

Scaling Greatness: From “Edgy” Athletic Techniques to Societal Transformation

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Abstract

This paper proposes that “edgy” high-performance techniques developed and refined in elite athletic contexts—flow state, breathwork, visualization, and somatic awareness—are not merely tools for individual optimization. They are, in aggregate, a latent human technology with the potential to reshape social structures, governance systems, and collective decision-making. Drawing on emerging research in collective efficacy, somatic abolitionism, and embodied social justice, this paper argues that the same neurological and physiological mechanisms that allow a soccer player to perform under extreme pressure can be scaled, adapted, and institutionalized to help societies navigate the structural pressures of inequality, political polarization, and rapid technological change. Three primary frameworks are examined: Collective Flow as a model for adaptive governance; Somatic Abolitionism as a body-level approach to structural reform; and Embodied Social Justice as a method for inscribing new social values into institutional behavior. The paper concludes that athletes—and the ecosystems that produce them—may be functioning as canaries in the coal mine for human potential, and that a systematic translation of athletic wisdom to civic practice represents one of the most underexplored opportunities in social innovation.

Keywords: collective flow, somatic abolitionism, embodied social justice, athletic performance, social transformation, nervous system, collective efficacy, structural change.

Introduction

For most of modern history, the techniques developed to maximize athletic performance have been understood as domain-specific. Breathwork helps a sprinter manage pre-race anxiety. Visualization helps a penalty-kick taker mentally rehearse success. Somatic awareness helps a midfielder stay composed under defensive pressure. These techniques are valuable, but their value has traditionally been bounded by the white lines of a field or the walls of a training facility.

That boundary is beginning to dissolve. A growing body of research across cognitive science, social psychology, trauma therapy, and organizational behavior suggests that the neurological mechanisms underlying elite athletic performance are not sport-specific but are human-specific. The same capacity for sustained attention, regulated arousal, embodied confidence, and adaptive coordination that defines a great athlete may also define a great institution, a resilient community, or a society capable of navigating structural complexity without fracturing.

This paper explores that proposition. Its central argument is that athletic performance techniques can and should be understood as a form of social technology—one that, when deliberately scaled beyond individual practitioners, can generate what is known as Collective Agency and Systemic Resilience. Collective Agency refers to a group's capacity to act with shared intention and adaptive precision under pressure. Systemic Resilience refers to a society's capacity to absorb and respond to structural stress—inequality, institutional failure, rapid change—without defaulting to the fight-or-flight dynamics that produce paralysis, fragmentation, or violence.

The paper proceeds as follows. The Methods section describes the theoretical and analytical approach. The Results section examines three possible frameworks that may be explored to possibly change a society at scale: Collective Flow, Somatic Abolitionism, and Embodied Social Justice. A synthesis section attempts to draw these frameworks together into a “unified” scaling model. The paper closes with recommendations for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, followed by conclusions and key findings.

Methods

This paper employs a theoretical synthesis methodology, drawing on published research from cognitive and social psychology, somatic trauma theory, organizational behavior, philosophy of mind, and social innovation. Priority was given to works that directly examine the relationship between body-based practices and structural or collective outcomes, as well as to research that operationalizes performance-state concepts (flow, arousal regulation, mental rehearsal) in non-athletic contexts.

Because this is an emerging and interdisciplinary field, the review is explicitly interpretive rather than strictly systematic. The goal is not to conduct a meta-analysis of effect sizes, but to identify and articulate a coherent theoretical lineage—from individual athletic technique to collective social practice—and to map the mechanisms through which that translation might occur. Citations reflect the primary theoretical anchors in each domain; they are not intended as exhaustive literature reviews of any single field.

Three frameworks are examined in depth because each addresses a distinct layer of the scaling problem: the cognitive layer (Collective Flow), the somatic and neurological layer (Somatic Abolitionism), and the institutional layer (Embodied Social Justice). Together, they describe a more complete pathway from individual practice to structural change.

Theoretical Background

The theoretical foundation of this paper rests on three interlocking premises drawn from adjacent fields.

