

## EXPERIENCES OF MIRE SPORTS: SENSORY ENCOUNTERS IN NATURE

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**Abstract:** Swamp soccer and swamp volleyball tournaments have been actively organized on Finnish mires throughout the twenty-first century, reflecting a change in the cultural relationship with mires. Joyful and festival-style team sports events on mires seem to be a modern trend, not only in Finland, but also in other European countries. This study focuses on mire sporting events in the Finnish context, asking: How do the sensory experiences of team play on mires affect the players' relationship with mire, and also the cultural heritage associated with mires? The analysis is based on the theoretical framework of the ethnography of the senses, which is complemented by the concept of space. The research material was collected between 2020 and 2022 and consists of thematic interviews with 33 mire athletes, as well as observational material based on the World Swamp Volley and Swamp Soccer Championships held in Finland. The study shows that these humorous sports events emphasize the sense of community between the players. Playing in mires, sensing them, and getting dirty are key factors in this process. Fears of the mire familiar from folklore are forgotten when playing together in the mire. Mire sports bring new multisensory and entertaining elements to the traditional use of mires.

**Keywords:** cultural heritage, mire sports, sense of community, senses, sensory ethnography, space

## INTRODUCTION

*There is something in mire. ... It's fun to roll around in the mud [laughter] and be messy. You can be so close to nature. You don't have to care about cleanliness, and you are allowed to be dirty, because you know you're going to get soiled anyway. You are allowed to be completely – in the mire. (SV3)*

The above interview quote is from a participant in a swamp volley tournament with his team in the summer of 2021. Swamp soccer (Fin. *suopotkupallo*) and swamp volley (Fin. *suolentis*) tournaments<sup>1</sup> have been actively organized on Finnish mires throughout the twenty-first century, reflecting a change in the cultural relationship with mires. Humans are part of nature, and here the cultural relationship with mire is examined from the perspective of the human experience. This cultural relationship changes and is shaped by changes in culture and society, and thus includes the different tangible and intangible uses of mires at different periods in time. Berry picking and traditional outdoor activities such as hiking and orienteering have been typical uses of pristine mires. Until the end of the twentieth century, drained mires were mainly used for agriculture, forestry, and peat production. Finland has a centuries-old tradition of draining mires for cultivation. Consequently, rural mires have been associated with an unrelenting work ethic. However, low-lying agricultural mires were often threatened by frost, which spoiled the crops. Perceptions and traditions related to mires – and nature in general – are changing alongside societal, cultural, and global trends. For those Finns living in cities today, forests and mires represent mainly rural areas where they can spend leisure time and holidays (Laurén 2006: 207). Thus, for decades, the main reasons for them to visit nature have been peace, quiet, beautiful scenery, and exercise (Hallikainen 1998: 119; Ojala & Heikkinen & Tolvanen 2013). Examples of the importance of outdoor leisure and exercise are the festival-style team sports events held on mires, which seem to have become a modern trend not only in Finland, but also in some other European countries during the past twenty years (e.g., Nikkilä & Korhonen 2008; Suopotkupallo.fi; Swampsoccer.se; Iceland Magazine 2018; Swampsoccer.co.uk). There is a key difference between the abovementioned traditional recreational mire activities and festival-style mire team sports: ordinary mire walkers try to stay dry and not sink, while mire athletes try to get in touch with the mire, sink and go into it (Laurén 2022). Thus, a close individual relationship with the mire is created, even though the main objective of the games is to play with other players.

The sports examined in this article combine sport, play and humor, and are constrained by certain rules and definitions inspired by traditional football and volleyball.<sup>2</sup> In general, the cultural characteristics of sport lie in its ritual patterns, which combine playfulness with varying amounts of play, work and leisure (Schultz & Lavenda 2005: 148; Blanchard & Cheska 1985: 55). In mire events, sport is mainly seen as a playful game, but one embedded in the norms and values of traditions that are specific to the culture it reflects. Like other sports and sporting cultures, mire sport can be seen in society as an ever-changing, diverse set of practices, activities and institutions (Reid & McKee 2021: 1). Playing sport in the mire is an activity that involves contact, meanings and emotions which are pathways towards a connectedness with nature (Lumber & Richardson & Sheffield 2017). By studying mire athletes and their individual and socially shared sensations, it is possible to gain an insight into the human relationship with mire. Thus, in this study the focus is on the mire sports phenomenon in a Finnish context, asking: How do the sensory experiences of team play on mires affect the players' relationship with mire, and also the cultural heritage associated with mires? According to UNESCO, intangible cultural heritage can be manifested, for example, in oral traditions and expressions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO 2003: 3). Cultural heritage in the context of mire sports events can be understood, for example, as the mire-related sites, things and practices that the community – the participants of mire sports events – consider as important and worth preserving (Brumann 2015).

Sport, emotions, and physical sensations are inextricably intertwined (Scott 2021: 61). It is a characteristic of mire sport that, to move around in a soft and often submerged mire, the entire body and senses are tangibly in contact with the peat, water and vegetation, and also with the weather conditions. Accordingly, bodily sensations and emotions are pathways towards a relationship with nature. They are also intrinsically linked to the environment, in this case the sporting event site on the mire. Moving and playing sports on mire, and actions like walking, running, jumping, and crawling are very physical and felt throughout the body. Thus, we examine the experiences of mire sports especially from the perspective of sensory ethnography and bodily sensations. Our study shows how a mire becomes a special social space where people meet and form relationships during the game events. It is noteworthy that in this space and in these relationships, the mire plays an active role in making possible encounters between humans, and also between humans and non-human nature. Thus, to deepen our analysis of the sensory mire sports experiences, we further draw on the theoretical concept of *space*, which emerges from social relations and encounters over a given period (Massey 2005: 11–13).

## **TRADITIONS, SPORTING AND SPORT EVENTS ON MIRES IN FINLAND**

Despite the fact that mires have traditionally been an everyday and valued environment and a source of livelihood, in an agricultural society, they were both respected and feared. The most common fears have been related to sinking and getting lost in vast and submerged mires. Thus, children have tended to be scared of going into the mire alone (Laurén 2006: 98–101). Even today, hiking or picking berries alone on an unfamiliar mire can evoke feelings of danger, such as a risk of stepping into a bog hole and sinking so that it is impossible to get out on your own (Laurén 2011: 114).

