repeatedly and explicitly been represented as an expert in healthy living, both in biographies and on radio and TV shows. More importantly, the specifics of her life story continue to play an important role in these representations. In short: after a number of notable victories in the early 1990s, Van Moorsel suddenly abandoned her sport. She returned to cycle racing a few years later, declaring that she had experienced an ‘anorexic period’. Determined to demonstrate that her years of self-starvation were over, Van Moorsel then went on to win six Olympic medals. The cyclist’s eventual migration to health expert, then, was intimately connected to her status as the Netherlands’ ‘most famous ex-anorexia patient’, as one biographer put it (De Vries 2006, p. 165).

The case of Van Moorsel helps to explain this article’s supposition that the aura of sport, and its relation to physical culture, affords athletes the possibility to represent an *embodied* lifestyle expertise. Since popular media conceptualise their physique as a sign of health, they have come to symbolise perfect ‘After-bodies’. This term, coined by Brenda R. Weber (2009), refers to makeover TV’s ultimate promise: the physically and psychologically reconstructed participant. As will be argued, following her struggle with self-starvation Van Moorsel transformed into a distinctive After-body. Representations of the athlete suggested that her lifestyle expertise could be ‘read’ from her appearance. More broadly, the case of Van Moorsel allows for an analysis of how celebrity athletes have become – perhaps to a greater extent than other celebrity subtypes – ‘a set of representations or discourses about the fashioning of the self’ (Turner 2010, p. 17). Notably, such representations of athletes’ bodies are typically affected by gendered, raced, and classed norms (Bruce 2016).

To examine the dynamics of these representations, this article focuses on several actors engaged in their construction: biographers, TV and radio editors, as well as the celebrity athlete herself. Conceptualising ‘celebrity’ as the outcome of a cluster of continually changing – sometimes aligning, sometimes competing – interests, it proposes that Van Moorsel should be seen as ‘one of several stakeholders in the exchange’ (Moran 2000, York 2013, p. 10). Herein, the primary focus will be on the construction of Van Moorsel’s life story – not on the (apparent) intentions of different actors. It should be noted that this study takes a similar approach to eating disorders. I adopt the view, formulated by psychologist Helen Malson, that ‘anorexia nervosa’ should not be seen as a ‘natural clinical entity but [as] a socially (discursively) constructed category’ that is constantly changing (Malson 1998, p. 98). This article, therefore, primarily looks at how historical actors such as
biographers, TV and radio editors, and Van Moorsel herself have used the term ‘anorexia’ to represent (parts of) their selves and others.

By tracing the career of one specific celebrity athlete, this study allows for an in-depth look at how the representation of their expertise can change over time. Because the celebrity athlete is a ‘multi-textual and multi-platform promotional entity’ (Andrews and Jackson 2001, p. 7), paying close attention to the historical development of their representation in a variety of media is critical. By focusing on an isolated TV show or series, previous research has perhaps put too much emphasis on how media use celebrities, instead of taking the way in which the interests of the two parties align into account (Wagemakers and Dhaenens 2015). Correspondingly, the source material for this study includes a selection of 91 public TV and radio broadcasts, aired between 1989 and 2019 (see Figure 1).² Several of these shows featured Van Moorsel as an experience-based expert, assisting and advising both adolescents struggling with an eating disorder as well as others more generally interested in healthy living. The study also takes into account five biographical works and four cookery books in which Van Moorsel makes an appearance. I have chosen not to include an analysis of (the use of) social media. First, because celebrities made little use of Twitter or Instagram for the majority of the three decades covered by this historical study (1989–2019) (Giles 2018). Second, because traditional media were (and are) Van Moorsel’s main mode of representation, whereas her unverified accounts on social media – where she mostly applies a one-directional ‘broadcast model of communication’ – continue to attract a comparatively modest following (Marshall 2010, p. 43).

![Figure 1](https://zoeken.beeldenge-luid.nl)
In the first part of the article, I track Leontien van Moorsel’s transformation into a lifestyle expert. The second part discusses a selection of Van Moorsel’s TV appearances between 2012 and 2018 to analyse some of the narrative choices that have helped to fortify her claims of embodied expertise.

**Early representations of Van Moorsel’s lifestyle**

Born in 1970 in Boekel, a small municipality in the southern part of the Netherlands, Leontien van Moorsel started cycle racing at the age of eight, joining the women’s seniors
in 1988. The early 1990s saw her first international sporting successes and the beginning of her celebrity (see Figure 2). In this period, as she started to appear on radio and TV shows, Van Moorsel’s first biography was published (1991).

A development that quickened the celebrity of Van Moorsel was the evolving stature of women’s cycling. Though in the Netherlands, female athletes had received the occasional burst of media coverage as early as the 1930s (Derks 2014), by the 1970s, women in cycling were still struggling to draw the attention of journalists. This lack of attention had been partly influenced by decades of (institutional) sexism (Vande Berg 1998, Russell 2008, Mclachlan 2016, Derks 2017), but for women’s cycling, the 1980s proved a transnational turning point (Lucas 2012). As the sport quickly professionalised, female cyclists were increasingly being acknowledged by the media.