The first is that human cognition is embodied. The work of Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) established that cognition is not a purely abstract, brain-internal process; it is shaped by and enacted through the body and its interactions with the environment. Antonio Damasio (1994) extended this understanding by demonstrating that bodily states—what he called somatic markers—are integral to decision-making, not peripheral to it. These findings have profound implications for social science: if thought and decision-making are embodied, then any intervention that changes bodily states at scale changes the cognitive and behavioral landscape of society.

The second premise is that flow is not only an individual state but a potentially collective one. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's foundational work on flow (1990) described it as a state of optimal experience characterized by complete absorption, effortless action, and intrinsic motivation. Subsequent research has explored whether analogous states can emerge in groups—not just as the sum of individual flows, but as a genuine collective phenomenon in which shared attention, coordinated action, and mutual calibration produce outcomes that no individual member could achieve alone.

The third premise is that trauma—including structural and intergenerational trauma—is held in the nervous system and the body, not only in memory or cognition. This insight, central to the work of Peter Levine (1997), Bessel van der Kolk (2014), and Resmaa Menakem (2017), means that structural injustice is not only a political or economic problem; it is also a somatic one. Its resolution, accordingly, requires somatic as well as political tools.

These three premises converge on a single implication: that body-based practices developed in the context of athletic training—practices designed specifically to optimize human performance under pressure—may be among the most powerful tools available for social transformation at scale.

Results

Three predominant frameworks emerged from the synthesis: Collective Flow as a model for adaptive governance and collaborative problem-solving; Somatic Abolitionism as a body-level approach to structural reform; and Embodied Social Justice as a methodology for inscribing new social values into institutional behavior. Each is examined in turn.

1. Collective Flow: The Blueprint for Optimal Collaboration

Individual flow is defined by a complete absorption in a task that is precisely calibrated to the individual's skill level—challenging enough to demand full engagement, achievable enough to avoid overwhelming anxiety. In this state, self-consciousness recedes, time distorts, and performance reaches its peak. The question that animates the Collective Flow literature is whether these dynamics can occur at the group level, and if so, what conditions produce and sustain them.

Research into Collective Efficacy—a group's shared belief in its capacity to achieve a goal through coordinated action—provides the most proximate bridge between individual flow and collective performance. Philippe and colleagues (2026) propose a calibration framework to describe how high-functioning groups in a collective flow state develop a form of distributed situational awareness: each member is simultaneously attending to their own task and to the relational field of the group, making micro-adjustments in real time that keep the collective in a state of coordinated, high-quality engagement. The analogy to elite team sports is direct. A professional soccer team in collective flow does not succeed because its players are individually executing predetermined scripts; it succeeds because they are continuously reading and responding to each other, to the opponent, and to the environment, with a shared attentional bandwidth that exceeds what any individual could sustain alone.

The societal scaling argument is this: many of the most intractable problems facing contemporary democracies—urban poverty, institutional stagnation, political polarization—are problems of coordination failure. They persist not because the knowledge to solve them is absent, but because the social structures designed to address them are too rigid, too siloed, and too reactive to generate the kind of adaptive, improvisational collaboration that solutions require. Collective Flow offers a model for what those structures could look like if redesigned around the conditions that produce peak collaborative performance: clear shared goals, real-time feedback, matched challenge and capacity, and a reduction in the ambient threat signals—bureaucratic friction, political tribalism, status competition—that pull groups out of the flow state and into defensive, reactive modes.

The most direct practical implication is that environments, not just individuals, need to be designed for flow. Just as a performance coach designs training conditions to make individual flow more likely—removing distractions, calibrating difficulty, building confidence through progressive challenge—social designers, urban planners, and governance architects can design civic environments that make collective flow more accessible to the communities they serve.

2. Somatic Abolitionism: Athletic Training for Social Justice

Somatic Abolitionism, pioneered most prominently by Resmaa Menakem in his work *My Grandmother's Hands* (2017), begins from a premise that is at once simple and radical: that racism, and the structural violence it produces, is not only an ideological or economic system. It is a pattern stored in the nervous systems of the people who live within it—those who perpetuate it, those who survive it, and those who witness it across generations.

