

# research snapshot

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## Masters Athletes Challenge Our Thinking About Health and Aging

### What is this research about?

Masters Athletes are those athletes who have passed the age of peak performance – usually about 35 or so – but continue to engage in sports and exercise, well into old age. They tend to be dismissed as anomalies, as representing a standard of health to which ‘normal’ people cannot possibly aspire. But because they have aged well – at least physically – Masters Athletes have intrigued many researchers.

It is a given that as people age their physical and cognitive abilities decline. However, there is a debate as to whether the bulk of this decline is a result of aging or lifestyle. A growing number of researchers argue that a poor lifestyle is the cause of many of the problems that are usually blamed on old age, such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and diabetes. Masters Athletes, then, have the potential to change the way we think about aging. They can serve as positive role models for how to age well. They can also inform our discussions about health care at a time when populations are growing older and governments want to promote healthy aging and non-pharmacological approaches to health like exercise. And yet no single book exists that summarizes the research that has been done on this intriguing group – until now.

### What you need to know:

Masters Athletes are not anomalies but, rather, potential models for how we should age. They challenge the widespread belief that chronic diseases are an inevitable part of aging. They demonstrate that maintaining physical activity, well into old age, has huge health benefits.

### What did the researchers do?

Researchers at York University and the University of Windsor compiled a book, *The Masters Athlete: Understanding the Role of Sport and Exercise in Optimizing Aging* (Routledge 2009), which brings together much of the current research on Masters Athletes. The book takes a multidisciplinary approach; it draws on research in psychology, epidemiology, exercise physiology, gerontology, sociology, and other areas. In other words, it breaks through the silos in which many researchers are contained, connecting different disciplines to one another.

### What did the researchers find?

Many people tend to see chronic diseases and cognitive and physical decline as inevitable, if not natural, parts of aging. But the example of the Masters Athlete challenges us to redefine how

we think about aging. Some people who undergo the aging process do quite well; some are even achieving more in old age than they did earlier in life. Although the book, *The Masters Athlete*, presents many different findings from different studies, the book's central point is that the Masters Athlete is not an anomaly; the Masters Athlete represents an ideal that can be attained. Although some Master Athletes compete at events, like the upcoming Sydney 2009 World Masters Games, most simply participate for the health benefits as well as for social benefits like travel. By getting involved – and staying involved – in sports and exercise, people can prevent some of the more negative effects that are thought to come with aging.

### How can you use this research?

*The Masters Athlete* offers researchers who are interested in health and aging an unprecedented resource for information about Masters Athletes. But it can also benefit a general audience by challenging its own thinking on aging. And it can help policy-makers concerned about the future of health care in Canada and other countries. The traditional belief that chronic diseases are an inevitable part of aging is not just problematic; it's unsustainable. As people live longer, many countries will not have the resources to handle the sort of chronic problems that can be prevented through better lifestyle choices. People need to change the way they think about aging, and *The Masters Athlete* can help them to do so.

### About the Researchers

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### Citation

Baker, J., Horton, S., & Weir, P. (Eds.). (2010). *The Masters Athlete: Understanding the role of sport and exercise in optimizing aging*. New York: Routledge. Preview available online at <http://bit.ly/1dho3Pu>

### Keywords

Aging, Chronic disease, Exercise, Health care, Masters Athlete, Sports

### Knowledge Mobilization at York

York's Knowledge Mobilization Unit provides services for faculty, graduate students, community and government seeking to maximize the impact of academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary has been supported by the Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation at York and project funding from SSHRC and CIHR.

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