Early profiles for radio and TV covered both Van Moorsel’s athletic achievements as well as her physical appearance. Sometimes called the ‘Barbie from Boekel’, the cyclist would later distinguish between her appearance and that of her ‘butch’ colleagues, explaining that her ‘feminine’ look was deliberate, and a source of great pride (Hurkmans 2008). However, because it was rumoured that she experienced distress related to her diet, the media also began to scrutinise Van Moorsel’s physical appearance in another way, conceptualising it as a marker of her personal lifestyle. This started at the 1990 Sportswoman of the Year award ceremony, where she was – quite literally – sized up. After accepting her award, the conversation on the podium turned to the cyclist’s body. ‘How’s your weight?’, the host inquired suddenly, followed by: ‘Diet, also still good?’ (Sportverkiezing van het Jaar 1990). The 1993 ceremony was even more curious. Celebrating her title on stage, Van Moorsel was presented a giant cream bun by a chef. He explained that it represented her thigh, and that he had created the pastry for her to get ‘nice and fat’ (Sportman, Sportvrouw, en Sportploeg 1993). Even though the focus on physical appearance was (and is) common in media representations of female athletes, its magnitude in Van Moorsel’s case is noteworthy (Kane and Lenskyj 1998, Bruce 2016).

As it turned out, while these early years marked some of Van Moorsel’s greatest successes in cycling, they would ultimately become known as her ‘anorexic period’. The athlete would later explain that during this period, she had been preoccupied with her weight ‘day and night’ (Steman 2002, p. 66). Van Moorsel was far from the only one struggling. In recent years, it has become clear that professional athletes, particularly sportswomen, run a heightened risk of experiencing extreme distress around food and body weight. Many of them are diagnosed with anorexia (Taylor and Kress 2006, Petrie and Greenleaf 2014). Surveying Dutch cyclists, a 2018 report called attention to the negative effects of the sport’s ‘disproportionate emphasis’ on nutrition. One participant observed the harmful effects of cycling culture’s approach to diet: ‘Your view of human beings and what is healthy gets all screwed up: as long as you’re light, you’ll perform …’ (Van Wijk et al. 2018, p. 19). This is a transnational problem within the sport, evidenced by the many renowned cyclists – predominantly but not exclusively female – who have recounted past experiences with extreme distress regarding diet, as well as diagnoses of anorexia, including Clara Hughes, Marion Clignet, Tyler Hamilton, Mara Abbott, and Dotsie Bausch (Clignet and Hovey 2005, Caple 2012, Hamilton and Coyle 2012, Pidd 2016, Hughes 2017).

In the early 1990s, however, such acknowledgements were less common. Accordingly, the narrative of Van Moorsel’s anorexia was ambivalent. Between 1991 and 1994, the
cyclist herself swung from candid interviews to evasive statements about her food-related struggles. In a chapter for a book titled *A Rose too little. Twenty women about life and well-being* (Camps 1994), Van Moorsel spoke of a ‘deep depression’ and an ‘obsession with dieting’. Notably, the chapter was titled ‘Fat asses can’t cycle’ – a direct quote from her coach (p. 174). Drawing a link between her lifestyle, her physical appearance, and her athletic achievements, Van Moorsel revealed: “Losing weight, going from 65 to 48 kilo’s has also not helped me”, it went through my head. “This life has no more meaning” (p. 175). However, at other moments, she evaded the public evaluation of her body, and explained her frequent absences by speaking in euphemisms (‘stuck in a rut’) or untruths (‘a crash in training’) (Superster Vrouwen 1993, Sportradio 1994).

In her early years, one publication provided the most comprehensive account of Van Moorsel’s diet and lifestyle: the cyclist’s 114-page biography, titled *Leontien van Moorsel: My Love for Cycling* (‘Mijn liefde voor de wieler sport’, 1991). While she was still a minor celebrity tethered to the social field of sport, the book – the product of a set of interviews with journalist Tjerry van Schijndel – gave Van Moorsel the opportunity to show elements of her life beyond her athletic achievements: her early childhood, her family, love letters from fans, et cetera. Written in the first-person singular, its style followed Van Moorsel’s speech mannerisms.

Though Van Moorsel would later characterise the early 1990s as her ‘anorexic period’, this biography made no mention of such a diagnosis. Nonetheless, it did offer readers an explanation for Van Moorsel’s purported need to lose weight. Her unremarkable debut in the women’s Tour de France (in 1989), the cyclist explained, made her realise that she needed to ‘work’ on her eating habits (p. 42). At several points, the book intimately discussed Van Moorsel’s physique, presenting the athlete’s rapid weight loss as the basis for her international achievements. Furthermore, this sudden transformation into a leaner, ‘better’ version of herself provided Van Moorsel with the opportunity to present herself as a lifestyle expert. In a chapter devoted to conversations between Van Moorsel and her sport dietician, the athlete included detailed nutritional instructions (p. 49–53). Crucially, though the complexity and divergent style of the text strongly suggest that it was supplied by the dietician, it is presented as part of Van Moorsel’s monologue. The chapter therefore marks the start of a decades-long string of representations of the cyclist as an embodied expert on the topic of lifestyle.