The folklore and cultural images of mires have tended to be quite negative. Mires are neither water nor land, which makes them anomalous in nature; they both reject and attract, take in and do not let out (Knuuttila 1999: 73). In Western folklore, mires and their dark waters have been considered as melancholic and gloomy sites where disease, frost and death prevail. They have symbolized the subconscious and the borderland between life and death, and served as a gateway to another world inhabited by supernatural beings (Lehtinen 2000: 84–84; Wilson 2005; Laurén 2006: 98–108; 2011: 108; Laaksonen 2008; Giblett 2014: 11; Joyce & Staunton 2020: 85; Kaukio 2023).

However, wet and submerged mires are given a different meaning in sports than in folk tradition, and they provide a demanding and difficult training ground where the heart rate rises, and fitness levels increase. Finnish competitive athletes have a long tradition of exercising by running on a summer mire, and famous athletes are cross-country skier and ski jumper Heikki Hasu, and cross-country skiers Juha Mieto and Mika Myllylä, all Olympic and world champions<sup>3</sup> (Laurén 2006: 58–59). Mire walking includes poles to enhance the use of the whole body in locomotion, which also provide support on unstable surfaces if needed. Running, walking, and cycling (using duckboards) on mires for exercise, recreation and having fun has grown in popularity in Finland and some other European countries especially in the 2000s (Latva-Mantila 2022; Bikepacking.com). Exercising by walking alone and in small groups is conducted in places where mires are easily accessible. In addition to fitness, walking on a mire is also about wellbeing and enjoying the peace and quiet of nature (Metsähallitus). Such activity on mires is a relatively new phenomenon, as in the countryside mires have been seen as a food store where people usually went to do or get something useful, such as hunting, picking berries, digging mud for soil improvement, and gathering bog-grass for cattle. But although mires have been crossed during hiking trips, they have not been seen

as popular sites in which to spend outdoor leisure time in the same way as, for example, forests and fells.

Mire sport events represent the same “crazy Finnish events” as, for example, the Wife Carrying World Championships, World Sauna Championships, and the Boot Throwing World Championships (Edunation; Keh 2017). However, nature is more central to swamp soccer and swamp volley events than to the other festival-style and humorous events mentioned above. Various team sport events on mires have been organized in Finland since the early 2000s (Nikkilä & Korhonen 2008: 252–256), and festival-style summer mire events have established their position and grown in popularity over the years. The first team sport to be played on mire was football. The idea of combining football and mire was inspired by the mire training of Finnish cross-country skiers. The first swamp soccer competition was played in 1998 in the municipality of Hyrynsalmi in northeastern Finland (Suopotkupallo.fi). Soon after, the official Finnish mire bandy/floorball championship was launched in Leivonmäki in central Finland in 1999, and swamp volley was organized in the municipality of Haukivuori in eastern Finland in 2003 (turning into the world championship in 2004: Swampvolley.com). However, swamp soccer is also played, for example, in Scotland, Estonia, Iceland and Sweden, all of which have taken inspiration from Finland (Juntunen 2007: 160–161).

Swamp sports events are the only and most important mass events held in the abovementioned rural municipalities, gathering thousands of players. These unusual events have gained national and international media attention. For example, in the early 2000s swamp soccer games were international events, and in 2007, teams came from 25 countries (Juntunen 2007: 148). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the games were not held in 2020 and 2021, and in 2022, the only foreign entrants came from Estonia. An Estonian TV crew visited Hyrynsalmi in summer 2022, making an episode on swamp soccer playing for the travel program *Wanderlust with Lada* (Loukasmäki 2022; SS9). The Finnish broadcasting company Yle and Svenska Yle's *Egenland* made a program about the 2019 Swamp Volley Championships, which was shown on Finnish national TV in 2020 (Yle Egenland 2020). The popularity of these events and their media attention have been important for the image of the municipalities, the local identity of people and communities, and also for the regional economy (Haukivuorelaiset ry; Kaskela 2019). However, the number of teams participating in the swamp soccer event has decreased in recent years, which is why the municipality of Hyrynsalmi has begun to consider the feasibility of financially supporting the event (Kurvinen 2022). But in comparison, the swamp volley event has grown in popularity every year (Bonnor 2022).



**Figure 1.** Duckboards are used for walking around the playing area and to protect the Vuorisuo mire. Photograph by Kirsi Laurén 2022.

Swamp soccer is played in a natural mire that is not specially modified for the games, and typical mire plant species such as tussock cotton grasses, sedges and stunted trees grow there. The landscape of the Vuorisuo mire is wide and open and surrounded by forest areas. There are 22 playing fields scattered on the mire, made by marking the lines with ribbons and the corners with pennants, and with simple goals made from sewer pipes. The playing field vicinity is accessed using traditional duckboards, which form a network on the mire (Fig. 1).

The swamp volley games are played on a former peat production mire where the top layers of peat have been extracted for human use. As a playing field, the peat production area is therefore in reuse. The arena is in the corner of a big peat production area surrounded by dug basins and young trees growing on their banks. Nearby, but out of sight is forest and pristine mire. In 2022, 21 playing fields marked with ribbons were set out in three areas. Duckboards are placed beside the playing fields, and sedge tussocks and birch saplings grow in the margins. Both of the mire event venues have a load-bearing gravel area in the center of the arena, where performance stages, food trolleys and marketplace canopies have been set up. A large bleacher is situated next to the main playing field for swamp soccer, and three smaller ones in the swamp volley area, from which it is possible to watch the games on several courts (FNSVL2021; FNSSL2022; FNSVP2022; FNSSP2022).

