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SHIPWRECK IN THE ROWING COMMUNITY IN 1902: REFLECTIONS ON LIFE AND DEATH IN SPORT

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ABSTRACT

People usually start thinking about death when something tragic happens, including in the sport context. At the beginning of 20th century, in South Brazil, four rowers died while they practiced their sport, coming back from an excursion to an island near to Porto Alegre, the capital city of Rio Grande do Sul, where they lived. Following the tragedy, the newspapers published details, both of the tragedy itself, and the ensuing commotion of society, with reflections about life, its fragility and death. This sporting tragedy is a suitable example for trying to understand the way we think about death in sport, given its vast newspaper coverage and the effort to remember the event throughout the 20th century. The interpretation of newspaper sources and reflections on the event will also be considered through the lens of the philosophy of existence of Martin Heidegger. The sources revealed that the shipwreck tragedy made it possible for people to realize that being mortal affects us existentially – that we can never return back to this moment (it is fleeting, it is here and then gone), that we have to make choices that we cannot take back, and that we ourselves are finite beings.

Keywords: sport; history; philosophy of existence; Heidegger; death; rowing; swimming

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INTRODUCTION

Sport is often considered to be a practice which helps to highlight human activity, striving to be better, and as such it celebrates life and promotes health. It is associated with healthy, strong and enthusiastic people, full of life. However, when an athlete dies during a sport event or sport training, such a tragedy may change the way we see the whole practice. This may cause various reactions, and people may start thinking about life, dying and death in relation to their own lives. Consider the case of Ayrton Senna in Formula 1 in 1994, who died after an accident during a competition in the San Marino

Grand Prix in Ímola (Italy), an event that touched people around the world. For the purpose of this article, we take a case in the year 1902, after the sinking of seven rowers of the second rowing club founded in Porto Alegre, the state capital of Rio Grande do Sul, in southern Brazil. Given its vast newspaper coverage and effort to remember the event throughout the 20th century, this event is especially suitable to discuss the topic of death in sport.

According to Silva (2011), a concern for acquiring healthy habits, both physical and moral, related to sports practice, began to take hold of the imagination of Porto Alegre in the beginning of 20th century. This movement had a special relation with rowing, as can be seen in the birthday celebration speech of a rowing club in 1923, when Castello (1923, p. 88) highlighted the benefits of rowing, stating that the strokes develop “our forces, active respiration and movement, develop the volume of the lungs and chest, increase our force and our resistance” and also recorded the transformation of “anaemic teenagers, lymphatic and rickety” (ibid., p. 88) into healthy young men through sports practice.

Rowing was institutionalized in Rio Grande do Sul in the late 19th century. At that time, there was already a Gymnastics Society (currently called SOGIPA), which initially fostered gymnastic activity, and both societies fostered body/sports practices that reproduced representations of German Brazilian cultural identities. The first rowing clubs were founded for German Brazilians, beginning with *Ruder Club Porto Alegre*, in 1888, followed by *Ruder Verein Germania* in 1892. The clubs’ language of internal communication was German, forcing anyone who wanted to enter that environment to master the language. The clubs’ constitutions were an expression of the Porto Alegre context of that period, when there were many immigrants in the city, with different origins, but mainly from Germany and Portugal (Silva, 2011).

Motivated by their common German Brazilian fellowship, and further to promote rowing in the city, the two clubs supported each other in increasing the impact of the rowing associations in Porto Alegre. They co-operated in the foundation of an entity responsible for the organization of regattas, the Regatta Committee, established in 1894. This committee is considered the first sports federation of Brazil (Hofmeister, 1979; Licht, 2013), and its foundation occurred because of the desire of the German Brazilians, the *Ruder Club Porto Alegre* and *Ruder Verein Germania*, to organize the first official race in the city. This collaboration between the two clubs was limited to the scope of sports competitions, sporadically promoted races, individual challenges, and recreational excursions.

However, something unexpected and tragic happened in 1902. Seven young rowers were surprised by a storm while returning to Porto Alegre after a trip to a remote island about 12 kilometres from the capital, and their two boats sank. Three rowers survived and four young men died. In the aftermath, there were many newspaper reports, and comments containing reflections about dying, death and life, as well as the perils of sport.