**The struggle with anorexia as a source of inspiration**

In 1994, while suffering from physical and mental exhaustion because of her prolonged distress around her diet, Leontien van Moorsel quit competitive cycling. To some, this was a sudden step, as Van Moorsel had been a dominant force in international cycling, winning the women’s Tour de France twice. Despite rumours of disordered eating, most representations of Van Moorsel’s dietary habits had been ambiguous, even positive. Her previously mentioned biography, for instance, included a quotation from *The European Sport*: ‘This fast and lovely lady can be queen of world cycling. Leontien van Moorsel may have lost her urge for chocolate and French fries, but she is more than hungry for success’ (Van Schijndel 1991, p. 72–73). Three years after the release of this biography, however, the cyclist’s withdrawal from competitive sport triggered negative representations of her habits regarding nutrition, and more broadly, her lifestyle.
Van Moorsel returned to cycling in 1996. In the years that followed, her ‘anorexic period’ became the organising principle in representations of her life story. Though she made few radio or TV appearances in the mid-1990s, on occasion, Van Moorsel would speak openly of the time when she weighed less than 50 kilos (Langs de Lijn 1996). Indicating that she had suffered from ‘a sort of anorexia’ (Het Terras 1995), she presented a narrative of a prolonged struggle, followed by a definitive defeat of the disorder. While slowly recovering, she proclaimed that she was ‘finally doing it in a healthy way’ (Langs de Lijn 1997).

By winning the 1998 World Championship time trial, Van Moorsel made her way back to the elite of international women’s cycling. Media interest increased, with much of it centred around her past battle with anorexia. One biographer later claimed that for Van Moorsel, ‘the human interest aspect generates more attention than her athletic achievements’ (Hurkmans 2008, p. 139). By the year 2000, the story of the cyclist’s eating disorder had already become so widely known, that one talk show host was hesitant to discuss it, claiming it had been recounted on TV ‘about 723 times’ (TV Show 2000). After the 1998 win, most journalists presented Van Moorsel’s life story as a classic comeback narrative. A well-known sport trope, the logic of this ‘rise and redemption arc’ is that those who work hard eventually overcome adversity (Whannel 2002, p. 154). Lance Armstrong – who would become the subject of the cliché himself – immediately anticipated that Van Moorsel’s biography had the capacity to inspire, remarking after her 1998 win: ‘I do think it’s a message, a good message’ (Pauw & Witteman 2011).

This inspirational quality was quickly turned into something more: many representations of Van Moorsel’s comeback focused on possibilities for emulation. Observers asserted that the cyclist was a ‘fantastic example of someone who got [anorexia] under control’ (TV Show 2000), and that her triumphant return made her ‘one of the most inspiring sportswomen of our time’ (Steman 2002, p. 6). Michael Zijlaard, Van Moorsel’s husband and agent/manager, concurred. He suggested that her successful return to professional sport could incentivise women to start cycle racing. While just a few years ago, the general public might have been under the impression that ‘all women’s cyclists are frustrated’ and that the sport demanded of cyclists that they ‘weighed thirty kilos’, he explained, ‘now they see like … um … bam! A healthy woman with charisma. Why wouldn’t you get on a bike?’ (Langs de Lijn 1998).

In the second half of Van Moorsel’s athletic career, she perfected her comeback story. Winning six Olympic medals, she became one of the most dominant forces in the history of women’s cycling. When Van Moorsel quit the sport in January 2005, she was a six-time Dutch ‘sportswoman of the year’, and had been named the second-best Dutch female athlete of all time (De Grootste Nederlander 2004). Eventually, she would come to agree with the appraisal of Lance Armstrong, journalists, and her husband: her life story did contain a ‘good message’ (Pauw & Witteman 2008). This ‘message’ would become the foundation of Van Moorsel’s post-sport career: that the experiences of this celebrity athlete had the potential to shape the experiences and lifestyle of others.

**Migrating to the field of lifestyle expertise**

In the years surrounding her retirement from cycling, Leontien van Moorsel started to migrate into other social fields, which solidified her celebrity status. After her last race, she
and her husband started a company (‘Leontien Total Sports’) which featured a sport centre and a clothing line. In the years that followed, she would coach her own women’s professional cycling team, organise a yearly leisure cycle ride for women (‘Leontien Ladies Ride’), and expand her work as a public speaker and product endorser. Many of these endeavours, like those of other branded lifestyle experts, were aimed at elevating the former athlete to ‘first-name fame’ (‘Leontien’) (Lewis 2010). At the same time, her comeback story was the subject of a near-constant stream of TV and radio appearances, and was covered extensively in four biographical works published between 2002 and 2008 – three of which were based on interviews with Van Moorsel herself (Steman 2002, De Kort 2003, De Vries 2006, Hurkmans 2008).