Swamp soccer and swamp volley are technically and tactically simpler sports than traditional soccer and volleyball, and it is possible to participate in swamp

tournaments without much previous experience of playing these sports. However, teams where players have experience of playing or have other sporting backgrounds tend to perform better than average. The swamp competitions are open to anyone, but in the swamp volley tournament, players must be over 18 years of age, and swamp soccer players are also generally adults. The rules of the swamp games are based on the rules of football, volleyball and beach volleyball, but these have been simplified and modified to suit playing in mires. The fields are smaller than in conventional football and volleyball, and there are fewer players on the field (five + the goalkeeper per team in swamp soccer, and four in swamp volley). There are several series in both the swamp soccer and swamp volley tournaments. Nowadays, the series in swamp volley are women's, men's, mixed, and business. Swamp soccer is played in series of men's competitions, men's hobby, women's, mixed, and the "Masters of Swamp" (Fin. *Konkarit*), where the players are over 40 years of age, or the team has participated in competitions at least ten times. In the swamp volley mixed series, teams have two men and two women on the field at the same time (Fig. 2). In swamp soccer mixed series, teams must have at least two female players on the field at the same time, and neither may be the goalkeeper (Suopotkupallo.fi; Swampvolley.com).



**Figure 2.** Mixed team playing in the swamp volley venue in the Rajasuo mire, which is a former peat production area. Photograph by Kirsi Laurén 2021.

## SENSORY ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE CONCEPT OF SPACE

The research method of this study is based on sensory ethnography. This means that in addition to describing and explaining people's activities, social relations, interpretations, and perceptions of the mire sports events, the focus is on multisensory experiences. Alongside the interviews we observed the sensory environments of the mire events by way of participant sensing (see Pink 2009: 67). Embodiment is an important part of sensory ethnography, as it is through this that people are related to the material, social and discursive environment. Anthropologist David Howes (2003: xi) has pointed out that "every domain of sensory experience is also an arena for structuring social roles and interactions". Accordingly, sensual relations are also social relations (ibid.).

When analyzing the sensations of a mire to study the cultural relationship with nature, the idea is that the senses are both physically and socially constructed, which means that they are formed through social interaction. Thus, the bodily experience is never a mere sensation, but contains cultural meaning makings, connotations, and denotations (Vannini & Waskul & Gottschalk 2012: 6, 130). The senses are located between the physical and the cognitive, operating in a tacit manner. Therefore, drawing conscious attention to them requires translation and interpretation, as the senses can be difficult to verbalize (Bendix 2005: 3). From a sensory ethnography perspective, our study focuses on the ways in which the mire is sensed in game events, and how the senses interact with each other (see Howes 2003: xi) and create social relations in a special mire sports space.

Senses and sensations play a key role when players participate in mire sports events, and it is possible to see, hear, feel, smell, and taste the mire and the mire space. The space of mire sporting events brings both people and the non-human nature of the mire actively and affectively together, including peat, grasses, water, and insects (see also Kaukio 2022; Latvala-Harvilahti 2022). The players are physically and sensuously interacting with the mire as they move through it, sink into it, and get tangled in the muddy peat. Through their presence and activities, humans and non-human nature are in a relationship during a mire sporting event, creating a specific space (Laurén 2022).

As mire sports take place at a special event and time in a space constructed on mires, their analysis benefits from the use of the theoretical concept of *space* which has been used particularly in the field of geography. According to this approach, the special mires that are formed during a sporting event are considered as open, social, and processual spaces. These spaces are perceived, experienced and lived simultaneously by the players and others who are present (see Massey 2005: 54–59). The meanings of the mire are constructed by the community

present at the time of the event, and can also be understood in their social and historical context. The meanings are generated through the interaction of the subjective experiences, cultural and social practices of event organizers, players, and other participants (Massey 1994: 154–156). Importantly, the different participants involved in the mire events can both individually and collectively change and shape the meanings of the mire (Laurén 2022).

## **RESEARCH MATERIALS AND INTERVIEWS**

The empirical research material consists of 31 semi-structured, thematic research interviews, two of which involved two interviewees. The interviews were conducted in 2020–2022. All of the interviewees were Finns, as very few foreigners participated in the games organized during the study period due to COVID-19. The interviews were conducted by the authors and three research colleagues working in the same research team. Of the interviewees, 21 (13 women and eight men) were swamp soccer players and 12 (nine women and three men) were swamp volley players. Four of them were organizers who also had personal playing experience. The interviewees were aged between 18–68 years old and about half of them were still actively participating in the games. There were also people who had participated in several competitions in the past, but no longer took part in competitions as players.

To get a comprehensive perspective of playing on mires, we wanted to find players of different ages and genders for this research. Some of the interviewees were found within our own circle of acquaintances, and others were found by advertising the research project on social media to find volunteer interviewees for our research. However, most of the players interviewed for the study were reached during fieldwork when we were observing games in the summer of 2021 and 2022. During the games, we talked to players on the sidelines and gave them leaflets with information about our research. In this way, we asked for volunteers to take part in our study, and due to the COVID-19 pandemic, about half of the interviews were conducted by telephone.

During the interviews, the interviewees were asked about their lifetime (from childhood to the present day) experiences of mires, and their current relationship with mires. In addition, they were asked to describe their feelings and experiences of being in and moving around the mire, their experiences and perceptions of the mire sports event, and the importance of the event to their relationship with mires. All but one of the interviewees had previous mire experiences, mainly from childhood berry picking with parents. Some had become

familiar with the mires during their military service, and others through hiking or through mires near to their homes. These experiences had created a sense of familiarity with mires and their sensory world. In general, however, mires were not particularly important to the interviewees. More important than the mire was the mire sporting event, and consequently, getting to and being on the mire with friends. The interviewees spoke in many ways about the mire sports events, games and gaming experiences. But the sensory experiences related to the games were clearly more difficult to put into words, even though they were implicitly part of the experience. However, when we specifically asked our interviewees about their sensory experiences, they tended to come back to them after a moment of recollection.

To support the analysis of the interviews, we use our own field notes (codes FNSVL2021, FNSSL2022, FNSVP2022, FNSSP2022), as well as photographs and videos taken by us and two research colleagues during the Swamp Volley World Championship Tournaments of 2021 and 2022 in Haukivuori, and the Swamp Soccer World Championship 2022 in Hyrynsalmi.