This study seeks to understand the way in which people think about death in relation to sport, using this sporting tragedy as an example. We will look at death as expounded by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, in relation to the newspaper reports, magazines and books covering the event.

Death in the Philosophy of Existence

In his early work, Heidegger (1978, 2007) took on the project of trying to describe human existence (*Dasein*) on the basis of first-person experiencing, in his project called ‘fundamental ontology’ that he worked on in the 1920s. Death is an important phenomenon in his description of human existence: an essential aspect of human life is that it is mortal. Since we often see death as something negative that we try to avoid in life (and even to avoid thinking about), Heidegger’s philosophy helps us to see death as a meaningful and important phenomenon that is inseparable from life.

So, human existence is *always* finite, and this is an important ontological aspect of it – that is to say, mortality, and the omnipresence of the possibility of death, are inescapable facts for all of us, as human beings. Human life is precarious – any one of us can be struck down by disease, or by a car, or by the weather, in the next moment. We may speak about statistics on expectancy of life in different cultures, but in each individual case, we cannot be sure about our own length of life. However, often we do not live according to this fact. Rather, we most often try to avoid it, focussing on the joys and difficulties that occur in our lives. Of course, we ‘know’ we are going to die, but the way we live often does not reflect this. This is what Heidegger calls ‘inauthentic existence’, which stems from the phenomenon of ‘falling’ (*Verfallen*) describing our tendency to disperse ourselves in events that are happening and things around us, without much awareness of this fact of existence (e.g. Heidegger, 1978, p. 295). In sport, which offers a lot of interesting moments while striving towards a pre-given end, in trying to be better than an opponent, ‘falling’ is difficult to avoid. Also, sports are made to be safe educational activities through which we improve our lives, not lose them. So we do not expect death in sport – and when it happens it is a shocking tragedy. But these tragedies do happen, even in sport. That is why an explanation of Heidegger’s understanding of death can enrich sport, so that participants are not naïve and inauthentic, but human beings, conscious of their humanity. As Heidegger says: “Death in this way of being gives to life a kind of sight, and constantly leads it before its ownmost present and past, a past that is growing within life itself and comes toward life from behind it” (Heidegger, 2007, p. 163). Through the phenomenon of death we can see the specific temporality of *Dasein*.

While describing the mode of existence of *Dasein*, Heidegger (1978, § 50 nn.) introduces the notion of ‘Being-towards-death’, which clarifies this fact of existence for us. ‘Being-towards-death’ does not mean that now we are alive and this is ended by death (dualism of life and death), but that in every moment of our lives, we are finite – and this has two aspects: (1) we can never return back to this moment (now); it is fleeting, it is here and then gone, we have to make choices that we cannot take back; (2) we know (if we dare to think about it) that we are going to die. And this can come any time, no matter how young or old we are. Heidegger says: “As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die” (1978, p. 289).

The rowers’ deaths may help each of us to see our being as finite, not knowing how long we are going to be here, as described in the words ‘*memento mori*’. From this point of view, we could see our recurring return to this accident as remembrance ceremonies, as a celebration of life – of human existence that wants to see itself as it really is – as mortal. The death of these four young men can remind us of our vulnerability, not just

in the face of the elements, but also in ordinary daily life and in sport. We do not know when we are going to die, and so we should think a little about what is meaningful for us to do – what are our priorities. This understanding can help us to live, no matter how long we live, more authentically (according to Heidegger’s account), i.e. according to our humanity.

In this study, we interpreted notes from different newspapers, magazines and books. Many newspapers and magazines published notes about the rowers’ deaths, in Porto Alegre and in Rio de Janeiro, and in different periods. In the year, of the tragedy, the newspapers *O Independente* (Naufragos, 24/05/1902; Naufrágio, 24/05/1902) and *Jornal do Brasil* (O Reporter, 16/05/1902; Naufrágio, 07/06/1902) reported the news, as well as the magazines *Sport Nautico* (Vascaína, 01/06/1902) and *Revista da Semana* (Nixe-Walkure, 01/06/1902). Years after, the event was recalled by other publications, such as the newspaper *A Federação* (Ocorreu, 12/05/1914), the magazine *O Biguá* (Aniversário, 3/05/1930), and the book *Revivendo o Passado* (Fortini, 1953), and it is referred to till nowadays (e.g. Silva, 2011, 2015).