What explains Van Moorsel’s continued celebrity after her retirement from cycling in 2005? On the one hand, the financial consequences of Van Moorsel’s post-sport activities provided a strong motivation for both her and a close circle of stakeholders to try to solidify her celebrity status. In her 2008 biography, she explained: ‘Once I stopped cycling, I started earning proper money’ (Hurkmans 2008, p. 48). Van Moorsel’s further celebrity was helped by the fact that the 21st century saw a transnational increase in the public interest in the lives of (female) athletes (Haverkamp 2019). However, according to several journalists there were also specific factors that contributed to her celebrity status: they claimed that both the allure of her comeback story as well as her openness in sharing details about her life were crucial (Vriend 2006, Hurkmans 2008). It may also have helped that portrayals of Van Moorsel aligned with common gendered cultural values: because many commentators in the predominantly white and male sphere of journalism considered her to be physically attractive, she represented a traditional, non-threatening type of femininity (Kane and Lenskyj 1998, Bruce 2016).

Before and after her retirement, observers consistently emphasised the possible emulative effect of Van Moorsel’s life story. TV presenters remarked that she set an ‘excellent example’ to others, and wanted to know what lessons people should take from her story (TV Show 2000, 2004, Max & Martine 2006, De Wereld Draait Door 2007). In a book about celebrities overcoming substantial challenges, one author even suggested that ‘inspiring people is now her work’ (Vriend 2006, p. 33–34).

Van Moorsel herself also seemed intent on influencing people’s way of living. In her 2008 biography, she remarked: ‘I am not a nutrition professional, but being an expert based on my experience, I could easily fill a book about getting in shape.’ Pointing to her own physique, she suggested that what mattered most was getting plenty of exercise: ‘I am living proof that it works’ (Hurkmans 2008, p. 111). Correspondingly, four cookery books, published between 2002 and 2018, advertised Van Moorsel’s way of living (Harms-Aris and Geerets 2002, Geus 2008, Van Moorsel 2012, Schreurs and Van Riele 2018). Inviting the celebrity athlete to give her ‘vision on nutrition’ (Harms-Aris and Geerets 2002, p. 11), the editors of these books used the aura of sport to present their recipes as ‘healthy’. Because they also recount Van Moorsel’s ‘anorexic period’, however, the mention of sport creates an unresolved tension in these books. After all, Van Moorsel’s athletic ambitions had been the reason for her fitness, but were also presented as an important catalyst for her eating disorder. To resolve this ambiguity, the cookery books make use of photos to signal a definitive end to Van Moorsel’s anorexia. A 2012 booklet consisting of lunch recipes featured eleven photos of the former athlete preparing and eating lunch in and around her own home, suggesting she clearly had moved beyond representations of
athleticism (Van Moorsel 2012). Van Moorsel's post-sport life, then, was presented as ordinary: the six-time Olympic medallist now lived like the average – slender and feminine – housewife.

Van Moorsel’s status as the country’s ‘most famous ex-anorexia patient’ also offered the possibility to specifically target others engaged in self-starvation. This appears to have been a personal ambition of the former cyclist: as early as the year 2000, Van Moorsel had been counselling young women in the privacy of her own home (Steman 2002). Eventually, between 2012 and 2018, she would extensively coach adolescents on public TV, both in a six-part series focused on anorexia called To the Bone (‘Tot op het Bot’, 2013), as well as in single episodes of It Gets Better (2012) and The Food Fight (‘Het Voedselgevecht’, 2018). In a radio interview explaining To the Bone’s conception, Van Moorsel described the series as a result of her wish to inform a broader audience, ‘to reach families and show families … ’. Furthermore, she highlighted the relevance of her show by asserting that anorexia and other eating disorders were a ‘growing problem’ in the Netherlands (BNN Today 2013).

This last statement was not entirely justified. Over the past thirty years, the number of diagnoses for ‘anorexia nervosa’ has not grown much in the Netherlands and in other Western countries (Smink et al. 2012, Hoek 2016, Keski-Rahkonen and Mustelin 2016). On the other hand, though, many cases of self-starvation remain undetected by healthcare providers. Plus, many cases still lead to death, which suggests an enduring, problematic lack of efficacy in the psychological treatment of self-starvation – a conclusion also reached by a recent Dutch report (Jansen 2016, K-Eet 2019). Another reason for the belief that anorexia is a growing problem may have been the increased cultural interest in eating disorders. The success of recent TV documentaries on the topic (Emma Wil Leven (‘Emma Wants to Live’, 2016), Gegijzeld door Anorexia (‘Taken Hostage by Anorexia’, 2019), and Louis Theroux: Talking to Anorexia (2019)), alongside the series featuring Leontien van Moorsel, attests to the enduring appeal of popular narratives about anorexia. Their ratings – varying from 325,000 to over 1 million viewers – indicate that the audience for such productions goes beyond adolescents engaged in self-starvation and their relatives.3