## **SOCIAL ENCOUNTERS IN THE MIRE**

*For a city dweller, my relationship with mire is surprisingly close, as I have been participating in the Swamp Soccer World Championships with my friends since 2014. It has become an important tradition for our group of friends, with which the mire is strongly associated. We joke all year long that we miss the mire, and that once we get there, we'll be doing this and that. The mire has become a unifying factor for us. (SS1)*

As an event space, mire is conceived through encounters and interrelations, and appears as a sphere of simultaneous diversity where different trajectories coexist (Massey 2005: 9–10). Accordingly, for the participants, the mire sporting spaces are temporary constructions representing other realities that are separate from everyday life. For urban dwellers, the sites represent the countryside, characterized by its remoteness and natural beauty. It is noteworthy that for the locals, the mire venues also represent a special space outside their ordinary lives, offering an opportunity for community encounters and sensory experiences that cannot be experienced in the daily modern world regulated by rules and self-discipline (see Edensor 2014: 32). For many interviewees, getting together with friends to play in the same mire was the highlight of the summer. For example, when asked what motivates them to take part in mire

sports games, one of the swamp soccer players replied: “It’s a tradition among a group of friends – in all its simplicity” (SS15). Mire sports events and the annual get-together with friends and acquaintances are seen as a recurring tradition that is hoped to be kept alive. Many teams register for the following year’s tournament even at the event or shortly afterwards. Planning the journey with teammates builds a sense of community and helps prepare for the experience of the event, and the multi-hour journey to the venue acts as a rite of passage. It is also essential that the competition weekend is usually reserved entirely for the team, so that everyone has time to be together.

Each of the interviewees pointed out that taking part in the competition is first and foremost about having fun and being together. The mire in all its specificity is central to this; it brings people together, even those who are strangers to each other. This is highlighted in a tradition of swamp soccer events, where a chosen player from each team reads the special oath at the official opening ceremony. Community spirit, fun, and a respect for the mire and nature are emphasized in the oath:

*I ... swear in the name of all Swamp Soccer World Championship players to honor Vuorisuo, nature, Swamp Soccer World Championship games, and humanity, and also respect fellow players and all participants, obey the rules, and play with a fair play spirit. The spirit of Vuorisuo consists in having fun and playing fair, meeting friends and gaining new friends, and wallowing in the swamp. (Suopotkupallo.fi)*

There is also a conscious effort to build a sense of community in the swamp volley event, where the opening ceremony is accompanied by a warm-up session led by the competition’s frog mascot, called Swamppis (Fig. 3).

The photos on the event website (which anyone can add to) also contribute to the sense of inclusion. The swamp volley event has active social media, Instagram and Facebook platforms, where administrators post updates throughout the year, keeping the spirit alive for the next competitions. The swamp volley official website also emphasizes a sense of community and fun: “The most fun summer sport and fun since 2003! The best thing about summer is swamp volley!” (Swampvolley.com). According to the players interviewed, an ordinary sporting event and playing field would not get people active in the same social way (e.g., SS5; SS8; SS15; see also Laurén 2022).

The interviews reiterate that it is implicit in the nature of the mire event that everyone is greeted and treated in a friendly manner. A special positive mental space is thus created in the mire, where people can meet each other openly and without prejudice. It is characteristic that participants of the mire

event meet each other physically at a very close distance, as it is almost impossible to avoid touching another person when passing on the narrow duckboards. Encountering each other like this makes greeting and chatting natural. This is clearly reflected in the following quote:

*Everyone is very social and you're expected to be social, chatting to strangers. I think it's nice. Finns don't, just like that, go around talking to strangers when walking in the city. But when meeting on the duckboards of mire, it's: 'Hey, good game!' (SV11)*

Success in games and winning also motivate people to take part in the tournaments, although this is not the most important thing. The competitive spirit fosters a sense of community within the team (SV2; SS3; SS4).



**Figure 3.** *Swamppis gives participants a warm-up session before the games start. Photograph by Marjukka Piirainen 2022.*

As one interviewee (SV5) said: “The unity of the team that comes from playing and having a few successes – it’s fun. ... It’s a different way for a weekend team to unite when we do something together for a common playing aim.” On the other hand, team spirit can also be perceived as a decisive factor for success (Andersson 2019). Foreign teams have participated particularly in the competition series (SS9; SS10). However, teams playing in the same series may have very different competitive objectives: the competitive mixed teams interviewed have to have a minimum of two women in the field at any one time, while the teams that put fun first do not necessarily pay attention to this issue (SS8; SS12; SS13; SS14; SS15; SS17). But the lack of skills and competitive spirit does not prevent players from enjoying the event: “Then, when we have a good team, it’s kind of ... even though you can’t really talk about sports when talking about our team, but the kind of teamwork, it’s something that you enjoy” (SS16).

Sociologist and historian Henning Eichberg (2009: 286) has argued that the culture of laughter, which was an essential part of medieval popular competitions, disappeared or became marginal with the modernization of sport in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the production of results and records became central. But in contrast to that, the carnivalesque culture of laughter is central in mire sports events (Laurén 2022). The need to belong to a group is innate in humans, and as well as the psychological effects of laughter, social laughter also increases group cohesion physiologically (Manninen et al. 2017; Martin 2007: 122–123). Laughter is physically relaxing (Bennett & Lengacher 2008), and the organizers of the swamp volley and swamp soccer events pointed out in the interviews that entertainment and fun were the central ideas for planning the events from the very beginning (SV4; SV9; SS9; SS19). The idea was to offer a special experience in the mire: “When people get splashed into the mire, even the strictest guy becomes a nice guy. Adult people liberate themselves in mire, restraints go away, and people become easy-going” (SV9). According to the interviews, this aim has been achieved and the attitude of the participants in the events is seen as follows: “Players must have the ability to throw themselves into the game, not take it too seriously. The culture there must be understood” (SS5). Players can also toss mud at each other (SV6; SV10; SS11; Yle Egenland), and as such, adults playing together in the mire breaks the current Western assumption that play is only for children, and mire sport has its own legitimized norms and rules that provide an alibi for exceptional behavior in another context (see Deterding 2018).

The remoteness and primitive conditions, as well as the relative anonymity, can facilitate a break from the Finnish social code which includes a reticence towards strangers. Research in tourism and marketing has found that in natural environments contact with other people produces different social values than in

urban environments. The most important of these are emotional contact with fellow travelers (community), and closeness and group orientation (cohesion). A similar duality of social systems has been observed, for example, in groups of friends who participate as spectators in experiential events such as sports competitions or rock concerts. But in nature parks, hikers also experience a sense of security generated by other people – including strangers – when moving in demanding conditions (Sorakunnas 2022). The natural environment and a fear of the mires may thus also increase the role of unknown people in the event. Especially, shared sensory experiences in the mire like getting wet and dirty also structure social roles and interactions between players in a way that increases the team spirit and also the sense of community (see Howes 2003: xi).

