

Why some amateur athletes are giving up on smartwatches

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Measuring the number of steps you take every day; tracking your heart

rate, your pace or average ascent while jogging; memorizing the total distance you cycle over the course of a year and sharing it with an online community. These practices have become commonplace in the world of sports, even for amateurs.

This digitization of physical activity is unfolding against the backdrop of a global proliferation of self-quantification tools used to measure productivity at work, track [calorie intake](#), [blood sugar levels](#) and weight, monitor [sleep regulation](#) and more.

The market for these tools in [sports activities](#), alone, is both [lucrative and competitive](#). As Finnish researchers [Pekka Mertala and Lauri Palsa](#) report, the digital sports technology business is estimated to be worth \$12 billion a year, with more than 10,000 portable digital devices for running, alone. Some 90 percent of amateur runners now use a smartwatch or mobile application.

Tracking your body with numbers is associated with a series of [promises](#) to become more active, happy and healthy, and with the concept of empowerment. Because of its objectivity and transparency (compared with the approximate nature of bodily sensations), this knowledge is considered to be the foundation of a [personal self-optimization project](#).

These embedded devices are also used for motivational support, to encourage regularity and assiduity and to put an end to lifestyle habits that are deemed unhealthy. Becoming part of a community of exercisers can also increase motivation by interweaving systems of mutual encouragement and competition.

Yet we are currently seeing a slowdown in this market linked to a [massive phenomenon of either discontinuing the use of digital devices](#) or, at the very least, using them for short periods.

The discontinuation of connected devices

First of all, we should recall that the adoption of connected devices for sports is [not evenly distributed across the population](#). It is over-represented among men who are urban, highly educated, socially advantaged and physically active. In addition, the 30-39 age group is the most equipped with [smart bracelets and smartwatches](#).

While certain population groups have less access to these embedded technologies, others who have acquired them will stop using them, usually after a limited period of use. [The mechanisms that lead to this are extremely varied](#), and include logistical overload, the time-consuming dimension of transferring and interpreting data, a lack of accuracy and reliability in [data collection](#), and difficulty in interpreting and using data, among others.

We believe that the rejection of these devices may be the result of a [deterioration in the quality of the experience of a sport](#) when using them. For some participants, putting numbers on an activity actually [leads them to experience it more as forced labor than as free, self-determined leisure](#).

Intrinsic motivation (the pleasure of running for its own sake) then tends to be supplanted by extrinsic motivation (rewards, comparisons, mutual monitoring). The context of a constant call to excel can lead to an anticipated fear of failure, as well as a feeling of shame and guilt in the event of underperformance. Cognitive overload and distracted attention can also lead to a [disconnect from the here-and-now of one's activity and the bodily sensations related to it](#).

Looking at it differently, the withdrawal of the smartwatch could be an act of resistance with strong political, philosophical or even spiritual significance. This may be a desire to break away from what is perceived

as a generalized surveillance system, to emancipate oneself from the pressure of sports social networks, to reject a materialistic race to over equip or even to [put the emphasis back on bodily sensations in sports training](#).

The attitude of rejection can be linked to [the emergence of minimalist values](#) such as sobriety, voluntary simplicity and frugality. It's a question of [rediscovering a form of lost freedom](#), of lightness, or even of [resonance](#).

The adherence to quantification tools

Not all amateur runners who have started using a digital self-quantification tool have stopped using it. While dropping the tools is a significant and explainable phenomenon, the reasons for sticking to them must also be considered. What are the conditions that enable amateur runners to continue practicing and quantifying their performance numerically while deriving pleasure and well-being from the activity?

We showed that [the amateur runners who persevered in using digital tools were the ones who had developed a high level of expertise in self-quantification](#). More specifically, they managed to cobble together and incorporate a series of tactics, or even ["everyday tricks,"](#) to use Michel de Certeau's expression, which enabled them to interact with their digital device without altering the quality of their sporting experience.

A first approach in this is to differentiate and alternate the uses of the smartwatch over time. To begin with, they modulate the intensity and types of usage of the tool to adapt to changing life conditions (for example, by suspending the goal to exceed performance levels during a year when family life is demanding). They also learn to let go of certain areas of quantification (sleep, for example) in order to focus their efforts exclusively on running.

When it comes to the training cycle, these runners [differentiate their modes of interaction with the tool](#) (frequency of consulting the tool, nature of the data collected) according to the type of training session they are engaged in. For example, they reserve intensive use of the smartwatch for interval training sessions but only consult it occasionally during recovery runs, marathon pace workouts or technical sessions. Finally, during a given running session, the runners target certain key moments when they consult their watch. Others never look at the watch during their run but only afterwards, or the other way around.

A second tactic consists of agreeing to adjust, revise or even abandon goals along the way, depending on a runner's perceived state of fitness and/or environmental conditions. [This flexibility](#) reflects the development of a relationship of self-care and benevolence towards oneself.

Finally, a third everyday tactic leads amateur runners to take systematic care to put into context what they consider to be counter-performances. Far from considering the figures only in their raw form, they use them to understand the mechanisms underlying the process of producing counter-performance (bad night, professional stress, etc.).

The nature of the attachment to the device

We wanted to gain a better understanding of the [connection runners formed with their digital tracking device](#). To do this, we asked them to take it off for a single running session, while describing in real time, using a Dictaphone, how they felt. This change, which was out of the ordinary for most of them, turned out to be particularly destabilizing and revealed how [deeply incorporated their use of, and attachment to the tool was](#).

All the subjects we studied initially admitted to being very apprehensive

about the idea of running without their watch. They tried to deal with it in different ways: by postponing the outing; by running on a course that they had just completed with the watch, so as to use numerical reference points; by using the Dictaphone to estimate the duration and pace of the run; and, finally, by hiding a watch in a backpack to be able to record the amount of running they had done.

Most of the participants then felt a motivational void caused by the absence of the watch, which, when worn, functioned as an incentive to perform and a way to challenge themselves. They felt that the session without the watch was longer, harder, more painful and even pointless: why push yourself if you don't know the exact result and it's neither recorded nor stored?

The runners also noted that the simple fact of wearing the watch prompted them to over-focus attention on numbers to the detriment of their running technique, the external environment or their bodily sensations.

The absence of the watch was also seen by some as physically destabilizing. Deprived of their tool, the runners felt naked, unbalanced and asymmetrical and more often than not, they were unable to inhibit the reflex gesture of consulting it—proof that the object and movement associated with using it had been assimilated into the runner's bodily habits. Lastly, some of them found it extremely difficult to regulate their running and reliably estimate common variables such as length, distance, speed and [heart rate](#).

Ultimately, there's nothing spontaneous, magical or automatic about interacting with your quantification device in a functional way. It has to be learned and built patiently. [Physical and sports education in schools must adopt a training role in this field](#), as digitalization is becoming unavoidable in the [world of sports](#).

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