In addition to the societal interest in anorexia, Van Moorsel’s personal involvement may have also been encouraging to the producers of To the Bone, It Gets Better and The Food Fight. Her celebrity status and her experience with self-starvation imparted these shows with a degree of legitimacy and an added dramatic element. Furthermore, there is some evidence that when celebrities take up social causes, they gain in popularity by having a personal, long-term connection to the cause (Panis and Van Den Bulck 2012). Therefore, Van Moorsel was ideally positioned to take the role of experience-based expert in a TV show.

Van Moorsel’s stance towards anorexia nervosa

The second part of this article examines the representation of Leontien van Moorsel’s embodied expertise by focusing on three specific elements of her expertise: her stance towards anorexia nervosa, the way in which therapeutic methods taken from her own life are represented, and how, in these shows, she was positioned towards traditional, trained experts. Because of Van Moorsel’s prominent role in To the Bone’s six episodes, the main focus of the analysis will be on this show.
To the Bone aired in the autumn of 2013 to an average of 834,500 viewers per week. Every episode features a different female participant diagnosed with anorexia, who receives moral support and guidance from Leontien van Moorsel. The former athlete also explains their behaviour to presenter Sophie Hilbrand, who never meets the participants. For 50 to 55 minutes, every episode follows a fixed pattern, closely aligning with the genre conventions of makeover TV (Smith 2010). First, Van Moorsel meets the participant and her family, after which they set various short-term goals (e.g. ‘playing hockey again’, ‘going to a restaurant’). Then, in all episodes – which are filmed over the course of one year – moments of success are followed by at least one relapse, with all six stories ending on a positive note. Van Moorsel is essential to the structure of each episode: she checks in on participants, coaches them in achieving their goals, and ‘translates’ their thoughts and emotions to Hilbrand, who plays the role of layperson. In the show’s first episode, the former cyclist can be seen or heard about 35 per cent of the time (19/55 minutes) – a proportion that remains fairly even throughout the series. Naturally, the focus is on the experiences of participants, but Van Moorsel’s story and accompanying life lessons are fundamental to each episode.

In To the Bone, It Gets Better and The Food Fight, Van Moorsel represents the ultimate After-body: she is the physical end-result of a successful ‘battle’ with anorexia. In many interviews regarding her post-eating disorder status, Van Moorsel had used the language of transformation, speaking of having a ‘new body and a new mind’ (Geus 2008, p. 44), and declaring that she was ‘100 per cent healed’ (BNN Today 2012). In an attempt to harness the inspirational power of this transformation, To the Bone similarly reifies anorexia, representing the disorder as external to the self – an entity to defeat. Its first episode introduces Van Moorsel with images of the former cyclist during ‘the lowest point’ in her career. After this segment of the athlete’s period of self-starvation, more recent footage is shown of Van Moorsel eating in a restaurant and laughing with her family. The sequence strongly suggests that the former cyclist’s experiences hold the key to recovering from anorexia. Crucially, these clips get shorter in every episode, until by the fourth episode, Van Moorsel’s Before-body – showing the visible signs of self-starvation – is never shown again.

As an After-body, Van Moorsel forms a visual reminder to the participants she is coaching: change is possible. In an interview about a year before the premiere of To the Bone, she explained:

> [W]ith some young people you just click. And I can see that when I come into the room, then you see a bit of confidence. You see them think … At the moment that you’re in the middle of your eating disorder you think: I will never get better. And when they then see someone who has had it too and is truly enjoying life again, and radiant … yes you do see, um, that they gain some confidence (BNN Today 2012).

Participants frequently concur, speaking of Van Moorsel as a ‘big example of the fact that it is possible’ (BNN Today 2013), and even, at times, of wanting to be ‘just like her’ (Tot op het Bot, 2013, Episode 2). The latter is encouraged by Van Moorsel, who exclaims in It Gets Better (2012): ‘Look at me, I did it too!’. The implication of this assertion is common in celebrity health advice: ‘I look better, I am better’ (Kissling 1995, p. 213). In an episode of To the Bone, Van Moorsel asks the participant: ‘When you look at me, how do you see me?’, resulting in the following exchange:
Participant: ‘Yeah just as, yeah, someone who is well-groomed and who looks good and healthy.’

Leontien van Moorsel: ‘But then really that is something we should strive for!’

Participant: ‘Yeah that’s the goal, really.’ (Tot op het Bot, 2013, Episode 2).