History of the first rowing tragedy in Porto Alegre

The rowing excursions organized by *Ruder Verein Germania* to places around Porto Alegre started in 1894. Destinations included Pedras Brancas, São Leopoldo, Aldeia dos Anjos, São Jerônimo, São Sebastião do Caí and São João de Montenegro. According to Litch (2001), the club organized its first excursions to Pedras Brancas Island in 1894. Pedras Brancas Island is located in Pedras Brancas city – which nowadays is Guaíba city, about 12 kilometres from Porto Alegre – and around the island were many large rocks. The excursions became frequent events organized by *Ruder Verein Germania* and *Ruder Club Porto Alegre*.

In 1896, both clubs made an excursion to the farm Quinca Peixoto, with some members going by packet-boat, and other by gigs and small boats (Rowing, 21/10/1896). However, according the newspaper *Correio do Povo* (Rowing, 23/10/1896), only *Ruder Verein Germania* kept to the programme. This kind of programme was more common among *Ruder Verein Germania* members than *Ruder Club Porto Alegre*. With the invention by the Regattas Committee in 1898 of the bigger annual competition *Wanderpreiss*, regattas within clubs and long excursions were incentivised.

The *Ruder Verein Germania* won the third *Wanderpreiss* in 1900, with the gig Freya and its oarsmen Hans Goeden, Hans Zeller, Julio Deppermann, and Whalter H. Deppermann, with Franz Protzen as cox. Three of these rowers participated in an excursion to Pedras Brancas Island on 11th May, 1902. Sadly, this was the excursion that ended with a shipwreck tragedy, which was reported in all the newspapers (Silva, 2015).

On May 11, 1902, there was a party in praise of the Holy Spirit and the Lady of the Conception in Pedras Brancas Island, just like every year, and *Ruder Verein Germania* organized an excursion to the party with two gigs for seven rowers and “many amateur races had taken place to carry there in several vessels members of the nautical centers of the city” (Vascaína, 01/06/1902, p. 4). For that purpose, on Sunday morning, the Nixe and Walkure gigs set sail from the *Ruder Verein Germania* boathouse. The first was manned by Hans Zeller and Hans Goeden and the other by Gustavo Bier Son, Luiz Rothfuchs,

Luiz Laurent, Ricardo Preussler and Whalter Deppermann, the latter being the cox (Vascaína, 01/06/1902). According to Licht (2001), Nixe was one of the first two gigs bought by *Ruder Verein Germania*, in 1894.

The participation of rowing clubs in this kind of event was common in Porto Alegre. Even before the institutionalization of rowing clubs, since 1877, longboats and dugouts had participated in the party to celebrate Our Lady of the Seafarers, the traditional major annual event to the Catholic patron saint of Porto Alegre (Licht, 2013). However, differently from the longboats and dugouts, the gigs are boats specifically designed to practice sport, so they are lighter and more fragile boats, so as to be faster, but also easier to sink or to break up.

When the rowers were returning from their trip to Pedras Brancas, in the late afternoon, they were surprised by a heavy storm with a strong wind that caused the gigs to sink. Three of the seven young men were saved because they swam many kilometres to the coast – “Luiz Rothfuchs Jr., Gustavo Bier Jr., and Whalter H. Deppermann were saved by swimming to the Ilha das Pombas” (Licht, 2001, p. 3). They were considered skilled swimmers, and tried to save their lives when they saw the waterlogged boats, breaking away from the Walkure and swimming toward Pedras Brancas (Vascaína, 01/06/1902). Nixe, the smaller gig, filled with water, as a result of wind and strong current, and turned over. At this time, the crew sought out the Walkure, getting closer to it to provide relief. However, the Walkure also soon filled with water and capsized. At this time, the cox called to everyone to abandon ship and to fall into the water, which they did, all of the crew clinging to the Walkure, striving to approach land.