Sport, competition and team play bring discipline to the event: the games have rules, and they start at a certain time. Breaching the rules will result in a penalty, which in the worst case can be a disqualification and exclusion from the following year's competition (Swampvolley.com; Suopotkupallo.fi). It is therefore important to be on the field on time, and fit to play. This partly restrains the use of alcohol, which is common at festivals in Finland. However, at normal sporting events, it is only possible for the audience, and not for the athletes. There is a general assumption that in mire sport teams alcohol can either be consumed or not, but while it is acceptable to party and stay up during the tournament, it is still necessary to be able to play (e.g., SS10; SS16; SS17; SV7; SV11). Because of the physical demands of the game, substitutes are important, so every player is usually needed. However, in a team with numerous players this is not so important (SS8). But for many teams, playing is a priority and alcohol is mainly consumed after games or not at all (e.g., SS4; SS5; SS9; SS13; SS14). When asked, most of the interviewees considered that mire sports events are not suitable for children because of alcohol consumption. However, both events are held in places where children cannot go on their own.

## **SENSORY ENCOUNTERS IN MIRE**

The sounds of the event site (loud pop music) and the signs, flags, booths and other equipment brought there create a very special space in the mire. Arriving at the mire event on the first game day is an awaited moment, moving the participants away from their everyday life:

*It's a wonderful feeling when we walk along those duckboards from the car parking area, and the mire opens in front of us. That's what we talk*

*about (among the team), that moment, it's an important moment, that step on the first Friday (the first day of the game) into the mire. The mire opens and gradually you can hear the music and see the flags flying. The mire is joyful, welcoming, and lively. (SS1)*

The soundscape of mire sports events is one of the key creators of the sensory space experience. Under normal circumstances, the mire is free from human-induced noise. But during the tournament the soundscape is filled with loud music from the speakers, chattering and jokes from the announcers to lighten the mood, human conversations, cheers and shouts of joy, the whistles of the referees, and in the swamp volley event, the occasional sound of a chainsaw as the game is stopped to remove a rhizome that has emerged in the playing field. The interviews reveal that the human-made sounds are perceived as an important part of the character of the festival, and distinguish it from everyday life and the common mire with natural sounds. Music creates the right atmosphere for the event and adds to the excitement of the game (e.g., SS6; SV1; SV2). It also creates spirit and a sense of community among the teams. Some teams have their own theme song, usually chosen from the genre of popular music, which is played on a sound system carried to the playing field. A team's favorite music allows the players to create their own smaller soundscapes, especially around the playing fields on the edges of the large swamp soccer area where the sound of the speakers in the middle of the arena is less audible. Instead, in a smaller swamp volley area, the soundscape is dominated by loud music chosen by the organizers and played from loudspeakers (SS5; FNSSL2022; FNSSP22; FNSVP22).

Many interviewees compared mire sports events with music festivals, which have several common elements: summer, loud music, the outdoors, food stalls, friends, people from all over the country and abroad, relaxation, and alcohol (Fig. 4). The soundscape plays a big role in this, as music creates a festival atmosphere and the announcements related to the games evoke a feeling of competition (SS8; SS9; SS15; SV5; SS5; SS9; SS11; SS13; SS14; SV1; SV8; SV2; SV5).

Part of the attraction of mire sports is their simplicity. Mire players in general do not need a glamorous setting to play, but are satisfied if basic facilities such as the possibility to eat are provided for. The environment is also of importance, especially in swamp soccer tournaments played in natural surroundings (SS1; SS8; SS11; SS12; SS15). "In between games, it's lovely to just be and look around. Because it's so special, sort of a huge party in the middle of nowhere, it's a really strange combination, but you enjoy the scenery" (SS17). However, not everyone pays attention to it (SS5; SS6; SS16; SV1; SV6).



*Figure 4. Loud background music, and festival-style food and drink are available at the mire sports events. Photograph by Kirsi Laurén 2022.*

Visually, the area can be identified as a playing field by the uniformed teams. The uniforms teams wear are usually like those worn in ordinary football and volleyball: shorts and a T-shirt, usually with the team's name and the player's number and surname printed on it. Identical team clothing is essential for creating a sense of team spirit and cohesion between the players. The playing uniform is a means of communication within the team that distinguishes them from professional players, and also from other players and participants in the event (see, e.g., Nash 1995: 86–87; Fig. 5). It also acts as a message to the outside world, making the wearer a representative of their home village or sports club (SS17; SS15). However, there are features of the clothing which show that mire athletes are not as serious about competing as professional football and volleyball players, and the team names written on the shirts are often sexually charged, a bit naughty, and contain indecent puns (FNSVL2021; FNSSL2022; FNSVP2022; FNSSP2022).

*There's a lot of investment in uniforms, but not necessarily a lot of money. Each team has its specific uniform. ... We also had a huge flag, of course it was pink according to our theme [laughing], it had the name of our team Los Poslinos in big letters, and the names of our sponsors. Wherever we went, the flag was always up. (SS5)*



**Figure 5.** “The Cream of Haukivuori” team dressed in maritime costumes poses in front of their tent at the swamp volley event. Photograph by Marjukka Piirainen 2022.

Dress plays an especially big role in swamp volley, where prizes for the best outfits are awarded every year (Swampvolley.com). But in swamp soccer, the level of physical contact between players is greater, and accessories that could harm other players are removed before the game. The role of the player is enhanced by the uniforms, and induces a playful state of mind (see, e.g., Stenros 2014), which makes it possible to enter a special space formed by a playing field in a mire. It allows people to break away from their everyday-self and throw themselves into the mire to play and get messy. The spirit of the game and the event is to get dirty in the mud. Getting dirty and playing together in adult play creates a sense of community, both with other players and also with the mire. It is a sign of belonging, and clean clothes, for example as a result of playing on dry playing fields, can even create a sense of embarrassment (SS2; SS13). As such, the feeling of mud on the skin is experienced as liberating.