The athletic parallel is precise. When a soccer player faces a high-stakes moment—a penalty kick in a championship final, a defensive stand with seconds remaining—their performance depends less on their abstract knowledge of technique than on whether their nervous system can remain regulated: present, responsive, neither flooded with panic nor numb with dissociation. The player who has trained their nervous system to settle under this kind of pressure performs better not because they think better, but because they feel better—more grounded, more available, more capable of the fine-grained sensorimotor adjustments that elite execution requires.

Menakem applies this logic to the problem of structural racism. The chronic, ambient threat of racial violence—historical and ongoing—produces the same nervous system responses in affected communities as acute physical danger: hypervigilance, dissociation, constriction, and collapse. Critically, these responses can become intergenerational, passed down through epigenetic mechanisms and through the lived example of traumatized parents and communities. The result is that structural reform efforts—however well-intentioned at the policy level—frequently fail to take hold because the bodies of the people they are meant to benefit, and the bodies of the people who resist them, are still operating in survival mode.

Somatic Abolitionism addresses this by applying breathwork, body-settling practices, and somatic awareness exercises to the project of structural change. The goal is not to bypass political analysis or material intervention, but to build beneath them a neurological foundation capable of sustaining the engagement, presence, and emotional regulation that deep structural reform requires. A community whose collective nervous system has been trained to remain settled under pressure can engage with institutional systems, policy debates, and historical reckonings without the reactive fragmentation—the social equivalent of a panic attack or a fight-or-flight flight—that so often derails reform efforts at their most critical moments.

The implication for social innovation is significant. Somatic practices are not soft supplements to the hard work of structural change; they are prerequisites for it. Programs that integrate body-based regulation practices into community organizing, civic education, and institutional reform processes may achieve substantially greater durability and depth than those that operate exclusively at the cognitive or political level.

3. Embodied Social Justice: The Body as a Site of Reform

The third framework, Embodied Social Justice as developed by Monique Rizer Johnson (2022), extends the logic of somatic practice from trauma resolution to proactive institutional transformation. Where Somatic Abolitionism focuses on healing what has been broken, Embodied Social Justice focuses on building what has not yet existed.

The framework's core claim is that macro-structural problems—inequality, exclusion, the concentration of power—cannot be adequately addressed by head-level policy alone. Policy changes the formal rules of a system. Embodied Social Justice changes the behavioral and affective culture within which those rules operate. Without that second layer of change, new policies are often absorbed and neutralized by institutional cultures whose underlying values—expressed in the body language, the hiring patterns, the informal hierarchies, the ways meetings are run and decisions are made—remain unchanged.

The athletic parallel is visualization and mental rehearsal. High-performance athletes do not only rehearse technique; they rehearse identity. A free-throw specialist does not only practice the mechanics of the shot; they practice the experience of being the kind of person who makes that shot under pressure—calm, confident, focused, present. Over thousands of repetitions, this mental rehearsal re-wires the internal map of what is possible for that athlete in that moment. The technique becomes not just a skill but a characteristic: part of who the athlete is, not just what they can do.

Embodied Social Justice proposes that the same process can be applied to the institutional imagination of community leaders, policymakers, and organizational decision-makers. By using visualization, somatic awareness exercises, and reflective embodied practices to rehearse what it feels like to lead from values of equity, inclusion, and shared power, it becomes possible to move new social values from the level of stated commitment to the level of instinctive practice—to embed them in what Johnson calls the muscle memory of institutions.

This has particular relevance for leadership development, policy design processes, and civic education. Programs that engage the body—not just the intellect—in the cultivation of civic values may produce leaders who enact those values more consistently, more fluently, and more durably than those trained through purely cognitive or didactic methods.

Theoretical Frameworks: Summary

The following table situates the three primary frameworks within their theoretical lineages, identifies the core mechanism each proposes, and maps its structural application.