When the magazine *Sport Nautico* (Vascaína, 01/06/1902) described the event, they said that the skilled swimmers did this in order to give relief to their partners, but of course we only have the testimonials of the survivors. It might have been considered an heroic act, but the human being is also motivated to save his own life, as well as helping another. These young men did what they could do – or could not do – to survive. We might infer that those who decided to swim showed a certain courage or fortitude (indeed, these terrible circumstances call forth such attributes). But, then, these four might have had more confidence in their swimming abilities, so we should not infer that those remaining with the wrecked boats lacked fortitude or courage – only that they died an awful death by drowning.

However, four rowers were not able to withstand the waves caused by the strong wind and heavy rain, and remained holding on to the fragile shipwrecked gigs: Hans Zeller (24 years), John Goeden (25 years), Ricardo Preussler (20 years) and Luiz Cristiano Laurent (17 years) (Licht, 2001; Os Naufragos, 24/05/1902; Naufrágio, 24/05/1902; Um Naufrágio, 12/05/1914; Aniversário, 03/05/1930; Fortini, 1953). Hans Zeller was 24 and was born in Germany, where he had a mother and relatives. He worked in the printing shop Reinhardt, in Porto Alegre. Luiz Laurent, who was the son of Professor Laurent, well known and esteemed in Porto Alegre, was 17 years old and, since born and raised in that city, found himself employed in the family business of Carlos Naschold. Preussler was 20, was born in Porto Alegre, son of Mr. Anthony Preussler, brother-in-law of Francisco Antonio Preussler and brother-in-law of Mr. Alberto Fehlauer, in whose musical establishment, on Andradas street of that city, he had already been some years as an employee (Nixe-Walkure, 01/06/1902).

The *Ruder Verein Germania*, after learning about the tragedy, sought to provide all possible help in hopes of finding the rowers. With empathy, and sharing the pain, *Ruder Club Porto Alegre* participated in the search for those missing (Naufragos, 24/05/1902), and was complimented by the newspaper *O Independente* (Naufragos, 24/05/1902). This tragedy touched the people in Porto Alegre city and the Brazilian rowing community, and newspapers from the Rio Grande do Sul capital and Rio de Janeiro followed the course of events, reported developments and provided space for those affected to express the feelings that were shared by so much of the population.

To the *Ruder Verein Germania*, as well as to the families of the young deceased, the newspapers expressed empathy for the pain of death, especially such unexpected deaths as these. In its tribute, *O Independente* said that it was “moved by such misfortune, and offers its deepest condolences” (Naufragos, 24/05/1902, p. 3). Furthermore, photos of the castaways were printed on the front page, “now serving a duty to print, in their honour, portraits of the shipwrecked unfortunates, bravely killed when fighting with the turbulent waters of our beautiful Guahyba” (Naufragos, 24/05/1902, p. 3). The news was also reported in Rio de Janeiro and the newspaper there made a tribute. *Sport Nautico*, a supplement of *Revista da Semana*, wrote “who could not be indifferent to the painful blow that has just damaged the racing societies here and in Porto Alegre, together with demonstrations provided to the memory of the dead ones to honour your grief?” (Vascaína, 1/06/1902, p. 4).

In the same way, the *Ruder Club Porto Alegre* helped in the search for the shipwrecked gigs and the rowers, in generously joining its *Germania* sister club, but soon the news came that it was too late for the rescue mission to be rewarded with happy success (Naufragos, 24/05/1902). *Ruder Club Porto Alegre* and *Ruder Verein Germania* were the only two rowing clubs in Porto Alegre, and both began with German Brazilian members, and so it is understandable that those socialized into German culture could identify with each other, and show solidarity.

In that period, Porto Alegre had about 73,674 inhabitants (Pimentel, 1945), a small city compared with nowadays, when there are about 1.5m inhabitants (IBGE, 2015). The rowers concerned worked in commerce in the city centre, and one newspaper source noted the “beautiful characters, all employees in our commerce, where they enjoyed the fruits of their daily work and knew how to sympathize with the honour and kindness of others” (Naufrágio, 24/05/1902, p. 3). So many people knew them, which enhanced the tragedy and shocked the inhabitants: “The longing of friends, the bleeding hearts of the fathers, covered in mourning, and Porto Alegre society deeply moved by this mournful event” (Naufrágio, 24/05/1902, p. 3). But now, their lives ended, they will have no more experiences, and we can have no more experiences of their actions, so they will always be remembered as of youthful good character, because they did not have time to live to an older age.