*That's because there's no need to think about what I look like. There you are free to be covered from top to bottom in mud and be free in that way. Even if you're dressed as a character, you can still be yourself, so to speak, even if you don't look like yourself. The fun and the sense of community, that's what it is. (SV6)*

Peat is also a valuable substance that is used in skin care, which some players were aware of (SS2; SS8; SV1; SV3; SV6; SV12), and could express humorously: “We women take it from the point of view that mud is good for the skin” (SS12). A long day playing on the mire field is physically tiring, but the peat on skin and clothes is not a problem – on the contrary, it is part of the game: “After a day in the mire, you feel clammy and dirty. But it doesn't feel bad or disgusting in any way” (SS15). The particles of peat cling to the clothes and skin, and only come off when washed off with soap (SS13; SS2; SS11; SS8; SS17; SV4; SV6; SV7; SV10; SV12). However, the peat is not necessarily something that should be taken off immediately, because it is a sign and proof of participation in the tournament (SS2).

As a consequence of Western culture, our senses are dominated by sight, and the touch of peat and the feel of nature on the skin is something that we rarely experience in our indoor daily lives. But when playing in a mire, the sense of touch forms a profound knowledge that usually takes place out of consciousness, and dominates and elicits a more comprehensive way of experiencing nature (see Subramanian 2021: ix–xviii). Culturally, the sense of smell is also considered essential because it provides useful information about the characteristics of an environment. The sense of smell indicates what is natural and real and what is not, and smell is instinctively valued as either pleasant or unpleasant (Porteous 1990: 6; Drobnick 2006: 13). The peat, moisture and vegetation give the mires their own special fragrance which most interviewees find enjoyable when walking on mires. However, the most characteristic smell during the games is that of decomposed peat and mud. It comes from the deeper layers of the mire, hovers over the playing fields, and clings to the players and their equipment (SS3; SS5; SS9; SS11; SS12; SS13; SS14; SS17; SV1; SV2; SV4; SV7; SV12). This smell, which is very different from everyday life, also forms a communal experience:

*And it has a kind of peaty, not so fresh a smell, which spreads. But you don't even notice that kind of thing when you're going and doing. It is perhaps more of a thing that you can notice at some point while sitting with cider, and you might find that yes, I smell pretty bad. But fortunately, everyone there smells just as bad, so it doesn't really matter. (SS16)*

From our research material we can find that a player's body odor is non-verbally linked to their interpersonal communication in a way that it acts as a mediator of emotions among individuals in a social group (see also Ferdenzi et al. 2019; Roberts et al. 2022). The players' dirty, peat-smelling skin and clothes unite both team members and different teams with each other and players with the mire, and are therefore seen as appropriate and acceptable (see Corrigan 2008: 5). The smell is also carried all the way home with the clothes and equipment, and serves to remind the players of their experience afterwards.

Nature also influences the game experience in the form of weather. A thunderstorm can feel terrifying, the blaze of the sun against a dark peat surface can give players sunstroke and burn their skin, while in cold weather a cool wind and rain can cause chilling. The coldness of the mire is a distinct feature of the gaming experience: "I have never waded into a mire voluntarily. But the swamp soccer was absurdly fun. Cold, and chilly. All at the same time" (SS7). Stepping into the cold and wet mire for the first time feels uncomfortable, but the movement of the games warms players up, and they do not usually get cold while playing. Rather, they become cold between games when time is spent in the competition area in wet clothes which intensify the effects of wind and low temperatures. But sprawling in the mire can also be a pleasant way to cool down if it is hot during the competition (SV9). In swamp soccer, the weather is experienced without a shelter, as there are very few covered spaces in the area. In swamp volley, many teams have their own tents and canopies next to the audience, where they can rest and watch the games. In both mire sport events, it is possible to warm up in a sauna set up for the occasion. Cold showers are available at both events, but in the swamp soccer area it is also possible to rinse and cool off in the pond next to the sauna.

There is also a different openness when playing in nature than experienced in urban environments. Wet clothes stick to the skin, and at the competition site one can take a sauna and swim, which some players, mostly men, do naked. Nudity is part of Finnish sauna culture, but women and men who do not know each other do not usually bathe naked. Wet clothes dissolve the boundary between the self and the world around it that is normally created by clothing, and bring an eroticism that is also seen in the names of the teams. This feature did not come up in the interviews, but it is nevertheless a part of the nature of the events and the mire space. The sexually charged atmosphere was also added to by the swamp soccer event hosts' speeches that were tinged with ambiguous humor (FNSVL2021; FNSSL2022; FNSVP2022; FNSSP2022). However, from a natural perspective, the skin's contact with nature strengthens the sense of togetherness between human and non-human nature.

Nature can also get too close, and in a hot summer mire, mosquitoes are attracted by the sweaty human skin. Mire areas can even be avoided because of mosquitos, and clothes that cover most of the skin, mosquito hats and insecticides applied to the skin are therefore typical equipment used by mire walkers. However, mosquitoes did not emerge in the mire sports interviews in any way, and nor did we see them during the tournaments covered in our fieldwork (FNSVL2021; FNSSL2022; FNSVP2022; FNSSP2022). One reason for this is that mosquitoes find people by way of the carbon dioxide exhaled by humans, and the heat generated by the crowd lifts the carbon dioxide high above the humans, so that mosquitoes cannot find people's skin (Hinkula 2018).

## **MOVEMENT AND BODILY SENSATIONS**

*Actually, the first alighting on mire is the most disgusting, but after that you get pretty much used to it. Of course, the fields that you sink into and get stuck in are a bit different, because it's a pretty strange feeling when you sink in and can't get out. But you get used to it too. (SS4)*

In both mire sport events, the participants are almost in constant contact or in close proximity with the mire during the tournament. The mire is not only sensed from a distance, but also by moving around in it. A moving and perceiving body does not isolate the senses from one another, but rather brings them together, getting it actively involved with the environment (Ingold 2000: 262). Playing in a mire produces sensations which differ from normal everyday sensory experiences. Ordinary mire-goers such as berry pickers and hunters usually equip themselves with waterproof footwear and choose their routes so as to avoid the softest and boggy areas. Even knee-deep immersion in the mire is a rare experience, and one that is avoided. But instead, those who go out to play in the mire know that they will get their shoes and clothes wet, and their skins coated with peat (see Laurén 2022). Many players wear old sneakers that are no longer used elsewhere. Some swamp soccer players have football shoes that do not absorb water, protect the toes, stay tight on the foot, and give a better contact with the ball than sneakers. Because shoes come off easily in a submerged mire, they are usually taped to the feet. Even if the shoes get wet and muddy, they still protect feet that could otherwise be injured by unseen underground tree branches and snags inside the mire. Swamp volley players can also protect their feet with swimming shoes or socks with duct tape wrapped around them, and some even play barefoot (SS2; SS6; SS16; SS17; SV12; FNSVL2021; FNSSL2022; FNSVP2022; FNSSP2022).

