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A comprehensive guide for students and practitioners
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Masters athletes

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Routledge Handbook of Applied Sport Psychology
A comprehensive guide for students and practitioners
Edited by Stephanie J. Hanrahan and Mark B. Andersen
The objective of this chapter is to provide sport psychology professionals with information and ideas on how to facilitate and optimize sport performance and satisfaction of middle-to older-aged athletes. Information pertaining to the topic is derived from my past and current research work with over 600 athletes aged from 35 to 90+ years in a variety of masters sports including track and field, bowling, golf, marathon, and swimming; my sport psychology consulting experience; and from other existing research conducted with masters athletes.

**Opportunities for sport involvement for middle- to older-aged individuals**

Masters athletes are individuals who continue or, at some later time in their lives, begin or resume training and competing at events available to middle- to older-aged adults (e.g., masters tournaments, Senior Olympics, Veterans Championships). Each sport governing body determines the status of a masters’ athlete based on the age at which peak performance (i.e., the open world record) occurs in a respective sport. For example, the masters’ designation begins at 25 years of age for swimming, at 35 years of age for track and field, and at 50 years of age for golf.

**The establishment and the expansion of masters sports**

Masters sport was established in the 1970s as an alternative to mainstream sport; that is, sports for youth and elite-level athletes. Prior to the 1970s, the exclusion of older people from organized competitions had been attributed to two social norms that were prevalent during that time (Coakley, 2008). First, organized competitive sport was believed to “build character” and should be promoted to young people and males especially. Second, strenuous physical activity was believed to be dangerous to elderly individuals. In the 1970s and 1980s, local masters clubs began to question these biases, and events such as World Veterans Athletic Championships, World Masters Swimming Championships, World Masters Games, and
Senior Olympics emerged as potential opportunities for sport participation and competition for older individuals. Recent trends indicate that the popularity of masters’ sports is on the rise as evidenced by increases in participation numbers and in athletes’ attendance rates at the major masters’ competitions throughout the world. For example, the first two World Masters Games, in 1985 and 1988, each had below 10,000 competitors (i.e., 8,305 and 5,500, respectively). In comparison about 20 years later, World Masters Games in 2002 and 2005 each had over 20,000 competitors (24,886 and 21,600, respectively).

How masters athletes become involved and why they continue participating

The purpose of this section is to provide practitioners with an understanding of the multidimensional nature of motivation and to recommend strategies that can be used to favorably support masters athletes’ mental processes and actions such as starting and maintaining sport involvement throughout life. In one of our studies (Medic, Starkes, Young, Weir, & Giajnorio, 2005), we surveyed over 450 masters athletes from track and field and swimming and found that that the three most common ways through which athletes entered into masters sports were: (a) continued involvement in competitive sport; (b) social networks, and (c) community recreational involvement. We found that most masters’ athletes had been involved in competitive sport throughout their lives; specifically, 49% of them were continuously involved in their sports since they were young, and 22% switched to their current sports from a different sport. Another common means for entrance into masters’ sports was through social networks, which included recommendations from doctors (18%), friends (15%), family (10%), and coaches (8%). The final means of entering masters sport was through community recreational involvement as fans/coaches/officials (9%), after becoming members of community sport programs or local masters clubs (21%), and by learning of opportunities from the local media (9%).

A number of studies conducted to date have shown that masters athletes, regardless of the sport, have a variety of motives for continuing to participate in sport including: enjoyment of the sport, opportunities to test skills, health and fitness concerns, social reasons, and extrinsic rewards (e.g., Medic, Starkes, Young, & Weir, 2006; Tantrum & Hodge, 1993). In addition, a number of studies have shown that masters’ athletes tend to be self-determined and goal oriented. Most participants do not intend to stop participating in sport, and the most important motives for continuing to train and compete are intrinsic in nature. Studies also have suggested that masters’ athletes’ motives for sport differ across age and gender. Specifically, Dodd and Spinks (1995) found that older masters athletes (generally, over 65 years) place greater importance on extrinsic rewards, implying they have a tendency to be attracted by external reinforcers such as athletic awards, medals, and trophies. The results of the studies that have examined masters’ athletes’ motives for sport as a function of gender suggest that female masters’ athletes are likely to give higher importance to intrinsic rewards, enjoyment, and health and fitness and lower importance to extrinsic rewards, competition, and achievement goals (Medic, 2009). In sum, research on masters athletes’ motives for sport suggests that to gain the most psychological benefits (e.g., well-being, flow, creativity, self-esteem) from their participation in masters sports, motivational strategies for masters athletes need to be individualized, and personal reasons for participation need consideration.
Masters athletes’ passion for sport

Passion is a strong inclination toward an activity individuals like (or even love), find important, invest time and energy in, and is part of their identities (Vallerand et al., 2003). Individuals can have, at least, two types of passion toward an activity. Obsessive passion refers to the motivational force that pushes people toward activities and produces compulsions due to internal forces that seem to control them. For example, an athlete with an obsessive passion for running would report having no choice but to attend a scheduled running workout. Harmonious passion, on the other hand, refers to the motivational force that leads a person to engage in an activity willingly and produces a sense of volition and personal endorsement about pursuing the activity. For example, an athlete with harmonious passion would be able to put aside a running workout if the need arose. Preliminary research has shown that obsessive passion is associated with negative affective and behavioral consequences and that harmonious passion is related to positive outcomes.