The first news about the matter came from Rothfuchs, who returned to Porto Alegre by ship. He swam 1 hour and 40 minutes to Pedras Brancas. The other survivors spent the night in a place covered with weeds (Vascaína, 01/06/1902). The survivors became heroes in the newspaper reports. A hero is a person who is admired for his courage, outstanding achievements or noble qualities, so for the newspapers, these young men were not merely survivors, but heroes, because they faced a very difficult challenge and had the courage and strength to survive.

Some days later, the four bodies were found – Goeden and Preussler in Pedras Brancas, Zeller close to the Asylo, and Laurent in Christal beach (Naufrágio, 24/05/1902), but the newspapers waited until the last body was found to publish the news, twelve days after the shipwreck. According to the newspapers, on the Monday after the tragedy, at 11am, the first body found was Goeden's. The body looked as if it was at rest on the land, in a sleeping position, which might suggest that he arrived on land alive, but could not endure. His body was in a state of putrefaction and his shirt was ruptured (Naufrágio, 24/03/1902; Vascaína, 01/06/1902). The gigs were found nearby (Vascaína, 01/06/1902).

Sleep and death can be compared – in both the eyes are closed and the body is motionless. Nevertheless, in sleep, the person will wake and come back to life, so there is still the hope to get a chance to say a proper goodbye. However, when death is confirmed, we feel as though “they were ‘snatched’ from us. We had no time to say goodbye – it was so sudden and unexpected.” These were the words of Dr. Wallau, who examined Goeden's body and registered his death (Vascaína, 01/06/1902).

Of course, if we live our lives avoiding the acceptance of death, then death can come unexpectedly for us – but this happens because we were not aware of our humanity, which includes finiteness. This attitude shows our misunderstanding of death as being a part of our lives – as if we expected it to come announced, giving us time to deal with it, to express our farewells. Unlike this common view, Heidegger highlights a more realistic understanding of death, i.e. the fact of life that death can come any time. A tragedy of the death of the four young rowers can remind us of our finiteness. If we take the understanding of our finiteness seriously, our attitude will change – our lives will reflect the certainty as well as unexpectedness of death in our choices, and thus we will be better prepared for the possibility. Heidegger (1997, § 53) describes death as our possibility – a possibility of being towards death, because it is up to each of us to choose this possibility. If not, we live in the avoidance of death.

The other bodies of the rowers were found in the following days, but in an advanced state of decomposition and near the water line. The leadership of the *Ruder Verein Germania* purchased a tomb for the burial of their four rowers in the Evangelical Cemetery (Naufrágio, 24/03/1902; Licht, 2002), which is connected to German Lutheran immigrants, who were, according to Gertz (2001), the most articulate Protestant group to enter Brazil and firmly to establish itself (since 1819, especially after 1824). On 17th February 1856, they founded their Evangelical Community. In the book *Grande Catecismo* (1529), one of the major Lutheran texts, Martin Luther prays to the Father in Heaven, when at the time of death, he brings the people close to him; believing that there is life after death, and disseminating this idea among Lutherans. In the cemetery there were many people from the German community, offering “statements of regret from the honorable and industrious German colony of residents” (Naufrágio, 24/03/1902, p. 3). Despite bad weather during the week after the accident, the burial of the victims occurred on successive days, as many people attended (Naufrágio, 24/03/1902) to pay tribute, to pray or just to watch. Subsequently, porcelain pictures were placed on the tombstone, in addition to the club shield and the messages of yearning on each tomb (Licht, 2002), to perpetuate the memory of the rowers and “to honour the memory of the unfortunate shipwrecked, burying them honourably” (Naufrágio, 24/03/1902, p. 3).

Heidegger's view of death is quite different from the one of Evangelical community. When Heidegger (1997, §49) talks about death, he talks about it in the context of life (human existence) and is not concerned with the question of life after death:

“[Our] analysis of death remains purely ‘this-worldly’ in so far as it interprets that phenomenon merely in the way in which it *enters into* any particular Dasein as a possibility of its Being. Only when death is conceived in its full ontological essence can we have any methodological assurance in even *asking what may be after death*; only then can we do so with meaning and justification. Whether such a question is a possible *theoretical* question at all will not be decided here. The this-worldly ontological interpretation of death takes precedence over any ontical other-worldly speculation” (Heidegger, 1978, p. 292).