Stepping away from the duckboards onto the boggy sports field means moving from a steady surface to a space where the speed and effort of movement is mostly determined by the surrounding nature. The wetness of the field is the most important factor affecting play, and the wet, boggy field limits movement and slows down the players' travel from one place to another. Moving the legs is difficult in wet peat, and sometimes the mire takes a player firmly in its grip, making it impossible to chase the ball. In a swamp volley tournament, the wetness of the playing surfaces can be controlled by humans by pumping water into the playing fields, so that the various playing fields can be made roughly the same (SV9). In contrast, the conditions in the swamp soccer tournament are mainly determined by nature. There are some small ditches and minor dams in the mire, but in dry summers the fields are drier, and in rainy summers wetter (SS9; SS19). Humidity levels are always different in the various parts of the large mire, which also has an impact on the games. Running on the wettest swamp soccer fields is impossible, and moving is done by crawling or rolling, and the ball is moved by bouncing it with the head or kicking from a side position if the foot is released quickly enough from the mire (Fig. 6). On dry playing fields it is possible to run, but the ball's movements on the mire are unpredictable due to the uneven surface (e.g., SS17; SS18; SS19). As one interviewee said: "The idea with the swamp soccer is that it makes it difficult to play football" (SS15). But when playing and moving around in the mire, the connection between humans and non-human nature is at its strongest, and in this connection the mire is an active participant and actor.



**Figure 6.** On a wet and sinking swamp soccer field, crawling and twisting are the ways to go. Photograph by Marjukka Piirainen 2022.

The playing experience is different in swamp volley and swamp soccer. In swamp volley, it is not necessary to take as many steps as in swamp soccer, where even moving from the edge of the field to one's own playing position can be exhausting. In swamp volley, contact with the ball is made with the hands, players move only within a small area, and the teams are not in physical contact with each other. In contrast, the swamp soccer playing field is bigger (ca. 35x60 m), both teams move in the whole area, and contact with the ball is made with the feet or head. The physical characteristics of players therefore influence their ability to move through the mire. Moving through wet fields is easiest for light and long-legged players, and those who are fit and have strong feet will also get ahead (SS2; SS6; SS10; SS15; SS17). But in mixed series, the size differences between players can be considerable, which can affect the game and even cause a risk in swamp soccer, especially on dry playing fields where movement can be fast (SS12A).

*Even though I'm not exactly of slight build, when a man who is three times bigger than you runs into you, nothing really helps, you fly. ... You can do a lot even as a small player and it doesn't matter as such, but sometimes it's just that even if you try everything, the other person has physically better natural gifts or experience. (SS13)*

Swamp sports can be physically very demanding, and almost all of the players stressed that playing in a mire is really hard. However, the difficulty of the game also depends on the team's objectives in the tournament, the tactics the team has chosen, and the player's role on the field (e.g., SS12; SS14; SS17). According to interviewees, it is difficult to compare the physical heaviness of playing swamp soccer with any other sport (SS13; SS14; SS16; SS17). It is more like a heavy foot workout in the gym or swimming with foot weights (SS17; SS18). However, the desire to win makes players try their best and exceed their own limits, pushing themselves beyond what they could normally have done (SS4; SS5; SS13; SS14; SS17). The physical exertion of the game also makes one feel relaxed and good afterwards (SS2; SS7; SS8; SS17). But the unusual physical exertion is also felt in the body.

*For a first-timer in particular, it feels that every time, damn, you can't move anywhere here. It requires both muscle and stamina, because if you have no muscles, the leg will not rise from the swamp when you are stuck. It's so holistic in a way when you have to use your whole body. After that trip, you usually find new muscles in the body. And then the most confusing thing is that even though we play football, especially in wet years, the*

*most painful part of the body after the whole trip has been the arms ... it comes from the crawling.* (SS16)

A very wet playing field can even out the level differences between teams, and when technically skilled players are unable to utilize all their skills on a submerged surface, the importance of game tactics and good fitness increases. This is particularly pronounced in swamp soccer, but there are also differences in swamp volley courts (SS1; SS12; SS16; SS18; SV2; SV4; SV6; SV8; SV10). For this reason, luck plays a role in the success of the team: the draw for the allocation of playing fields may affect the placing of the team in the tournament because goal difference affects ranking, and on a wet field, few goals are scored (SS5; SS6; SS11; SV10). This is mainly accepted as part of the sport, but some interviewees still wished that the playing fields were more evenly distributed (SS4; SS16).

There is a risk of physical injury in mire sport, so professional athletes tend not to participate in swamp games (SS9; SS19; SV4). Getting stuck in the mire can cause joint dislocations and muscle strains. The movement of players on the playing field moves and compacts the peat, causing long-submerged rhizomes to emerge from the mire, which have not decomposed under the mire's anoxic conditions. These can cause injuries if unknowingly stepped on, where a foot gets caught under the root or a sharp edge breaks the skin. But in swamp volley, rhizomes can also be useful for providing a firm foothold. Rhizomes are often removed with a hoe and chainsaw during the swamp volley tournament, but in swamp soccer they are only marked and avoided during games, or hoisted outside the playing field until later. Plants, grasses, dried roots and twigs in the mire can also cause wounds to bare legs and thighs, although the player may not notice them during the game itself (FNSSL2022). However, wet fields are safer than dry ones because movement in them is slow, and in hard fields the speed is faster and the risk of accident is higher (SS1; SS2; SS13; Juntunen 2007: 117). The risk of physical injury resulting from the mire was mentioned in several interviews, but with a few exceptions, it was felt to be relatively low and not emphasized.