In our recent study (Medic et al., 2007b), we surveyed 138 (95 male, 43 female) masters athletes from track and field and found that their scores were very high on harmonious and moderate to low on obsessive passion. We also found that masters athletes whose sport motives were autonomous (intrinsically motivated) and highly internalized (integrated within the individual’s self) were the ones who had a high sense of personal endorsement and volition about engaging in their sports, that is high levels of harmonious passion. For these masters athletes, sport involvement is likely to be in harmony with other aspects of their lives, but at the same time not overpower their identities and take over their personal lives.

Our results further suggested that masters athletes whose sport motives were internalized into their identities by external agents are the ones who had high levels of obsessive passion. These internal compulsions (e.g., feelings that they absolutely have to engage in their sports) are likely to lead to feelings of guilt and/or anxiety if one cannot engage in the activity or are likely to lead masters athletes engaging in their sports even when they should not (e.g., due to injury). With this internal pressure to engage in their passionate activities, masters athletes who have high levels of obsessive passion may find it difficult to disengage from thinking about, and participating in, their sports. Masters athletes who have high levels of obsessive passion, when faced with needing to cut back on or cease training and competition, will likely do one of two things: (a) continue engaging in their sports despite unfavorable circumstances (e.g., overtraining syndrome, sport-related injuries) or (b) reflect on their sport involvement and consequently experience negative feelings similar to psychological withdrawal when they are prevented from participating in their sports. From the practical standpoint of the sport psychologist, these situations may call for strategies such as reassessment of short- and long-term goals; cross-training and/or resting; spending more time working on mental skills; and/or starting, maintaining, and reflecting on a training log. Furthermore, depending on the severity of symptoms when obsessively passionate athletes have their sports taken away, the above mentioned strategies may be supplemented with psychotherapy and anxiolytic or antidepressant medication, especially during initial stages.

Dealing with motivational lapses to train

When unmotivated, masters athletes, regardless of their levels of harmonious and obsessive passion, experience feelings of incompetence, lack of control, and/or no purpose with respect to their sports. One approach that sport psychologists can take in working with
masters athletes is to explore why unmotivated feelings are occurring. For some athletes, leaving the sport may be the best alternative. For example, athletes may come to realize that they are in sport only because of habit, and they may want to consider trying new activities. Another approach could involve educating masters athletes about the strategies that can decrease the likelihood of motivational lapses. For example, research (Medic et al., 2005) has found that even though masters athletes report low levels of being unmotivated, about two-thirds of them have at one time or another experienced lapses in motivation to train. Motivational lapses in masters athletes most often occur as a result of injury, burn-out, and family and work responsibilities. The most successful strategies masters athletes report using to overcome motivational lapses are summarized in Table 40.1 and include goal setting, doing imagery to model competition, training with a group or a coach, and keeping a training log. In addition, focusing on performance rather than outcome (e.g., winning medals) may be beneficial for masters athletes' motivation. Research indicated that masters athletes rate their performances (e.g., times) as more successful, and due to more internal and intentional causes, than their outcomes (e.g., placings: Hanrahan & Gross, 2005).

**The dark side of masters sport**

Despite many positive experiences that can be gained from participating in masters sports, sport psychology practitioners should be aware that there are potentially many dark sides to continuing to train and perform including: experiencing feelings of desperation, trying to fix regrets and past failures, and bringing disruptions to families and professional lives. For example, research has shown that masters athletes are more likely to experience acute and chronic injuries, to have more fears of injury, and to take longer to rehabilitate than younger athletes (Spirduso, Francis, & MacRea, 2005). Furthermore, about 80% of masters athletes report having athletic goals that have remained unaccomplished and that still exert considerable influence on their present motives to continue training and competing in their sports (Medic et al., 2005). Finally, one of my studies has shown that most masters athletes, even though reporting low to moderate levels of obsessive passion for their sport, also reported that they would cease their sport involvement under extreme circumstances related to their

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**Table 40.1 Motivational strategies used by masters athletes to overcome lapses in motivation to train.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major themes</th>
<th>Minor themes</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-regulatory</td>
<td>Goal setting</td>
<td>77.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strategies</td>
<td>Doing imagery to model</td>
<td>39.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>competition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cross-training</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Keeping a training log</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entering competitions</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>regardless of fitness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group-approach</td>
<td>Training in groups</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strategies</td>
<td>Training with younger athletes</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commitment to coach</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing strategies</td>
<td>Reaching a new age group</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Taking time off</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
health and well-being. The majority of participants (81%) reported that an injury would make them stop; 33% said that very old age and illness would prevent them from participating in sport, and 10% went as far as saying that they will never stop regardless of any condition. The following were some of the unique responses:

I would not stop unless I was injured in such a way that I could not run upright.