To demonstrate that she is a rational anorexia expert, Van Moorsel not only presents herself as ‘100 per cent healed’, but also explicitly distances herself from her previous experiences. Consequently, the three TV shows suggest that anorexia’s manifestations are both understandable as well as foreign to Van Moorsel. In To the Bone, for instance, Van Moorsel pokes gentle fun at participants for their ‘anorexic’ beliefs, often calling them a ‘dope’ (Dutch: ‘muts’) when they express that they feel ‘fat’ (Tot op het Bot, 2013, Episodes 1, 2, 3, 4). Though Van Moorsel consoles participants by saying that she knows ‘like no other’ how they feel, she assertively distances herself from anorexia when speaking directly to the camera. Her reaction to seeing one of the participants for the first time constitutes a clear example: ‘Well, it scares me every time, but now, now I was truly scared. I . . . phew. She is in a very advanced stage and I really . . . It made me a little nauseous’ (Tot op het Bot, 2013, Episode 2). In their analysis of It Gets Better, Wagemakers and Dhaenens (2015, p. 575) point out that this distancing strategy helps to suggest that the celebrity After-body is ‘more balanced’ than the participants. For the purposes of this article, it is also significant that Van Moorsel’s positioning suggests a tension between ‘experience’ and ‘expert’ that cannot entirely be resolved. Ostensibly, in order to convey that she has gained the ability to dispassionately evaluate the symptoms of anorexia, the former cyclist strikes a tone that closely aligned with conventional morality. Though Van Moorsel bases her expertise on her lived experience, here she distances herself from the participant, choosing to sympathise instead with the internal audience (the family members of participants and presenter Hilbrand) and the majority of the external (home) audience, to whom the logic of persons engaged in self-starvation could seem alien (Brunsdon 2003).

Therapeutic methods and embodied experience

The therapeutic methods employed by Leontien van Moorsel in It Gets Better, To the Bone, and The Food Fight have their basis in her own experiences with self-starvation. However, this relation between Van Moorsel’s life story and the approaches used is often left implicit. From 1997 onwards, Van Moorsel would often repeat her key aphorism to overcoming an eating disorder: ‘A balanced life leads to greater rewards’ (Jij & Ik 1997, Steman 2002, Geus 2008, BNN Today 2012, Tot op het Bot, 2013, Episode 4, Het Voedselgevecht 2018, Schreurs and Van Riele 2018). To help participants (re)gain that balance, she uses several approaches in To the Bone that appear to have been effective in her own recovery. Because taking pride in her looks had been a source of comfort throughout her athletic career, Van Moorsel attempts to boost the confidence of participants in To the Bone by complimenting them on their appearance (Tot op het Bot, 2013, Episode 1, 4). Similarly, the show features several scenes in which Van Moorsel and participants go shopping together. The former cyclist presents buying clothes as having a therapeutic aim, as it helps participants confront their changing bodies. However, Van
Moorsel’s personal attachment to shopping – her ‘only hobby’, according to biographers – is left unsaid (Steman 2002, p. 19, Hurkmans 2008).

Another method used in To the Bone is the ‘moment in the mirror’, an exercise that is common to the makeover genre (Moseley 2000). Here, its goal is to demonstrate to both the participant as well as the home audience the effect anorexia can have on body image (Tot op het Bot, 2013, Episodes 1, 3, 4, 6). It is a method lifted straight from Van Moorsel’s own life, as confirmed by a 2008 interview with her husband Michael Zijlaard:

You don’t want to know how many times I’ve stood in front of the mirror with her and told her to look at herself. “Come on, who do you think you are tricking here? One day you’re with me, the next you want to go back to square one”. There we stood, the two of us. To the point of tears (Hurkmans 2008, p. 101–102).

In 2013, Van Moorsel takes on the role of her husband in To the Bone. While looking in the mirror herself, she assertively tells one participant: ‘How nice would it be if you just, like this [puts hand through her hair], think: “Oh I look good, my hair looks nice today. It’s all good”’. At the end of the episode, Van Moorsel rewards the young woman with a professional photoshoot, to ‘affirm what a beautiful person she is’ (Tot op het Bot, 2013, Episode 4). It is clear, then, that To the Bone employs Van Moorsel’s personal experiences when presenting consumption and taking pride in one’s appearance as tools for empowerment.

To the Bone also draws on the genre conventions of makeover TV in these instants. These conventions accommodate what some would call a ‘postfeminist sensibility’: they incorporate a ‘grammar of individualism’ and an ‘obsessive preoccupation with the body’ in their pursuit of ‘empowering’ women (Genz 2006, Gill 2007, p. 149). Focusing on the individual agency of participants, To the Bone suggests that anorexia is preventing young women from fulfilling their social duties as traditionally feminine, active consumers. In this regard, it is particularly significant that some critical psychologists see anorexic women as being in defiance of the – at times conflicting – responsibilities associated with femininity (Orbach 2005). In focusing on individuals and their social obligations, To the Bone pays little attention to this societal context of anorexia. The effect is that its formula exhibits what Lauren Berlant has called a ‘cruel optimism’: it presents as desirable that which arguably hinders participants in their flourishing (Berlant 2011). In other words: though the pressure to comply with social expectations may partially explain anorexia’s prevalence, it is compliance with such pressures which To the Bone paradoxically presents as the key to participants’ liberation.