So, for Heidegger, it is first necessary to understand death as a part of our lives (Being-towards-death), since we are humans existing in the world, and any interpretations of what may be after this comes next. When we start thinking about life after death before thinking about finitude of our lives, it may rather draw us away from the phenomenon of death and our acceptance of mortality.

Temptation towards idealization: sport, death and dying in news reports

In the news reports, we become aware of the human tendency to idealize the dead, especially the young dead, of whom we have such hopes and expectations for the future. (We say: ‘Don’t speak ill of the dead.’) But we should beware of this temptation. Just because they died in this shocking way, we should not assume that they were good men, or heroes – for many cowards and villains have also died at sea.

This is not, of course, to besmirch the memory of these young men, of whom many were willing to speak highly – only to suggest that their demise is insufficient evidence of their virtue. Such idealization reaches the sphere of society, when the reporter E. da Gama romanticizes: “The Porto Alegre society, deeply moved by this mournful event, I see deprived of the honest and fruitful collaboration of these delicate young men who were their virtues, their true mainstays” (Gama, 24/05/1902, p. 3). The reports evidence a process of idealization and heroization in death which, although entirely understandable, indicates again our own incomprehension of death, and fear of dying.

And when we look at death as the opposite of life, it does indeed look like something alarming and frightening: “Unfortunate young men – full of life and happy when they left their families for this tragedy that it was fun to participate in, without thinking for a moment that this was the last time that their family would see them” (Gama, 24/05/1902, p. 3). Sometimes, we call the idea that everybody will die ‘destiny’ or ‘luck’, so as to suggest that death is not in our control and is not part of living: “How capricious luck combined with fate, as she delights in giving deep blows, well-aimed and unexpected, at frail humanity” (Gama, 24/05/1902, p. 3).

When the topic turns to the fact of dying, the interpretation changes, and it is possible to see the fear in the text of the author of the commentary, “how cruel and horribly awful must have been the slow agony of those unfortunates!” (Os Naufrágos, 24/05/1902, p. 3). Dying is potentially a very frightening, threatening and painful event (or set of events) in our lives, which scares us. That is why the reporters tended to idealize the rowers’ courage:

“Thus, for long hours, evoking the good and merciful God, limbs benumbed with cold, numb through fear of imminent death, the miserable lads held their heads above water, until a last breath [...] delivered in the most terrible of endings their souls to the Creator. The cruel fate of these brave boys!” (Os Naufrágos, 24/05/1902, p. 3).

On the other hand, the report also suggests how much the end of young lives seems especially tragic to us. We often think that we should live to an old age, to reach at least an average lifespan. Especially in current times, generally living longer than any other time in human history, a long lifespan is one of the measures of a developed society, and we may expect to live until old age. And that is why we see these four rowers as having died tragically – not getting their chance of a longer life. So in many reports the ages of the rowers are often mentioned, and how young they were, as well as about their life and relatives.

We can see how this affected their friends, their club, and their sport. And we have not even mentioned their parents, who will have to live bereft of a child. It is often said that the tragedy of a parent is to outlive a child – and especially these children, who had grown into strong men, with bright futures. Imagine the years of attention, effort, love, care and resources that had been invested into these young men, all to be lost in a day. From the viewpoint of life understood as an opposition to death, this is a tragedy.

Nevertheless, the newspapers brought other kind of reports too – those that provoked reflections about life: “What is life but a plaything of chance. They always say: birth is life. We will say: – born to die, because when we think that we will live tomorrow, that is the moment when we tumble into the dark and gloomy abyss of the tomb” (Gama, 24/05/1902, p. 3). In such thoughts, we can see how the rowers’ death could help us to see our being as finite. Death is inseparable from life. And so, the tragic event also brought about important reflections on life, some of which resembled Heidegger’s descriptions. With the four young men dying, we can see: if they had a life, like us, then we can also die, possibly also unexpectedly like them. We are all living and dying at the same time (see both aspects of death above). From this point of view, dying is an inseparable part of life.