Framework	Key Theorist(s)	Core Mechanism	Structural Application
Collective Flow	Csikszentmihalyi (1990); Philippe et al. (2026)	Shared absorption and calibrated coordination in groups pursuing complex, adaptive goals.	Replaces bureaucratic friction with dynamic, distributed problem-solving in governance and community organizing.
Somatic Abolitionism	Menakem (2017)	Nervous-system-level processing of intergenerational and structural trauma through somatic practice.	Enables sustained engagement with structural injustice without fight-or-flight collapse or reactive fragmentation.
Embodied Social Justice	Johnson (2022)	Visualization and mental rehearsal as tools for re-mapping what is structurally possible.	Scales high-performance mindsets to community leaders and policymakers, embedding new social values in institutional behavior.
Somatic Cognition	Varela, Thompson & Rosch (1991); Damasio (1994)	Cognition and decision-making are grounded in and shaped by bodily states, not just abstract reasoning.	Policy and institutional change that engages the body—not only the intellect—is more durable and socially embedded.

Synthesis: Scaling the Edge of Wellness to the Edge of Society

Taken individually, each of these three frameworks addresses a distinct layer of the problem of social transformation. Collective Flow addresses the cognitive and relational layer—how groups think and collaborate under pressure. Somatic Abolitionism addresses the neurological and historical layer—how bodies carry and can release the residue of structural violence. Embodied Social Justice addresses the institutional and aspirational layer—how new social values can be inscribed in organizational behavior, not just organizational policy.

Taken together, they describe something more: a complete human technology for social transformation, one that operates simultaneously at the level of the individual nervous system, the collaborative group, and the institutional structure. What makes this technology distinctive is that it was not developed in a laboratory or a think tank. It was developed on the training ground, in the locker room, and in the thousands of hours of deliberate practice through which elite athletes learn to perform at the outer edge of human capacity under conditions of extreme external pressure.

The argument of this paper is that soccer players—and athletes more broadly—are functioning as canaries in the coal mine for human potential. The techniques they use to master their internal states under the pressure of a championship match are the same tools required to navigate the structural pressures of the AI age, the climate emergency, and the fracturing of democratic institutions. The difference is scale and context, not mechanism.

Moving from Soccer for Social Good—using the game as a vehicle for community development—to Athletic Wisdom for Social Structure—using the underlying human technology to build more resilient institutions—requires a deliberate translation effort. That translation is the central practical challenge this paper identifies, and it is one that researchers, practitioners, and policymakers are only beginning to take seriously.

The Scaling Framework

The following table maps each primary athletic technique to its individual benefit and its proposed societal structural equivalent, illustrating the translation logic that underlies the scaling argument.

Athletic Technique	Individual Benefit	Societal Structural Benefit
Flow State	Peak focus and effortless execution under pressure.	Collective Flow: agile, non-polarized social problem-solving and adaptive governance.
Breathwork	Stress regulation and autonomic recovery.	Somatic Abolitionism: a settled collective nervous system capable of sustained, non-reactive structural reform.
Visualization	Personal goal-setting and mental rehearsal of performance.	Social Re-Imagining: embodied blueprints for new, equitable social structures and institutional cultures.

Athletic Technique	Individual Benefit	Societal Structural Benefit
Somatic Awareness	Real-time body control and self-regulation under external pressure.	Embodied Justice: moving social values from written policy to institutional muscle memory and lived practice.

Recommendations

1. Invest in research on Collective Flow in civic and institutional contexts. The evidence base for individual flow is robust; the evidence base for collective flow in non-athletic settings remains thin. Targeted research programs examining flow conditions in community organizing, participatory governance, and collaborative policy design would substantially advance the field.
2. Integrate somatic practices into community resilience and civic education programs. Breathwork, somatic awareness, and nervous-system regulation are teachable, scalable, and evidence-based. Their exclusion from mainstream civic and organizational development represents a significant missed opportunity.
3. Develop embodied leadership curricula for community leaders and policymakers. Programs that combine cognitive training in equity and systems thinking with somatic and visualization practices may produce more durable behavior change than either approach alone.
4. Bridge athletic and social innovation research communities. Sports science, trauma therapy, organizational psychology, and social innovation operate largely in separate silos. Cross-disciplinary convening around the mechanisms of human performance under pressure could accelerate progress in all four fields.
5. Pilot and evaluate scaling programs in high-pressure civic contexts. Communities facing the most acute structural pressures—chronic disinvestment, high violence, institutional breakdown—may be the most responsive to interventions that meet the nervous system at the level of lived experience rather than abstract policy.
6. Treat environmental design as a flow variable. Just as athletic performance environments are designed to minimize distraction and maximize focus, civic environments—public spaces, meeting structures, deliberative processes—can be redesigned around the conditions that make collective flow more likely.