(masters runner)

Death or severe ailment close to death would stop me … this is my lifestyle … to stop training is like to stop breathing … I live for training … competitions are just the product of such a lifestyle.

(masters swimmer)

Altogether, these results suggest that sport psychologists need to be aware of these potential problem areas and be ready to deal with them if necessary. For example, consultants and coaches could work with masters athletes on monitoring their levels of sport involvement. Masters athletes might also explore alternative perspectives on what their sport involvement could be about. An example would be to analyze (by identifying strengths and weaknesses) scenarios in which athletes would leave their sports for short periods.

Optimizing sport performance of aging athletes

The purpose of this section is to review evidence on how age-associated decline in athletic performance can be tempered through continued physical training. To effectively assist masters athletes with their training, sport psychology practitioners and coaches need to understand factors that moderate sport performance decline. Some individuals who are having trouble accepting decline in athletic performance as a result of age may ask sport psychologists for assistance.

Various approaches (e.g., analyses of cross-sectional, longitudinal, and world record athletic performance data) have been used with an aim to understand the age-related sport performance declines in masters athletes. Generally, studies have suggested that, after the age of peak involvement (generally about 35 years), performance gradually declines at a rate of 0.5 to 1% per year until approximately the age of 70 years, after which the decline accelerates. Studies have also suggested that the rate of decline is generally greater for long-distance than for middle-distance events (Young, Weir, Starkes, & Medic, 2008), and for swimming and track and field than for golf, and for women more than men (Starkes Weir, & Young, 2003).

Training is, to a certain degree, under the control of individuals if they are motivated; have access to adequate resources such as equipment, coaching, and facilities; are able to remain free of injury; and are not compromised by the effects of secondary processes of aging (Salthouse, 1991). For example, one secondary aging effect is the damage that arises from prolonged training over many years (e.g., arthritis) that in turn may hinder one’s ability to train. In an attempt to examine how the typical decline in 10 km running performance of middle-aged masters (40–59 years) can be slowed, we (Young et al., 2008) collected longitudinal performance and training data from 30 masters runners. Our results showed that masters runners who retain high levels of performance do so because they have maintained years of uninterrupted practice (the next section “Choosing when to compete” provides more detail on the importance of continuous involvement), consistently have shorter
off-season periods, exhibit higher weekly amounts of sport-specific practice (rather than cross-training), and avoid injury.

Sport psychologists working with masters athletes should be aware that with increasing age, declines in sport performance are inevitable. An exception would be masters athletes who are novices to the sport or those who have switched to different events, for whom performances will likely improve for the first few years, after which their absolute performance will probably start decreasing. There are at least two successful strategies that can be used to assist masters athletes in accepting that decline in athletic performance is inevitable as one ages. One is to help masters athletes reassess their long-term goals and discuss which is more important: continuing to participate in sport for many years in the future (promoting health and well-being) or being able to keep increasing or maintaining their performances, and/or winning medals. The second strategy is to use the age-grading tables that employ mathematical formulae (based on archival performance data) to derive age-corrected times from absolute performance times (age-grading tables are currently available for track and field and swimming). One value of age-grading tables is that a performance-level percentage (higher percentage indicates better performance) can be calculated and used to compare performances across a wide range of events, independent of one’s age. The second value of age-grading tables is that one’s current performance can be compared to previous performances regardless of age, because all performances are mathematically converted to 35 years of age. For example, an athlete’s current running time may be slower when absolutely compared to the performance time achieved five years ago, but the mathematically adjusted time could show that the running performance has actually improved, once age has been considered.

Choosing when to compete

A motivational strategy aimed at establishing a fair playing field in masters sports involves the use of age categories that generally progress in five-year intervals (e.g., 35–39, 40–44, 45–49, and so forth). Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence from masters athletes suggests that as they start approaching the upper ends of their age categories, they feel less motivated to train and compete because of their relative age disadvantage.