The shipwreck remains in memory: ‘memento mori’

The effects of the tragedy were manifested in the rowing community. According to Licht (2002), it was the reason why the Regattas Committee cancelled the prize *Wanderpreiss* in 1902. The impact on rowing activities was strong, and latent members began to appear in the clubhouse. There was a significant attempt to recover the sporting life of the *Ruder Verein Germania*, whose leadership scheduled three internal regattas in September, October and December, with various tests and attractions, seeking to celebrate life. In this way, the club tried to show to society that it was staying alive.

Following this lead, in the next year, Luiz Cristiano Laurent’s father, Ernesto Laurent, and Whalter Deppermann participated and won the prize *Wanderpreiss*. This was to show that life goes on, but perhaps with more care. Possibly, with the same intention, Gustavo Bier Son was in the group that founded the Rowing Club Almirante Tamandaré, on January 18, 1903. This club started with the goal to promote other practices, too, among them swimming, “We know that, in addition to rowing sport, the new club regattas to be based

in the capital will be dedicated also to swimming, shooting, gymnastics, etc.” (Regatas, 15/01/1903, p. 2).

Swimming began in Rio Grande do Sul already in the late 19th century; and Porto Alegre was the main town for the development of sports practice in clubs. The main landmark of the emergence of swimming in Porto Alegre was the construction of the first pool in the state and in the country in 1885, by Turnerbund, the current SOGIPA. After the tragedy, swimming gained a pragmatic function – the possibility of saving lives in the aquatic environment – which promoted the practice in the city. This sport was considered an important practice by the rowers, because they could see that it could be a means of saving life if some misfortune occurred. Therefore, the Rowing Club Almirante Tamandaré published a note in the newspaper *A Federação* inviting members to practice swimming exercises while they did not have gigs to practice rowing (Regatas, 03/04/1903).

For memories to be perpetuated, they need to be continually renewed through elements that maintain that memory. However, to begin with, only one means was used to keep the memory alive – a frame with pictures of the four rowers in the gigs’ boathouse of the *Ruder Verein Germania* (Fortini, 1953), which is still there. Furthermore, in the next year, the newspaper did not publish anything *in memoriam*, as a reminder. So quickly were events forgotten, that in the photo which showed the first four women to practice rowing, in 1907 (Silva, 2011), the clothes seem impossible for swimming: long skirts, blouses with long sleeves, ordinary shoes and hat. So, in just a short time, the risks of the practice had been pushed to the back of the mind.

Twelve years later, though, the events were recalled by the newspaper *A Federação* (Ocorreu, 12/05/1914). This newspaper reminded readers how young the rowers were, how fragile were the gigs, and how the survivors prevailed because of their swimming abilities. This refreshed the memory of the population of Porto Alegre (Assmann, 1995), as well as recollecting the commitment of the club: “As in previous years, the Club Germania made a deposit yesterday, in the catacombs where lie the remains of the unsuccessful rowers, very rich crowns with expressive markings” (Ocorreu, 12/05/1914, p. 3). This can be interpreted as an effort to keep alive the idea of ‘life after death’, with memories of how the young rowers lived and the connections among the community, because “the motivated production of memories as key components of the formation and perpetuation of individuals and communities – we only have left what society, in every age, is able to reconstruct for its own contemporary frame of reference” (Halbwachs, 1925).

Even after it changed its name in 1917, during the Brazilian government’s initiative to nationalize the German Brazilian clubs, when it became Clube de Regatas Guahyba (Silva, 2011), the club still tried to keep alive the memory of the tragedy that marked the history of the *Ruder Verein Germania*. This was mainly for the club’s members, because, in 1930, a publication in the club’s magazine, *O Biguá*, talks about the tragedy in 1902. In this publication, the club invented a tradition, every year, that the club should send a commission to the cemetery to put flowers on the rowers’ graves (Aniversário, 03/05/1930). Let us recall Hobsbawm’s (1948, p. 9) definition of a tradition as a “set of practices, normally governed by tacit or openly accepted rules; such practices, of a ritual or symbolic nature, seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior through repetition, which automatically implies continuity with regard to the past”.