Conclusions

The central argument of this paper is neither metaphorical nor speculative. It is grounded in a convergent body of evidence from cognitive science, trauma research, social psychology, and organizational behavior: the human capacity for peak performance under pressure—the capacity that distinguishes the great athlete—is a general human capacity, not a sport-specific one. The techniques developed to cultivate and sustain it are portable, teachable, and scalable.

What has been missing is not the evidence. What has been missing is the translation: a deliberate, theoretically grounded effort to move these techniques from the training ground to the civic commons, from the individual body to the collective nervous system, from the flow state of a single player to the adaptive, non-polarized problem-solving of an entire community.

Collective Flow, Somatic Abolitionism, and Embodied Social Justice represent three distinct but complementary attempts to make that translation. Each addresses a layer of the problem that the others do not. Together, they sketch the outline of a new field—call it Applied Athletic Wisdom, or perhaps Somatic Social Innovation—whose potential has barely begun to be explored.

The stakes are not small. The structural pressures bearing down on contemporary societies—technological disruption, ecological emergency, democratic fragility—are, in their essential character, not unlike the pressure of a championship final. They demand of their participants precisely the qualities that elite athletic training is designed to produce: presence, regulation, adaptive coordination, and the capacity to perform at the outer edge of one's capacity precisely when the cost of failing to do so is highest. The techniques exist. The question is whether we have the imagination and the institutional will to use them.

Open Questions and Limitations

Several important limitations and open questions bound the arguments made in this paper. First, while the individual-level evidence for the performance benefits of flow, breathwork, and visualization is strong, the evidence for their collective and structural scaling effects remains nascent. Most of the claims in this paper are theoretically grounded but empirically underspecified; rigorous empirical testing of the scaling hypotheses is a priority for future research.

Second, the translation from athletic to civic contexts is not straightforward. Athletes operate within highly structured, goal-clear, feedback-rich environments that are unusually conducive to flow. Civic and institutional environments are often the opposite: ambiguous, politically contested, and characterized by diffuse and delayed feedback. Designing civic environments to approximate the conditions for collective flow is a genuine and unsolved design challenge.

Third, this paper has focused primarily on frameworks developed within Western academic and clinical traditions. The somatic practices and collective regulation techniques that this paper frames as novel scaling innovations have deep roots in Indigenous, contemplative, and non-

Western traditions that deserve fuller acknowledgment and engagement than space here permits.

Key Findings

- Athletic performance techniques—flow, breathwork, visualization, somatic awareness—are grounded in general human neurological and physiological mechanisms, not sport-specific ones, and are therefore portable to non-athletic contexts.
- Collective Flow offers a model for redesigning civic and institutional environments around the conditions for adaptive, non-polarized collaborative problem-solving.
- Somatic Abolitionism demonstrates that structural injustice operates at the level of the nervous system and that its resolution requires somatic as well as political intervention.
- Embodied Social Justice extends the logic of visualization and mental rehearsal to the project of inscribing new social values in institutional muscle memory, not just written policy.
- The scaling framework proposed here moves from Soccer for Social Good to Athletic Wisdom for Social Structure—from using sport as a community vehicle to using the underlying human technology as a structural tool.
- Athletes may be functioning as canaries in the coal mine for human potential: the techniques they use to perform under extreme pressure are the same tools required to navigate the structural pressures of the contemporary moment.

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