When a lot of people move around in a natural mire, the surface is broken up and tracks are left behind. The playing of swamp volley in a former peat production area was not generally considered to be a problem, because the mire is no longer in its natural state. Nor has the use of the natural Vuorisuo mire for swamp soccer been a subject of debate in the municipality of Hyrynsalmi, as there are many mires in the area, and it is not threatened, protected, or generally valued as a cloudberry mire. When asked, most swamp soccer players perceived that using one mire for sports purposes is acceptable, but it is important that

the event is always held in the same place and that new areas are not spoiled. However, although the mire surface is broken up and vegetation has disappeared mainly in the area of the playing fields, no deep passages are created due to the construction of a network of traditional duckboards in the area (cf. Savela 2021). Any garbage and marking ribbons are removed, and most of the structures erected for the competitions are taken elsewhere. The landscape will also receive attention from the organizers, and while building new duckboards using traditional methods is expensive, old and broken duckboards still have to be replaced with new ones, because other types of pathways would not blend with the landscape (SS9).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In this study, we have analyzed the perceptions and sensory experiences of mire athletes playing in swamp volley and swamp soccer tournaments. Throughout the events, sensations form mutually reinforcing and unifying combinations through which players create their relationship with mire. The interpretations of these sensations are affected not only by the players' previous experiences, but also by the shared interpretations of other participants. Ultimately, the practices formed over decades by the community in mire sporting events and their shared perceptions of mire sensations add to the intangible cultural heritage of mires.

Our research reveals that multisensory team games in the mire give adults the opportunity to take on a role different from their everyday lives. This is enhanced by a humorous attitude and wearing particular playing uniforms. In these conditions, adults can play like children, they can get deep into the mire, get wet and dirty, and feel nature with all their senses. The festival atmosphere also plays an important role in creating a sense of community, and includes the commentary of the event presenters, loud background music, flags, stalls and their scents. But the most important factor in creating a sense of community and a desirable atmosphere is the mire, where people come together to play and have fun.

Interacting with mire, for example by moving through it, smelling and touching it, and getting tangled in the peat, are essential characteristics of mire sports. Seeing is also important, but it is not emphasized in the same way that it is in everyday life outside the mire. Our research indicates that the fascination of mire sport lies in its multisensory nature. However, a special space created in the mire during a sporting event through interactions between people and

between people and the non-human mire enables people to act differently than usual, and to experience nature in a new way. In this setting, the mire plays a role that reflects today's multisensory trend of mire use.

The location of the venue is mentally and physically far away from normal everyday life, and is an important factor in the creation of a special social space. As a difficult and unpredictable environment for moving around, mire brings humor and entertainment to the sporting events. At the same time, it requires players to step outside their comfort zone. Thus, the participants are people who can laugh at themselves. Mire events also offer the opportunity to participate in a sporting competition for people who have no playing skills and who are otherwise not into sport. In addition, playing together in mires without serious achievement goals lowers the threshold to exercise, and increases the joy of movement. Competing and playing in this environment as a team evokes strong emotions such as frustration at being stuck in the mire, excitement, a desire to win, joy, and also disappointment. Because playing in a mire is physically challenging, and because success in a tournament does not depend solely on playing skills or physical fitness, just being able to play can in itself create a sense of victory. On the other hand, the challenges of the mire also form a space in which to let go of the illusion that humans can control everything.

The sporting events offer people an opportunity to encounter mires and, but for these, many of the participants would probably not otherwise go to mires at all. The negative images of the mire related to folklore were familiar to the interviewees when they were asked about them, but there were no feelings of danger and fear during the swamp sport tournaments. The area is usually well-known by the players, and the people around them create a sense of security. The fear of sinking into a mire is not necessarily only about the real danger, but also about the unpleasantness of getting wet in mire water, which is something we usually avoid. But in face of this, mire sports bring new elements to the traditional use of mires, such as lots of people, humorous costumes, playing, a noisy soundscape, and a positive attitude towards exercise and getting wet and dirty. Here, humorous play makes the mire more familiar, and it no longer feels as unpredictable as before. So, the sports events can also be interpreted as helping to dispel pre-conceived fears about mires during the games, and thus lowering the threshold to visit mires in general.

On closer inspection, what is required from the mire in sports events follows the traditional moral code of taking only as much of nature's gifts as is needed. For such events, only parts of specific mires are used for sporting events, and the area required is relatively small. Although human traces are left in the mire, nothing is taken away except for the small amount of peat that is stuck

to clothing, and as mires are only used for short periods of time, snakes, bears and other animals can continue to roam the areas freely.

Swamp soccer and swamp volley events have been organized regularly for several decades. The nature of these events has changed somewhat over the years, with varying numbers of participants, new players replacing old players, changes in series and rules, and new elements being added to the program. But these events have become a tradition for the players, and they hope that they will be continued in the future. Consequently, these multisensory mire sport events reflect the living cultural heritage of mires in twenty-first-century Finland.

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## **RESEARCH MATERIALS**

Interviews (33) of the swamp soccer (codes SS1–SS19) and swamp volley (codes SV1–SV12) players conducted in 2021–2022. Field notes of the Swamp Volley and Swamp Soccer World Championship Tournaments 2021 and 2022 (codes FNSVL2021, FNSSL2022, FNSVP2022, FNSSP2022). Photographs and videos taken at the tournaments. The research materials have been gathered by the Mire Trend research team and will be stored in the Finnish Literature Society's Joensuu archives after the research project is completed.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The term *swamp* has become established in the context of mire sport. In this article we use the general term ‘mire’, but in the context of mire team sports we use the established term ‘swamp’. Swamp soccer is the established term for swamp football, and swamp volley for swamp volleyball, therefore we use these established terms in our research.
- <sup>2</sup> Competitions played in the mires are considerably different from professionally played modern football and volleyball that are among the most popular sports in the world, attracting millions of people.
- <sup>3</sup> Heikki Hasu’s active international racing career spanned the 1940s and 1950s, Juha Mieto’s the 1970s and 1980s, and Mika Myllylä’s from the 1990s to 2000.

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