Faster, Higher, Stronger, Older: Benefits of Masters Sport and Implications for Older Adults' Participation

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Master's sport involves opportunities for middle aged and older adults to engage in competitive sport for their physical activity and recreation. This may be a critical outlet for successful ageing (Diongi et al., 2011), which is of increasing interest given the number of people aged 60 and over is projected to increase to 2 billion by 2050 (World Health Organization, 2011). Being physically active provides older adults with benefits, such as increased cardiovascular function, decreased incidence of Type 2 diabetes, improved bone health, and improved balance and flexibility, all resulting in a prolonging of the age of mortality (Chodzko-Zajko et al., 2009; Vogel et al., 2009).

Participation in Masters sport may provide additional benefits, such as giving meaning to life, enjoying the competitive challenge, and meeting new friends (Dionigi et al., 2011; Ogles & Masters, 2000; Smith & Storandt, 1997). However, research on the benefits (and costs) experienced by Masters athletes has been largely limited to the physical domain (cf. Gayman et al., 2016). Further research is needed to uncover psychological, social, and cognitive benefits that Masters athletes may experience, as part of the four domains of successful ageing (Geard et al., 2017), as well as the costs or constraints to participation. With this study we bring a focus on Masters-level athletes to the sport management field, where implications of costs and benefits can be addressed in the design and promotion of attractive and impactful programs and competitions.

To explore the perceived benefits and costs to Masters sport participation, we conducted in-person, semi-structured interviews with 19 women and 21 men, aged 50 years and over, who compete in Masters events, in a variety of sports. The interviews followed a conversational approach (Patton, 2015) that allowed us to obtain background information (i.e., age, sport, competitions, practice schedules) and probe for further insights. Transcript checking was employed to allow participants to correct any errors or provide any additional information (Creswell, 1998).

The findings present a profile of Masters athletes that includes "continuers" in competitive sport, "re-kindlers" after an absence from sport, and "late starters" to sport (cf. Dionigi, 2015). Independent and collaborative coding among the investigative team members resulted in consensus about emergent themes within the categories of physical (e.g., overall health, strength), psychological (e.g., self-confidence, pride), cognitive (e.g., clear mind, enhanced problem solving), and social benefits (e.g., stronger relationships with family and friends). Perceived challenges to Masters sport participation ranged from the time and financial costs of training and traveling, to injuries, to having a supportive life partner.

The findings advance understanding of the role of sport in the four domains (i.e., physical, social, psychological, and cognitive) of successful ageing (Geard et al., 2017). These new insights to the Masters sport experience have implications for the development, design, and promotion of programs and competitive events that address the benefits, and costs, in support of older adults' introduction to, and continued participation in, sport as a positive activity for successful ageing.