From 1937 to 1945, a new Brazilian nationalization movement was initiated by New State¹, a dictatorial government, just after Clube de Regatas Guahyba and Clube Regatas Porto Alegre – the former *Ruder Club Porto Alegre* – combined to become Clube de Regatas Guahyba-Porto Alegre, in 1936 (Silva, 2011). Even with such changes, a frame with the young rowers' pictures was kept on the wall in the clubhouse until 1953 (Fortini, 1953). This can probably be explained as an attempt to invent or to sustain hero-figures, which Oliveira (2003, p. 68) explains as making a “symbolic constitution, which involves several symbolic battles for the appropriation of past events that should be remembered, and demarcation of those to be forgotten”.

From reports in newspapers, magazines and books, we can see the initiative to build heroes, as a way of coming to terms with death. Both the rowers who died and the survivors were caught up in the discourse of hero-invention, with the survivors seen as omnipotent beings, successfully passing through a time of trial, even at the end of their tether. This evokes a lonely struggle with evil until the final triumph, “which implies the advent of a time of glorification, based on manifestations of pride and compassion, this is the basic profile of the hero that confirms their exceptional nature” (Araújo cited by Oliveira, 2003, p. 67). But as a side-effect of this cult of heroes who died in the sea, we can see the reminder of death: death can come at any time, at any age, unexpectedly, so it is important to keep the possibility in mind: “*memento mori!*”

CONCLUSION

The documentary analysis of the sinking of the boats and the deaths of Porto Alegre rowers in the early 19th century, leads us to reflections about a subject that does not often motivate researchers in the field of sports – death. When tragedies occur within sports, such events move people to reflections on life and its fragility. The tragedy of the sinking of the rowers in 1902 in Porto Alegre caused a commotion in the society of that time, and even many years later, the event was still remembered and often refreshed not only in the memory of the people of Porto Alegre, but also of the people who lived in other cities in the south of Brazil, who mourned the loss of their citizens/athletes/sportsmen.

In the sports scene, death creates conflicting representations – between improving health and strength, made possible by exercise, and the risk of injury or even death. Sports activities are usually represented as strategies to overcome physical and psychological limits, and they are meant to improve our lives². However, when athletes sustain a serious injury or death in training or sports competitions, athletes and those around them may be drawn to realization that life is finite, and start thinking about the important existential fact that death belongs to life. In a way, some news reports pointed to the finitude of life as highlighted by Heidegger. We all are going to die some day, and the realization of this fact

¹ New State is the name of the Brazilian political system founded by President Getúlio Vargas, in November 10, 1937, which lasted until October 29, 1945, which is characterized by centralization of power, nationalism, anti-communism and authoritarianism.

² However, this is not true about all sports – some sports are seen as dangerous and they are labelled in this way as ‘risk sports’, ‘extreme sports’ or ‘dangerous sports’ – see e.g. Russell (2005), Martínková, and Hsu (2009); and based on the phenomenological perspective see e.g. Breivik (2011).

should become part of our existence, not so much as a maudlin presentiment, but more as an active commitment to living more authentically, in line with the basic fact of the finitude of our existence. In the case of the sinking of the rowers, the three who survived did so because of their physical endurance and swimming skills. And after coming so close to death, it is possible that they started to give more care to the way they live.

With the death of four and the survival of three rowers, reflections on practical proposals motivated by staying alive and facing death were also covered by the newspapers in great detail, reflecting the imagination of Porto Alegre society. In this context, the event brought about strategies to save life and to prevent unexpected death. For example, the practice of swimming began to be valued more highly by rowers, and this motivated the teaching of swimming by sports clubs. We note that at that time, the early 20th century, there were pools at the Porto Alegre club, where people learned to swim in rivers and lakes; and also on the banks of the Guaíba Lake in Porto Alegre, near the docks, where all the rowing clubs were located. In addition, a new rowing club was founded, which included swimming practice: Grêmio de Natação e Regatas Almirante Tamandaré (Swimming and Rowing Club Admiral Tamandaré). However, although it is understandable to try to have strategies to guard against needless death, this should not lead us away from trying to understand death within our lives.

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