To systematically examine the influence of masters athletes’ relative age advantages/disadvantages within five-year age categories, our research team (Medic, Starkes, & Young 2007a) analyzed archival data on participation entries and national records set at USA masters championships in track and field and swimming. Based on the five-year age categories in which masters athletes compete, participation entry and record setting ages were each scored separately as frequencies in five separate categories (i.e., years 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5) and were collapsed across all five-year age categories. Year 1 included masters athletes who were in their first year of any five-year age category when they participated or set a record (i.e., those who were age 35, 40, 45, and so forth). Likewise, Years 2, 3, 4, and 5 contained frequencies for participation entries and records set by masters athletes who were in the second, third, fourth, and fifth years, respectively, in any five-year age category. Our results provided strong evidence that the odds of participating in the U.S. national championships were significantly higher for masters athletes who were in their first or second year, and were lower if they were in their fourth or fifth year of any age category. We also found that the odds of setting a U.S. masters record were significantly higher if athletes were in the first year of any five-year age category, and were lower if they were in the third, fourth, or fifth year of an age category. The results for track and field and swimming have been replicated (Medic, Starkes, Weir,
Young, & Grove, 2009). In contrast, for two sports with both age and weight classes (i.e., rowing, weightlifting), we found that the odds of participating in the competition were equally distributed among individuals across all five constituent years of an age category. Altogether, these findings suggest that the perceived age disadvantage that may discourage participation in competition might be less evident for masters athletes competing in sports with both age and weight classes as is the case for weightlifting and rowing, than for masters competitors arranged by chronological age only (e.g., track and field, swimming).

When sport psychologists are notably younger than clients

Finally, when working with this population (especially older masters athletes), practitioners need to be aware of the possibility that they will be substantially younger than the clients. Consultants working with older clients should be aware of the generation gap that may exist between themselves and the clients. Practitioners should find ways to relate to the clients to minimize situations in which misunderstanding can occur due to differences in experiences, opinions, habits, or behaviors. For example, by developing mutual trust and understanding, developing empathy, actively listening, being honest and consistent, occurrences of misunderstanding will be minimized. Finally, practitioners should be aware of their own attitudes, stereotypes, and predetermined beliefs about older people, especially given that many people in Western societies generally hold negative views about the aging process. See Box 40.1 for a summary of suggestions for sport psychologists who are working with masters athletes.

Conclusion

The main objective of this chapter was to provide insights and ideas to sport psychology practitioners on how they can effectively work with middle- to older-aged individuals to enrich and enhance their lives through masters sports involvement. Given that aging individuals are confronted with a number of life issues such as decreased social networks (deaths of loved ones and fellow competitors) and changing relationships with their aging bodies, it is important for practitioners to recognize that in their work with masters athletes the focus should not be exclusively based on them as athletes, but rather on the person as a whole. Based on materials reviewed in this chapter, I suggest that to assist masters athletes in gaining potential psychological and physical benefits from sport involvement, and to enhance their welfare, consultants need to be aware of how they can foster long-term motivation and commitment to sport. For example, practitioners could work with masters athletes on developing sporting environments that: (a) promote training and competitive activities and events that are intrinsically motivating and enjoyable, (b) emphasize the development of new skills and techniques, (c) involve high levels of internalization of the sport activity, and (d) provide high support and low pressure from significant others. Also, practitioners should be aware that extrinsic reasons for masters sport participation at most are moderately important – at most – for the majority of masters athletes. Exceptions may be masters athletes who are 65 years or older, males, and those in the first year of a five-year age category. Thus, to be effective, strategies that can be used to keep masters athletes optimally motivated (providing that athletes want to continue with their sport involvement) need to be individualized so that they complement personal reasons and the specific needs for continuing to train and compete in sport (see Box 40.1).
Box 40.1

Key points when working with masters athletes

- To enhance long-term motivation and maximize benefits that can be gained from sport participation, practitioners could work with masters athletes on developing sporting environments that place emphasis on intrinsically motivating activities, involve high levels of internalization of the sport activity, and have the potential to provide high levels of social support.
- Most masters athletes experience periods when their motivation to train is low. Successful strategies that can be used to overcome motivational lapses are exploration of why feelings of being unmotivated are occurring, goal setting, imagery, group training, and keeping a training log.
- Reassessment of goals and use of age-graded tables can be used to assist masters athletes who have difficulty accepting that decline in athletic performance is inevitable.
- Five-year age categories, an inherent feature of masters sports, can have some negative motivational consequences, especially for those masters athletes who are older relative to their peers in the same age group. To maximize chances of normative or outcome success, practitioners could work with masters athletes on developing strategies that involve entering competitions when they are in the early years of a five-year age category and structuring their training schedules accordingly, and placing an emphasis on performance (e.g., time) rather than outcome (e.g., placing).
- Consultants working with masters athletes who are older than themselves need to be aware that: their clients may have great depth of experience and knowledge in their sports; a generation gap may exist between themselves and their clients; misunderstandings can occur due to differences in experiences, opinions, habits, and/or behaviors; and their own attitudes, stereotypes, and predetermined beliefs about older people may be different from those of their clients.

References