Hence, Van Moorsel’s experiences with self-starvation have had a significant impact on the structure of these TV shows, as the application of her personal methods demonstrates. Yet while viewers of It Gets Better, To the Bone and The Food Fight are repeatedly reminded that the former cyclist’s expertise, and therefore her authority, comes from personal experience, Van Moorsel rarely relates her therapeutic approaches to her own life story. There are exceptions: during a dinner scene in To the Bone’s third episode, Van Moorsel practices tough love while telling the participant that she herself used to be on the receiving end of this very direct method (Tot op het Bot, 2013, Episode 3). Similarly, in the show’s first episode, she explains that setting clear goals has helped her through tough times (Tot op het Bot, 2013, Episode 1). But such glimpses into Van Moorsel’s own history with self-starvation are sparse. The ‘moment in the mirror’ method is never presented as
something that was important to Van Moorsel herself; neither are shopping for clothes or beautifying oneself. In instances where Van Moorsel is trying to explain the behaviour of participants – when one adolescent girl is purposefully trying to hurt the people she loves most, or when a participant engaged in endurance sport is eating too little – she is also reluctant to relate them to her personal experiences (Tot op het Bot, 2013, Episodes 2, 6).

Regardless, the focus on one specific celebrity has clear consequences for the content of the shows. The centrality of Van Moorsel’s life story and the extent of her expertise appear to have influenced the selection of participants and, in a more general sense, the story told about eating disorders. Notably, both the shows as well as most representations of Van Moorsel’s life story focus on the physical consequences of self-starvation, offering little consideration of its causes and the entire psychological profile of its subjects – an approach that also reflects, in part, contemporary psychotherapeutic practice (American Psychiatric Association 2013, K-Eet 2019). Another way in which Van Moorsel’s stories about her experiences appear to have influenced the shows, is their presentation of the disorder as a problem demanding the intensive involvement of family members. Presumably, such editorial choices were not just governed by Van Moorsel’s experiences and conventional psychiatric wisdom, but also by genre conventions: focusing on the causes of self-starvation complicates storylines, whereas the social interaction between participants and family members give both To the Bone and It Gets Better an emotional charge. It seems plausible that the goals of the shows’ producers and those of Van Moorsel ran parallel. The former cyclist, ultimately, was able to present herself as an expert based on her experience, without being forced to disclose too much about her personal life, while the editors could focus on Van Moorsel – using her celebrity to draw viewers – without derailing the storyline with extensive flashbacks to her athletic career.

**Positioning towards healthcare professionals**

The final aspect of Leontien van Moorsel’s representation as an expert on lifestyle and, more specifically, anorexia that will be discussed here, is the way she was positioned in relation to trained nutritionists and psychologists. In the early stages of her career, representations of her expertise focused solely on Van Moorsel. Eventually, they changed, making space for the presentation of professionals as valuable colleagues of the former cyclist. As recounted, in her first capacity as expert Van Moorsel received full credit: her 1991 biography does mention her personal dietician, but its comprehensive advice on nutrition is attributed to Van Moorsel. Though the author’s intention may have been to sustain the book’s first-person singular form, the effect of this choice is that it presents Van Moorsel as a definitive source on (sport) nutrition.

In later years, given the opportunity Van Moorsel would occasionally point towards official sources of information: in a 1997 radio interview, she explained how people should eat foods from ‘every meal disk’ – referring to the model of the Dutch Nutrition Education Bureau (Langs de Lijn 1997). In more recent TV shows, her positioning towards professional authorities appeared to have changed permanently. Though It Gets Better, To the Bone and The Food Fight all present the former cyclist as an important expert on anorexia, the shows unquestionably acknowledge – and adhere to – the expertise of trained professionals in nutrition and psychotherapy. In fact, both It Gets Better and To the Bone affirm the importance of professional psychological help by showing parts of participants’
sessions with their therapist. In the second episode of To the Bone, Van Moorsel is very clear about what she sees as the limits of her expertise:

I want to share my experience, and to keep showing [the participant] … that, um, life without an eating disorder, that then you actually have a good life. But I can’t do this alone. And I don’t feel confident doing this alone. Yes, we need real professionals here (Tot op het Bot, 2013, Episode 2).

In treating the help of ‘real’ professionals as a welcome addition instead of a threat, Van Moorsel carves out an important but limited role for her own embodied expertise. In the context of To the Bone, which devoted much time to the ideas and the suggestions of the former cyclist and her ‘24/7’ availability to participants, this invitation resembles a gesture of generosity – despite its humble wording. From a position of control, the celebrity athlete offers air time to trained psychologists. For both Van Moorsel and the show’s editors, the participation of these professionals has the welcome effect of legitimising the ex-cyclist’s claim of expertise. However, it also reflects a broader practice: Dutch healthcare professionals often make use of experience-based experts when treating self-starvation (Meije et al. 2016).

Van Moorsel’s commitment to working with trained professionals was not limited to these TV shows. Both To the Bone and The Food Fight introduce viewers to the Leontien Foundation, a charity funded by gifts from individuals and commercial parties. In 2015, this foundation opened the Leontien house, a renovated farmhouse offering walk-in consultations for people with eating disorders (see Figure 3). The charity still exists today, aiming to ‘motivate, coach and mentor’ people with an eating disorder (Het Leontienhuis 2019). According to Van Moorsel, who recently claimed that the house was one of her proudest achievements, its grand opening had meant the fulfilment of a long-standing wish (Meer Dan Goud 2019). As explained in the TV shows, the Leontien house offers ‘inspiration’ days, with Van Moorsel showing footage from the highs and lows of her cycling career. According to the house’s website, on a regular week a team of 120 volunteers use their expertise based on experience to counsel visitors, with the occasional help of a trained psychologist.

Hence, both Van Moorsel’s TV shows as well as her charity work underscores the importance of professional care for people with an eating disorder. Ultimately, however, both champion the experience-based expert. In fact, at the end of two episodes of To the Bone, Van Moorsel invites the participant to join the Leontien house’s team of volunteers (Tot op het Bot, 2013, Episode 4, 6). Both accept the opportunity instantly, seemingly thankful for the chance to become an experience-based expert. By offering them the possibility to become role models to others, To the Bone grants the two adolescent girls the prospect of transformation. According to the show’s logic, they can now achieve the ultimate goal for a person with anorexia: the status of After-body.

Conclusion

Over the course of her career in cycling, Leontien van Moorsel became a celebrity athlete. After an initial, cautious attempt at lifestyle advice, she faced a highly-publicised ‘anorexic period’, causing a change in representations of the cyclist as an experience-based expert. On the one hand, the aura of sport remained critical in giving Van Moorsel’s advice on nutrition and exercise – detailed in a considerable amount of (cookery) books and TV and
radio shows – a degree of legitimacy. Yet at the same time, following her ‘anorexic period’, representations of Van Moorsel often contained a contradictory message: engaging in competitive sport could, in fact, be incompatible with a healthy lifestyle. Because many of these representations never resolved this tension, post-anorexia portrayals of the cyclist show the possible ambiguities in presenting celebrity athletes as experts on healthy living. Van Moorsel’s ‘unhealthy’ and ‘healthy’ narratives could coexist while hardly influencing each other. This flexible use of her life story illustrates the distinct authority granted to celebrity athletes who migrate to the field of lifestyle expertise.

Part of the authority of celebrity athletes stems from the fact that they are embodied experts: their physical appearance is presented as a sign of health. This is certainly corroborated by Van Moorsel’s case, whose consistent representation as an After-body suggests that her appearance is used as a marker of a (rediscovered) healthy lifestyle. However, the former athlete’s life story also demonstrates that this representation as an After-body has specific effects on the conceptualisation of the experience-based expert. On the one hand, Van Moorsel’s personal experience with anorexia functioned as the basis for positioning her alongside trained professionals. But at the same time, the TV shows in which she appeared in the 2010s hint at a tension between ‘experience’ and ‘expert’. It Gets Better, To the Bone, and The Food Fight contain few references to Van Moorsel’s personal experiences and methods for coping with anorexia. Such editorial choices were in all likelihood partially shaped by genre conventions. But the way in which the former cyclist actively distances herself from her period of disordered eating also suggests that in this case, representing a dispassionate expert demands the suppression of (parts of) the celebrity athlete’s life story.

Ultimately, the case of Van Moorsel demonstrates the particular value of analysing the role of athletes as celebrity experts, as it highlights the relevance of celebrities’ original social field. The former cyclist’s story illustrates the unique possibilities the aura of sport has offered (and continues to offer) athletes in regard to their celebrification and their migration to lifestyle advice. At the same time, focusing on athletes can also help to illustrate that this migration is complex, and that the representation of celebrities’ embodied expertise is, at times, decidedly ambiguous.

Notes

1. Though she took the name ‘Zijlaard-van Moorsel’ after her marriage in 1995, Van Moorsel is still referred to by most media – like the website of her own foundation – by her maiden name. See: https://www.leontienhuis.nl/nieuws/i/33-actueel/195-ceo-dante6-fietst-amstel-gold-race-voor-leontienhuis (last Checked: 5 February 2020).
2. The metadata in the Dutch public radio and TV database at the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision [‘Beeld en Geluid’] is not perfect. However, in the vast majority of ‘hits’ for the search string ‘leonieen moorsel’, Van Moorsel appears in person in the given episode. https://zoeken.beeldengeluid.nl (Checked: 13 September 2019).
3. Statistics from the Dutch Foundation for Ratings Research (SKO), obtained through email correspondence with broadcasting organisations.
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